

Grand Coulee Journal

May 1998

Text and Photographs By J. Patrick Kelley

"**Landscape.** n. 5. An extensive mental view; an interior prospect."
—*American Heritage Dictionary*

If you live in the Pacific Northwest and enjoy being outdoors, eventually you will come under the influence, in one way or another, of the Columbia River. I've always been interested in the river, for its natural beauty, its historical significance, its sheer size and grandeur. Last year, however—and for reasons I don't quite understand—my interest in the Columbia began to develop into something of an obsession. The need to see the river, be on the river, photograph the river, listen to the story of the river, understand the people of the river, became more urgent and pressing the more I thought and read about it.

As a cover story for this obsession, I began to tell people that I was writing a book about the river. "Big subject," the most perceptive would reply. The book, as my story evolved, would be black and white photos and essays. And, I heard myself telling a friend last fall, I wanted to start with the area around Grand Coulee Dam. (Dams are another topic of endless fascination for me—but this one dates from childhood.)

For various reasons, I wasn't able to actually begin work on my new Columbia River project until the first week in May, almost ten months after being struck with river fever.

This is a journal of my first week on the Columbia.

Tuesday May 5, 1998—Grandpa Cuts Loose the Ponies

I get a late start, running around hunting down last minute supplies. Driving east from Seattle on Interstate 90, it's 5pm before I reach my first stop on the river: Wanapum Vista Overlook, near Vantage. I've been reading *Fire, Faults and Floods* by Marge and Ted Mueller, an excellent guidebook to the geology of the Columbia River basin. So I know that when I look south to the impressive gap in the Saddle Mountains, I'm getting a good overview of how the path of the original Columbia River was widened and scoured out by successive catastrophic floods from the huge glacial Lake Missoula in Montana about 15,000 years ago.

This series of terraforming floods is much beloved by the Muellers since it has revealed so much about the geological history of this area. It turns out that the Missoula Floods, as they are called, will become very important to me as well during the course of the week, mostly because it was these series of floods that created what I'll come to see as the most compelling parts of the landscape around Grand Coulee Dam—particularly the Grand Coulee itself.

At the moment, what's more interesting to me than the geology is the discovery that this overlook is also the site of the sculpture "Grandpa Cuts Loose the Ponies" by David Goredare, twenty five beautiful horses of weathered sheet-steel galloping along the ridge above the overlook. I hike to the top and photograph the river with the horses in the foreground. But it's the view from down below that's the most evocative. I imagine that they're alive, moving, and for a moment I'm lost in what feels like a timeless waking dream.



Grandpa Cuts Loose the Ponies, sculpture by David Goredare

Coming back down the hill to my truck I see my first magpie of the trip, perched on the overlook's interpretive plaque and giving me some serious attitude. A good bird omen.

At 7pm I stop for my first real view of the Grand Coulee at Dry Falls overlook. Dry Falls today looks like a small semicircular canyon end with a long narrow bluff in the middle, but the plaque at the visitors center informs me that during the Missoula Floods the bottom of the canyon was the base of an unimaginably huge waterfall. I peer down at placid little lakes dotted with fisherfolk tricked out for trout, and try to imagine a wall of water 300 feet above my head plunging into the basin below. The light is fading, and I vow to return to this place.

Third stop, 7:40 p.m. in front of the entrance to Steamboat Rock State Park. I am now in the heart of the Grand Coulee. Coulee is a French word for "flood-carved canyon," similar to the Spanish arroyo. This canyon is now a lake, Banks Lake,

created after Grand Coulee Dam was built, to hold irrigation water for large sections of desert south of here.

A curve in the wall of the coulee has formed a fascinating hollow that I later learn is called Devil's Punchbowl. (Where do they get these place names? Can I speak to whomever is in charge here please?) In this light the texture of the successive lava flows stacked on top of each other is endlessly fascinating, almost like watching the big fish tank at the aquarium. Huge swatches of yellow and ochre lichen color the coulee walls, and groundwater seeps out to stain the rocks and form rivulets on the face of the cliff, where birds perch to drink and feed. Behind me, the sun hits the edge of the coulee. Steamboat Rock, a large plateau or mesa in the middle of the canyon-lake, is impossibly picturesque in silhouette.



Devil's Punchbowl

I'll definitely want to come back to this place as well.

I check into the Columbia River Inn, a comfortable and attractive motel facing the dam, and read through my notes over a surprisingly good plate of *camarones mexicanos* at a local restaurant.

Wednesday—The View from 1000 Feet

My idea for a Columbia River book is to find a way to integrate aerial photos of the river and surrounding areas with what I imagine as lyrical and impressionistic (yet informative) essays. The writing part seems like a natural, but aerial photography

is mostly an unknown to me at this point. To test the concept, I plan to go up with a local pilot for a few hours (or failing that, have someone fly over from Spokane), and see if the resulting pictures are anything I can work with.

So I ask Ron, the personable owner of the Columbia River Inn, if he knows of any local pilots, preferably ones who have experience working with photographers. "I'll call around," he says, acting like this is the most normal request in the world.

I set off for a walking tour of the town, with the eventual goal of buying a sandwich and hiking to the overlook at the top of the huge granite outcropping that looms over the dam to the northwest. I don't get very far, however; Ron drives up in his pickup and says he's found someone for me to fly with—someone, moreover, who is a photographer himself.

At 1pm I meet Dan Adams, the manager of the local airport, at the gate to the airstrip, about ten minutes from town. His plane is a lovingly restored vintage Taylorcraft, similar to a Piper Cub. "A basic airplane," my dad calls it when I tell him about it later. Dan himself is more helpful and friendly than I have any right to expect, having left this crucial aspect of my trip more or less to chance. He fills the plane up with gas, takes off the doors so I'll be able to photograph without obstruction, and we're off.

I choose as my initial targets the Dry Falls area that I found so fascinating on the way into town last night, and Grand Coulee Dam itself. I'm clumsy with my cameras in the cramped space of the cockpit, but Dan is patient and helpful, repositioning the plane and offering suggestions on shutter speed and camera angle.

It's hard to separate out the excitement of being up in a small plane (with no doors! with just a seatbelt on!) from the exultation that I feel looking through the viewfinder and snapping away as we circle slowly around Dry Falls. Everything looks different from up here, fresh to the eye, appealing.

We make a steeper turn around the dam and I switch to wide angle, letting out involuntary whoops of exhilaration and taking shots almost as fast as the camera will let me.

After another turn over the dam we head back. We've been in the air about an hour and a half at this point, and I'm actually a little weak with the thrill of it.

As we fly towards the airport, Dan mentions something that I've heard from other pilots: "When things get a little tense I like to come up here, it really helps me unwind." Maybe so, but at the moment all I'm feeling is over-stimulated.

Next I want to head upriver at the end of the day, to see what the landscape looks like in the luminous light and long shadows I find so attractive in the work of Marilyn Bridges.

Just after 6:30 we're back in the air. Moving east from the Grand Coulee the terrain becomes quickly more mountainous, bare green hills in fantastically sensuous curves and undulations, pine forests so vast and fecund that they stain the big river with huge curving floats of bright yellow pollen. The hills are punctuated in places by baroque outcroppings of that deep fundamental granite—including the famous White Rock that Lewis and Clark used as a navigation marker. "Imagine," Dan

Adams, my pilot, said, "the river about 200 feet lower than it is today, and Lewis and Clark turning the bend in the river and coming upon that huge white cliff face."

Coming back, flying into the sun, we keep getting those receding vistas of silhouetted hills so popular in certain types of poster shops. Interesting how a cliché becomes meaningful, even transcendent, when you experience it yourself. Shooting into the sun I'm not sure what I'll get, but the way the sun hits the water in some of these curves in the river, with the hills receding in the background to the west is nothing short of superb.

Getting ready to land, turning for the final approach, the wing high, I get a view south down the coulee that, in the remembering, will send chills down my spine for weeks to come. Steamboat Rock is in the middle of the scene and I take a quick shot, getting that thrill that comes when you've got something special, your eye connecting with the image in the viewfinder, the image exploding into your brain and outward into the future, the killer picture that keeps photographers coming back for more.

After dinner, two couples are sitting on the patio outside my door drinking and talking loudly, so I take my laptop down to the little park in front of the dam. It's after 11pm now, three-quarter moon above, tiny bugs swarming in the glow of my screen, the deep throbbing music of the generators, the lighted arches of the spillway, the dam looming above with moonlight glistening on the water spilling down the face of it, cool air sweet after the heat of the day.

The weather must be affecting my prose, it seems a little overheated as well tonight. But then I'm incredibly stimulated and entranced by everything I've seen and done so far.

If my book turns out as well as my first day here, it's going to be a very special project indeed.

Thursday—Powerhouse Number Three

Slow start today, lingering in my room over coffee and journal, the ultimate luxury. My only plan for the day is to focus on the dam itself, check out the visitor's center and take a tour.

Walking across the dam to meet the 2 o'clock tour of Powerhouse Three, images from the sunset plane ride yesterday, floating at 1000 feet in the half light upriver to Fort Spokane, begin to sweep over me like a dream. Once again, as if it were the first time, I'm startled, amazed, intensely pleased, by the power of the visual to enrich and inform. Today, even as I photograph the dam and powerhouse with relish and enthusiasm, those images from last night's flight stay with me, and will for quite some time afterwards.

This afternoon I have a wide-angle lens on one of my cameras, and stroll the mile across the top of the dam on the way to meet the tour, taking pictures as I go. Suddenly it's almost two and I have to hustle. All this outsized generating equipment, the lines and angles and shadows of the concrete and the transformers and the power lines in the afternoon light, look great to me in wide angle.



Aerial view of Grand Coulee Dam with Powerhouse 3 in the foreground

Powerhouse 3 at Grand Coulee Dam is the newest and most high capacity of the three powerhouses. It's a little disappointing that once you get down into the powerhouse itself you can't really see anything, since the giant rotor and bushing assemblies, the guts of the 2228-ton generators, are covered up. The tour goes below to look at the turbine shaft turning, and that does give you some idea of the power and scale of these machines.

It's a quiet thrill to stand at the top of the dam and feel the throb and hum of the turbines below, three 600MW and three 800MW generators. The penstocks that carry the water to the turbines are 40 feet in diameter, the width of three greyhound buses side by side, or, as Dan Adams told me, the wingspan of his Taylorcraft, with 4 feet to spare.

I love dams. Their scale; the way they brazenly attempt to control water, one of the most awesome natural forces on the planet; and in fact the way that dams seem to embody a lot of the narratives and symbols from the ancient story of humans vs. nature.

After reading *Grand Coulee: Harnessing the Dream*, by Paul C. Pitzer, I have a real appreciation for the achievement this particular dam represents. But it's not an unambiguous achievement by any means; there are costs, consequences, tradeoffs. So I just wish the tour guides didn't feel they had to be so defensive about environmental issues—spotted owl jokes, for crying out loud! We got that a lot at

Hanford too. All these unnecessarily dichotomized views. Why can't we all just find the common ground? Why can't we all just work together?

After the tour I walk north from Powerhouse 3 and into town from the east, to visit the Colville Confederated Tribes museum. I'd met an artist of Yakima-Nez Perce descent, John Grant, at the dam visitor center, and he told me about the museum. I was taken by his work; it's a technique called scratchboard, where you scrape away the black over-painting to reveal the white underneath, and depending on the tool you use you can get some fantastic textures. He also does pen-and-ink; one I particularly liked was of his grandmother on horseback, a scene from the 30s, large baskets of huckleberries hanging off her horse, from when they'd go up into the summer hills for the berry harvest.

While at the museum I buy a beaded bracelet to wear. Ever since I arrived I've been looking for a talisman to focus my perceptions of the spirit of the place into; a kind of grounding tool or remembering device, to contain my experiences here, so that I can carry them with me when I leave.

The most impressive thing about the tribal museum is the photographs. The two long walls of the fairly large A-frame building are covered with historical photographs of all the peoples of the area, many only with names and dates, some going back to the mid-1800s. The summary effect of all these portraits is very powerful. I will be going back tomorrow and spend some more time with these remembering walls.

Friday May 8—Flying Downriver, Flying

Went up with Dan Adams in his plane again this morning. We left at 8am and headed down river. Flying with the doors off on a cool day, it's much colder a thousand feet off the ground. It was cold enough for my camera batteries to stop working at one point when I hung out into the wind a little too long for a picture.

The Columbia downstream of Grand Coulee Dam changes shape and character around almost every bend. We saw farms on glacial meltwater plateaus, steep clay cliffs eroded into fantastical cathedral spire shapes, big circular pens in the water on the reservation side of the river for fish farming, and green hills, wonderfully voluptuous from a thousand feet up, with the river snaking through them so picturesque it's looking phony, another landscape painting cliché.

Past Chief Joseph Dam, about 50 miles west of Grand Coulee, the river is bordered more and more by gently sloping table lands with prosperous looking farms and orchards.

After an hour and a half of flying (we'd also headed upstream briefly, back to photograph Lewis and Clark's White Rock in the morning light), Dan decides to land at the Chelan airport so we can top off the fuel tank, stretch our legs, and try to warm up a little. The notion of just flying around in the back country a thousand feet off the ground and then deciding to land somewhere just for a little rest stop is so appealing that it just aggravated the itch that's been developing for a year or more, and that became almost unbearable the moment I took off for the first time from Grand Coulee Airport with Dan Adams—the itch to get my pilot's license.



Heading west at sunset

In fact, Dan lets me fly the plane briefly when we are returning home. Like most novice pilots I have a tendency to over-control, but the experience as a whole is nothing short of thrilling—and surprisingly like Flight Simulator, considering the obvious differences.

Coming back we take a shortcut overland and cross a glacier-scoured plain with huge boulders scattered everywhere, left as the glacier retreated. "Glacial erratics," the geology guidebook I'm using calls them, but west of the Grand Coulee they are so numerous that the landscape looks like a graveyard for an assortment of ruined Stonehenges.

Finishing up almost three hours of flying, with the weather turning chancy, the wind coming up and high clouds putting even more of a haze over everything than there was before, we make our turn for final approach, and once again I am transfixed by the view south down the grand coulee, with Steamboat Rock in the center of this incredible man-made lake. I'm certain this symphony of water and basalt and granite will stay imprinted on my romantic soul for some time to come, but I am determined to get a picture of it before I leave that is as expressive as the mental picture I carry with me. And so, Dan and I have tentative plans to go up Sunday at the end of the day, weather permitting.

After we land, I return to the Colville Confederated Tribes Museum to get another look at the photographs there. Also, tonight there's a dedication ceremony for the new museum.

I write down some of the titles of the photographs. By themselves the titles are quite suggestive, but they don't begin to convey the cumulative power of the actual pictures:

- Women's stick game by kerosene lantern, early '40s
- Methow George and his wife Jenny
- Jesse Jim—Princess America II/Daughter of Long Jim/Mother: Wash-Wi
- Quiotsa, Medicine Man, brother to Chief Moses, c. 1905
- Poker Joe, Nespelem Policeman, 1920s

While I'm writing in my notebook, a reporter from the Grand Coulee newspaper introduces himself. He's writing an article about the museum and gives me some good background information on the museum, pointing out key people in the room who were involved in making it happen.

The dedication ceremony begins, and I'm overcome by how moving and emotional the speeches are. One person says the exhibit will help members of the tribe "rest in the vision of our ancestors." Another, talking about how things in the modern world are changing so fast, refers to the museum as "a bridge between the past and the future."

I'm honored to have been present for this.

Saturday, May 9—Picnic at Steamboat Rock

I've been so obsessed with Steamboat Rock ever since I got here that today I decided I'd hike to the top and see what there was to see. Dan Adams warned me that a person could spend all day messing around up there, and he wasn't wrong. Once I got up there, I didn't want to come down.

Steamboat Rock is basically a huge section of land in the middle of the upper Grand Coulee that didn't get washed away when the canyon was originally created. It's about a mile wide and three miles long, narrow at the north end, which faced into the raging torrent 15,000 years ago, broader at what was the downstream end, and roughly the same height as the canyon walls, about 800 feet from the surface of the lake. From the highway that goes along the edge of Banks Lake, it's easy to see how Steamboat Rock got its name, this squat and looming shape that features prominently (almost as prominently as the dam itself) on every postcard rack in town.

continued



Steamboat Rock

Climbing cheerfully with a neurotically overloaded daypack crammed with food and drink and camera equipment forces me to take it slow and stop frequently on the steep climb to the top. In fact I have to stop for lunch about half way up (blame it on a late start), making a nice little picnic on one of the shelves in the cliff face at the boundary layer between the successive lava flows that formed the pre-flood landscape.

I believe I'm seeing everything at its best. Butterflies and wildflowers too numerous to mention (although perhaps I will mention a few once I'm back home and can consult my field guides), everything still green but with just a tinge of rust and brown to make it more interesting as late spring fades into early summer.

The large number of meadowlarks here is a real treat for someone from Western Washington; we're not used to seeing them all the time and in such numbers. Here's one as I eat lunch. He's perched on the top of a bush at the edge of the cliff above, giving a short sharp *peerk* call, not the bubbling-brook melody you usually associate with meadowlarks. The trail leads up a bowl-shaped draw in the side of Steamboat

Rock, formed, one of my guidebooks says, by eddies and whirlpools in the currents during the great floods. However it was formed, the steep walls make a great echo chamber for the call of this meadowlark and his kin. Swallows scold and tumble in high-speed flight at the cliff's edge above, and a kestrel glides, looking for something to eat.

At the top, finally. Some of the swallows turn out to be swifts, larger birds with a radical wing shape and an even more radical flying style, capable of astonishing aerobatics while pursuing their prey of flying insects. When I stand at the cliff's edge the swifts and swallows don't seem to know or care I'm there, sometimes flying within a foot of my head, or so it seems. Until I leave at the end of the day I'll make a game of cataloging the various kinds whooshing and swooshing noises these birds make as they streak by.

Standing on the eastern edge of the plateau I look across at the coulee wall. I know everything is much larger than it appears to my eye. The people in the campground below are tiny; my truck in the parking lot looks like a toy.

It's very quiet up here. The wind, and the birds.

Robin. Raven. Redtail above.

The smell of the sagebrush bushes is very strong, and they're oily to the touch. Over a dozen plants are in bloom up here. One, close to the ground, resembling a succulent, has small round white flowers that are extremely fragrant, like concentrated lavender. A large bee flies by, and a butterfly is hilltopping about ten feet away. "Long live the pollinators!" I hear myself saying out loud.

Ever since the first night I arrived I've been fascinated by a section of the lake near Steamboat Rock where small islands of granite outcroppings poke up out of the water like miniature continents. From up here I can't help but compare this part of the lake to a scene from "Riven" or "Myst," some sort of proto-mythical world created by the twisted imagination of an altered-consciousness game designer.

I find a perch that looks out over this landscape, and sit with my camera for a few hours, studying the scene as the light changes and snapping a picture from time to time. Sometimes I worry when I travel (and especially, like this trip, when I travel expressly with photography in mind) that I run the risk of living life through the viewfinder and missing the "real story," whatever that might be. This afternoon, though, it seems like I'm able to slow down enough to at least begin to hear, and understand, something of what these rocks are trying to tell me.

As the sun gets lower in the sky I move around to the south end of the plateau, the broad stern of the steamboat. When I first read what they'd done to this canyon, filling it with water to irrigate sagebrush country farms, subsidized water for subsistence farmers, I thought it was a pretty stupid idea. I still hold something like those views, but can't do so exclusively. Because when you look out over the lake, its beautiful blue, those sheer cliff walls, the open sky and clouds above, putting all this water in this place doesn't seem like such a bad idea after all.

Coming down off the mountain I feel tired and spent, but in a sweet, glowing kind of way. Two magpies (another common bird that I have yet to tire of) fly close across my path, startling me, beautiful harlequin gliders with long black tails.

When I get back to the parking lot I drop my pack and lie on my back on the lawn for a few minutes, watching the sky change colors as the sun sets. Steamboat Rock in silhouette. My first impression of this place is still true: everything is beautiful in this light.

Sunday May 10—The Ghost of Kettle Falls

My idea today is to drive north from Grand Coulee through the Colville reservation, east to Kettle Falls, and then south again along the eastern bank of Columbia River, also known for several hundred miles upstream of Grand Coulee Dam as Roosevelt Lake.

To begin I have to drive southeast from Grand Coulee, out onto the rolling plains of the dryland wheat farms that stretch all the way to Spokane. I want to take Highway 21 to the Keller ferry, cross the river there, and then head north along the Sanpoil River.

Coming back up to the edge of the river valley from wheat country I am struck dumb by the view of the Columbia and the mouth of the Sanpoil in the distance. I really can't say what it is about this particular river vista fading to mist in the distance, this particular steep mountain road with sharp switchbacks leading down to the river. Maybe I'm tapping in to an ancestral archetype, in the same way that suburban lawns are supposed to remind their owners on a deep and buried level of the African savanna their ancestors saw when they first came down out of the trees. All I know is that this particular landscape, on this particular morning, is filling me with a sensation way beyond what my over-educated and over-caffeinated mind can normally produce on its own. Something like possibility and wonder combined.

It's still and hot this morning, but hazier than usual in the distance; somewhere to the north huge slash fires from logging clearcuts have been burning for the last few days. But here in my little circle of sunlight everything is in crisp focus, and outlined in gold. The meadowlarks down in the canyon, the kestrel pair in the bare pine just below the overlook where I'm standing, the flicker flying by, the tops of the trees.



The ferry is small, barely large enough for ten or so cars, but the crossing is thrilling: wide river, imposing cliffs, calm water. Looking at the rocky banks on the north side of the river I think again about what Dan Adams said, how when Lewis and Clark came this way the river was much lower, and so the expanse of rock stretching upward above their boat that much more impressive.

The Sanpoil River, and the road that follows it up through the reservation, are an unexpected treat. Halfway to Republic I stop and take a picture that's a landscape

cliché: rustic bridge, meandering river, cottonwoods and pines, granite cliffs in the background. But none the less pleasing for being so familiar.

Later I will think: standing in that landscape is what was most pleasing; remembering that moment, and viewing the picture of it, somewhat less so, maybe even fatally diminished. And I wonder how the folks from the Colville Confederated Tribes who live there feel about that landscape, particularly in the winter. When is a landscape not a landscape? When the viewer just can't leave it alone.

Heading further up the Sanpoil the canyon narrows rapidly, and takes on the familiar U-shape of a glacial valley. The granite walls are very dramatic here, a kind of miniature Yosemite. Strange and a little disorienting how the terrain changes so rapidly in this part of the state, from rolling wheat fields to a mountain canyon inside an hour or so.

Driving north I leave the reservation and enter the Colville National Forest, picking up the road that goes east over the Kettle River Range and back down to Kettle Falls. Approaching the summit I get another surprise. A forest fire, started by lightning, burned a huge section of the national forest a few years ago, and for more than seven miles along the road massive stands of charred ponderosa pine march up the hillsides and stick up along the ridges. For some reason I can't get enough of this, stopping repeatedly, taking the same photograph over and over. This partially decomposed corpse of a forest reminds me of a marble sarcophagus I saw once in the Louvre: so beautiful you can't stop looking at it, but the whole time you're looking at it you can't stop thinking about death.

Finally I reach Kettle Falls, my destination for the day. Approaching from the west it doesn't look like much: a bridge, some red and white electric transmission towers on either side of the river, a few buildings. The Kettle Falls interpretive center hasn't yet opened for the season, but I follow the road past it to an old mission building, and walk from there to the bluff that overlooks the site of the former falls.

They keep the river low this time of year, in anticipation of the spring runoff, and you can see the tops of the rocks that once made up part of the falls, ghostly, a sad skeleton, silent history that stares up at you from underneath the water in the slanting afternoon light.

When the lake was created and the falls drowned, a large granite boulder, used as a sharpening stone for spears since time aboriginal, was saved from inundation and placed on this site. Strange how a simple grooved rock can speak so forcefully of the past. Maybe it's not a real past; maybe it's an idealized, false Eden. And maybe it's not my past, but some other culture's. But I do feel a kinship with the people who came here more than 9000 years ago. And I do feel a loss of innocence and purity and relevance in the world, so strong that it must be something similar to what the direct descendants of these river people are feeling today.

Someone has wrapped several sagebrush branches in colored thread and placed them on the rock, reminding me of the ancestor offerings along the cliffs of the Puna coast in Hawaii. I spend some time carving a sun on a piece of pine bark, and leave it out on the point as an offering to my own gods and ancestors. Then I call my mom on my cell phone and wish her a happy Mother's Day.

The drive south from Kettle Falls, down Highway 25, along the eastern bank of Lake Roosevelt, is very picturesque. I try, without complete success, to harden my heart to the beauty of this stretch of the river. It is, after all, no longer a river really, but a 200-mile long lake. Even without considering that the building of Grand Coulee Dam killed the second-largest fishery on the Columbia, causing the people of the river who depended on Kettle Falls to starve (of course I am considering all this, having just visited the Colville Confederated Tribes museum), it's hard not to feel a sharp sense of loss for the larger, grander, almost mythic idea of the ancient and undisturbed Columbia River.

Even as I visit these ideas I step back from them, question them, try to see both sides, as I somehow have been trained to do. I wonder if this yearning for a mythic river is just the sentimental and largely useless conservation ethic of the suburban middle class. I imagine someone from the Colville Confederated Tribes wondering if I'm trying to appropriate their myths, their history, their pain, for my own—an ironic state of affairs considering that I belong to the race of interlopers who conspired to take it away in the first place. I imagine, in the silly way we did in the sixties, that I could invoke the tortured history of my own Celtic ancestors as token of solidarity, proof of sincerity.

Finally, I decide that although the pain and loss I'm feeling is elusive, it is nevertheless real. I feel it here just as strongly as when I'm looking at construction debris where there were once trees. It comes to anyone who will stop and listen: that the pace of modern life is seriously out of sync with the natural world; that the long-term effects of more people, more construction, more domestication of the wild, more using up of non-renewable natural resources for short term profit, are not what we really want; and that it's not too late to readjust priorities and avoid some of the worst that is already beginning to happen.

It makes me sad and angry too that, at this point anyhow, I don't know how to phrase these important ideas in a way that, to loggers or fishers or farmers or condo developers, doesn't sound like fighting words. I won't give up trying though. It's too important, and the voice of the ancient and mythic Columbia is speaking to me too strongly to ignore.

South then, past Fort Spokane, back up into wheat country, west to Grand Coulee. A full day, but the best is still to come: driving into town, I call Dan Adams on my cell phone and arrange to meet him at the airport for an end-of-day flight. My plan is to retrace, from the air, the route of the drive I've just taken.

We begin by flying around Steamboat Rock several times. I'm certain, even without having looked at any of the photographs I've taken so far, that I still haven't really "gotten" the picture I want of this place. We circle in the late afternoon light a thousand feet above the water of Banks Lake, but only a few hundred feet above the bluffs at the top of Steamboat Rock.

I feel, as I take one manic exposure after another, what can only be described as a technology-mediated state of altered consciousness, every bit as strong as anything I've felt from psychotropics, religious mysticism, or music. It's a physical thrill, visualizing through the viewfinder of a camera while describing languid circles in

the air. If I haven't gotten the picture I want this time, the image my mind's eye dreams of, I never will.

Even though I regard Steamboat Rock as key to this week's experiences, images from the places I've visited today by car are still fresh in my mind, and I want to revisit them from the air—just to see, just to compare. We lift effortlessly up over the edge of the coulee—flying!—and out over farmland, heading east toward the Keller Ferry overlook. I love the way Dan Adams points out the farmhouses of the people he knows, telling me a little bit about the history of each family, and invariably finishing with "they're good people."

North now, over the edge of the farmland plateau, and as I look down at the highway turnout where I began the day, it's like having an out-of-body experience. I feel everything I felt this morning, twice over, more intensified, all in an instant, but this time I'm looking down from 500 feet on an earlier version of it all. Before I can begin to sort things out, the road falls away below us, and we're out over the Columbia.

Over the Columbia, where the ferry is just docking, and then north up the Sanpoil River. I want to photograph the dramatic granite cliffs I saw earlier, but we're flying into some weather. Storm clouds block the end-of-day light, and the rain begins, an inconvenience when you're flying without the doors on. So we turn east, hitting 5000 feet to get over the Kettle River mountains.

The last images of the day are looking south from the town of Hunters, the picturesque section of Roosevelt Lake that made me feel so melancholy earlier in the day. From a thousand feet up, you can see more clearly the bends of the long-established river that the lake replaced. From the highway, the river's sinuous shape is softened and muted by all the new water. But from the air the original shape seems to re-emerge, more suggestive than ever.

Back at the hotel, I lay out the rolls of film I've taken today and fuss over them, fondling them like little treasures, like a collection of precious rocks and seashells from one of those timeless childhood days at the beach.

Monday—Meadowlark, Raven, Dry Falls Lake

My last day in Grand Coulee. I linger over coffee and packing, and don't make it out to my final destination for this section of the trip until early afternoon.

I've come full circle, sitting at the bottom of the Dry Falls canyon that I admired so much the day I arrived. Perched on a twenty-foot pinnacle near Dry Falls Lake, I enjoy a late lunch, and wait for the sunlight to come out from behind the clouds. I'm facing north, toward where the falls once were. There's a strong wind from the southwest, stirring up the cloud cover and causing random blobs and splotches of light to rush across the canyon floor and sweep up the north wall. The changing light is making me crazy; just when I think I have something I want to photograph, the clouds move again and throw a flat shadow over everything. Plus I'm getting mayonnaise all over my camera.

Time to slow down, empty the mind, listen to the rocks and the critters. There's probably prairie dogs and lizards down here with me, and a lot of other animals too. But I key in on the birds, since that's what I'm used to looking at.

On a small pinnacle nearby, another meadowlark. The meadowlark's song is so loud, and so echoing against the circular canyon wall, that it's hard to believe this music can come from such a small instrument. And he's so close that when he sings I can see his chest feathers ruffle out. I've never seen this before, and suddenly this small detail renders me as emotionally raw as a baby getting ready to cry.

An unexpected treat among the gulls: the slender body, swept-back wings, and bright orange beak of a Caspian tern. A quail to my left calls, making a sound like a woman with a cold shouting "Ralph!" at a naughty child. There are scores of redwings around the lake, loud and raucous, constant and alive; and a raven flies by and lands in front of a shallow cave high on the cliff to my right. It must be this raven, or one of its kin, who is making the startling loud complaint, somewhere between a honk and a caw!, that echoes off the canyon wall from time to time.



Dry Falls Lake

Finally, I am calm enough to take pictures again, and I find my eye responding to the dappled sunlight. The quickly moving clouds, once an aggravation, now an aesthetic.

Finally it's time to go. A cheeseburger-deluxe and a double espresso, the road fuel of champions, and I'm winding the truck up out on highway 2, heading east. I'll stop in Spokane for a day of rest and recollection, and then head south to Pyramid Lake, near Reno.

I'm not sad or maudlin or sentimental, like I thought I was going to be there for a while earlier in the day. It's been an intense seven days, but I've finally had a chance to follow this river obsession of mine a short way, and found it to be worthwhile, and rewarding.

Even as my memory of the afternoon begins to fade like the end-of-day light at the bottom of Dry Falls canyon, I smile to myself, knowing it's not an ending by any means, just a good beginning.

Afterword

As the introduction says, the big coffee table book with essays and photographs about the Columbia was really just a cover story for an exploration of a different sort. Since that time, almost ten years ago now, I've turned my attention away from the Columbia and, at least as far as conservation and study goes, and am sticking closer to home. Nevertheless, the coffee table book is still sitting there in the back of my mind: a project that would bring the essay and the photograph together in a way that hasn't been done before. The subject is unclear at the moment—the Skagit Valley perhaps, or Puget Sound as a whole, or—something yet to come.

—Redmond, Washington
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