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Columbia Basin Primary Documents

“Roll on Columbia” by Woody Guthrie

The folk singer Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born in 1912 and grew up in Okemeh, Oklahoma where he learned to sing and became familiar with hardship. His hometown of Okemeh became a boom oil town in 1920, but a few years later the boom town busted and during the Great Depression Guthrie worked as an itinerant musician, hitchhiking and riding trains from place to place. He arrived in the West 1937 and worked for KFVD radio in Los Angeles until 1940. There he developed “a talent for controversial social commentary and criticism,” and became a public advocate of social justice. He continued to travel throughout his life, using the power of song as a form of resistance. Guthrie died in Queens, New York on October 3, 1967. Woody Guthrie Website, <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/index.htm>



The history of the folk song "Roll On Columbia, Roll On" is tied directly to the Bonneville Power Administration and to Woody Guthrie. In the early 1940s, BPA produced a promotional film to encourage rural electrification in the Northwest. As part of this project the BPA hired Woody Guthrie to write songs for the movie. They paid him \$270 for writing 26 songs in a 30-day period. “The Columbia River Ballads” glorified the river’s power and potential for development and community building. “Roll On Columbia, Roll On”, a song about taming the mighty Columbia and its environs, was among the most popular. It became Washington State’s official folk song in 1987.

Roll on, Columbia, roll on

Roll on, Columbia, roll on
Your power is turning our darkness to dawn
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.

Green Douglas firs where the waters cut through
Down her wild mountains and canyons she flew
Canadian Northwest to the oceans so blue
Roll on Columbia, roll on

Other great rivers add power to you
Yakima, Snake, and the Klickitat, too
Sandy Willamette and Hood River too
So roll on, Columbia, roll on

Tom Jefferson's vision would not let him rest
An empire he saw in the Pacific Northwest
Sent Lewis and Clark and they did the rest
So roll on, Columbia, roll on

It's there on your banks that we fought many a fight
Sheridan's boys in the blockhouse that night
They saw us in death but never in flight
So roll on Columbia, roll on

At Bonneville now there are ships in the locks
The waters have risen and cleared all the rocks
Shiploads of plenty will steam past the docks
So roll on, Columbia, roll on

And on up the river is Grand Coulee Dam
The mightiest thing ever built by a man
To run the great factories and water the land
So roll on, Columbia, roll on

These mighty men labored by day and by night
Matching their strength 'gainst the river's wild flight
Through rapids and falls, they won the hard fight
So roll on, Columbia, roll on

Center for Columbia River History

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