

# The Flathead Lake Fight Of 1943

Editor's Note: The following is authored by Forrest C. Rockwood, Kalispell attorney. We think the article should be of interest to all because of

the vital role our precious resource, water, has played in our past and which will undoubtedly be of even more importance in the future.

By FORREST C. ROCKWOOD

PREFACE

I have often thought of writing an account of the Flathead Lake fight of 1943 wherein the unanimity of the public's protests to the raising of Flathead Lake so as to flood a major part of the valley successfully defeated the plans of the Bonneville Power Administration and the U. S. Corps of Engineers. I have not done so prior to this because of the seeming agrandizement of myself and the appearance in the story of the word "I" to an unbecoming amount. However, I have recently been asked to write the story and especially the initiation and organization of the public protests formulated in the hearing on June 3, 1943. I could well dedicate this little story to Mabel Brewer now the County-City librarian who has recently urged me to do this. Hence, I rather reluctantly write this story and apologize for what is not intended to be an exaggeration of the part that I and Dr. Thomas B. Moore played in arousing the public to a realization of our danger, and likewise for the reason that I know I will not be able to mention many who played a prominent part in the fight, and I hope they will not take offense.

PROLOGUE

I would now like to point out the deadly serious situation in which the people of Flathead County found themselves in June of 1943, in the midst of World War II. Little did most of us then know that the motivation for more power and more power immediately was the development of the atomic bomb in the Washington plant at Hanford, Washington.

I think that the situation which confronted us can be best expressed by a letter that Mike Mansfield wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt on July 8, 1943; Mike was then a congressman from the western district of Montana and at this writing is a U. S. Senator. In this letter he stated that he thought it was the most important letter he would ever write; and he should be forever honored for this letter. This letter was written about a month after the hearing but before the decisions had been made by the congressional committee on irrigation and reclamation. This letter is as follows:

"July 8, 1943

"Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt,  
The White House,  
Washington, D. C.

"My Dear Mr. President: This is the most important letter I have ever written in my life, and I hope it comes to your personal attention because it affects the security and welfare of 25,000 people directly, and 50,000 people indirectly. I have communicated with you before but have received, in return, answers from your secretary and I feel quite certain in my mind that you did not see the communications addressed to you. However, that is past and those communications were unimportant in comparison with this one.

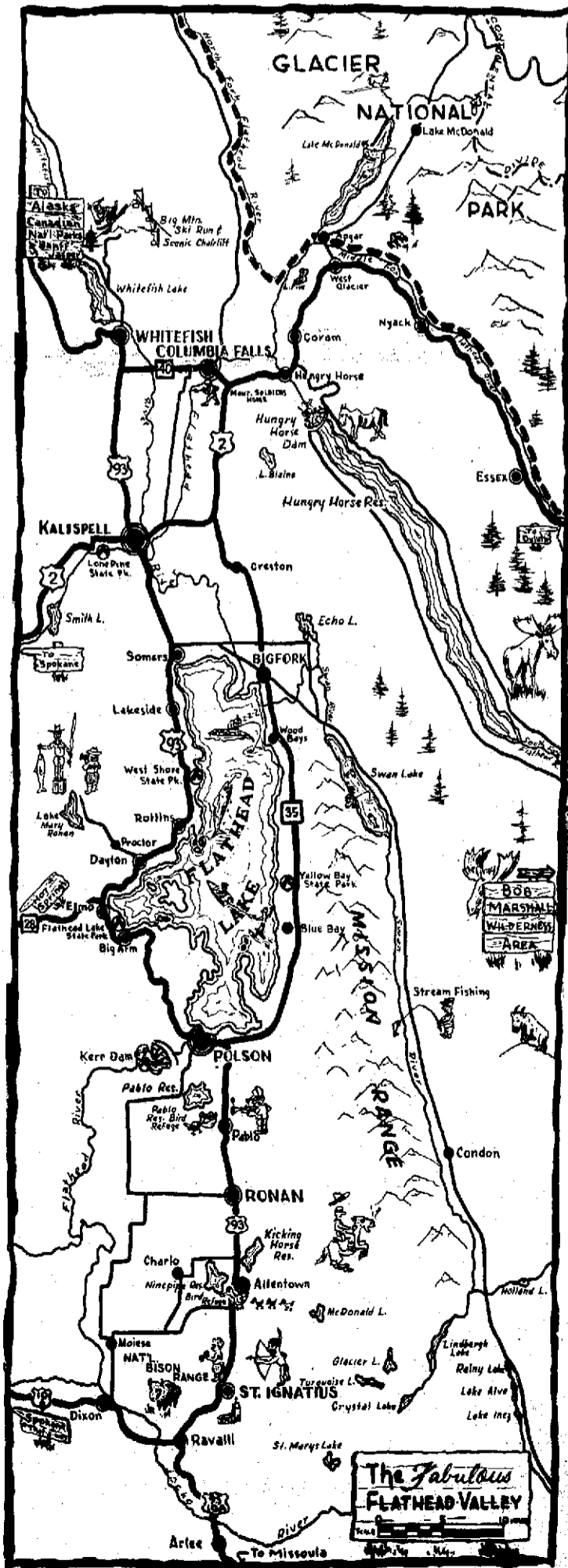
"On June 3 a public meeting was held at Kalispell, Mont., attended by the Bonneville Authority and the Army engineers for the purpose of discussing a proposal to raise Flathead Lake 17 feet by 1945 and 37 feet ultimately. This added water would furnish additional power to Grand Coulee and Bonneville Dams. If this project had gone through as contemplated it would have brought about the destruction of a large lumber industry; it would have affected the number of people enumerated above; it would have brought about the removal from their homes of people who had determined to spend the rest of their lives in the Flathead Valley; it would have inundated something like 50,000 acres of the best agricultural land in the country; it would have wiped out some towns completely, others partially; and it would have made a stinking morass of the most beautiful scenic area in the United States. Because of the opposition, and it was bitter, of the people in western Montana, the Federal authorities decided to look elsewhere for added power and they gave out the statement that the Flathead project as proposed was ended. Since then, meetings have been held at Priest River and Sandpoint, Idaho, and Portland, Oreg., but now the Bonneville people and the Army Engineers are back in Montana looking over Flathead Lake again.

"I beg you, Mr. President, in the name of my people, to do everything in your power to end this uncertainty in their minds. If we were convinced that tampering with Flathead Lake was a war need we would, I assure you, give our wholehearted assent to what was necessary. However, we do not believe that such is the case and we do know that there are other areas which could be developed, such as the Hungry Horse, Kootenai Lake, and the Cabinet Gorge, which would not affect the economy of the region as the Flathead Lake proposal would. The Flathead has sent between 3,000 and 4,000 of its sons and daughters into the armed forces of the United States to fight to protect their homes and their country. I sincerely hope that when they return they will not find they have won the war abroad only to find they have lost their valley and the homes which they love so much and cherish so dearly.

"Montana has made many contributions to the war through its manpower, its buying of bonds, and in giving of its natural resources, but Montana has been treated shabbily since the war started and many of our people have been forced to leave the State for other parts of the country. We feel that we have been and are being treated unfairly in this Flathead matter and I assure you, Mr. President, that this is something that cannot be tossed off lightly. It is deadly serious and some assurance must be forthcoming from Washington so that the uncertainty and the fear which have come to be a part of the lives of our people out there can be done away with once and for all.

"I beseech you to do everything in your power to stop this iniquitous activity which is being carried on and to assure the people of western Montana that nothing will be done to alter the status quo there insofar as Flathead Lake is concerned.

"I repeat, Mr. President, this is the most important  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



**The  
Flathead  
Lake  
Fight  
Of 1943**

**Presented  
As A  
Public  
Service  
By Your  
Home  
Owned,  
Independent**

**VALLEY  
BANK**

**41 3rd. St. W.  
Kalispell**

**Extra Copies  
of this  
entire section  
available  
FREE at the  
VALLEY BANK  
for a  
limited time**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

tant letter I have ever written to anybody and it is not a matter of politics with me but it is a matter of looking after the welfare and security of the people of western Montana. We look to you for help in this moment of urgency. Please do not fail us.

"Respectfully yours,

Mike Mansfield"

#### THE FLATHEAD VALLEY

In order to understand what follows, one should have a general idea of the location and nature of Flathead Lake and the Flathead Valley. Of course local people know all about the Flathead Valley but in case nonresidents should read this story, they might not have a good picture of the valley and the general situation. Reference to the map inserted at this point will give you an idea of the general layout. (Map on page 1.)

The heart of the Flathead Valley is Flathead Lake. The north half of the lake and the land above it is in Flathead County, the south half and land below it in Lake County. Kalispell is about 10 miles north of the lake and is about 30 miles southwest of Glacier National Park. Polson is the county seat of Lake County and its north boundary is, in fact, the lake itself. The Rocky Mountains rise abruptly from the level of the floor of the valley on the east. On the west beautiful foothills roll upward. All of the valley, mountains and foothills are timbered except where cleared and cultivated. Flathead Lake itself is 28 miles long and about 10 miles wide and of an elevation of 2893 feet and is the largest fresh water lake in the United States west of the Great Lakes. Kalispell's elevation at the Burlington-Northern depot is 2959 feet. The farming land is, for the most part, rich, dry, sandy loam and grain crops, potatoes, hay and other crops thrive, with seldom a crop failure even without irrigation. The area is a recreational and vacation land without peer. The population of Flathead County is about 38,000; that of Lake County about one-third of that. Livestock, lumbering and sweet cherries are important industries. Hunting, fishing, skiing and boating are the most important recreations and sports. The climate is ideal, dominated by the Pacific Coast, the continental divide to the east sheltering it from the violent storms of the plains. Flathead Lake is fed from the north by the Flathead River which, a little to the east of Columbia Falls, branches into three forks, namely, the North Fork, the Middle Fork and the South Fork. The outlet at Polson is also called the Flathead River, later becoming the Clark Fork of the Columbia River.

The Hungry Horse dam was built by the Bureau of Reclamation in 5 years, 1948 to 1953. Built in the Flathead River 4 miles above its confluence with the main Flathead River, this dam has a drainage basin of over 1,000,000 acres. There is no private land within this drainage basin. The 34-mile-long reservoir covers 22,500 acres and impounds approximately 3,500,000 acre-feet of water. At the time of construction, plans called for diverting a million-acre feet of water into this reservoir from the Middle Fork through an 8-mile tunnel from Spruce Park to somewhere near Devils Corkscrew Creek. Hungry Horse Dam is 2,100 feet long and 564 feet high and contains approximately 250,000,000 cubic yards of concrete. It has 4 generators with a combined capacity of over 285,000 K. V. A. It cost approximately \$100,000,000 to build. This money is rapidly being returned to the United States treasury from the sale of electric power. Waters of the South Fork are now regulated to control the flow of the Flathead River, thus preventing floods in the valley and contributing to flood control all the way to the Pacific Ocean. \*

\*Courtesy of "The Flathead Story" by Charley Shaw



Hungry Horse Dam which was completed in 1953.

#### THE STORY

For some time during the spring of 1943 my wife had been reporting to me rumors about the raising of Flathead Lake. I was busy in the law office and dismissed such rumors as old wives tales.\* However, one afternoon I received a call to attend a meeting of citizens in the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce building. I went over to the meeting and found a large number of members of the Chamber of Commerce and businessmen present. As I recall, Al Winkler was president of the Chamber and Donald Treloar, owner of radio station KGEZ, was present and they had

\* Daily Inter Lake April 26, 1943, page 1, news item:

"Don Treloar was in receipt today of the following telegram from Senator James E. Murray, sent from Washington, D. C.:

"Relative to rumors and reports being circulated in your area that Army Engineers are planning to install dams which would raise the level of Flathead Lake and destroy the valley, I have contacted both the Reclamation Service and Army Engineers and they assure me that these reports are false and erroneous...."

"Daily Inter Lake May 17, 1943, page 1, news item stating that the preceding Saturday evening the county commissioners of Flathead County, Mayor D. S. Cameron, representing Kalispell, and representatives of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce made and passed resolutions protesting the proposed raising of the level of Flathead Lake. That these were passed so that A. F. Winkler, who was representing the above organizations at a meeting in Washington, D. C. May 21st, might have a copy of them to present to Bonneville Advisory Board, with the hope that the raising of the lake level might be stopped."

charge of the meeting. Mr. Hans Walchli was there in his capacity as attorney for the group. As I recall, Mr. Winkler made a statement about a meeting he had attended on the coast and that it was indeed a fact that the Bonneville Power Administration demanded more water and demanded it immediately and was going to raise Flathead Lake. The discussion then was how to prevent this action. The plan proposed was the assembling of facts and figures showing the economic loss in dollars and cents to the land to be flooded and damaged, such proof to be submitted in legalistic manner at the hearing which had been set by the Corps of Army Engineers for the following June 3rd.\* I then briefly addressed the meeting and said while I heartily approve of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

proposed procedure as outlined, I did not think that that procedure alone would be worth a damn when it came to the final decisions. I said that our only chance was to raise enough hell by way of public protest that our voice would be heard. No one

\* Daily Inter Lake May 20, 1943, page 1, news item:

This item states that Governor Ford, et al, had protested the proposed raising of Flathead Lake to the Bonneville Advisory Board and that probably a public hearing could be secured; that meanwhile the Bonneville Board agreed to withhold its recommendations regarding further power development along the Columbia River. This item further stated that the telegram from Senator B. K. Wheeler to the Inter Lake today states that he has arranged for a hearing at Kalispell on the Flathead Lake situation.

made any response or answer to my remarks.

The next morning I had arisen at my usual hour of about 6 A. M., when the phone rang and Dr. Thomas B. Moore, a lifelong friend of mine, asked what I was doing. I said "I'm building a fire in the kitchen range". He said "I am coming over". I said "okay", and in a few minutes he arrived.

He had recently returned from Seattle where it appeared that the people were more informed as to the proposed raising of Flathead Lake than we ourselves were. He was much excited. He said we would have to do something.

As an aside at this juncture, it is very likely that I personally would not have taken up the cudgel and activated myself had it not been for Dr. Moore.

So, the problem was, what can we do? I said, "first, we can prepare a radio speech for you to give over KGEZ alerting the public to the danger. Second, we can write a letter to the editor of the Daily Inter Lake again advising the public of our imminent danger." And then we agreed that I would have a meeting called in the lower valley which would be completely flooded and go to that meeting and present the situation and get those in attendance to sign telegrams and pay money for the sending of the telegrams to President Roosevelt and our senators and congressmen. Dr. Moore was to do the same thing as to the Flathead Lake Cherry Growers Association of which he was a member.

Consequently, we wrote a radio speech for Dr. Moore, which he delivered on May 21, 1943. There were only two copies; Dr. Moore's has been lost in the intervening 27 years; mine was burned in the Conrad National Bank fire in 1959. His speech was of the same general tenor as the letter to the Editor of the Daily Inter Lake just following. Any written word of course does not carry with it the intensity and earnestness of Dr. Moore's delivery, which in fact was an impassioned bit of oratory.

I then prepared a letter to the editor of the Daily Inter Lake which the editor published. The letter speaks for itself:

Daily Inter Lake May 22, 1943 under Public Forum:

"PEOPLE SHOULD MAKE A VIOLENT PROTEST

"Editor of the Daily Inter Lake  
Kalispell, Montana

Dear Sir:

"We would appreciate your publication of this letter in this evening's paper.

"From the information acquired by the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce relative to the proposed raising of Flathead Lake it appears to us that absolutely the only thing that will prevent the destruction of this valley is for every man, woman and child in this valley to protest so vigorously that they will not dare go through with their plan. Every organization in Flathead County ought to protest immediately and also the active aid of all organizations throughout Montana ought to be enlisted and that immediately. This ought to be the primary responsibility of the Governor to protect the interests of his State, but it is up to the people to see that this is done.

"The only way to stop this is to make so violent a protest that it becomes a matter of national knowledge and interest.

"We are fighting this war on foreign shores to prevent foreign enemies from destroying our country and way of life, but we believe most of us would prefer being bombed out by the enemy than have our valley destroyed by Washington, Oregon and the Federal Bureaus.

"As a concrete kind of action every man and woman in Flathead County ought to immediately wire Governor Sam C. Ford, Helena, Montana, our United States Senators B. K. Wheeler and James E. Murray and our Congressmen Mike Mansfield and J. M. O'Connor, Washington, D. C. demanding that this thing be stopped now.

"If the people don't jump on this with both feet right now then in a year or two there will be a lake between Somers and Whitefish during the Spring and a stinking mud flat the rest of the year.

Respectfully submitted,

T. B. MOORE, M. D.  
FORREST C. ROCKWOOD" \*

Dr. Moore called his meeting of the Flathead Lake Cherry Growers Association and presented the matter and the members signed telegrams and paid the expenses of the telegrams. Charlie Weaver of the lower valley called a meeting of the lower valley Grange, as well as all other lower valley people whom he could contact. The Grange hall was full that evening. Bob Speer, then the manager of the local Royal Milling Company, and I drove

\* I am indebted to Burl Lyons, now the publisher of the Daily Inter Lake, who generously allowed me access to his paper files to procure this letter, as well as other facts happening about that time.

down to present the case. We had been having a lot of rain with mud and muck everywhere which emphasized the very nature of our errand with the thoughts of later flooding. I presented the case to the farmers and they believed me. They signed up telegrams and gave me about \$75.00 with which to send them. As stated before, the recipients were President Roosevelt, our congressional delegation and the Governor of the State of Montana, as well as our own Montana local senators and representatives. I wish I had some copies of those telegrams. The people were in a desperate mood and our telegrams were not too genteel but were demanding in nature that the Bonneville Power Administration be stopped dead in its tracks.

At any rate, the above efforts got the ball rolling and like a snowball, it gathered size and weight at every roll. I remember that Attorney Charlie Baldwin was one of the first of the attorneys and businessmen who came to the assistance of the doctor and me. \*

Our plans for the hearing then took on the aspect of a full fledged campaign. I was given the task of securing statements from all of the local farmers and local people and organizations,

\* Daily Inter Lake May 25, 1943:  
Public forum article by attorney Charles S. Baldwin arousing public to oppose raising of Flathead Lake.

and Mr. Walchli took over the enlistment of the aid of people and organizations outside of the valley.

As an illustration of our successful efforts to enlist the aid of non-Flathead Valley residents, Charlie Weaver and I attended a State Convention of the Montana Stockgrowers Association in Billings, Montana, and obtained a resolution supporting our position.

Our campaign and preparatory efforts involved two phases: First, the simple protest that this atrocity ought not be visited upon the people of the Flathead Valley, and second, that we offered an alternative, namely, the building of the Hungry Horse Dam. Donald Treloar and Al Winkler devoted their energies more in the channel of the Hungry Horse Dam idea. For well over a month and until the day of the hearing my law office was filled with farmers and other people bringing in their statements and protests and I arranged for some of them to present their protests orally at the time of the hearing.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

I can well remember, at the outset of our efforts to prevent the raising of Flathead Lake, I talked to my partner, Mr. G. H. Grubb, who was a mighty wise old man. He said to me, "Forrest, I approve of what you are trying to do but I hate to say that I don't think you have a chance in the world". "Well", I said, "Mr. Grubb, perhaps not". I said "if all of the people in Kalispell opposed the raising of the lake, it might not be enough; if all of the people of Flathead and Lake Counties opposed the raising, it might not be enough" I said, "but if all of the people of Montana would oppose the raising of the Lake, that might be sufficient to defeat the Bonneville demand".

Finally the day of the hearing came. It was held in the auditorium of the Flathead County High School and was conducted by Col. R. Parks of the Corps of Army Engineers. The auditorium was packed. The excess stood and sat on the lawn in front of the high school. Don Treloar, owner of radio station KGEZ set up loud speakers transmitting the proceedings to those outside. Many people took their lunches to be assured of their seats. A newspaper story was to the effect that there was no business in the stores and many were closed during the hearing, and spoke of the tense atmosphere. The people in attendance were deadly serious. Col. Parks turned out to be a fine old gentleman subject to human emotions but as all military men would have done, he conducted the meeting with abrupt military methods.

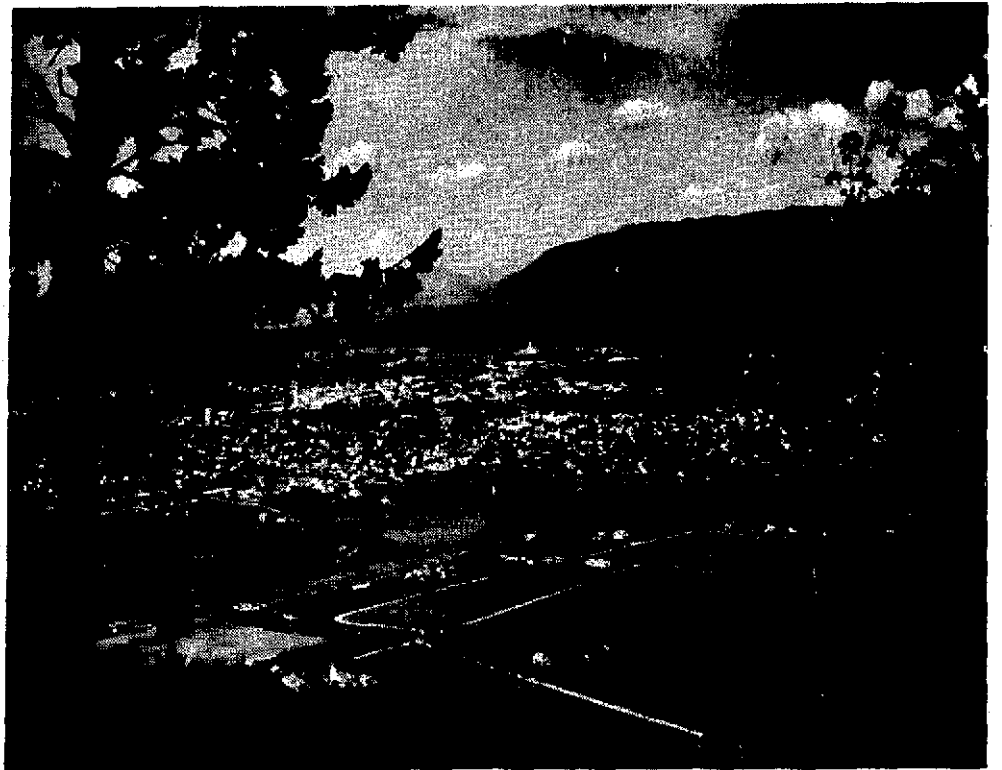
The engineers had a huge map, practically the full size of the back of the stage in the auditorium, depicting Flathead Lake and Flathead Valley. Col. Parks first said that the Bonneville Administration needed more water and needed it immediately; that the Corps of Engineers had canvassed every possible alternative and that there was none; that Flathead Lake had to be raised.

The obvious reason for the Corps in picking on Flathead Lake was the ease in getting more water by storage in Flathead Lake because a very minimum of effort and time and expenditure would raise Kerr Dam at the foot of the lake and its outlet. It was an engineer's dream from the standpoint of storage.

Col. Parks then took his long pointer and stated what the plan contemplated. First, he said that they would raise the outlet a matter of three feet, which would be done almost instantly, and he pointed out on the map how much of the lower valley that additional three feet would flood. He then said that by 1945, which was after all only a matter of two years later, they would raise the lake seventeen feet. He then pointed out where the seventeen foot raise would back the water. The water would virtually reach the south end of Main Street and would make the Conrad Memorial Cemetery an island. The water at that level would reach virtually to Columbia Falls and Col. Parks said that ultimately the lake level would be raised a matter of thirty-seven feet. Of course this would have destroyed the entire valley in every worthwhile way. All of the best land would have been taken and instead of a decent lake when the drawdown came, there would be nothing but stinking mud flats throughout the valley.

After Col. Park's explanation, the taking of testimony began. I might say that the atmosphere was tense, indeed, and the Colonel and one of the engineers attempted to make a joke about the flooding, no doubt without malice aforethought, but it was taken, I might say, almost viciously by the audience.

The meeting was conducted as in a court of law. I was very proud of the attorneys who handled the matter. We called on the various witnesses who presented their thought, some by reading and prepared statements and some extemporaneously. There were some tremendous speeches made if we could call them speeches.



Kalispell from the top of Lone Pine Hill.

None were long. Everyone was in dead earnest. It was a tremendous exposition of democracy in action conducted in the proper way. I might say that we had protests from almost every kind of organization in the State of Montana and many from out of the state, from the ladies sewing clubs to the biggest labor unions to the railroads, as well as many, many individuals. The number and nature of these protests can only be described by listing them. According to the transcript, these protestants included the following:

- Donald C. Treloar, owner and operator of radio station KGEZ
- Northern Pacific Railroad and Northern Pacific Transport
- Hon. Sam C. Ford, Governor of the State of Montana
- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation and members thereof
- Mountain States Association of Salt Lake City, Utah, which was an organization composed of civic groups of the eight Rocky Mountain states
- Montanans, Inc.
- State Chamber of Commerce of Helena Sanders County, Montana, by its Board of Commissioners
- Butte Chamber of Commerce
- Lake County, Montana, by its Board of County Commissioners
- The Flathead Electric District
- W. C. McCormick, former Lt. Governor and a farmer in the lower valley

The protests of the individuals in many cases were magnificent. I now quote the statement of Mr. McCormick:

"Years ago I was a member of the executive committee, vice president of the National Grange, and for years president of the Farm Bureau Federation. I belong to practically all farm organizations organized in the last 40 or 50 years. I am one of those joiners. I live next to the hills, about 80 rods from where the land goes up on the west along the State highway, 7 miles south. I have helped the neighbors fight high water from natural causes ever since I have lived there, by building dikes. Sometimes we were just a shovelful ahead of it, but fortunately when nature inundates the land of the valley it only lasts 24 hours or for about 6 or 7 days and the dikes hold although sometimes it gets soft and if you walk on the lower side of them you go up to your middle, on account of the nature of the soil. So it is interesting to me to hear people talk about diking out the Somers Lumber Co. and Woodland Park.

"I am not an engineer and do not understand the slide rule but I do know Flathead water. I represented the county commissioners at the Kerr Dam hearing in Washington and made trips down there and appeared before committees in congress, and I have studied the geology of Flathead Valley. I am not a college graduate but I have gone to the school of life and I am almost ready to graduate. John B. Goff, the temperance lecturer, said he believed when a man talked to the public he should be full of his subject, so I got full of my subject before I got up to talk. If there is any thing I do know it is Flathead Valley, its geology, and the effect of water on it and the impossibility of putting up dikes and having them hold for months. While I worked on the dikes back in 1996 from daylight to late at night we were working a shovel full ahead of it for a long time down at Wiley's near my place. His land would overflow down to Somers as it had entrance to the sloughs. I went clear to my middle, and the water had only been up about 3 days. It is just the same as mortar in a mortar box

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5