

Water, Words, and Wars: The Aswan High Dam
Junior Individual Documentary
Erin Altenhof-Long

In considering the theme “Conflict and Compromise” I realized I had an amazing opportunity because I was taking a vacation to Egypt in November. The Aswan High Dam leaped out at me when I started searching for topics in Egyptian History that included Conflict and Compromise.

I started my research by looking at broad secondary resources: encyclopedias, reference books, and documentaries. Next I was able to interview a primary resource during my trip to Egypt, as well as tour the dam and nearby monument. From this basic knowledge and several primary interviews, I started to look for more specific primary resources such as newspapers, magazines and speeches. I wrote to the World Bank Archives, the editor of the Arabic/English newspaper Al-Ahram, the Cultural and Educational Section of the Egyptian Embassy in Washington D.C, the National Russian Library, the American Research Center in Egypt, the Princeton University Library: Near Eastern Studies Resources, and I emailed the head of the African Studies Department at Harvard University. Additionally, I visited local libraries, and found unique books through interlibrary loans. Quite soon it became clear that I had picked a topic that would not be easy to research, especially concerning primary sources from all parties involved in the conflicts/compromises, which would make my research balanced. I was easily able to find primary sources with American opinions such as newspapers, and magazines, but finding the Egyptian and Russian views was frustrating and slow. Still, I was able to find several books written by prominent Egyptians and to interview a second Egyptian resource.

I love the documentary medium, using pictures and video to enhance text, and I am not the type of person who loves to work in a group, so my category, individual

documentary, was cut out for me. After I reached a point in my research where I could create my own analysis of the conflicts and compromises surrounding the Aswan High Dam, I wrote the thesis statement that, “The building of the Aswan High Dam represented conflicts and compromises regarding Arab Nationalism, Water Management, and Human Resettlement.” Based on this, I outlined a script that would be the basis of my documentary.

My topic, the Aswan High Dam, was built out of the conflict between Arab Nationalism and British Imperialism in Egypt. Revolutionary Egypt needed a symbol of power; the Aswan High Dam fit that role. The quest for its financing led to yet another conflict when Western powers refused to help because of Egypt’s arms deals with Czechoslovakia, or more accurately the Soviet Union. Nasser responded by escalating the conflict when he nationalized the Suez Canal. This conflict grew when France, Britain, and Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. During the construction, Egypt compromised with the Sudan, and other Nile basin countries over water management, and land lost by the Nubian people. Lastly, many nations of the world compromised when saving the Nubian monuments. The building of the Aswan High Dam represented conflicts and compromises regarding Arab Nationalism, Human Resettlement, and Water Management.