

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

B Street: The Notorious Playground of Coulee Dam. By Lawney L. Reyes.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hs8g890>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 34(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Schweninger, Lee

Publication Date

2010-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

B Street: The Notorious Playground of Coulee Dam. By Lawney L. Reyes. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. 184 pages. \$18.95 paper.

The genius of Lawney Reyes's new book is that it takes a close and very personal look at the subaltern side, as it were, of the consequences of the building of Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River. As any history book on the subject insists, the dam completed in 1941 had an immense impact during the final years of the Great Depression, by employing thousands of people who worked directly on the dam for several years and by indirectly providing employment for at least hundreds more who provided services to those dam builders. The dam continues to generate huge amounts of electricity and provide water for irrigating eastern Washington farmlands. What those same history books are not as likely to recount, however, are the details of the lives of the working people; nor are those books—whose titles include phrases such as *Our Promised Land*, *Harnessing a Dream*, or *From Pioneers to Power*—likely to detail the adverse effects the dam had on the lives and cultures of the Native Americans who lived in the areas to be flooded. For those accounts we can turn to Reyes's book, as well as Paul C. Pitzer, *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream* (1994); Richard L. Neuberger, *Our Promised Land* (1938); and Grand Coulee Dam Bicentennial Association, *From Pioneers to Power: Historical Sketches of the Grand Coulee Dam Area* (1976).

In addition to a few published monographs and several contemporary newspaper accounts, Reyes relies on personal interviews and his mother's diary for much of his history. He also brings to bear his own recollections: before being shipped off to an Oregon boarding school, he and his sister lived with their parents on B Street during its heyday. *B Street* is, in a sense, also an elaboration on a chapter in one of Reyes's previous books, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy: Learning to Be Indian* (2002). In this autobiographical account, Reyes devotes a few pages to his experiences on B Street in a chapter called "Surviving," and the idea of survival is central to his narrative in *B Street*.

Reyes begins his biography of "The Street" on the benches above the Columbia River well before the dam was ever even conceived of. "Over the centuries," he writes, "hunters and gatherers of different tribes quietly moved with the seasons, and other beings, like deer and coyotes, carved subtle trails along the ravine." All this was to change, however, once "white people came through the area." Those people, he writes, "would not believe that a community of others could live for centuries without disturbing the natural balance and beauty of this unusual landscape" (xx). Thus Reyes sounds a theme that will recur throughout his account of B Street: the indigenous peoples lived at peace and in harmony with the landscape and natural world, whereas the non-Indian settlers ravaged the land and destroyed the lifestyles and traditional cultures of any and all who stood in their way. The devastation peaked with the construction of the dam.

This somewhat unfortunate stereotype is reiterated several times throughout the book. To take one example, once construction on the dam has started, the people who were to be displaced "were disturbed and saddened as they watched huge machines and powerful explosions tear and

blow apart the beautiful landscape before them. Over the years, they had learned from their culture to love the land and treat it with respect. What they were witnessing now was foreign to them. They had not expected this. The wounding and changing of the greatest living being, Mother Earth, was unthinkable to them" (39).

Regardless of the extent to which he relies on stereotypes, however, Reyes convincingly demonstrates his contention that the landscape was radically and adversely altered by non-Indians. One of the most devastating and far-reaching results of the damming of the Columbia is what it destroyed forever: "there is another side to this story—the loss of what was once the greatest salmon run in the world. It is important to realize that construction of the Grand Coulee Dam cut off approximately eleven hundred miles of salmon spawning grounds" (143). The long-term cost to humanity of such losses is incalculable, especially because the perishing of the salmon irrevocably altered the livelihoods of the people whose lives centered on the fishing: "All could foresee the end of a way of life. Others knew that a tribal culture, centuries old, was on the verge of disappearing" (24). In addition to the loss of the salmon and the way of life that salmon fishing supported are the very literal losses of the towns and villages such as Inchelium and Kettle Falls.

Although Reyes frames his book with statements about and examples of the harsh realities of the devastating effects on the people as a result of the building of the dam, the center of the book actually concerns the ability of the people to survive. He devotes a chapter to the "working stiff," men who lived in crates, caves, or their cars, if they had them, while they worked on the dam. He describes the tough working conditions and the racist hiring practices and remembers the fatalities: "Men were injured or killed because of rocks, steel equipment, or tools fell on them. A few fell from the high cliffs. . . . Others were maimed or killed when they were run over by heavy equipment" (52). Years later, Reyes informs the reader, there would be a fence decorated by more than a hundred hard hats, a silent salute to the thousands of men who worked on the dam and "a reminder that seventy-seven workers had lost their lives during construction" (142).

Reyes also devotes a chapter to descriptions of the lives of the prostitutes, the "pretty ladies" as he calls them, who were attracted to B Street by the thousands of men who were receiving steady paychecks. As he does with the working men, he humanizes these workers. They are remembered as "honest, caring, and considerate," and Reyes's informants attest to their kindness to children and others (65). These women "considered themselves businesswomen," writes Reyes, some of whom "regularly sent money home to help support their families, while others saved much of their profits for the future" (76).

Throughout the accounts of the men and women who lived and worked in Grand Coulee during these years, Reyes weaves the story of his own family's experiences. His mother, Mary (Sin-Aikst), and his father, Julian (Filipino), were living in the town of Inchelium, which stood on the very edge of the Columbia, when news came that the dam would be built and that Sin-Aiksts, or the People, would be displaced. Alone among the residents of Inchelium, they moved to Grand Coulee and settled on B Street to work.

Reyes intersperses the details of the couple's successes as they start a Chinese restaurant, even though they knew next to nothing of Chinese cooking, with the trials that all went through at the time. He describes B Street, where his mother and father set up their restaurant business, as the lively and bustling place of muddy streets and poorly constructed buildings that were initially without electricity. Reyes comments on the stench resulting from the lack of storm drains and a proper sewer system. He points out that those "identified as Indians, especially the ones with darker skins" were not accepted on B Street (56). They were not allowed to drink alcohol in the taverns and were not allowed in the dance halls. He also recounts that initially neither African Americans nor dark-skinned Native Americans could get jobs on the dam, and when they did, they had the most menial of jobs and were the first to be laid off when work slowed.

But in addition to describing the segregation, racism, difficult financial times, and inevitable flooding of the homes, Reyes points out the successes: he reports that the restaurant thrived, and that Mary and Julian hired a Chinese chef named Harry. He describes how Harry became a very close family friend who took over when Reyes's parents sold the business to return to Inchelium. Harry is also successful, but he sympathizes enough to grieve "when he thought about what Grand Coulee Dam had done to Julian, Mary, and the children. . . . The construction of this mighty edifice had destroyed everything of value for them. It would take away their homes, their land, and their most valuable source of food, Kettle Falls" (136). In the face of the many reasons to grieve, however, as we see from the many success stories that Reyes intertwines, *B Street* is not merely a lament. It is also a testament to the ways that a family and a people found, and continue to find despite the setbacks, to survive.

Lee Schweninger

University of North Carolina–Wilmington

Copper Mines, Company Towns, Indians, Mexicans, Mormons, Masons, Jews, Muslims, Gays, Wombs, McDonalds, and the March of Dimes: "Survival of the Fittest" in and Far beyond the Deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. By Larry R. Stucki. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2009. 532 pages. \$44.95 cloth; \$34.95 paper.

The basic premise of Larry Stucki's work is that individuals, social systems, or societies seek to reduce entropy (disorder or uncertainty) in their environments: they seek to optimize their levels of environmental control. In that context, Stucki identifies factors that allow "human-created systems (e.g., companies, governments, religions, etc.)" to defy the odds and achieve long-term survival (vii). How, he asks, do social systems of varied complexity establish the control of crucial environmental elements (for example, social, political, economic, and natural) that ensures their longevity?