

RUNWAYS & RECLAMATION

The Influence of the Federal Government on Moses Lake

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The history of Moses Lake is the story of a town affected by its geographic location and the impact of the federal government. Situated in the rain shadow of the Cascade Mountains, Moses Lake did not live up to the promise of the railroads that advertised it as "the Last Best West." Its eight-inch annual rainfall was far below the amount needed for dry land farming. Schemes for irrigating with lake water marked the town's earlier years and the actions of the federal government influenced its growth after 1940. Construction of an air base and the development of the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project brought growth to the town, allowing it to escape the fate of other farm service communities such as Batum, Schragg, Ruff and Wheeler.

The settlement of Moses Lake began in 1911 when little land was still available for homesteading. Optimistic newcomers to the Columbia Basin were lured into Grant County by the railroads and the government. Part of the area had been made available under the provisions of the Homestead and Desert Land Acts, and other land was offered for sale by the Northern Pacific Railroad.

The Brunder Family Blunder

Moses Lake, first known as Neppel, was founded by the Brunder family of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Brunders intended to create a planned community beside the lake. They hired German immigrant F. H. Nagle to develop the community and start the Grant Realty Company. Nagle laid out the streets, installed an electric generator, set up plants to pump fresh water from the lake, and constructed a hotel and wooden sidewalks.

The planned community envisioned by the Brunder family did not materialize. One reason was the failure of the town planners to keep the Scandinavian immigrants they had recruited to operate dairy farms near the town. These farms were to have furnished milk for the cheese factory that had been built across the street from the train depot. So optimistic were the Brunders about the success of their plan that they built and fully equipped the factory before the dairy farmers arrived. The cheese factory never opened because the recruited dairy farmers quickly moved from the area when they discovered the high price they would have to pay for pumping water from the lake. Another reason for the failure of the planned community was the fact that a battle over water rights left the Brunders high and dry when they tried to sell lots in the town.

A long legal struggle for water rights was waged among the Grant County Realty Company; the Brunder family's business in Neppel, and Ham, Yearsley and Ririe, the law firm representing Stade Orchard Tracts. This long-lived battle peaked during the land sale that the Brunders had

planned for Neppel in 1913. Prior to the sale flyers had been sent to all parts of the United States to advertise this "promised land" of irrigated farming. Prospective buyers had already begun to arrive in Neppel when signs appeared all over the town claiming that the water rights belonged to Ham, Yearsley and Ririe. As a result, not a single parcel of land was sold. The failure of the land sale did not stop the legal entanglement that lasted until the last partner, Wilbur Yearsley, died in 1929. The Moses Lake Irrigation District was formed in 1927 to regulate the distribution of lake water.

Despite the Brunder family's failure to create a planned community, the town of Neppel grew into a small service community for nearby farmers. By the 1920s there were approximately 350 acres of irrigated orchards along Moses Lake in the Cascade Valley. The large number of people pumping water out of Moses Lake led to other struggles over land claims and riparian rights.

If the lake was an asset to those who settled its shores, it was a barrier to those attempting overland travel. By 1905 a bridge allowed travelers to cross the lake, and in 1913 a high wooden bridge spanned the 1,300-foot narrows two miles southwest of Neppel. Each spring floods threatened to wash out the bridges, a dam and a road that crossed the lake on a dirt fill. Roads were also a problem for the early settlers around Moses Lake. Deep ruts became dry dust beds during the summer and mud holes in spring and fall. Tire repair kits and a spare tire or two were essential for any journey.

Electric power began to flow into Neppel in 1912 from a generator owned by the Grant Realty Company. It serviced about 50 customers plus the ten street lights along its five blocks of power lines. Until 1922 the plant operated only from sunset to midnight. It was then sold to the Washington Water Power Company, which converted it to 24-hour electric service.

Neppel's Struggle to Survive

The great depression ended two of Neppel's earliest industries. Apple orchards flourished on irrigation water from the lake, and carp were seined and shipped by railroad ice cars to New York where they were considered a delicacy. When prices plummeted, the orchards and fishing operations were forced to shut down. When the depression hit the rest of the nation in 1929, the Columbia Basin had already been experiencing it for ten years. Settlers who came to the area in the 1900s had been deceived by the land. Subsoil moisture had supported grazing and the first few years of farming, but when the moisture that had accumulated underneath the bunch grass evaporated, the settlers realized that they had penetrated too far into the semi-arid desert. The wind picked up the dry soil, causing severe dust storms. The summer and winter winds that whistled continuously through the flimsy homestead shacks ended the early dreams of area settlers much as the Dust Bowl of the 1930s ended the hopes of farmers in the southern plains.

By 1920 a large number of farmers had left the area, and Grant County's population had dropped 10 percent from its 1910 high of 8,700. During the 1920s the population fell by an additional 130 percent to around 5,600.

For those who remained, cash hardly existed in the area. Many families survived on as little as three dollars a week. The desperate situation is illustrated by the following letter written to Red Cross Headquarters in Ephrata, the Grant County seat.

Dear Sir:

We are in need of groceries and clothing. The bank foreclosed on us and took my cows, my horses, and car and machinery so please try to do something. Everybody says the Red Cross is going to help us again. So please try and let us know this time because we need it. No kidding! Does a person have to come to Ephrata or will they bring it to us? Let us know soon because we are in need please.

P.S.—Please let us know as soon as possible.

The dream of a federally funded irrigation plan helped some persevere through the drought and depression. The failure of earlier small-scale irrigation schemes led farmers around Moses Lake to look toward a large and improbable solution, the building of a dam at Grand Coulee on the Columbia River. During the 1920s and 1930s Neppel and Moses Lake citizens joined with those from the rest of the Columbia Basin in the struggle to promote construction of Grand Coulee Dam.

Social Institutions

Despite the drought, depression and difficult years that Neppel faced from 1910 through the 1930s, schools and other social institutions continued to function. Schooling was conducted in homestead cabins, and teachers were paid with funds generated from Washington's "Barefoot Schoolboy Law." This act, which originated with John Rogers and became law in 1895, the year before he was elected governor, provided funds for each child who attended a public school.

Homestead schools were eventually replaced with one-room schoolhouses. When Grant County was formed from a portion of Douglas County in 1909 it contained 96 school districts, 96 female teachers, 30 male teachers and 2,658 schoolchildren. Male teachers received \$69.84 monthly, while their female counterparts were paid \$64.10. Neppel school records date from 1913 when it was labeled School District No.116. At that time the district included the Plainview, Liberty, Moses Lake and Neppel schools, totaling 32 students and four teachers. The Neppel school had two rooms until 1921 when a two-room annex was added.

Newspapers chronicled the social life of towns and created a sense of community. The *Neppel Record* was published between 1912 and 1918 by the Whitman-Humphrey Press, which also printed newspapers in nearby Wheeler, Warden, Ruff and Beverly. All five of the papers carried the same news but were printed with individual mastheads. The Neppel paper actively promoted the "famous Moses Valley." Newspapers of neighboring towns, such as the *Ritzville Journal-Times* and Ephrata's *Grant County Journal*, also covered Moses Lake area news.

The social life of Neppel, like that of others towns of the era, included church and club activities. Homespun events such as country dances provided recreation for the pioneers. Dances held in the schoolhouse were popular Saturday evening diversions. Student desks were pushed back to make space for the dancers, and the teacher's desk was moved into a corner and loaded with pies and cakes. Entire families attended the dances, and as the children tired they fell asleep on the desks and were covered up with coats. At midnight the home-baked desserts were served, and dancing continued until dawn. The music was provided by community members playing fiddle, piano and drums.

In Neppel and the surrounding Moses Lake area the entertainment center was the local auditorium owned by Jack White. Dances there resembled those in the country, except that the

midnight lunches were cooked and sold by the Women's Club. Annual celebrations included Neppel Harvest Festival and Rodeo and the Independence Day Picnic held each Fourth of July.

Literary societies, another form of entertainment, usually met in school-houses. On literary nights various members would read poetry, conduct dramatic readings or perform plays. One example of a favorite literary activity was a mock wedding where the shortest woman played the part of the groom and the tallest man was cast as the bride.

The Fight for Grand Coulee Dam

With the failure of most private irrigation schemes and the advent of drought and depression, the people of Moses Lake and the surrounding Columbia Basin began their desperate fight for Grand Coulee Dam. Known as the "pumpers," their struggle was spearheaded in 1919-20 and after 1929 by James O'Sullivan, the single most important individual in the local battle to secure the dam. An opposing irrigation scheme, the Pend Oreille "gravity" plan, provided the pumpers with a healthy opposition. Reflecting on the fight for Grand Coulee Dam, O'Sullivan later commented:

You know, I kind of enjoyed fighting those fellows. They were so smart and so powerful and they had so much money, but basically they just didn't have a good project. A little bunch of pumpers down there in the sagebrush, with no money and no influence but with a really good project to promote, licked them to a frazzle.

The "really good project" O'Sullivan referred to was the plan to build a dam at Grand Coulee and pump water into the upper Grand Coulee, now known as Banks Lake, where it would flow by gravity through a series of canals and laterals to irrigate the arid lands of the dry Big Bend Desert.

The dreams of local residents began to come true on July 16, 1933, when United States Senator C. C. Dill lifted the first shovelful of earth for the construction of Grand Coulee Dam.

Transformation of Grant County

On September 9, 1938, the people of Neppel officially voted to incorporate the town and name it Moses Lake. The election established the mayor-council form of government, which remained in force until 1959 when a change was made to a council-manager system. At the time of incorporation the town's population was listed at 370; yet, by 1940 it had fallen to 326. That number remained stable until outside forces such as World War II and the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project brought newcomers into the area. The population grew rapidly, from 2,679 in 1950 to 11,299 in 1960. Growth slowed and leveled off in the next two decades. The population of Moses Lake in 1970 was 10,310 and 10,629 in 1980.

The transformation of Columbia Basin and Grant County agriculture began gradually in the 1930s and 1940s as "combined harvesters" replaced threshing machines and bulk grain handling replaced individually sewn sacks. The huge crews that once followed the threshing machines were no longer necessary.

In the mid 1930s a diesel tractor came on the market that was economical enough to replace the horses that had pulled the combines. Many Grant County farmers switched to the new tractors during the '30s and '40s. The move to mechanized farming eliminated the need for working farm animals, and many were sold at auction.

In the late 1940s self-propelled combines began to appear in Grant County fields. In 30 years the combine had evolved from a huge contraption requiring the power of up to 40 horses and seven men to a machine driven by a lone farmer who could adjust the height of the cutter, control direction of the combine and dump the grain unassisted. Their improved equipment did not diminish the farmers' need for more moisture, and they continued fighting for irrigation as they struggled to make a living.

The town of Moses Lake was affected only indirectly as dam building began. Workers who came through the town on their way north did not stay. Glenn Arnold, one of five publishers who had rushed to establish a newspaper in the mushrooming town of Grand Coulee, moved his operation to Moses Lake in 1941 to get away from the competition. Anticipating the development of the Columbia Basin project, including construction of the main canals and laterals, he began publishing the *Moses Lake Herald* on July 31, 1941. The newspaper, which became the *Columbia Basin Herald* the following year, was a source of great encouragement to businessmen who had not seen a local paper since the *Neppel Record* ceased publication in 1918.

A New Era of Farming

Construction of the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project began immediately following the end of World War II. Its completion in 1952 was marked by the "Farm-in-a-Day" event that began at 12:01 A.M. and continued until 11:30 P.M. on May 29. During that period 300 people worked to clear and level the land, build a house and out-buildings, and plant crops. The day became a full-blown media event covered by all major wire services, magazines, newspapers and newsreels of the day.

The completed farm was presented to Donald D. Dunn, "the nation's most worthy World War II veteran," who had been selected in a Veterans of Foreign Wars drawing.

Most of the land that eventually came under irrigation through the Columbia Basin Project was privately owned. The publicly owned acreage was distributed by lottery and intended for World War II veterans. In order to participate in the lottery veterans were required to fill out a five-page application, have farm experience, be physically and mentally fit, and have good character references and a net worth of at least \$3,700. The first drawing in which veterans had priority took place on November 15, 1948. Before the last lottery was held in 1967, 1,157 units had been sold for settlement.

Twentieth-century homesteaders in the Columbia Basin began by clearing the sagebrush and leveling the land to support rill or furrow irrigation. Rill irrigation was augmented by line sprinkler and circle irrigation as technology developed. Over 70 different crops were planted in the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project, including sugar beets, potatoes, wheat, alfalfa and seed crops.

The opening of the U & I Sugar company in Moses Lake in 1953, shortly after water began pouring through the irrigation canals, influenced farmers to plant sugar beet crops. The sugar crop brought a substantial migration of Mexican-American workers to toil in the sugar beet and other fields of the irrigated Columbia Basin Project. When the U & I plant closed in the 1970s large numbers of Mexican-Americans stayed on to make the Columbia Basin their home and to work in other sectors of the economy.

The Army Arrives

Before the Columbia Basin Irrigation project was completed, World War II had brought population growth to Grant County. Because of its sparse population the area had plenty of acreage available for the war effort. In 1940 the 2,680-square-mile county was home to only 14,668 people. When the United States entered World War II after the bombing at Pearl Harbor, the army suddenly viewed Grant County, with its treeless, flat land, as a good place to land planes, train pilots and conduct practice bombing runs.

Grant County's relationship to the Department of the Army began on April 10, 1940, when two lieutenants appeared in Ephrata to arrange quarters for troops building a bombing range in the south-central part of the county. Moses Lake Army Air Base, which was officially activated on November 24, 1942, began slowly, with 211 enlisted men and 10 officers on the site by the end of 1943. The first contingent of troops arrived in April 1944, and by June 21 the manpower of the Moses Lake base had expanded to 2,834.

The mission of the Moses Lake Army Air Base was to train 124 pilots each month to replace those lost in war. The official history of the base describes the chaotic beginning. The air base was short on supplies, civilians and repair services. The commander, personnel officer, air inspector and other key officers arrived late.

Nothing arrived on time. The instructors came before the trainees and had no one to train. The mechanics arrived before the airplanes and had nothing to fix. When troops arrived they found a shortage of more than just officers.

Another report read:

Field tables were more common than desks, chairs were a luxury, and a typewriter was a treasure to be kept under lock and key with such rarities as staplers, erasers, clips, scissors and thumbtacks.

Morale problems were compounded by the air base's isolation. Moses Lake, with its tiny population, offered little in the way of entertainment, and Spokane was a three-and-a-half-hour trip by road. It took seven hours to reach Seattle and twice as long to reach Portland. One of the airmen stationed at Moses Lake in 1944 wrote the following poem, "A GI's Impression," describing his feelings.

*Vast, bleak, empty craters of the moon,
clay-baked, desolate of life or vegetation,
unless the scrawny sagebrush
groping its roots between the glacial
scab rock can be called vegetation.
Such is Moses Lake Army Air base
situated in a shallow crater-like depression,
the rim meeting the sky vast distance away.
Between man and the horizon: Nothingness.
Over the rim: Civilization.
We take up where Lewis and Clark left off.*

The base trained pilots and combat crews for the B-17 Flying Fortresses; the instructors were seasoned flyers returning from wartime duty. When peace was declared and the Army Air Corps left the area, The Boeing Company moved onto the base, testing its B-47 and B-50 aircraft there

until 1948. The Air Defense Command then took over the base to protect the Hanford Atomic Works to the south and Grand Coulee Dam to the north.

Moses Lake Air Base was officially named Larson Air Force Base on May 17, 1950, in honor of Major Donald A. Larson, a World War II flying ace from Yakima who had been killed in action.

On April 1, 1952, control of the base passed to the Tactical Air Command (TAC), and the C-124 transports moved in. While it was a TAC base Larson became the scene of an aviation disaster. A Globemaster transport crashed during takeoff on December 20, 1952. Most of the airmen on board the early morning flight were on their way home for Christmas leave with luggage full of gifts for family and friends. The airplane was still on the ground when it reached the end of the 10,000-foot runway. When the pavement ran out, the plane lifted sharply and then settled. As it hit the ground the high-octane gasoline ignited, killing 87 of the 116 people on board.

During its time as a TAC base, Larson underwent its largest growth spurt. The runway was extended from 10,000 to 12,000 feet, and 1,330 housing units were built for married servicemen and their families. The Boeing Company constructed a flight center with huge hangars to house the B-52s it was testing.

On July 1, 1957, Larson Air Force Base was taken over by yet another command. The Military Air Transport Service (MATs) gained jurisdiction of the base and used it as a launching point for supplies and men headed for all parts of the globe. A task force of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) came two years later to prepare for one more transfer of the base command. SAC took formal control of the base on January 1, 1960. Two years after that Boeing shut down its Moses Lake operations.

On April 1, 1961, the 568th Strategic Missile Squadron was activated at Larson. Three Titan I Missile complexes were begun that year at the nearby towns of Barum and Warden, and on the Royal Slope. The Titan I, the Air Force's first two-stage liquid propellant-fueled intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) had a range of 6,000 miles. ICBMs had been operational for only a short while when the Department of Defense discontinued the project and deactivated the 568th Squadron on March 15, 1965.

Upon hearing that the new complexes were to be abandoned, residents of the Moses Lake area generated a flood of local schemes to make use of the silos. One suggestion was to utilize them for propane storage. However, not one of the proposals was implemented, and the complexes were stripped and sold for scrap.

Life After Larson

Larson itself saw its fate in 1964 when the Defense Department scheduled it for shut-down in 1966. This concerned residents of the Moses Lake community, which had literally grown up around the air base. Along with the Columbia Basin Project, the presence of the Air Force had turned Moses Lake into the marketing center of the area. During that time its population had grown from 326 to over 10,000.

The gloomy projections that accompanied Larson's closing did not materialize. In 1965 voters approved creation of a port district to make use of 4,500 acres on the former base and bring new industry to the area. They mounted an aggressive campaign to attract industrial

development into Grant County. Early success resulted in 1968 when Japan Air Lines was lured to train pilots on runways that had been built long enough to launch fully loaded bombers.

The availability of cheap electric power from the Grant County Public Utility District (PUD) and its location along Interstate 5 fostered the development of the area and the growth of the port district. Formed in 1938, the PUD took possession of the Washington Water Power Company's lines and equipment four years later. This takeover was made possible by passage of the 1930 PUD Act, which allowed the formation of public utility districts in Washington.

The presence of the air base had been a crucial factor in the decision to establish a community college at Moses Lake in 1962. When chosen for the site of Big Bend Community College, Moses Lake was a town of 10,000 people with a booming economy and a rosy future. At that time Larson Air Force Base was flourishing with approximately 4,000 airmen and a base population of over 10,000; the Titan missile silos were being constructed; Boeing was operating its flight test facility; the Wanapum and Priest Rapids dams were being constructed by the Grant County PUD; and the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project had turned Moses Lake into the primary farm service center of the area. The boom town also boasted a 50-bed hospital, built in 1955 to replace an 11-bed clinic constructed out of old army barracks.

Moses Lake profited from its connection with the federal government. Prior to that the town served solely as a supply center for the surrounding farmers. The arrival of the Army Air Corps in Grant County and the development of the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project linked the town with events occurring at the national level. The sale of the closed air base to the Port of Moses Lake and the subsequent use of its housing and runways allowed the city to remain economically viable. The Columbia Basin's agricultural productivity, along with the business attracted by the port, confirmed the City of Moses Lake's connections with the national and international economies. The relationship with Japan Airlines may foreshadow a link with the Pacific Rim that could define the future of Moses Lake, a town that has survived the challenges of drought and depression, military base and plant closures, and Washington's fluctuating economy.

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