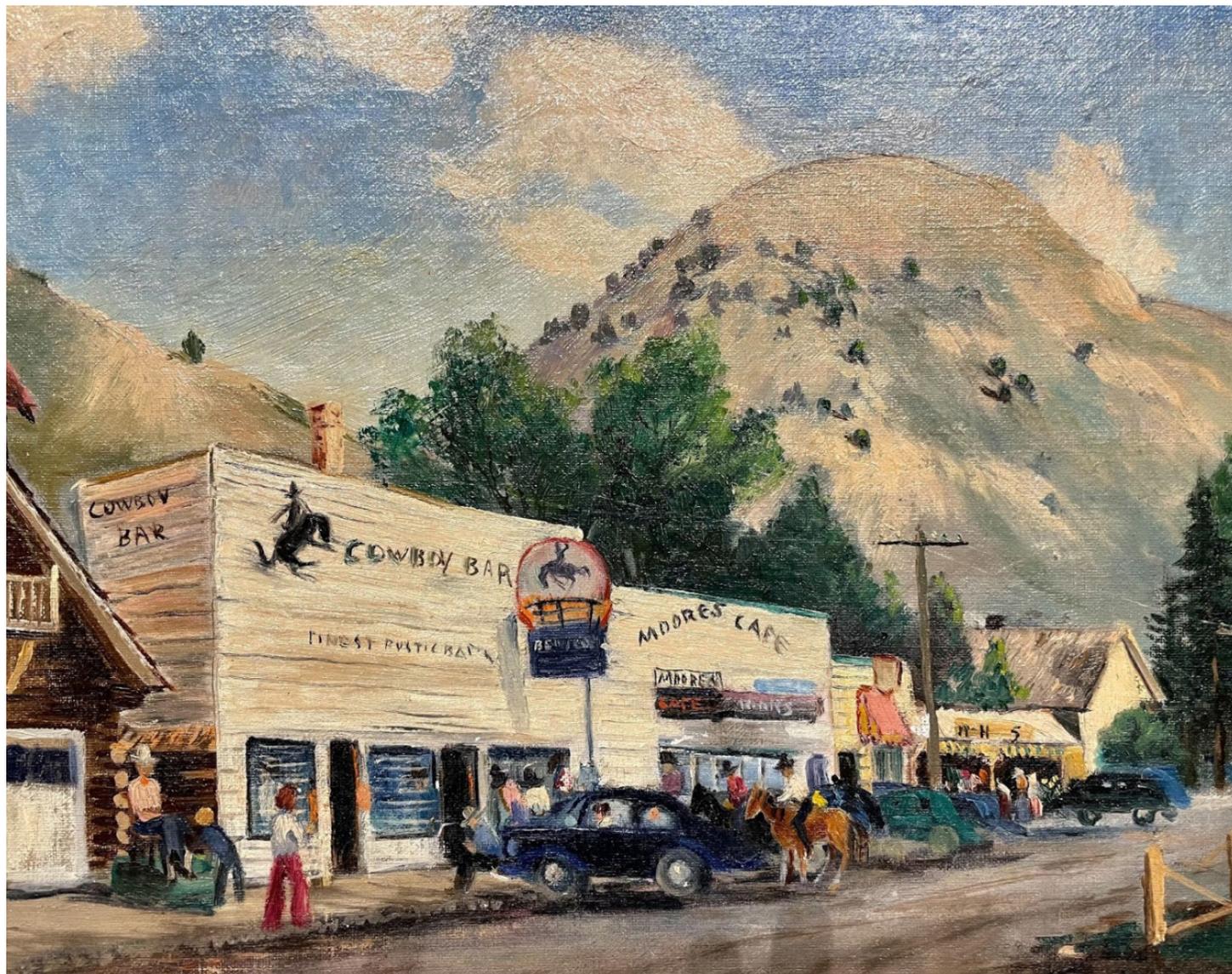


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Painting of The Cowboy Bar and Moore's Cafe by Archie Boyd Teater, circa 1939.



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PART II

BUILDING JACKSON LAKE DAM

BY ROB MURPHY

When Congress created Grand Teton National Park in 1929, it excluded much of the valley, the eastern shores of Jackson Lake, and the Jackson Lake Dam. Not long before, a national controversy over the damming of the Tuolumne River in the Hetch Hetchy Valley of Yosemite in 1913 fueled the debate over a dam's place in a National Park. [1]

Preservationists argued that this sort of human-made construction had no part in a natural park, while others argued for protecting the area surrounding the dam from development. Finally, after more than a decade of debate, President Roosevelt created the Jackson Hole National Monument on March 14, 1943, to protect the land around the dam.

The *Jackson's Hole Courier* took a position against this perceived power grab and published several articles against the monument that received national attention. The Wyoming congressional delegation attempted but failed to repeal the 1906 Antiquities Act, which authorized the creation of national monuments. The State of Wyoming then sued the federal government over the President's power to designate national monuments.[2] Several more years of legal struggle followed, and the Jackson Lake

Dam (JLD) and the Jackson Hole National Monument were finally made part of Grand Teton National Park by an Act of Congress and signed on September 4, 1950. For more information on this period, see Dr. Robert Righter's must-read book, *Crucible for Conservation: The Struggle for Grand Teton National Park*.

Since its construction, controversy continued to surround the Dam. The missions of the agencies involved with the dam were not well aligned. Created to provide water for farms and towns, the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) managed the JLD to provide irrigation water for the people of central Idaho. [3] The National Park Service's mission to preserve, "natural and cultural resources and values ..." and the multi-use philosophy of the National Forest Service were at odds and often clashed with the needs of Teton County. The County, with only 3% private land, fought any attempt to shrink its tax base. World events and national politics helped cause more controversy at the JLD.

Two years after the 1976 collapse of the Teton Dam that killed eleven people in Idaho, the United States Congress passed the Reclamation Safety of Dams Act authorizing the USBR to repair failing dams. Then, in 1983, the USBR held a series of public opinion workshops and published the

Jackson Lake Safety of Dams Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement. The report's summary indicated a, "...40% probability of failure during the next 100 years." [4] The EIS proposed six alternatives, many of which (like building a new dam at Pacific Creek) were unacceptable to the Jackson Hole community.

The Bureau's mission, "...to fulfill its contractual obligation to the water users [Idaho farmers]," clashed with the goals of the Park and the community. [5] The EIS summary continued, "Maximum failure of the dam during an earthquake, with a full unrestricted reservoir, would cause uncontrolled, catastrophic flooding along the Snake River from Jackson Lake to Palisades Reservoir resulting in possible loss of life and significant property damage." [6] This dire assessment aimed to steer public opinion to the preferred alternative of complete reconstruction.

The Jackson Hole Alliance for Responsible Planning, now called the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, represented local concerns and lobbied against reconstruction. The Alliance argued that, "...both the Draft and the Final EIS failed to address many of the topics we felt were important..." [7] These topics included permanently lowering the lake level and the location of mines and quarries involved in the reconstruction. In the end, the USBR ignored many Alliance concerns, chose their preferred plan, and rebuilt the dam over four years ending in 1989 for 82 million dollars. [8]

More controversy followed in 2003 when University of California seismologist Ralph Archuleta gave a presentation on earthquake danger. After his talk at Teton Village, the Geologists of Jackson Hole drafted a resolution demanding the release of USBR study data. They argued, "Archuleta provided significant scientific evidence that the sediments beneath Jackson Lake Dam ... are likely to liquefy (like quicksand) at a seismic event of Magnitude 7... likely to cause the dam to fail." [9] This news shocked Jackson Hole and the region.

Acquiring more data from the USBR proved difficult. *The Billings Gazette* wrote, "Geologists and politicians have fought the Bureau unsuccessfully to release a 2003 study of the dam's safety." In the words of former Teton County Commissioner Bill Paddleford, "They've been withholding the dam safety study, the hazards report, from us for a number of years under the aegis of national security." [10] Unfortunately, instead of the full report, the USBR released in 2004 an "Executive Summary Seismic Risk Analysis." In another attempt to sway public opinion, USBR argued that, "...earthquake induced failure of Jackson Lake Dam would result in little to no loss of life...." [11]

The EIS continued, claiming that the broad floodplain of the Snake would disperse the flood. This rosy outlook is an entirely different assessment than in the 1984 EIS used to justify rebuilding the dam. A lack of transparency continued to fuel the Jackson Hole community's historical distrust of the Federal agencies in the area.

Is the JLD safe? The Bureau of Reclamation believes it is. Even so, in a *Jackson Hole News and Guide* article by Mike Koshmrl in 2020, dam tender John Bennett reported, "For the most part she's good, but you've got to remember that a lot of the parts are 100 years old." [12] The Jackson Lake Dam is just a concrete wall. Relatively small by dam standards but trapped between multiple government agencies, local needs, water owners, and at the whim of external events. The scarcity of water in the west, coupled with an increase in population, ensures that the Jackson Lake Dam's history will continue to influence the community of Jackson Hole and the nation.

ABOUT ROB MURPHY

Like many of us, Rob Murphy came to the Jackson Hole valley in 1980s for the skiing. An avid Nordic skier with a lifelong love of history, he enjoys the many outdoor recreational activities in the area. With a focus on environmental history, Rob received a Master's Degree in History from Arizona State University in 2020. Rob is the father of two children and lives in Wilson.

[1] Robert W. Righter, *Crucible for Conservation: The Struggle for Grand Teton National Park*. (University Press of Colorado, 1982): 19.

[2] Righter, *Crucible*, 110.

[3] *National Geographic*, March 2021

[4] United States. Bureau of Reclamation. "Jackson Lake Safety of Dams Project (WY, ID): Environmental Impact Statement." (1984): 1 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ien.35556031240187>.

[5] *Jackson Lake Safety of Dams Study: Information Summary*, (May 1983): 19.

Jackson Hole Historical Society id. 2002.112.98

[6] United States. Bureau of Reclamation. "Jackson Lake Safety of Dams Project (WY, ID): Environmental Impact Statement." (1984): 1 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ien.35556031240187>.

[7] *Jackson Hole Alliance, Newsletter*

[8] Dan Berger, "The Dual lives of Jackson Lake," 17. (Other sources provide different figures in the same range.)

[9] *Associated Press*, "Expert says quake may break Jackson Lake Dam," *Billings Gazette*, September 17, 2004

[10] *Associated Press*, "Expert says quake may break Jackson Lake Dam," *Billings Gazette*, September 17, 2004

[11] U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, "Technical Memorandum No. JL-8313-4," 15.

[12] Mike Koshmrl, "Living the dam life" *Jackson Hole News and Guide*, Oct 7, 2020