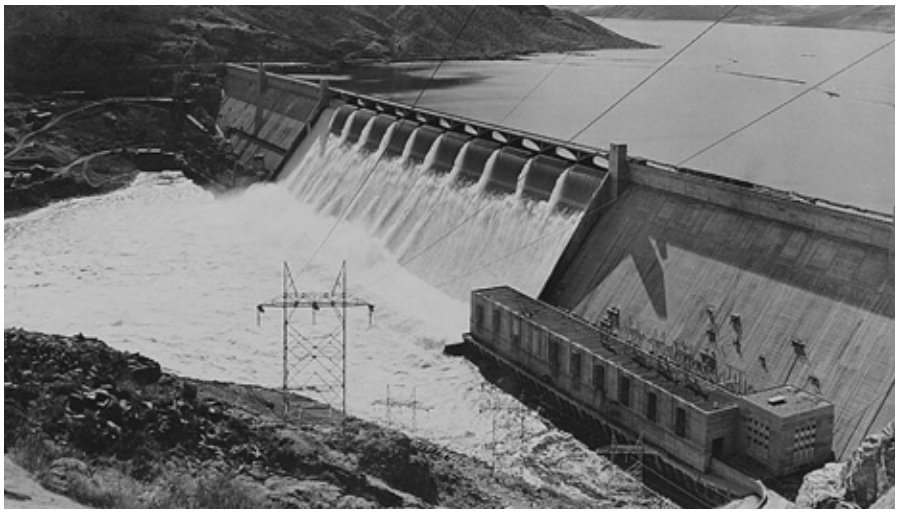
DAM(N)!

Prepared for the Literary Club of Cincinnati
by Jerry Kathman, Club Trustee
June 13, 2016



The Grand Coulee Dam in Washington State as pictured in 1941, after completion.

She heads up the Canadian Rockies where the rippling waters glide,
Comes a-roaring down the canyon to meet the salty tide,
Of the wide Pacific Ocean where the sun sets in the West
Grand Coulee country in the land I love the best. …

Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of 'thirty-three,
For the farmer and the factory and all of you and me,
He said, "Roll along, Columbia, you can ramble to the sea,
But river, while you're rambling, you're gonna do a little work for me."

Now in Washington and Oregon, you can hear them factories hum,
They're making chrome, they're making manganese and light aluminum,
And there roars the Flying Fortress gonna fight for Uncle Sam,
Spawned along Columbia by the great Grand Coulee Dam.

Well, the world has seven wonders that the trav'lers always tell,
Some gardens and some towers, I guess you know them well,
But now the greatest wonder is the Uncle Sam's fair land,
Spawned along Columbia it's the great Grand Coulee Dam.

Damn! These lyrics fired a young boy's imagination. Like many an adolescent of my generation, I went through a phase where I found myself fascinated by the work of singer/songwriters. Unlike most of my peers, fifty years on, I am still stuck in that phase. For me these lyrics represent the best of the song-writing craft—dense with meaning, wit, a splash of bravado and teeming with optimism. Songs teach us about other times and places—and they help us understand our world today as well.

But this is not an essay on the songwriting craft. And yes, it's a Woody Guthrie tune, but tonight I will not read another insufferable paper about Woody's life (as I did a few years ago). Rather tonight, I explore the subject of this song, the Grand Coulee Dam, "the mightiest thing ever built by a man"—how it came to be, what it promised to be and what it, in fact, became. Woody Guthrie's lyrics brilliantly set the stage for the ideas I hope to develop in my time with you tonight. What can this song, "The Grand Coulee Dam," teach us?

Beyond the construction of the dam itself, I will examine the era when the Grand Coulee Dam was conceived and built. It was built in the midst of the Great Depression, a time when a benevolent "Uncle Sam" was a friend capable of great, even heroic things, building parks and monuments, harnessing nature and yes, going on to win the war—crushing the Germans and the Japanese, and creating the promise of Pax Americana.

At the time the song was written, the nation was still intoxicated by the spirit of Manifest Destiny. We had conquered the west and we were now harnessing its natural resources.

We now refer to the folks doing all of this work as the "Greatest Generation." Some members of this generation

are at this gathering tonight. We continue to honor you and take inspiration from you.

In today's time of collapsing infrastructure, unmoored foreign policy and contempt for the governing class, it's a challenge to imagine ourselves back in that era when we, with a guiding hand from Uncle Sam, could do anything. We managed to dig ourselves out of a great economic collapse, dig canals and dams, win the war and once all of that was done, settle down and start a massive boom in the production of babies—which, by the way, included your reader. (As an aside, I'm not convinced that family formation was on the minds of the returning soldiers and sailors. I suspect that babies were simply the consequence of what was really on their mind—but that is a topic for another paper on another occasion.)

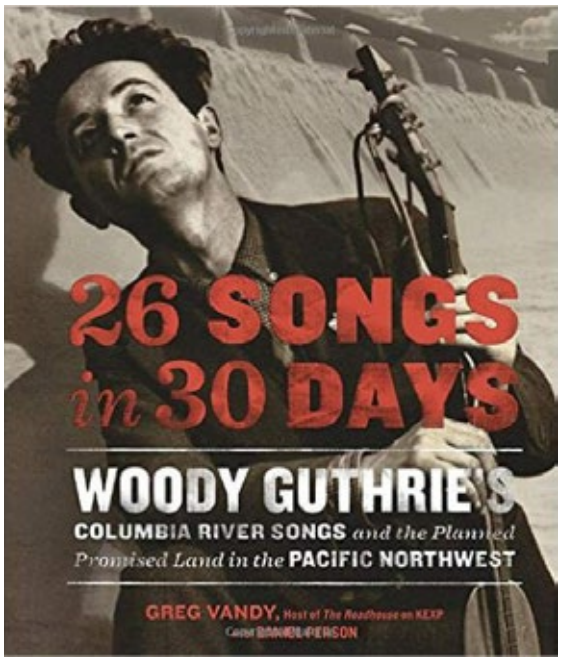
So we might start tonight by asking, "what's so grand about the Grand Coulee Dam?" In the 1950s the American Society of Civil Engineers identified seven engineering wonders of the United States. Selection-committee members looked at uniqueness and pioneering design as their main criteria. They selected Chicago's Sewage Disposal System, the Colorado River Aqueduct, the Empire State Building, the Panama Canal, the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, the Hoover Dam and the Grand Coulee Dam.

Including the Grand Coulee Dam was hardly a surprise. The popular press had by then dubbed the Grand Coulee Dam "The Greatest Structure in the World," "The World's Greatest Engineering Wonder," "The Eighth Wonder of the World" and "The Biggest Thing on Earth." Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the dam generated sensational nationwide publicity. Richard L. Neuberger wrote in 1942, "Everyone in America has heard of Grand Coulee."

That was not accidental. The publicity was deliberate, strategic and multifaceted. In fact, the lyrics to the song

“Grand Coulee Dam,” which I read to open this paper, were penned by Woody Guthrie in May of 1941 when he spent a month as a federal employee hired to travel through Grand Coulee country writing songs to promote the huge hydroelectric dam on the Columbia River.

Hiring Woody was a seemingly odd choice. The government was facing significant opposition from private utilities in the area, and a fellow named Paul Raver at the Bonneville Power Administration, the public entity building the dam, had a notion that folk songs would prompt more public support. Alan Lomax, the great folklorist and director of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, recommended Guthrie for the job.



Woody Guthrie wrote 26 songs in 30 days--including classics like “Roll On Columbia” and “Pastures of Plenty”--when he was hired by the Bonneville Power Administration to promote the Grand Coulee Dam.

Last year, National Public Radio interviewed Elmer Buehler, now 96 years old, who was assigned to drive Guthrie around the Pacific Northwest in a brand-new 1941 Hudson Hornet to learn about the dam and the region while searching for songwriting inspiration. Buehler recalls the day Guthrie auditioned: “He sat there on the administrator’s desk … and strummed on his ‘geetar’ as he always said. I don’t think he was there over half an hour and Dr. Raver said ‘well, you’re hired.’”

Guthrie was paid the princely sum of $266.66. When the month was over, Woody had written 26 songs, including the classics “Roll on Columbia,” “Pastures of Plenty” and,

of course, “Grand Coulee Dam.” A number of the tunes were recorded in the basement of the agency’s headquarters.

Guthrie’s work captures the spirit of the period, harnessing the power of nature to help the common man. No consideration whatsoever was given to the fate of the salmon or, for that matter, the impact on the native people whose way of life, which relied on that salmon, was destroyed by the construction of the dam. Rather, the song’s promise of irrigation, shipping and electricity would lift the people up and, by the way, help win the war. As is our nation’s way of recording history, we choose not to dwell on inconvenient truths.

So what’s the true story of the Grand Coulee Dam? Was it the “Eighth Wonder of the World” or rather was it a colossal example of government overreach and misplaced promises? Some believed that there was no end to the good things that came from building the dam. It was an elixir for the economic ills of the Great Depression and it made the dessert bloom. The boosters gave little heed to the darker notion that it was an act of cultural savagery against the Colville Tribe whose ancient rites and rituals vanished with the rising water of the dam’s reservoir. One opponent, an anthropologist who had lived on the Colville Reservation in the 1920s, was stunned by the effect of the Grand Coulee Dam. It was built with what he saw as “a ruthless disregard for Indians as human beings.” The blockaded river “drowned the native culture it had long nourished.”

Chiefs of the Colville Indian Reservation gathered to witness the completion of the Grand Coulee Dam.

Both sides had valid points. In the end, things worked out pretty well for the dam boosters, though it took a war to clearly tip the cost/benefit balance in their favor.

Let's spend some time thinking about rivers and dams. William Lang, a historian, writes "A river is the most dynamic thing in nature. To dam a river is the most audacious thing a human being can do." Whether or not those claims should go unchallenged, I think we can agree that dams have served as a powerful force in human history. First, a clarifying definition is perhaps warranted. What exactly is a dam? A dam is a barrier that impounds water. Other structures such as levees, dykes or floodgates are used to manage water, preventing or enabling the flow of water into a specific area. Dams, in addition to impounding water, also store water for distribution to other locations. Hydropower is often used in conjunction with dams to create electricity today.

The word itself is from Middle Dutch, thus giving names to cities such as the capital of the Netherlands, Amsterdam, at the site of a dam on the river Amstel, as well as Rotterdam, at the site of a dam on the river Rotte. The central square of Amsterdam, the location of the original 800-year old dam, is still called "Dam Square," or simply "the Dam."

Dam building began in Mesopotamia and the Middle East. The earliest known dam is in Jordan, northeast of the capital Amman. The Jawa Dam dates back to 3000 B.C.E. The Sadd-el-Kafara Dam in Egypt near Cairo dates to 2800 B.C.E.

In the third century B.C.E., a rather complex system of water management including reservoirs, channels and dams for collecting and storing water was built in India.

Romans, known for their engineering marvels, constructed dams on a grand scale. They introduced the civilizing concept

of large reservoir dams which provided a reliable year-round water supply, enabling urban settlements to survive the dry season. Their innovative waterproof mortar allowed for much-larger dams than previously built, including the Lake Homs Dam and the Harbaqa dam, both in Roman Syria.

Romans made routine use of all known types of dams, including masonry, gravity dams and embankments. They innovated to include arch dams, arch-gravity dams, buttress dams and multiple-arch buttress dams.

Not all dams are the result of human activity. Natural causes, landslides for instance, create dams. Wildlife, beavers being the most infamous, make dams as well.

Today, a number of distinct structural types can be found. The most beautiful structure, many would argue, is the arch dam, where stability is obtained by a combination of the arch and gravity. The most desirable location for an arch dam is a narrow canyon with steep walls of solid rock. The Hoover Dam is the most famous dam of this type and arguably the most famous dam in America. Though smaller than the Grand Coulee Dam, the spectacular beauty of the setting and its proximity to Las Vegas make it a popular tourist destination.

The Grand Coulee is a gravity dam. The force that holds the dam in place against the water is earth's gravity, pulling down the mass of the dam. The engineering challenge is to ensure that the dam is heavy enough to win the battle with the force of the water. The toe of the dam must be sunk deep enough in the earth so that it does not slide forward.

As in the case of the Grand Coulee, a gravity dam often proves to be the most effective type of dam. Though not as beautiful or perhaps even "heroic" in appearance as arch dams, gravity dams are thought to represent the best and safest type of dam building.

Here's where the Grand Coulee Dam comes into its claim as the "mightiest thing ever built by a man." The Grand Coulee Dam is the largest concrete structure ever built—not just the largest dam—the largest concrete structure of any type ever built. This claim was first made in 1941 and remains true today, 75 years later.

In 1936, three years after construction began, the Columbia River still was flowing over the foundation of Grand Coulee Dam. By 1938, the rising dam would block the river.

Several other dams in the world are larger, including the recently completed Three Gorges Dam in China, but they include earthen berms. So when it comes to concrete, the Coulee is king.

But no more about the structure of the dam. This is not a paper simply about an engineering feat, it is about us as people and how we've changed since the era of the Grand Coulee Dam. In some ways we are diminished as a people—our dreams are petty, not grand. Today in our local community here in Cincinnati, we can't even come up with a viable plan to replace an obsolete bridge across the Ohio River, a bridge that all politicians and business leaders agree is vital to our region's commerce.

So it is perhaps instructive to look back, albeit somewhat wistfully I confess, to a time when we built big things, things that inspired wonder. How did it happen then and why can't it happen now? Let's visit some history and at least find out why one of those big things, the Grand Coulee Dam, came to be.

First of all, why the Columbia River? As Woody tells us, the Columbia headwaters are found in the Canadian Rockies. The river courses thru a barren landscape for 1,200 miles, draining a watershed of more than 258,000 square miles, south into the United States and then west cutting through the Cascade Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. It is one huge, wild, free-flowing river. It's the largest river in the west, much larger than the Colorado.

After running some of its terrifying rapids, the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were filled with both hatred and awe for the river, using words like "horrid", "incredible," and "inconceivable" to describe it.

So where did the idea to dam this wild river come from? The first notion to dam the Columbia Plateau came in the 19th Century when the Coulee City News reported a scheme by a man named Laughlin McLean. Laughlin dreamed of diverting the flow of the Columbia into the bone-dry Grand Coulee, thus irrigating what would become viable farmland. Nothing ever came of it.

In 1918 Rufus Woods, the publisher of the Wenatchee World Newspaper began to promote the idea once again. Woods was a bit of a character. Before running the paper, he was a part-time schoolteacher, a failed attorney and veteran of the Alaskan gold rush. Woods, along with attorneys Billy Clapp and James O'Sullivan from nearby Ephrata, are considered the fathers of the dam. All three were active and enthusiastic promoters. They suggested that if nature once blocked the Columbia River with an ice dam that forced water into the then fertile, now-dry Grand Coulee, man could do it again with concrete.

O'Sullivan also saw the potential of hydropower. In an article he wrote in the Wenatchee World Newspaper, he noted, "The revenue from the sale of the electric energy alone would

surely pay all the upkeep, interest on the investment, and provide a sinking fund for the liquidation of the cost of the project." The era of hyperbole had begun.

Richard White, historian, explains it this way, "To understand the promoters of the dam, you have to realize that they thought about electricity the way the public today thinks about the Internet. This is not just a technology. These are machines that are going to transform society itself."

A number of studies were commissioned in the 1920s endorsing the construction of the dam as the promoters envisioned it. Other studies recommended simply diverting water farther upstream and irrigating the area thru the construction of canals, a much-cheaper alternative. Both ideas had staunch advocates.

In 1932 Roosevelt was elected president, and with the nation reeling from the Depression, the Grand Coulee Dam project offered the promise of employment in addition to the benefits of irrigation and hydropower. The Grand Coulee Dam was suddenly a potential example of the New Deal in action. As Woody's lyrics tell it:

> Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of 'thirty-three,
> For the farmer and the factory and all of you and me,
> ... "Roll along, Columbia, you can ramble to the sea,
> But river, while your rambling, you're gonna do a little work for me."

By the way, it was around this time that scorching winds had turned parts of the drought-ravaged West into a dust bowl. The dark clouds of the dust blow actually brightened the prospects for the Grand Coulee Dam.

Even Roosevelt balked at the initial cost estimate of $450 million. (More than the Panama Canal, he noted.) He recommended a low dam, 150 feet tall instead of the proposed 550-foot project. As Woody's song tells us, construction began in 1933. The early work focused on the foundation, which could support any size dam. By 1935, the plans were upgraded and the original high dam was under construction. Roosevelt's New Deal policies supported the concept of multipurpose dams: power generation, irrigation, recreation and even flood control. The lower dam would only generate 1/8 of the power of the high dam.

Washington State governor Clarence Martin supported the high dam and he reluctantly agreed that it should be a federal project, although he and his Republican colleagues choked on the idea that a Democratic administration should take over "their" dam.

The federal project not only conformed with New Deal principles, but it satisfied Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes' conviction that public relief projects should help the nation's recovery while creating something of value that would pay for itself. The Grand Coulee Dam met all the tests. And perhaps even more shockingly, in time, it actually did pay for itself! Hyperbolic claims sometimes turn out to be true, even if it takes a world war to make them so. More on that in a minute.

As you might imagine, building "the mightiest thing ever built by a man" was an enormously complex undertaking. By July of 1933, thousands of hungry men flooded into eastern Washington lured by the promise of work on the dam. Many rode boxcars from other parts of the country. They slept in the street, they slept in caves near the town and they slept in their cars if they had them.

Grand Coulee Dam workers.

Ed Kern, a dam worker, described it this way: “Well, see the Depression was so bad, ya know, I was just outta high school. I was still 19 years old. And, well what was there to do? I walked down there and, hey, there’s a whole block of people waiting ahead of me, see. Trying to get on. So I just waited and waited and waited, and finally my turn came. He looks at me, he says, what can you do? Are you a carpenter? No. Are you a welder? No. Trade? No. Well then we got nothing for you but labor. That’s when he put me down with the rock gang. He said, it’s going to be hard, hard work.” Mr. Kern soon learned that he had been accurately warned.

The construction site was hundreds of miles from the nearest town. There were no decent roads or rail connections. Soon, however, the “biggest thing on earth” began taking shape.

The work was not only hard, it was dangerous. For every thousand cubic yards of concrete poured, or million dollars expended, men paid with their lives. They were knocked off the steep walls of the foundation and impaled on rebar, drowned in the frigid waters of the Columbia or, in one

horrible incident, ripped apart by a heavy conveyor belt. By the time the foundation was complete, 60 men had died. In the midst of the Depression, there were always new workers to take their place.

And they kept on coming, completely transforming the area around the dam. In the canyon, closest to the river, the Bureau of Reclamation had erected two all-electric, model communities for their skilled employees. Called Engineers Town and Mason City, they boasted houses with carefully tended lawns, tree-lined streets, flower-growing contests and laws against drinking.

Grand Coulee Dam workers.

But up in the hills, beyond the western edge of the canyon, the mass of common laborers, who were mostly single, found what lodgings they could in the raucous and ramshackle boomtown of Grand Coulee, which featured a larger collection of saloons and brothels than any other town in the West.

In the summer of 1934, after construction began, the Grand Coulee Dam received a surprising visitor, President Roosevelt. According to Blaine Harden who wrote about the occasion, “It was completely unexpected for the President of the United States to come to this godforsaken corner of Washington State, when there was almost nothing to show for it. There was just dust and a hole in the side of the river. But he was there to talk about what could be and what this big project represented as part of the New Deal.”

“We are going to see with our own eyes electricity made so cheap that it will become a standard article of use not only for manufacturing but for every home,” proclaimed the President, with his wife Eleanor looking on. “I know that this empty desert country is going to be filled with men, women and children who will be making an honest livelihood and doing their best to live up to the American standard of living and American standard of citizenship.”

Harden states, “Roosevelt talked about it as sort of planting a seed for a new future for that region and for all of the West. He looked on it as, as the perfect symbol of what he was trying to do. Look at all these men who have jobs,” he said, “Roosevelt said this while sitting in the back of an open roadster, surrounded by dust and not much else.”

President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated Bonneville Dam on Sept. 28, 1937.

Mary Henning, a Grand Coulee resident, was ten years old when Franklin Roosevelt came. “This hillside was just covered with people that came from all over. We’re in the midst of this terrible Depression and, I mean, here you are in this open field and … the cars and people were just everywhere. And they were so excited. The idea that there was going to be some employment, there was gonna be something to do and there was gonna be a paycheck. Of course we believed in

Franklin D. Roosevelt. We just knew something wonderful was going to happen."

By January of 1935, the Grand Coulee Dam had truly become the epic public works project that its boosters had promised. 2,500 men worked on the dam, with hundreds more pouring in every month.

On May 22, 1941, after eight years of construction, the Grand Coulee Dam began producing power. Within the year the United States would be at war, quieting the dam's many critics who derided the colossal dam in the middle of nowhere and whose only customer, according to one congressman, would be "sagebrush and jackrabbits."

The "White Elephant Comes Into Its Own," announced the Saturday Evening Post, admitting that the dam had gone from a magnificent daydream into "one of the best investments Uncle Sam has ever made."

Blaine Harden states "the critics of Grand Coulee Dam, from the engineers on the East Coast, to some critics in the press, to Republicans in Congress all shut up because all of a sudden you could see that this was a strategic godsend for the war effort."

Steven Hawley, another writer states "Roosevelt and his boosters looked like geniuses. It was really one of the most amazing coincidences in American history."

Quickly the major consumer of Columbia electricity became the aluminum industry. The aluminum industry was critical for the war effort. We needed it for those Flying Fortresses that Woody sang about. It takes huge amounts of electricity to produce aluminum and the Columbia was suddenly producing huge amounts of electricity.

B-17 Flying Fortress
Warbird airplane

Grand Coulee's turbines helped the Boeing Airplane Company in Seattle churn out a third of the planes used in World War II, as many as 16 Flying Fortresses a day.

More intriguing was Grand Coulee's so-called "secret load," a huge amount of electricity funneled to an isolated spot on the river called Hanford.

The site was one of the Manhattan project's most cloistered places, home to 51,000 people and built to produce plutonium for the atomic bomb. It sprang up from the desert in less than six months to become the fourth largest city in Washington.

Richard White, a historian, explains "Hanford itself was selected because it was largely in the middle of nowhere. Planners for creating an atomic bomb loved it because it's isolated, it was on a river with abundant cold water, and there was abundant electricity. There couldn't have been a Hanford Nuclear Works facility without the Columbia River and, of course, the Grand Coulee Dam."

The workers at Hanford knew they were working on the war effort, but they had no idea what they were actually

producing. And it was only when the atomic bomb was dropped that they learned what they had done.

The stunned Hanford workers discovered that the plutonium they had produced had been used to fuel the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, bringing World War II to an end. So the Grand Coulee supplied electricity

to the war effort, servicing the region's aircraft and aluminum industries—and also the Army's top-secret nuclear facility in nearby Hanford. Quoting Woody again, "And there roars the Flying Fortress gonna fight for Uncle Sam, Spawned along Columbia by the Great Coulee Dam." Woody, of course, knew nothing about Hanford.

Government publicists and patriotic news reporters at the time hailed the Grand Coulee Dam as almost single-handedly winning World War II for the allies. I suspect Churchill, Stalin and the 16 million Greatest Generation Americans who served our country in uniform might be surprised to learn that.

But the boosters were not willing to let up on the hyperbole. Even after the war ended, vice-presidential candidate Earl Warren remarked "Probably Hitler would have beaten us in atom-bomb development if it had not been for the hydroelectric development of the Columbia, making possible the big Hanford project which brought us the bomb."

Damn! Note, of course, that he was running for office when he said it.

In our cynical age, where hyperbole is not fashionable (unless, of course, you are supporting a certain pathologically insecure real-estate developer for president), we turn more comfortably to the measured conclusion of Paul C. Pitzer, who in his book, Grand Coulee Dam: Harnessing a Dream, published in 1994, states more modestly,

> Grand Coulee Dam's contribution augmented those of the Hoover Dam, the Tennessee Valley Authority dams and other hydro and non-hydroelectric projects nationally … Grand Coulee allowed the government to produce aluminum and run Hanford while not disturbing the day-to-day lives of most Americans. The government could have diverted power from domestic uses but Grand Coulee, among other projects, made this unnecessary. Except for inconveniencing the civilian population, little would have changed had Grand Coulee not existed during World War II.

Damn! Well that's certainly a little deflating. Facts are sometimes stubborn and unwelcome things, aren't they?

Let's return quickly to Woody's time and explore further one specific aspect of the social history the song conjures—our attitude toward government during the era the Grand Coulee Dam was built.

As I stated earlier, I'm particularly taken by the way Woody used the kindly term "Uncle Sam" when he referenced our government. "Uncle Sam" is certainly a quaint expression—not something we hear all that often these days. When I cried out "Damn" at the beginning of this reading, it was my visceral reaction to the jolt that Woody's song sent through me. How I envy someone who lived with that optimism. I look back and I'm fascinated by those times, when a different sort of social contract existed between the government and the governed. I personally believe, as a people, we occupied a pleasant middle ground between the ideas of Karl Marx and Ayn Rand. At least for a while Roosevelt redefined the balance between the individual good and the collective good.

I do not stand here assuming everyone tonight agrees with me. For some in our club, I know that municipal fire departments are evidence of creeping socialism.

In Woody's tune, Uncle Sam has our back. The role of government is unapologetically to help us get thru a rough patch. The kindly uncle character was an excellent expression of the affirmative function of government—not a nanny, a pejorative British term for government cuddling—just a kindly uncle.

Woody spoke of Uncle Sam frequently in his songs. In the second stanza, "Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of 'thirty three." In the next verse, "And there roars a Flying Fortress gonna fight for Uncle Sam." And finally, "Now the greatest wonder is in Uncle Sam's fair land." The belief in a benevolent role for the federal government is implicit and expected in Woody's worldview.

The use of allegorical figures to represent nations goes back to classical times. Uncle Sam, as an endearing personification of the American government, has a long, noble history going back over 200 years. The Uncle Sam character followed earlier personifications of our nation, most notably Columbia, which began in the 18th Century. Columbia is derived from the Latin for "The lands of Columbus."

According to legend, Uncle Sam came into use during the War of 1812, and some say was named for Samuel Wilson, a meat packer from Troy, New York, who supplied rations for the American troops. He labeled his goods U.S. for United States, but a coworker joked that it stood for Uncle Sam (Uncle Sam Wilson).

Whatever his beginning, Uncle Sam came into his own in World War I with a famous recruiting poster created by James Montgomery Flaggs (inspired by a British recruitment poster showing Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of War, in a similar pose).

J. M. Flagg's 1917 poster was used to recruit soldiers for both World War I and World War II.

"I want YOU for U.S. Army," Uncle Sam states with his finger pointed right at us. The government printed four million posters in WWI and more again in WWII. Uncle Sam's striking features and expressive eyebrows are endearing. He comes across as very warm and human. Uncle Sam is depicted as a mature man with white hair and a goatee wearing a white top hat with white stars on a blue band. He sports a blue tailcoat. With perhaps a slight wardrobe change, he would not be out of place in our clubhouse. By all appearances, he would be a very "clubbable" addition to our literary group (assuming the fellow could write).

Uncle Sam has been part of popular culture for almost 100 years, appearing on products ranging from cereal to car insurance. He has made regular appearances in political cartoons for most of the century that followed the creation of that iconic recruitment poster. Woody's frequent references were a product of a time when government was commonly referred to as Uncle Sam.

As noted earlier, we live in a different time now. No benevolent uncle is looking out for us. There's not much love for government out there these days. For some, an Orwellian Big Brother has replaced our kindly uncle.

They’re not making Flying Fortresses in Seattle anymore of course. In fact, Boeing, in a decision that shocked the Pacific Northwest, moved their headquarters to Chicago a few years ago.

Seattle today is better known for over-roasted coffee and clunky software. And of course, more distressing to our crowd, Seattle is the hometown of the online bookseller that has caused the demise of charming neighborhood bookstores everywhere.

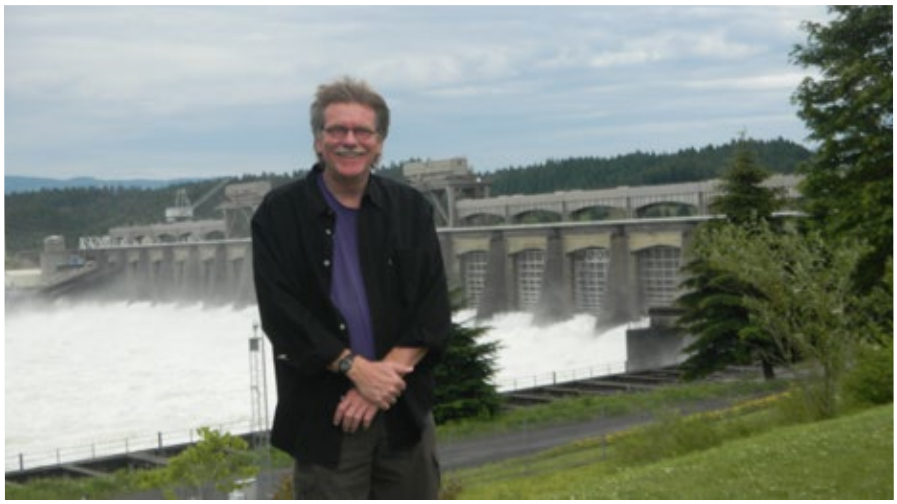
Woody Guthrie wouldn’t recognize the place. I suspect he wouldn’t like a lot of things he would find in Seattle or, for that matter, America today. He certainly would have a lot to say about what has replaced civil discourse in our election cycle this year. Don’t you wish he were around to write songs about it? Well maybe you wouldn’t like that, but I would!

Woody would be pleased to know the Grand Coulee Dam still stands proudly upon the Columbia Plateau. Its turbines are still churning out environmentally friendly, cheap electricity. In fact, it is still the largest electric-power-producing facility in the United States … yet another astonishing claim.

I don’t really know how he would react to this fact. In 1987, the state of Washington declared one of his Columbia River ballads the official folk song of the Evergreen State. “Roll On Columbia” is probably the most famous of the songs he wrote tooling along in that 1941 Hudson Hornet. It’s more famous than the tune I focused on tonight, “Grand Coulee Dam.” Both songs share many themes—one focuses on the dam, the other on the river.

The song is a masterpiece. The chorus reminds us that the Columbia River is now “turning our darkness to dawn” as it rolls toward the Pacific Ocean.

This is of course only true because almost ninety years ago there were men in our land who were capable of both dreaming big things and making their dream manifest … something that should give us all pause.



Jerry Kathman by the banks of the Columbia River.

I'll finish by reading my favorite stanza of "Roll On Columbia."

> Up on the river stands the Grand Coulee Dam,
> The mightiest thing ever built by a man,
> To run the great factories and water the land,
> Roll on Columbia, roll on.