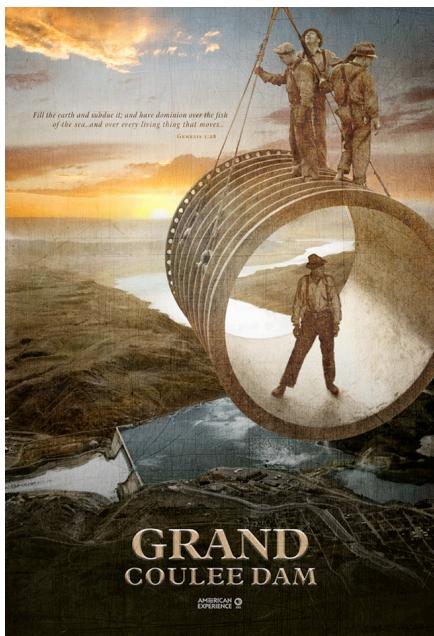


## AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Presents *Grand Coulee Dam*

Premieres Tuesday, April 3, 2012  
8:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m. ET on PBS

*New film reveals contradictory history of the dam that became  
a statement of American power and prestige*



During the darkest days of the Depression when construction was started on Grand Coulee Dam, everything about it was described in superlatives. It would be the “Biggest Thing on Earth”, the salvation of the common man, a dam and irrigation project that would make the desert bloom, a source of cheap power that would boost an entire region of the country. Of the many public works projects of the New Deal, Grand Coulee Dam loomed largest in America’s imagination, promising to fulfill President Franklin Roosevelt’s vision for a “planned promised land” where hard-working farm families would finally be free from the drought and dislocation caused by the elements.

Not surprisingly, the reality of Grand Coulee could never live up to its mythic image, the one celebrated by folksinger Woody Guthrie in his famous song, *Roll On, Columbia*. The dam was controversial from the start, opposed by the power companies in Seattle and Spokane, and by congressmen back East, who called the project a “White Elephant in the Desert” with no market for its power or irrigation.

Its prodigious output of electricity would trigger an astonishing transformation of the Pacific Northwest, fueling the burgeoning cities of Portland and Seattle. A closer look at the Columbia basin, however, would reveal the tragic casualties left in the wake of Grand Coulee’s massive spillway. The dam and reservoir had inundated whole towns, dislocated the tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation, submerged sacred Indian burial grounds and time-honored fishing sites, and obliterated one of the greatest natural fish populations in the world by denying Columbia River salmon access to their spawning grounds in the upper reaches of the river.

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL INSURANCE. MAJOR FUNDING IS PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION. ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR GRAND COULEE DAM IS PROVIDED BY THE KENDEDA FUND, THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING, AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.



ALFRED P. SLOAN  
FOUNDATION



Although the waters it captured would, in fact, generate seemingly limitless amounts of clean hydropower, and create one of the largest agricultural irrigation projects in the nation, the dam left a complicated and controversial legacy. In the end, the dam would be seen by many as a monument to noble ideals and unintended consequences.

Written and directed by Stephen Ives (*Seabiscuit, The West, Panama Canal*), **Grand Coulee Dam** will premiere on the PBS series **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE** on Tuesday, April 3, 2012 at 8:00 p.m. (check local listings).

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The idea for Grand Coulee Dam was born in 1918 in the dusty little town of Ephrata, Washington. Rufus Woods, editor and publisher of the *Wenatchee Daily World*, and other local boosters had hatched a plan for what then seemed like an impossible dream – a dam on the Columbia River next to a huge ditch carved out by floods thousands of years before, known as the Grand Coulee. At this one spot, the Columbia could be captured in a massive reservoir that would back water all the way up to the Canadian border. The water could then be pumped up over the river's canyon, and into the Grand Coulee, that would become a new reservoir. From there, the water could be fed southward by gravity and irrigate more than a million acres of good farmland. It was a remarkable vision, but because of its size and its cost, the project remained an elusive goal.

For more than a decade, competing power companies in the Northwest and Republicans in Congress objected to the idea of Grand Coulee Dam. Then the stock market crash of 1929 plunged the nation into a Depression, and scorching winds turned the western prairies into a dust bowl. The nation's new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was desperate for shovel-ready projects that could both employ large numbers of people and showcase the kind of government planning at the heart of the New Deal. With its combination of a vast irrigation project that would help small farmers work the land free from the vagaries of drought, and its promise of huge amounts of cheap public power, Rufus Woods's plan for the Grand Coulee Dam now seemed to make a great deal of sense. In June of 1933, Congress approved Roosevelt's Public Works Administration, giving the President wide latitude to begin a series of ambitious public works programs. In July of that year, FDR approved \$63 million in start-up funds for the Grand Coulee Dam.

While Grand Coulee Dam was touted as a visionary project that would transform an entire region of the country, to realize its Olympian goals, the dam's vast reservoir would destroy Native American communities, inundate sacred fishing spots and ancestral burial grounds, and erect an impenetrable barrier denying salmon access to their spawning grounds. The builder of the dam was the Bureau of Reclamation, the vast federal agency in charge of water projects in the West. The Bureau intended to relocate the communities affected by the dam and use fish ladders and hatcheries to try and protect the salmon population, but its plans proved ineffective, and some promises went unfulfilled. During the dark days of 1933, there was little consideration of the extraordinary changes that the Grand Coulee would have on

America's wildest stream – on its rapids and waterfalls, its fish and the native peoples whose world revolved around it. Rufus Woods and FDR's engineers and builders believed that they could achieve miracles with the Columbia. And they were ready to begin.

By July of 1933, thousands of hungry, desperate men had flooded into Eastern Washington, lured by the promise that Grand Coulee Dam would create as many as 100,000 jobs. More than 4,000 men eventually found work under a superintendent by the name of Manley Harvey Slocum, a hard-drinking, profane former iron worker, who had proven himself on dams in California and in the jungles of Panama. After diverting the turbulent Columbia out of its ancient streambed, the design called for Grand Coulee to be built in massive blocks, stopping the river using nothing more than the dam's enormous mass. Thousands of workers swarmed over the huge structure, working in shifts around the clock. By February of 1938, the foundation was finished. It would take millions of cubic yards of concrete to finish the job, but what was being called "the biggest thing on earth" was at last taking shape.

By the end of 1940, Grand Coulee Dam was nearing completion, but FDR and his New Deal were on the defensive. The President's attempts at balancing the federal budget during his second term had pushed the nation back into recession and unemployment had once again soared as high as 19%. To date, the dam had dislocated the Indians of the Colville Reservation, devastated the Columbia's salmon, and little else. 72 men had lost their lives on the project. It looked as though the critics of the dam had been right all along.

Then, just as the dam was nearing completion, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America was at war. Power from the dam helped make the aluminum used by the Boeing Airplane Company in Seattle which churned out a third of the planes used in the war effort, while in Portland, Grand Coulee's power brought 750 big ships to the high seas. In addition to these more conventional war industries, a large share of the dam's electricity also went to one of the Manhattan Project's most secret locations, an isolated spot on the Columbia called Hanford that produced plutonium for the atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, bringing the war to an end. Over the course of the war, Seattle and Portland's populations boomed and a regional economy that had once been dominated by fishing and timber now boasted an industrial base to rival other major American cities. *The Saturday Evening Post* proclaimed "the white elephant comes into its own," and the dam was now seen as "one of the best investments Uncle Sam has ever made."

Featuring interviews with the men who worked on the dam and families who lived alongside it, Native people whose lives were profoundly altered by it, and historians and writers who have sought to grapple with its many contradictions, ***Grand Coulee Dam*** explores the astonishing achievements and profound controversies that are part of the dam's legacy. At once a symbol of America's remarkable ability to dominate nature and rejuvenate an entire region of the country, it is also a cautionary tale about arrogance, our relationship to the natural world, and the price of progress.

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## **The Participants, in alphabetical order**

**Colleen F. Cawston** is the former Chairwoman of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.

**Blaine Harden** is the author of *A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia*.

**Steven Hawley** is the author of *Recovering a Lost River: Removing Dams, Rewilding Salmon, Revitalizing Communities*.

**Mary Henning** lived in the Grand Coulee Dam area during construction.

**D.C. Jackson** is a historian and author of *Big Dams of the New Deal Era: A Confluence of Engineering and Politics*.

**Ed Kern** was a worker on the Grand Coulee Dam project.

**William Lang** is a professor at Portland State University and the author of *Great River of the West: Essays on the Columbia River*.

**Margaret O'Mara** is a historian at the University of Washington focusing on the evolution of political institutions, the growth of cities and suburbs, the impact of economic globalization, and the emergence of high-technology economies.

**Paul C. Pitzer** is a historian and author of *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream*.

**Lawney Reyes** is a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes and the author of *B Street: The Notorious Playground of Coulee Dam*.

**Stewart Whipple** was a worker on the Grand Coulee Dam project.

**Richard White** is a historian, a past President of the Organization of American Historians, and the author of influential books on the American West, Native American history, and environmental history. He is the Margaret Byrne Professor of American History at Stanford University.

**Wilfred Woods** is Chairman of the Board of *The Wenatchee World* newspaper in Wenatchee, Washington.

## About the Filmmakers

Produced by	Amanda Pollack
Edited by	Adam Zucker
Story by	Rob Rapley
Telescript by	Stephen Ives
Directed by	Stephen Ives
Narrated by	Michael Murphy
Associate Producer	Lauren DeFilippo
Music by	Peter Rundquist
Cinematography by	Andrew Young
Assistant Camera	Kyle Kelley

**STEPHEN IVES (Director)** In his twenty years of work in public television, Stephen Ives has established himself as one of the nation's leading independent documentary directors. His landmark series *The West* was seen by more than 38 million people nationwide during its national PBS premiere in the fall of 1996, making it one of the most watched PBS programs of all time. Caryn James of the *New York Times* wrote that *The West* was "fiercely and brilliantly rooted in fact," and *The New York Daily News* called the programs a "breathtakingly beautiful series of films. . . that make riveting TV." Ives' documentary film *Lindbergh*, a portrait of the reluctant American hero Charles A. Lindbergh, premiered in the third season of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE on PBS in 1990. In 1987, Ives began a decade-long collaboration with filmmaker Ken Burns, as a co-producer of a history of the United States Congress, and as a consulting producer on the groundbreaking series, *The Civil War* and *Baseball*.

After the premiere of *The West*, Ives turned his attention towards contemporary films, producing a profile of the innovative Cornerstone Theater Company, which aired on HBO in the fall of 1999, and *Amato: A Love Affair with Opera*, a portrait of the world's smallest opera company which aired nationally on PBS in 2001 and earned Ives a nomination from the Director's Guild of America for Outstanding Directorial Achievement.

His profile of the 1930s thoroughbred Seabiscuit, which aired on AMERICAN EXPERIENCE in April 2003, won a Primetime Emmy award, and his PBS series, *Reporting America at War*, about American war correspondents, was described by *The Los Angeles Times* as "television that matters...a visual document of power and clarity." Since 2003, he has directed seven films for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: *Seabiscuit*, *Las Vegas*, *New Orleans*, *Kit Carson*, *Roads to Memphis*, *Panama Canal* and *Custer's Last Stand*.

**MARK SAMELS (Executive Producer)** Under Samels' leadership, the series has been honored with nearly every industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations, and Sundance Film Festival Audience and Grand Jury Awards. Samels also serves on the Board of Governors at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Prior to joining WGBH, Samels worked as an independent documentary filmmaker, an executive producer for several U.S. public television stations and as a producer for the first co-production between Japanese and American television. A native of Wisconsin, he is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

### **About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as "peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including 14 George Foster Peabody Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and 30 Emmy Awards, including, most recently, *Exceptional Merit in Nonfiction Filmmaking* for *Freedom Riders*.

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