Sean Richardson
Voices Across Columbia
1 May 2017

The Death of the Small Farm Dream

Ever since the beginning of the Oregon Territory until the late 1900s, Oregon has meant someplace to immigrate to in order to start up a small family farm in the minds of the people. In the mid 1800s, Oregon was described as “an easy place to make a living, to get free land” (Dodds 231). People immigrated to Oregon for an easy fresh start. This same vision of small farms continued through Roosevelt’s New Deal, in which Roosevelt’s new deal engineers described the Columbia River Basin as a “Planned Promised Land” (Pitzer, "Grand Coulee" xiv), a place in which many war veterans and families could succeed on small allocations of land. Throughout history, Oregon has been representative of the supposed ease of small farm success. However, towards the end of the Columbia Basin Project, “The small family farmer could no longer persist on the government’s eighty-acre allocations” (Dietrich 307). Clearly, the reality and the vision of small farm success in the Columbia do not align. Both the government and the people wanted a community of small farms; however this dream never came to be. If both the government and the people wanted small farms to succeed, why did the vision of small farm success in the Oregon territory never become a reality? The ultimate failure of small farms was not a doomed to happen ever since the vision; rather, the failure of small farms was due to a variety of factors including bad policies, and unlucky economic timing which together slowly ate away at the small farm dream.

While Dietrich points out that small farms were ultimately unsuccessful, during the initial settlement of this area, small farms did prosper. For example, “[The Willamette Settler’s] wheat output increased from 3,000 bushels in 1835 to 5,000 in 1836 . . . 8,000 to 10,000 in 1841, and up to 52,000 in 1846" (Gibson 142). Such a steep increase in wheat production over a period of only 10 years demonstrates the quick success of the farmers in this area. The first settlers in this area had every reason to be successful farmers -- little previous existing competition, and "the mildness of the weather and the availability of readymade grassland" (Gibson 141). This success of early settlers is the same success that the government emphasized in order to promote immigration to Oregon, shaping the initial perception of the Oregon territory into a land in which the settlers "never hear of failures" (Dodds 225). However, simply because an area has initial success does not guarantee success for later setters.

The initial generous distribution of land was a key reason for this initial success of farmers, but made it difficult for later settlers to compete with the early farmers. Several policies in particular resulted in large initial land claims. Prior to 1848, "the federal act creating Oregon territory" (Johnson 42) had not been created, meaning that Oregon was not under the same federal land claim restrictions as the rest of the country. The only restriction was one passed by the providence's provisional government, which allowed "any white male settler to claim at no cost a full section of land (640 acres, a square mile)" (Johnson 42). For comparison, the Preemption act of 1841, which applied to all federally owned land, "limited a settler to purchasing 160 acres at a cost of $1.25 per acre" (Johnson 42). Clearly, the under-regulated land of Oregon was much more appealing to the settlers, and the rapid immigration to Oregon began. Even after the establishment of the Oregon territory, land distributions were still generous under the Oregon Donation Land Law of 1850, granting "640 acres . . . to married men who had lived on and cultivated the land for four consecutive years . . . [and] 320 acres to single men under the same conditions" (Fuller 24). The settlers took full advantage of these generous policies;

according to table, “Average Farm Size of Oregon and the Midwest” (Johnson 47), in 1850 the average farm size in Oregon was 372 acres, over two times the size of every midwest state average at the time. This generous land policy did not last forever; in 1855, the acreage “decreased to 320 if married and 160 if single” (Fuller 24). This smaller claim policy was further solidified by the Homestead Act, “which took effect [1863], granted 160 acres of unappropriated public lands to anyone who paid a small filing fee and agreed to work on the land and improve it” ("Homestead Act"). This Homestead Act would mark some stability in these quickly changing policies, remaining “in effect for more than a century, and the last claim made under it was granted in 1988” ("Homestead Act"). Even with the decrease, the damage for future settlers had been done by previous policies. 1857, “The surveyor general of the territory reported ‘there is but little vacant good land west of the cascade mountains’” (Johnson 44), marking the first warning of the later struggle for settlers to find good available land.

Leading into the 1900s, with much of the quality land already taken, settlers began the expansion into the drier land. Because claiming land through the Homestead Act required paying for the land and often “the land of the Government was not worth $1.25 an acre” (Ganoe 145), people needed other ways to obtain a land claim. The Timber Culture Act of 1873 and the Desert Land Act of 1877 were two other options people could use to obtain land, and both acts played a large role in “encourag[ing] movement into dry Western Land” (Pitzer, "Grand Coulee" 5). The Timber culture Act stated that “for planting and cultivating forty acres of trees for a period of ten years a person could obtain a patent of up to 160 acres” (McIntosh 349). However, while this was one way for newcomers to have small farm success, the requirement of ten years of work is still difficult and the end result is still only a small plot of 160 acres. The Desert Land Act on the other hand was more generous with the acreage, “being able to enter 640 acres under the desert land act” (Ganoe 145) for a reduced price per acre. However, the desert land requires that the landholder irrigates the land, which is no easy task, requiring “the skills of the engineer, the accountant, the mechanic, and the marketer as well as the farmer” (Dietrich 229). The overall trend in these different ways to obtain land is difficulty in getting started without any previous resources or money. In order to get land, you need to pay or work for the land which proves difficult without some stability going in. Even with success, landholders in the days of the initial distribution with less regulation still have the advantage. Even in the years leading up to the twentieth century, the dream of small farm success was far from reality mostly due to the progression of policies.

At this point, the government is faced with two major problems which it has the responsibility to fix. Firstly, the problematic initial distribution of the land made it difficult for newcomers to the area to farm successfully. Secondly, the expansion into the drier land had potential, but was impractical without access to irrigation. The Columbia Basin Project was the proposed solution to these two problems; the government would attempt to redistribute land by providing irrigation to farmers in the Columbia River Basin in exchange for land. Ultimately, “the Columbia Basin Project was supposed to redistribute wealth” (Dietrich 305). The vision for this project was huge; specifically, “The Joint Investigators of the 1940s anticipated that the project, when half finished, would have between 175,000 and 200,000 residents, and about seven thousand farms” (Pitzer, "Visions" 268). However, despite this effort to redistribute land, the project never lived up to these expectations and the plan ultimately failed for a variety of reasons, bringing down the hopes of a redistribution of wealth in the favor of small farms.

The policies and laws surrounding the Columbia River Basin Project was essential in determining the direction of the Columbia River Basin Project, and contributed to the ultimate failure of the success of small farms. The Anti-Speculation Act of 1937 became necessary even before the government began irrigation, for “when construction started at Grand Coulee Dam and it became clear that some day the government would irrigate the basin, land prices from Ephrata south to Pasco rose rapidly . . .” (Pitzer, "Grand Coulee" 268). Irrigated land is more valuable than dry land, so the appearance that the land would soon be irrigated drove up the value of the land. This spike in prices was problematic, for if land itself is more expensive, then new small farmers will have a more difficult time getting started and making a profit in their first few years. In order to prevent this, “The Interior Department sponsored a law to control the situation . . . The Anti-Speculation Act limited each project farm to forty acres, regardless of soil characteristics” and present owners were not allowed to sell the land for above a government set price (Pitzer, "Grand Coulee" 269). The Anti-Speculation Act certainly helped promote small farms for a while; however, it was soon overruled by the Columbia Basin Project Act of 1943, which made some significant changes. Firstly, by the new act, farmers were allowed to keep “ten to 160 acres depending on land quality. Owners of record prior to 1937 could retain up to 160 acres regardless of land quality” (Pitzer, "Visions" 83). This creates a split in the land values owners of different time periods are allowed to own, which puts latecomers at a disadvantage. This unbalance strongly contributes to a small amount of farms expanding and becoming successful while smaller farms have difficulty starting up. Even more significantly, the act “allowed farmers to withdraw their land from the project with the understanding that then they would receive no water” (Pitzer, "Grand Coulee" 273). Allowing farmers to withdraw land from the project will allow current holders of large amounts of land to keep that land. These farmers will be at a disadvantage without government supplied irrigation, but this disadvantage can be manageable depending on the crop, so this ability to keep land can still result in a few large farms dominating; this ability to drop out is something farmers did take advantage of later on. Later, the Acreage Limitation Law of 1957 further increased the allowed acreage for farms on the project. The passing of the 1957 law was largely influenced by the people; before the law was passed, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Fred G. Aandahl held a hearings on farmer's thoughts on the bill. Aandahl continuously heard from the people that "modern farm machinery could easily handle more than one-unit and that it was inefficient on small parcels" (Pitzer, "Visions" 187). With the people's influence, Aandahl went on to push the bill forwards and was instrumental in having it passed. The specifics of this new act "allowed any operator to hold multiple units up to 160 acres. A husband and wife together could own up to 320 acres" (Pitzer, "Visions" 189). This increase in allowed acreage had a significant impact on the amount of land farmers owned. "In 1958, the average farm contained 84.1 acres. By 1972 it reached 107.3 acres" (Pitzer, "Visions" 189), demonstrating that the Acreage Limitation Law of 1957 further pushed farms in the project away from the small farm ideal. In general, while government policies had a strong start in promoting small farms through the Anti-Speculation Act, following acts made the dominance of larger farms increasingly possible.

A huge problem in preventing large farm domination of the project was the loophole in which farmers could operate multiple units of land if they rented the land from other landowners. There are extreme cases in which "One farm near Othello which had 5,117 acres on the project and another 15,000 acres outside the project" (Pitzer, "Visions" 334). A farm operating on a plot that large entirely outcompetes standard small farms of 160 acres or less. It would seem that there would be regulations on this practice of renting out land, and in fact there were; “Limits on renting were firmly established . . . Nevertheless, the practice of renting multiple units flourished . . .” (Pitzer, "Visions" 185). Regulations on renting were simply not enforced, meaning that despite all of the other laws and regulations of the time, massive farms could still exist and be successful making it much more difficult for small family farms to follow with the same success.

A significant setback to Columbia River Basin Project as well as the success of small farms in general was the drainage problem. As the project progressed, it became more and more evident that draining excess irrigation water would be both expensive and often unsuccessful. “During the 1960s, [drainage] always consumed at least twenty-five to thirty-five percent of each year’s appropriation for the Columbia Basin Project” (Pitzer, "Visions" 256). The increasing costs of drainage led to resistance regarding support for the project; “In 1967 . . . the House of Representatives cut funding for the Columbia Basin Project by over a million dollars” (Pitzer, "Visions" 256), which was in large part because of this cost of drainage. The funding freeze was lifted a year later, but it acts as an indicator that the project is slowing down and becoming a fight to complete. The project is ultimately a plan to redistribute wealth, and incompletion of the project means a failure to distribute the wealth into a system in which small farms can prosper. In addition to slowing down the progression of the project, the drainage problem promoted the renting loophole. Often, farmers would discover “top land . . . that is being flooded out of existence by too much water” (Pitzer, "Visions" 258), often making much of their land unusable. To be fair . . . “Under an act passed in 1954, a farmer could also exchange land if the government found that his was insufficient to support his family due to quality” (Pitzer, "Visions" 268), so if a farmer fell victim to having his property flooded, the farmer could in theory make a new claim where he is unaffected. However, this was often a difficult process such as in the example of farmer Charles Smith. Rising water on Smith's property had "reduced his 136 acres to only seventy that could still be irrigated" (Pitzer, "Visions" 260). However, according to Smith, "[The government] been giving me the run-around up at Ephrata for the last four years. They've promised to exchange the land for dryland down here - but they won't do anything about it" (Pitzer, "Visions" 260). Smith's story of unsuccess was the general trend in people dealing with flooded land. "Most of the owners who acquired lieu lands leased them, and only a few moved their farms" (Pitzer, "Visions" 264). Leasing out farms only puts more property in the hands of fewer owners and is generally harmful to small farm success. While it may appear that having parts of property flooded would humorously decrease the average farm size and create a community of smaller farms, the reality is that owners affected by drainage problems would rent their land out, further increasing the problem of obtaining large pieces of land through renting and overall resulting in larger farms. Overall, unexpected problems with drainage significantly hurt the progression of the Basin Project and the success of small farms both through the harm to the project and more directly by encouraging renting.

The economics of the time during the Columbia River Basin Project was impactful in changing both the willingness of the government to support the project, and the enthusiasm of the people to participate in the project. Simultaneous to the development of the Basin Project for some time was World War II, and this war had an impact. Specifically, "World War II brought both higher wheat prices and . . . the start of a wet weather cycle" (Pitzer, "Visions" 83). Suddenly, farmers of the time found that they could sell food for more, and irrigation became less necessary due to the change in weather. With this change, government provided irrigation did not seem worth the cost of land. By the Columbia Basin Project Act of 1943, farmers could withdraw their land from the project, and many did. During the war, there was a trend of land withdrawals from the project. “By 1946, over 300,000 acres had been withdrawn; nearly a third of the project total” (Pitzer, "Visions" 83). Less people willing to participate in the project harms the effectiveness of the project to redistribute land and ultimately harms small farm success. Good conditions at this time in the Columbia Basin Project hurt small farms because it gave the Basin Project less support and momentum while beginning. However, bad economic conditions came in the 1950s, which was at the time many people were trying to start small farms. The economic difficulty of the 1950s in this area is known as the “Cost-price squeeze”, meaning farmers had to buy farming tools for more and sell crops for less. “By 1955, retail prices paid by farmers for the goods they purchased reached 262 percent of the 1910-1914 parity level while returns on crops dropped to 237 percent as measured on the same scale” (Pitzer, "Visions" 181). The percentages are high due to inflation, but the statistic simply indicates that it is becoming significantly more expensive to buy supplies, and the increase in crop prices does not match it, making it harder for farmers to make a profit. The economics of the time made it difficult for small new farms to be successful, but the government still encourages it. The example of Donald Dunn’s “Farm in a Day” in 1952 indicates this difficulty. In the case of Dunn, volunteers constructed “a farm, house, furniture, and equipment materialize on eighty acres of sagebrush in just twenty-four hours” (Dietrich 305) in order to demonstrate how quickly anyone could be a success through farming. However, even though Dunn was given a head start, “within two and a half years [Dunn] was $63,000 in debt” (Dietrich 306). Dunn had to sell the farm, but the small farm never found independent success, for after Dunn, “the farm subsequently . . . had three other owners, and ultimately succeeded only after being combined . . . to make a four-hundred-and-fifty acre spread” (Dietrich 307). Dunn was not alone in this economic difficulty either, “Of 725 unites sold by the government from 1952 through 1956, sixteen percent changed ownership during that period” (Pitzer, "Visions" 182). This was simply a bad economic time to be selling land. The economic prosperity at the beginning of the Columbia Basin Project made the project seem unnecessary and the “cost-price squeeze” during the period the government was promoting buying project land gave the appearance that small farms were inherently unsuccessful. Government action did not align with economic condition, ultimately slowing down the Columbia Basin Project and hurting the dream of small farms.

The status of the Columbia River Basin Project by the 1970s paled in comparison to the original visions for the project. The Grand Coulee Dam for example, was projected to help “100,000 farm families” (Dietrich 293), but ended up only supporting “just over two thousand families, individuals, or corporations” (Dietrich 293). The small farm community that the project sought to created was ultimately a failure by the end of the 1970s. Later however, Reclamation reform act of 1983 (Pitzer, "Visions" 303) altered the entire situation by stating “whether by ownership or by leasing, all farms had to fall inside the 960 acre limit” (Pitzer, "Visions" 307). However, at this point in history, technology was making it increasingly impossible to be competitive operating farms on a small scale and the Oregon Territory area simply missed its opportunity to have a community of small family farms.

To summarize, the failure of small farms in the area defined by the original Oregon Territory was a result of multiple problems. The initial distribution problems with the land caused an initial unbalance that put newcomers at a disadvantage under new more strict regulations. The Columbia Basin Project was a good attempt to redistribute the wealth and encourage small farm success, but the project ultimately failed for a number of reasons including drainage problems, unfair policies, and unlucky alignment of project progression with economics of the time. The failure of small farms was simply due to the combination of many different factors that were hard to control, meaning that while a small farm community did not have success, this was not a dream that was guaranteed to fail.

Works Cited

Dietrich, William. Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River. N.p.: U of Washington, 1997. Print.

Dodds, Gordon B. Varieties of Hope: An Anthology of Oregon Prose. Corvallis, Or.: Oregon State UP, 1993. Print.

Fuller, Tom, and Art Ayre. Oregon at Work: 1859-2009. Portland, Or.: Ooligan, 2009. Print.

Ganoe, John T. "The Desert Land Act in Operation, 1877-1891." Agricultural History, vol. 11, no. 2, 1937, pp. 142–157., www.jstor.org/stable/3739672.

Gibson, James R. Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786-1846. Vancouver: UBC, 2014. Print.

"Homestead Act of 1862." Britannica Academic, Encyclopædia Britannica, 11 Oct. 2016.

Johnson, David Alan. Founding the Far West: California, Oregon, and Nevada, 1840-1890. Berkeley: U of California, 1992. Print.

McIntosh, C. Barron. "Use and Abuse of the Timber Culture Act." Annals of the Association of American Geographers, vol. 65, no. 3, Sept. 1975, pp. 347-362. EBSCOhost, login.watzekpx.lclark.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eih&AN=14534835&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Pitzer, Paul C. Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream. Pullman, WA: Washington State U, 1994. Print.

Pitzer, Paul C. Visions, Plans, and Realities: A History of the Columbia Basin Project. N.p.: U of Oregon, 1990. Print.