

Floyd E. Dominy

Donald J. Pisani

Dominy, Floyd E. (1909 -) is easily the most colorful Commissioner in the illustrious history of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (see Photograph). He was an important subject in two influential books focusing on water in the West: Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* and John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid*. Dominy joined Reclamation in 1946 as a land settlement specialist. He supervised the Allocations and Repayment Branch, Division of Irrigation between 1950 and 1957. Dominy rose to Assistant Commissioner from 1957 to 1958, and eventually assumed the Associate Commissioner's job from 1958 to 1959. Dominy took control of the Commissioner's office on May 1, 1959. Notable events during his term as commissioner include completion of Glen Canyon, Flaming Gorge, and Navajo Dams on the Colorado River Storage Project. Dominy also played a role in the authorization and initiation of construction of San Luis Unit and pushed for the completion of the Trinity River Division, Central Valley Project.

Dominy was born on a farm near Hastings, Nebraska. In 1958, in hearings before Congress on the 160-acre limitation, Dominy talked about what it was like to grow up on such a farm. "I want you to know that...it took [my grandfather] from 1876 to 1919 to pay off the \$2,000 that he borrowed to make the trek to [Nebraska from Illinois] to provide his home on a public land homestead. . . . [W]hen my own father reached maturity he took a homestead in the same area, 160 acres. On that farm 6 of us children were born and 6 of us reached maturity on the subsistence of that 160-acre homestead. We had outside plumbing. We did not have deep freezers, automobiles, [or] school buses coming by the door. We walked to school in the mud. We had...one decent set of clothes to wear to town on Saturday. Otherwise we wore overalls. We didn't have the modern things that a farm today must provide."



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Dominy attended the University of Wyoming, and majored in agricultural economics. He graduated in 1933, not a good year to begin a career, and after a brief stint at teaching school he became a county agricultural extension agent in Campbell County, Wyoming, which was grazing country. "I saw there the [bitter] fruits of the 640-acre Homestead Act...I want everyone in this room and I want this committee to know that most of those 640 acres could not sustain a family under any reasonable economic conditions that have prevailed then or now." In short, by the time he became commissioner, Dominy's experience growing up in Hastings, Nebraska, and his later experience in Wyoming suggested that the small farm was a thing of the past, given the standard of living of most Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. (Ironically, he ran a family farm himself in Virginia, twenty miles from the capitol, after he came to Washington in 1938. He started with 32 acres and eventually secured 380 acres, but thought that even that was inadequate to make a living.) Soon before he left office in 1969, he observed in a speech that "The general trend now is. . . the abandonment of family-sized farms and the deterioration of small communities into ghost towns. In our modern mechanized and high-speed civilization, I see no major changes likely in this trend."

Little wonder, given his background, that Floyd Dominy showed scant interest either in the family farm or in maintaining the 160-acre limitation on cheap water. When federal reclamation began in 1902, Dominy recog-

nized, it was a subsistence program, but by the 1960s, the rural standard of living had changed dramatically. "[In 1902] Those guys didn't think a farmer should have indoor plumbing or electric lights, for heavens sakes," Dominy observed in his oral history. "They didn't think their kids should go to college or to the dentist. They were subsistence farmers. That's all a farmer was supposed to do in 1902 was live, exist. Not prosper, but exist. That's the origin of the 160-acre limit and all that crap."

There were, of course, other forces working to end the era of dam-building besides the decline or erosion of the traditional family farm ideal. Those who have studied Dominy's reign as commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation have focussed on the debate over the construction of Glen Canyon, Bridge, and Marble dams and the Pacific Southwest Water Plan. They have regarded the Bureau of Reclamation as far more powerful, and certainly far more autonomous, than it really was. Like all institutions of government, the bureau was subject to historical trends over which it had little or no control.

To begin with, big dams looked far less attractive to Americans—and even to many Americans living in the West—by the 1960s. Traditionally, one of the strongest arguments against such dams had been that it made more sense to move people to water than water to people. Far more water was lost in transit, through seepage and evaporation, than was delivered at the end of the pipeline or ditch. Now many critics of dams began to question whether they represented conservation at all. The Sierra Club regarded silt as more than something that clogged dams; it was also a symptom of the Bureau of Reclamation's refusal to cooperate with those agencies that tried to protect the land. "[T]he real management of rivers begins in the headwaters and on the hilltops. . . through good land management," a writer observed in 1950 in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. For example, both the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation refused to cooperate with the efforts of the Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service to fight soil erosion.

In the 1950s and 1960s, environmental organizations did not simply argue that dams were bad for the environment, they also argued that dams represented an outmoded, expensive technology. In the 1930s, part of the appeal of high dams was that they would last as long as the pyramids. But that changed during the Cold War, when the very dams that provided the power to run many of the nation's defense industries became potential targets for Russian missiles and bombs. Many of the West's cities could be as easily paralyzed by disrupting their water and power systems, or by the floods that would result from bringing down one of these gigantic structures, as from the detonation of a bomb over the city itself. And even more important than the danger from the destruction of dams was the promise of nuclear power. As a writer in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* observed in 1948, "we may live to see the regulated use of atomic power a few years from now. If we learn to use it properly...we won't need to harness all the rivers of the land....At least we might wait a little while and see what happens before we drown our greatest canyons and destroy forever so much natural beauty."

David Brower suggested that atomic energy might make high dams obsolete long before they filled with silt. He asked, "Is it not time to reverse the trend of centralization—of concentrating tremendously remunerative strategic targets: of building larger projects to enable more people to live in less space[?]" In the middle of the 1960s, during debate over the proposed Rampart Dam in Alaska, a Corps of Engineers structure that would have created a reservoir larger than Lake Erie, a writer in *Living Wilderness* pointed out that any one of five atomic generators produced by the General Electric Company could produce as much power as the proposed hydroelectric plants at Rampart at half the installation cost. And, she estimated, the price of the power to consumers would be just as cheap.

By the 1960s and 1970s, hydroelectric power no longer seemed as attractive as it did during the 1920s or 1930s. California was a prime example. In 1910, falling water produced most of the electricity used in the state. Steam power was used mainly to meet peak demands. But the increasing efficiency of steam generators, the falling prices of petroleum and natural gas, and the fact that such plants could be located near large cities, made steam turbines increasingly attractive. In 1920, hydroelectric power constituted 37 percent of the power generated within the United States. That figure fell to 33 percent in 1940, and despite the large hydroelectric plants opened during World War II, even in 1945 only 36 percent of the nation's power came from hydroelectric plants.

Neither waste nor the growing cost of water projects explain the end of the dam-building era any more than the declining number of good dam sites. After all, water projects had *always* been wasteful, and nineteenth century river and harbor improvements had been a method to distribute surplus federal money as much as a way to improve transportation. Nor did this change. Many of the water projects undertaken during the 1930s were "wasteful" by nature because their primary purpose was to provide jobs. Nor were agricultural subsidies new. But after World War II the West and South benefitted more from water projects than other parts of the country. In 1902, federal reclamation had been sold to Congress partly as compensation to the West for river and harbor bills that mainly benefitted states around the Great Lakes and along the eastern seaboard. But the historian Tim Palmer estimates that from 1950 to 1976, the Northeast received only six percent of the money spent on water projects by the Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation, while the South received 28 percent and the West about half. In effect, residents of the East and Midwest subsidized the growth of cities in the West at the expense

of those in the northeast, as crops grown in California and Arizona received greater per acre subsidies than crops raised in other parts of the nation.

By the late 1960s, it was very difficult to argue that the West needed or deserved more federal aid than other parts of the country. The region's economy may not have been as diversified as that of the East, but the importance of grazing, mining, lumbering and other extractive industries had declined as the West urbanized. Moreover, the Vietnam War cut into the budgets of virtually all domestic programs, and the lessening of tensions between the United States and Soviet Union reduced the appeal of building dams to power the defense industries of the West.

During the 1960s, Dominy was extremely effective in squeezing money out of Congress. But he was successful not just because western politicians were effective at winning the pork, but also because Dominy used a wide variety of effective arguments when he testified before Congressional committees. Federal reclamation projects, Dominy argued, produced many of the nation's vegetables, particularly during the winter months when crops could be grown only in the warm and sunny Southwest. In 1965, he pointed out that 95 percent of the lettuce, 70 percent of the cantaloupes, 52 percent of the sweet corn, 50 percent of the carrots, and 44 percent of the cauliflower came from land watered by the Reclamation Bureau. After the war, nutritionists argued that Americans should diversify their diet, and by providing fruits and vegetables grown in the winter, federal reclamation improved the health of *all* Americans. Moreover, in testimony before Congress Dominy repeatedly pointed out that reclamation ministered to the health of the soul as well as the body. The 10 most-visited bureau reservoirs attracted more vacationers per year than the ten most heavily used national parks and thus took much of the pressure off the parks. In 1967, he observed that in the previous year more than four million "visitor days" had been spent on Lake Mead and only two and one-half million at the most heavily visited National Park, Grand Teton. Dominy also claimed that irrigating land drove up its value, along with crop values. Increasing wealth expanded the tax base of communities and the quality of their schools and other public services. "[T]he income tax increases as a result of our project growth is greater each year than the total investment in reclamation," he noted.

Above all, Dominy warned that the nation had to prepare to feed a much larger population. The nation's population increased by 15 percent in the 1940s and another 20 percent in the 1950s, and the number of people in the West increased even faster than that. Meanwhile, millions of acres of marginal farmland in the South and Midwest were retired from production after World War II, and Dominy estimated that half the nation's farms were "marginal." In any case, at the end of his term as commissioner Dominy predicted that "by 1980, the Bureau of Reclamation will be able to go it alone, continuing the program solely out of income. But as in any business venture, it is necessary to spend money to make money. And to get back on schedule, it will be important...to step up the program as the committee has indicated just as soon as the present budget emergency is over."

From 1903 to 1950, the Bureau of Reclamation spent two billion dollars on its projects. It spent another two billion from 1951 to 1961, and the bureau's construction appropriations peaked at \$300 million in 1964. In fiscal year 1965, the budget began to shrink and when Dominy stepped down as commissioner in 1969 he observed that "water development is being slighted. . . . I think our national priorities are not being assessed properly, and that we are spending far too much on space and other elements. If we need to cut back, we should not cut back on the one thing that keeps America strong, its development of resources."

The last major project authorization came in 1968, a year before Dominy left office. That was for the Central Arizona Project, the aqueduct that stretches from the Colorado River to Tucson, via Phoenix. For a man who grew up on the plains of Nebraska, a man who knew rural poverty first-hand, the American West of 1969 was a far better place to live because of the Bureau of Reclamation. Dominy genuinely believed that the dams and canals built by the bureau had improved the living standards of the region's rural and urban residents. Many of us would argue that that economic growth came at a high, even an intolerable, price to the environment, Native Americans, and to other groups that did not share in the wealth produced by the projects. But that story has been well-told. What I've tried to do is suggest it that while the personalities and values of individual commissioners certainly helped shape the policies they followed, Dominy did not have the power or autonomy attributed to him by many historians. Sometimes the bureau responded effectively to change, as it did in building the high dams in the 1930s and 1940s, but much was beyond its control, from the emergence of a consumer economy and increasing living standards in the 1920s to the Vietnam War and the stagnant American economy of the 1970s. Just as Dominy was a man of a particular time and place, so was the dam-building impulse that drove the bureau during the first seven decades of its life.

Source: Pisani, Donald J., 2002. "A Tale of Two Commissioner: Frederick H. Newell and Floyd Dominy," presented at *History of the Bureau of Reclamation: A Symposium*, Las Vegas, NV, June 18.