

Early river work set stage for modern Long Tom

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This is the second article of a monthly series on the history of flooding and the river developments in the Willamette basin and the Long Tom watershed. In the first installment, we left off in 1861 at the greatest recorded flood in Willamette history.

At the end of the Civil War, the nation resumed its development of the West, and much of the work fell to the Department of War and its Army engineers. Its completion would have significant effects on the tributary basin of the Long Tom River. The rapid growth of Portland and outlying settlements may have been made on wheat and lumber, but both were almost wholly dependent on navigable waterways. However, in their nearly natural condition, the river systems could not meet the need for safe and extensive shipping of people and goods.

The engineer officers recognized the expanding demand for reliable river transport and systematically sought federal monies to survey and remove physical impediments on the Willamette and Columbia. The river work of this period was provisional and localized, but nonetheless, by 1876 ship traffic on these rivers had grown tenfold.

Most of this early river engineering continuously reacted to robust and widespread local interest, and lobbying to Congress was a routine by which most river work was initiated. Despite the comprehensive navigation goal in the region, rarely was an individual project scaled beyond a localized setting.

Over the next 20 years, the Willamette and the lower reaches of its main tributaries were modified in numerous ways: rocks blasted, side-channels dammed, the river bed scraped and dredged, and heavy wood snagged and cleared. Extensive and detailed surveys were made from its mouth to Eugene, and the first bank revetments were placed during this time.

In the end, these activities changed the shape and function of the river. In part, the theory was to maintain ship-draft depths through a single channel, where increased river velocity would prevent the annual refilling of shoals and bars. Over 65,000 trees and downed snags were eventually removed from the

Willamette's channels and banks.

At the start of the last century, the local initiative and complexity of river works turned toward a more national dimension, with President Theodore Roosevelt's conservation movement. Roosevelt powerfully argued that "every stream is a unit from its source to its mouth, and all its uses are interdependent". In his forceful manner, he urged development of the nation's rivers for general public benefit.

In 1925, Congress commissioned the Corps of Engineers and the Federal Power Commission to make a national study of navigation, in combination with "the most efficient development of potential water power, the control of floods, and the needs of irrigation." The Columbia and its tributaries became prominent fixtures in the completed report.

The test of necessity for river development began to shift from navigation to another predominant interest: power production. Though there was strong local advocacy for this development to occur via private, municipal and state interests, the national economic events of the Great Depression soon overwhelmed these financing proposals. While seeking the presidency in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt promised that the next hydroelectric development must be on the Columbia.

Even then, the prospects of flood control and irrigation continued to play less important roles in determining river development. This wasn't for lack of need, as flood events of great destruction had occurred in the Northwest for scores of years — at least eight more major floods had hit the Willamette basin by the mid-1930's. Responding to a spate of disasters around the country, Congress recognized "that destructive floods constituted a menace to national welfare." The sobering history was multiplied by realization that greatly increased development of the nation's floodplains was inevitable.

Enactment of the Flood Control Act of 1936 became a national water policy milestone, and set the stage for the most involved river development to be undertaken in the Willamette. By now 75 years had passed since the homesteads and settlements were wiped out in the record flood of December 1861.

Next month: Oregon's model project.



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