

An Interview with the Producer

Ken Verdoia is KUED-TV's Senior Producer for Public Affairs. He is the recipient of more than eighty regional, national and international awards for journalistic and program excellence. *Glen Canyon: A Dam, Water and the West* is his eighteenth documentary for KUED. His previous works include: *A Matter of Principle*, *Utah: The Struggle for Statehood*, *Brigham Young* and *Joe Hill*.

Q: What led you to the Glen Canyon Dam as a subject for a documentary?

A: We need to collectively refresh our memories from time-to-time. Glen Canyon is not just the story of a dam and the making of a lake. It is the story of the American West in the years after World War Two. It is the story of how public policy is shaped, how the values of an era can manifest themselves in the projects government undertakes in our name as citizens and taxpayers. The documentary has very little to do with the groups calling for the draining of Lake Powell. Rather, it has everything to do with helping the public understand that water is one of the pivotal issues that shapes life in the Great Basin and southwest.

It is funny how documentaries are born. The concept for Glen Canyon actually started to form two years ago when I was working in southern Utah on another documentary (**The Frontier Photographers**). I stayed overnight in Page, Arizona and, like any tourist, went to the Glen Canyon Dam site. Big dam, I thought. Must have been quite a job building it. I thought I would like to talk to the workers that built that dam. As I drove back to Page, I realized that the city's welcome sign proclaimed its birth in 1957. Literally, a company town carved out of the desert. That's an interesting story, I thought. Then I turned back and looked at Lake Powell, and I wondered what was there before water filled the canyon. Within thirty minutes I had the framework for the project.

Q: You interviewed almost thirty individuals for the program. Do any stand out?

A: Tough question. If you say "these three or four were special" you somehow leave the impression that the others were less valued. Each interview made an interesting contribution to the program, and shaped the telling of an important story.

But two people interviewed for this program were very special. David Brower was a director of the Sierra Club, and a pivotal figure in the development of an environmental movement in this nation. Floyd Dominy was the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation in its heyday as a dam builder in the West. These two men have left footprints in very different fashions. What they have in common, though, is quite compelling. Each is a person of deep conviction. Each has the courage of those convictions. Over the years they have engaged in heated battles with each other over the use and development of natural resources. While not yielding an inch of ground to the other on principle, they have fashioned a rough understanding of each other that has to be characterized as respect. These two men were lions in a different time, and their work has shaped the world we live in today. I was fortunate to be able to capture their voices for Glen Canyon.

Q: Glen Canyon provides a glimpse of sites that can no longer be seen, namely the Colorado River and its side canyons through the Glen Canyon area. Where did you obtain the film?

A: It doesn't make much sense to tell the story of building a dam unless you can show what was there before the dam created a reservoir. That is particularly true of the Glen Canyon Dam, since the resulting lake flooded one of the lesser understood corners of the nation.

The Bureau of Reclamation graciously provided films of the early survey work and construction of the dam. The Glen Canyon Institute provided priceless film shot by David Brower in the early-1960s. The Special Collections division of the Marriott Library has a fascinating collection of visual material linked to Glen Canyon, not the least of which is the promotional film shot by early river runner Norm Nevills in Glen Canyon in the very early 1950s. The University of Utah also provided copies of films produced as part of the archeological work undertaken during dam construction.

Q: The archeological work seems to be a little understood aspect of the Glen Canyon story.

A: For the general public, it is little understood. But the three years of young men and women racing against time to document over one thousand years of human history in Glen Canyon before it was flooded forever is an

extraordinary story.

The government had taken heat in the 1920s and 30s for building dams without any consideration for the landscape it was flooding, aside from relocating families or roads that were in the flood zone. So in the 1930s Congress passed a law mandating that any federal project that irretrievably claimed a portion of the public landscape would first undertake a "salvaging" of the history, geology and ecology of the area to be flooded. That bill was passed too late to be put to work on the Hoover Dam in southern Nevada, so the Glen Canyon Dam represents the most significant undertaking under the federal law up to 1960. Since well over 100 miles of landscape were to be flooded by the dam, Glen Canyon presented a huge challenge.

The Museum of Northern Arizona administered the survey of the "south shore" of the Colorado River, while the University of Utah managed the "north." Those are loose descriptions of the areas, but are fairly accurate.

The work was remarkable for what it was able to achieve in such a short period of time. Literally hundreds of sites linked to the ancient native Americans were found in Glen Canyon. Not to mention hundreds of additional sites associated with pioneering efforts of a later period, such as the rock inscriptions of the John Wesley Powell crews. Thousands of artifacts were removed to museums for future generations to study.

The salvage project turned out to be a trial by fire for an entire generation of archeologists and anthropologists. Under the guidance of project director Jesse Jennings, something on the order of two dozen future university professors and advanced researchers were trained on the banks of the Colorado River. Their subsequent work has resulted in hundreds of archeological projects in the southwest, and dozens of published works that leave us all better informed about the cultures that populated this region long before pioneering settlement.

For all of that achievement, however, there was one thing the young project participants could not do. They could not salvage the ancient dwellings and rock art that were found throughout Glen Canyon. Those priceless treasures of history were lost to the rising waters of Lake Powell starting in 1963.

Q: Is that a statement of opposition to Lake Powell?

A: Absolutely not! Any objective reading of the impact of the building of Glen Canyon Dam and the creation of Lake Powell produces a litany of impressive contributions to the development of the West. Recreational opportunities have attracted tens of millions of visitors over the years, and those visitors have contributed billions of dollars to the local economies in the same period of time. The hydroelectric power produced by the dam has served populations throughout the region, and produced enough income in power sales to pay for building the dam and other operational aspects of the Colorado River Storage Project. Its clear that tens of thousands of people have come to depend on the existence of Lake Powell and the Glen Canyon Dam.

Conversely, there are people who view the dam as producing environmental consequences that damaged the region and the Colorado River. Some even question the structural future of the dam.

(For more information on groups supporting and opposing the Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell, visit our page on related web links.)

As we say in the documentary, any two people with different interests can view the Glen Canyon Dam and come to different conclusions about what constitutes progress in the West.

Q: What do you hope the average viewer might take away from viewing Glen Canyon.

A: The greatest reward for any documentary producer is when a viewer makes a simple statement of personal discovery. "Gee, I didn't know that."

An entire generation of Utahns--perhaps more than half of the current population of the state--have no knowledge or memory of Glen Canyon before the construction of the dam. I hope the documentary will help people realize that important, far-reaching decisions had to be made and great energies applied to create the dam and Lake Powell, and that those decisions and energies were based on a national policy for development in an era very different from the one we are living in at the present time. I hope people will be able to understand the differences between that bygone era and the present time. I hope they will weigh those differences, and form opinions about what they believe should be government policy toward development of the West for the 21st century.

I hope a viewer might look at the program and develop an appreciation for the beauty and history that existed in Glen Canyon before the building of the dam. I hope they would respect and appreciate the labors of those who built this extraordinary public works project, and who created the town of Page, Arizona.

In the end, I would hope people viewing the program might develop an understanding of what came before in

this remarkable corner of our nation.

Q: Was it an easy story to tell?

A: All great stories have lots of different layers. The story of Glen Canyon and the building of the dam is a good example of that. Sure, its the story of water in the west. But its also the story of river runners savoring the isolation of the area. They invariably come in conflict with the forces of progress, which bring thousands of workers who undertake the truly daunting task of building this enormous concrete project in the absolute wilderness of Glen Canyon. Add to that the battle over the Echo Park dam. . .the first emergence of an environmental movement. . .the political deal- making that took place. . .the work of the archeologists racing against time and rising water. Well, there is just no end to the layers that exist in this story. In their own way, each of those stories could be its own documentary.

So Glen Canyon simply represents a producer getting lucky. Its a story from the past with great implications for the present and future. There are great layers to the story, with fascinating men and women at every level along the way to serve as guides. It takes place in a different era, yet one that is close enough for many of us to recall. On top of it all, it takes place in one of the world's most beautiful locations.

As an old journalism professor once told me, "Sometimes the challenge is to simply stay out of the way of a story that can tell itself."

Q: You mention the Echo Park controversy. Very few people seem to recall that chapter of the story.

A: Yet, at the time, it was a major national angle on the story of managing the Upper Colorado River after World War Two.

In the early 1950s the Bureau of Reclamation proposes a dam near the confluence of the Green and Yampa Rivers. Actually two facilities. One in Echo Park and the next slightly further downstream at Split Mountain. The Bureau is convinced these will serve important water storage purposes, and also offer maximum hydroelectric benefits. The local population, based primarily around the town of Vernal, Utah, is virtually unanimous in its support for the dams. In fact, people start buying land and drawing up blueprints for developments to take advantage of the expected reservoirs and increased tourism. Of no small consequence is the fact that the Echo Park Dam would be built well within the confines of Dinosaur National Monument, and would flood extended stretches of canyons protected by monument status.

The executive director of the Sierra Club conservation group, David Brower, hears of the proposal. Utilizing films shot by people who had run the Green River in rafts, Brower begins a national public awareness campaign against construction of the dam. For the Sierra Club, the critical issue is flooding part of a dedicated national monument.

It may be the first nationwide environmental campaign to utilize mass media to stop a public works project. And it soon proves to be very effective. Thousands of letters pour into Congress protesting the construction of the Echo Park Dam. Under the pressure, members of Congress start to back away from their early support for the dam. In fact, the entire Upper Colorado River Storage Project--an entire system of dams--becomes endangered.

To save the full Storage Project, the Bureau of Reclamation scraps plans for Echo Park.

The interesting twist is that, for the Storage Project to work, the water that was going to be held in Echo Park had to be held elsewhere. People still argue over what happened next. But it seems clear that plans for an already-proposed dam for Glen Canyon were expanded, resulting in more of the canyon being flooded than might have been originally proposed.

So, in a very real sense, Echo Park was a landmark victory for the emerging voices of conservation, yet it substantially contributed to a very different result further down the Colorado River system.

Q: What is next for you?

A: The team that built the Glen Canyon documentary has already moved on to production of another program based on a chapter of history from the region's past. We are now in production of **Fire in the Hole**, a documentary that will look at the important, and little understood, "wars" that took place surrounding mining in the West at the turn of the century.