

The plan to flood the Flathead Valley during WWII

By Rick Hull

At the height of World War II in 1943, Polson residents were alarmed to discover federal officials were proposing to flood their city. Kerr Dam would be enlarged, raising Flathead Lake water levels by 17 feet and ultimately up to 37 feet. Portions of Polson, Somers and Bigfork would be flooded, and much of the Lower Valley inundated. At the full 37 feet, the lake would be lapping at the edge of Kalispell.

The plan also called for dredging the outlet at Polson, allowing Flathead Lake to drop an additional 10 feet during the winter draw down. Much of Polson Bay would become mud flats.

It was all part of a wartime emergency project to impound an extra three million acre feet of water in Flathead Lake, boosting power production at downstream dams in the Columbia River system.

The news struck the Flathead Valley at the end of May, 1943, and the Bonneville Power Administration and Army Corps of Engineers scheduled a public meeting June 3 in Kalispell.

But there were immediate protests.

About 300 people turned out May 28 in Polson. Raising the lake the full 37 feet would flood half of Main Street, submerge the Hwy. 93 bridge into town, and inundate the city's water and sewer plants, they noted.

S.C. DeMers, representing the confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes, said, "I don't believe Money can buy our Flathead valley," and added, "I'm sure there are a few tomahawks left on the reservation."

The Kalispell public meeting lasted three days, with local resistance on the rise. Montana's congressional delegation was enlisted in the battle, with both Senators and both Congressmen declaring their opposition.

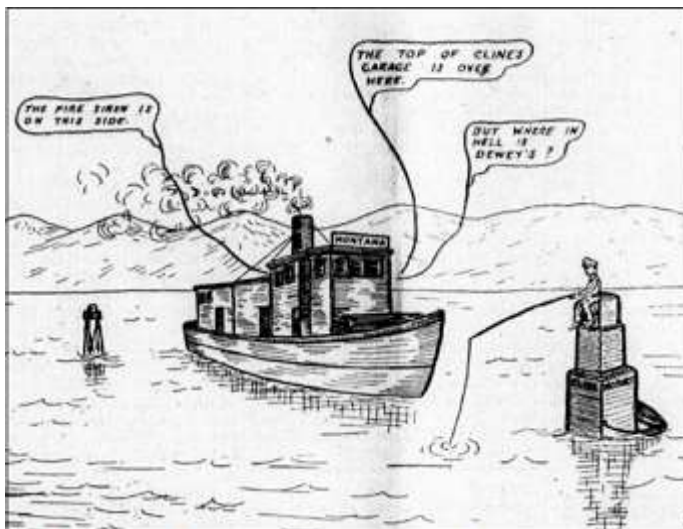
But in a June 17 front-page article, the *Flathead Courier* said, "There is a growing indication that for all the protests made at the public hearing at Kalispell and the assurances of Montana congressmen, the plan to raise the level of Flathead Lake by the army engineers and Bonneville administration is not dead, and has not been abandoned."

A Flathead Valley committee was formed, and \$10,000 raised to pay for the work of

various groups and necessary trips. At a meeting of East Shore residents, a six-year-old girl insisted her 18 cents be added to the fund. The meeting's contributions peaked at \$100, and there were many \$50



Kerr Dam at Polson was operated by Montana Power during World War II on leased tribal land.



A cartoon in the Flathead Courier showing a boy fishing atop Cline's Garage in downtown Polson.

donations, the Courier reported.

There was an immediate search for a more acceptable source of the extra water. A low dam on Albeni Falls on the Pend Oreille river had support in Idaho. Other proposal included dredging the south inlet on the Kootenai River, which would drain 30,000 acres north of Bonners Ferry, Idaho, and dams on the Z Canyon in northwest Washington and Glacier View on the North Fork of the Flathead.

But the most promising was a low dam on the South Fork river. "Such a plan will involve partial construction of Hungry Horse dam to impound about 1,000,000 acre feet of water as quickly as possible for war purposes," noted Paul Raver, Bonneville Power administrator.

It was estimated the Hungry Horse Dam could be on line by 1945. The proposals came at a time when the allies were just turning the corner in World War II and the conflict was expected to last to 1948 in the Pacific.

The Albeni Falls Dam was built in 1955 and the Boundary Dam at Z Canyon in 1967. The full Hungry Horse Dam was completed 1953.

Congressional pressure began to weigh on the Kerr Dam proposal. Burton K. Wheeler, Montana's powerful Senator, pressured federal authorities for a decision. An upcoming Congressman, Mike Mansfield, said, "I want to call to the attention of Congress that is the raising of Flathead lake is allowed to go through it will directly affect 25,000 people and indirectly 50,000 or one-tenth of the population in my state."

By August the Flathead Lake proposal was essentially dead, and it was taken out of the emergency "war project" arena and turned over to Congress.

The House of Representatives' subcommittee on irrigation held a hearing in Kalispell that September.

"At no future time will an effort be made to change levels of Flathead lake," Raver said at the hearing, and added that the Bonneville administration "has come to believe it would have been a mistake."

Instead the emphasis would be on the interim Hungry Horse plan, he said.

Pony Tracks March 2023