

Echo Park Controversy

by Herm Hoops

Echo Park is in the heart of Dinosaur National Monument at the confluence of the Green and Yampa rivers. It is the most beautiful place on the planet—a place of bucolic wonder. It is also the site of the most significant conservation battle of all times. I developed this chronology of events to guide National Park Service and River Concession staff in interpreting Echo Park. Each event below is a piece of a puzzle, but missing in this chronology is the intrigue associated with the Echo Park controversy. For example, anti-communist sentiment and the national defense (power needs for uranium) "significance" of the dam caused investigation of several key dam opponents.

John Cosco's Echo Park and Mark Harvey's A Symbol of Wilderness cover the Echo Park controversy in depth. The following chronology is a good outline for river guides to use in sorting out the many, complex issues surrounding Echo Park.

Chronology of Events Dinosaur National Monument

The Early Years

1902—Bureau of Reclamation established. After passage of Reclamation Act of 1902, portions (the Lodore and Split Mountain areas) of the Green River within the present boundaries of Dinosaur National Monument were reserved as dam sites. The USGS placed a gauging station on the Yampa River near Cross Mountain.

1904—Preliminary report to the Bureau of Reclamation proposes a reservoir site at Brown's Park on the Green River with a possible dam location at the head of Lodore Canyon.

1909—After several years of drilling and finding poor foundation conditions, along with difficult access to the narrow rock gorge of Lodore, with the possibility of a project at Flaming Gorge, and the inundation of ranch lands in Brown's Park, the Brown's Park Project was abandoned.

1915—Dinosaur Quarry established as National Monument. The original 80-acre site was proclaimed by President Woodrow Wilson to preserve the extraordinary Dinosaur remains of the Jurassic Period.

1916—National Park Service established.

1920—Federal Power Commission (FPC) created. The Federal Water Power Act (FWPA) authorized the FPC to reserve sites, provide lease agreements and royalties to states, and to permit water development in publicly controlled lands; including national parks and monuments. President Wilson signed the Bill

reluctantly because there was no protection for national parks and monuments included.

1921—Congress amends FPC authorization to protect National Parks and Monuments. The Jones-Esch bill amended the FWPA of 1920 to exempt existing national parks and monuments.

1920s—Many ranchers around Vernal and Craig wanted Dinosaur National Monument expanded. They thought it would protect and provide better grazing.

—Bureau of Reclamation and Federal Power Commission began planning additional and larger projects.

1922—Colorado River Compact meeting of western state representatives. Fearful they might lose all control of water, they decide to hammer out a state rights oriented water agreement on the Colorado River basin.

—USGS crew makes topographic survey of the Green River from Rock Springs, Wyoming to Green River, Utah, in order to locate dam sites for power and irrigation and to collect data on water flow.

1928—Colorado River Compact completed and ratified by lower basin states (CA, AZ & NV). Hoover Dam construction began.

1930—Report from the 1922 survey indicated the site at Lodore Canyon was not feasible as a dam and reservoir site. But the head of Whirlpool Canyon, where the Green River leaves Echo Park was considered a good site. That site would create a 30-mile lake up both the Yampa and Green rivers with a storage capacity of about 580,000 acre-feet. The report listed advantages of the site as saving ranch lands, reduced evaporation loss from the reservoir, and flow regulation of both rivers. A second power site in Split Mountain Canyon was proposed with storage extending into Island Park.

Options discussed in this proposal included tunneling water from the dam to the mouth of Red Wash on the Green River. Decisions on these sites were delayed due to lack of ratification of the seven-state Colorado River Compact.

1931—A presidential Executive Order temporarily reserved 7,890 acres in the Split Mountain area for suitability as an addition to Dinosaur National Monument. The order stated the existing power withdrawals would not be interfered with. However, in a letter to President Hoover, the Secretary of Interior wrote: "It appears that the area covered by this proposed withdrawal may have greater public value from a scientific standpoint and for the administration of Dinosaur National Monument than for economic development..."

1933—Roger Toll, Superintendent for Yellowstone National Park and special investigator for new areas for the Director of the NPS submitted a report on the suitability, quality and importance of the Green and Yampa rivers for national monument status. The

report stated the scene was virtually unchanged from the days of Ashley and Powell and the desert had unusual scientific interest as an extension of southern deserts, lending itself to popular education of geology, erosion, archeology, botany and natural history subjects as well as having a fascinating historical background.

1935–Congressional amendment to the Federal Power Act excluded all national parks and monuments from power development, and reaffirmed amendment intent of 1921 for all national parks and monuments.

1936–NPS Director Conrad Wirth announces (in Vernal) opposition to an Echo Park dam.

1937–Interior Secretary, Harold Ickes, under pressure, approves building of Colorado/Big Thompson Project under Rocky Mountain National Park.

1938–Quarry at Dinosaur National Monument expanded to encompass canyons of Green and Yampa rivers (the wording of document was critical to Echo Park, and later issues.)

1940s–Bureau Of Reclamation (BOR) studies dam sites: Glen Canyon, Echo Park and Split Mountain would provide 68% of the storage and 70% of the power.

–BOR requested the NPS study the scenic, scientific and recreational resources of the Colorado Basin as part of a comprehensive plan to utilize water resources of the region.

1941–A BOR engineer described the Echo Park Site as "one of the brightest power prospects in the area." The BOR used the needs of the defense industry as a reason to call for immediate construction of power plants at Echo Park and Split Mountain. BOR officials claimed that the lake created by Echo Park Dam would become one of the biggest recreational areas of the West.

1945–BOR presented its comprehensive plan for water development on the Colorado River and its tributaries. The plan called for construction of Echo Park Dam at an estimated cost of \$43 million. The dam would back water up the Yampa 40 miles and the Green 60 miles, impounding about 2.5 million acre-feet of water.

–People of Craig, Colorado, thought of Echo Park as a Utah project and opposed the dam at Echo Park.

1946–The report of recreational resources of the Colorado Basin, completed by the NPS, was critical of the dam sites proposed within Dinosaur National Monument. The report stated the construction of the projects would adversely alter the dominant geological features, wilderness qualities, and the relatively minor archeological and wildlife values of the canyon to the extent that the area would no longer possess National Monument qualifications.

–Organized opposition began against the dam. The Carbon Co. Utah Associated Industries, representing the coal industry, was the first group to go on record

opposing Echo Park there was already a surplus of power!

1949–NPS Director Drury offers compromise: build Split Mountain Dam not Echo Park to save most scenic features in the monument.

1950–Department of Interior recommends building five high dams (Echo Park, Glen Canyon, Navajo, Whitewater, Flaming Gorge) and a large number of smaller dams (over 100 other dams including Split Mountain and projects from 1946 report). The report called Echo Park, along with Split Mountain and Glen Canyon the "wheel-horses" of upper basin development; providing 70% of the power and 68% of the water storage of the Upper Basin Project.

–Interior Secretary Oscar L. Chapman approved the proposal over National Park Service opposition. Chapman argued that the Echo Park Dam was more economical because of less evaporation and stated that this project would not set a precedent for other NPS areas. In the end, Newton Drury, NPS Director, resigned. Many protests were filed with President Harry Truman against Chapman's actions; the dilemma was postponed to a new administration.

–New York Times article alerted conservation groups (Izaak Walton League, Audubon and Wilderness Society) to the Echo Park issue.

1951–NPS Director Newton Drury resigns in a storm of protest.

Midlife Crisis

1951–Sierra Club takes first trip down Yampa with Vernal river runner Bus Hatch.

1952–Dwight Eisenhower elected president. Utah's Ezra Taft Benson, later to become President of the LDS Church, was named Secretary of Agriculture; Senator Arthur Watkins of Vernal, Utah was an advisor to the President on water and power issues. Governor Dan Thornton, of Colorado, was a close personal friend of President Eisenhower.

–Conservation organizations began taking regular river trips, David Brower begins working with Vernal businesses reminding them how much is spent by river trips (\$11,000 in 1952).

–Articles appear in media very regularly, Wallace Stegner's Beyond the Hundredth Meridian published, claiming that Powell would have opposed the dam. This is Dinosaur published and presented to all Congressmen by publisher Alfred Knopf. The battle took on a national audience, with opposition to the dam coming from conservation organizations, Congressional members from middle-western farming states, and national civic groups. Proponents of the dam were primarily from a regional audience, but even that was fractured with opposition from the coal industry and other special interests.

–California groups, including water groups oppose the dam spending \$111,000 for lobbying (Ironically they point out that only 15% of irrigation costs are borne by users, 85% subsidized by taxpayers).

–Former President Hoover comes out in opposition to Echo Park Dam.

–Tax payer group points out that (UT, CO and WY) will expend 15 million for the dam, while New Yorkers would pay \$123 million.

1953–Sierra Club lawyer Bestor Robinson, after a trip through Dinosaur contacted high interior officials (unauthorized), and recommended compromise (Split Mountain, Cross Mountain, Flaming Gorge and Glen Canyon instead of Echo Park).

–President Eisenhower approves project, states support to preserve national parks.

1954–upper basin states ratify Colorado River Compact.

–At Congressional hearing conservationists turned out in force with detailed facts and figures. It becomes public that BOR figures for evaporation rates of Echo Park Project were grossly inaccurate. Interior Secretary Douglas McKay was furious with the error.

–Corps of Engineers (U.S. Grant III) opposes BOR proposals.

–Congressional mail 9-1 against Echo Park Dam.

–House sub-committee approved project in May.

–Senate hearing: Devereux Butcher (NPCA) travels to Utah and finds many local misconceptions. Many thought they would get water from Echo Park, but the project was for power and not an irrigation project, others didn't know there were 30 other unchallenged sites.

–Senate committee approves bill containing Echo Park.

–Former Wyoming Governor Leslie Miller comes out in opposition to Echo Park Dam Project.

–1954 National Geographic article contained first (subtle) anti-dam message: comparison photos with an artist concept of the dam.

–U.S. House of Representatives mail running is 80 - 1 against Echo Park Dam. When 83rd Congress adjourned the bill was still on the floor, requiring new bills and hearings in the following session.

Surrender at the Point of Victory

1955–Congressional amendments to delete Echo Park from bill are introduced, but defeated.

–Coalition of groups announce opposition to entire upper Colorado Basin Storage Project. BOR managers and some politicians begin to fear the entire Colorado River development may fail.

–June: House sub-committee fearing they would lose the whole project deletes Echo Park from the bill.

–November: Congressmen and governors from CO, NM, UT and WY, agree to drop Echo Park from the bill

–November 30: Department of Interior drops support of Echo Park site. Interior Conservation Advisory Committee recommends a ban on dams on the upper Colorado River and reservations, national parks, monuments or conservation lands.

–Conservationists stop opposing the project and fall silent. Senator Albright (opponent) and leading conservationists sign document agreeing to support

upper Colorado River Storage Project, minus Echo Park, with amendments to protect NPS lands from encroachment.

–The proposed Echo Park Dam site deleted from the upper Colorado basin bill. The bill passes House and Senate and "not a soul raised an objection to the withdrawal of Echo Park"

–Conservationists felt the greatest battle since Hetch Hetchy (in Yosemite National Park) had been won. But construction of the Glen Canyon Dam was the trade off. The day Echo Park Dam site was removed from the upper Colorado basin bill, Interior Secretary Douglas McKay resigned.

A Stormy Horizon

1966 to present–Reserved water rights battle for the Yampa River within Dinosaur National Monument

1972–Senator Moss (UT) introduces a bill to delete the protection clause from Federal Power and Water Act of 1920 (exemption for national parks and monuments).

1980s–Tellico Dam controversy; Glen Canyon, Navajo and Fontenelle dams have structural problems; McPhee Dam completed on the Dolores River.

2000s?–Sandstone Dam, Juniper Dam, Cross Mountain Dam proposals

–Loss of federal water rights in the West

–Loss of Yampa River water rights within Dinosaur

–Animas-LaPlata water project a controversy

–Modification of NEPA, Endangered Species Act, etc.

–Loss of popular support for NPS due to excessive fees

Or

–Decommissioning of Glen Canyon Dam, Flaming Gorge Dam, Navajo Dam and McPhee Dam

–Support to retain federal supremacy in water rights

–Recovery of water project real costs through user fees

–Reaffirmation of NEPA, Endangered Species Act, etc.

–Recanting of excessive user fees imposed on private and commercial river runners and increased interaction and support between these groups

In opposing Echo Park Dam people gave up careers and income and in many cases were personally shattered; some never recovered. Belief in their cause, and its high and noble purpose led to lifelong dedication.

As a member of CPRG and the River Community what will you do to participate in the future of rivers within the Colorado Plateau? ☼