

Robbins, William. "The Willamette Valley Project of Oregon: A Study in the Political Economy of Water Resource Development." *Pacific Historical Review* 47 (1978): 585-605. (Reviewed by Susan Mershon)

This is a historical, political work. It summarizes how business interests, the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), and Oregon politicians worked together in the 1930s to get big projects done on the Willamette River. Robbins emphasizes the driving force of business.

Governor Charles Martin and Oregon Senator Charles McNary were two politicians who responded to pressure from business interests and pursued federal funds for the Willamette Valley project. Robbins describes the creation of agencies to facilitate the project, such as the 1935 State Planning Board and its Willamette Valley Project Committee. Heavy lobbying of the federal government brought the Congressional approval of the Willamette Valley Plan in 1938.

Public hearings on the project were packed with supporters. Robbins says, "the Oregon public was subject to an unrelenting stream of propaganda through the news media, which gave the illusion of a public consensus favorable to water resource development. That consensus, however, was forged by the business community, and no effective challenge emerged to diminish this image..." (604) Robbins counts naturalist William Finley as the only outspoken dissenter of the project.

Robbins says that everyone-- the politicians, the newspapers, the businessmen-- extolled the benefits of dams. The dams would bring great economic progress to the valley, including short-term benefits like putting men to work. The USACE "went far beyond its... civic-works authority and acted like a public relations agency through its stream of press releases and public appearances in local communities. The Corps did not, however, devise and force through the Willamette Valley Project over the wishes and without the approval of State and local officials, as some opponents have charged." (602) Robbins makes it clear that business interests clamored for the project in the beginning and continued pushing it through, over the decades.

Critique

Robbins' article describes a story told by the business interests-- and I am increasingly conscious of his own narrative.

Robbins seems to say that business interests are different from the interests of the people as a whole. So what were the people as a whole thinking? Robbins has to rely on biased newspapers and politicians. The next step of research would be to do interviews with people who lived in the Valley in the 1930s. Their voices may not have been heard in the paper records. Robbins leaves open the possibility of other, doubtful people.

Robbins describes making apparent consensus, which is really interesting. The Corps were not the bad

guys from outside, wanting to push the project through-- everyone was working towards the same aim. Businessmen and politicians were really fanatical about the project, it seems.

Robbins has many footnotes with information on his sources. He uses newspaper articles and politicians' papers to good effect. The many sources would be a great starting point for further historical research. This article is a good source for the 1930s.

The 1932 USACE Report on the Willamette River was a precursor to getting a concrete Willamette plan and federal funds.

[return to info sources page](#)

[return to home page](#)