

• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

Waterbuster



Elizabeth Grinnell-Tallbull and Family, © 2008, Brave Boat Productions

"I will never know the towns of Independence or Elbowoods, except in story. My grandmother rarely spoke of the days of the Garrison Dam and the flooding of our ancestral lands, but when she did, she always spoke of what lay below as her true home. I have come back here to reclaim that home and what was denied to my generation and all the generations that will follow."

— J. Carlos Peinado,
Producer, *Waterbuster*



In 1947, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began a \$300 million, multi-damming project in North Dakota. Thousands of acres of farmland were seized, hundreds of families were displaced, and nearly 90 percent of the Fort Berthold Reservation, home to the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara people was destined to go under water.

The project, while slated to create hydropower and electricity, irrigation, barge traffic and recreation, displaced thousands of Native American and non-Native American families and flooded towns. The aftermath of the building of the Garrison Dam, a more than two-mile-long earthen structure, is the subject of ***Waterbuster***.

Returning to Fort Berthold to find out why his grandmother left the reservation as a young woman, J. Carlos Peinado discovers the origins of his kinship within the Waterbuster Clan. He also realizes that the glistening water of Lake Sakakawea caused much pain among his relatives, pain that still resonates today.



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This guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the film, the building of the Garrison Dam and its legacy, not only for the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara people, but for all those impacted by the dam and subsequent flooding and its effect on communities, culture, livelihood and the environment.

PRODUCER’S NOTES

J. Carlos Peinado, Producer/Writer/Director/Editor

I returned to North Dakota in 2004 to research the history of the Garrison Dam and to film the responses to it of my elders and contemporaries living on and off the reservation. It had become apparent to me after years of discussions with my grandmother and her peers that some were still suffering from the circumstances of the 1950s. This was a difficult and at times painful subject for them to talk about. Those who did speak believed that a frank discussion of what had happened was necessary to heal the community so that they could get on with the work of facing new challenges and asking different questions. Those I interviewed raised a variety of issues as they contemplated what it meant to be an American Indian in the 21st century and what it meant to live in an altered landscape, a landscape that had shaped their people and communities for centuries. Throughout the process, their resilience, intelligence, courage and sense of humor rang clear.



Waterbuster weaves together the voices of those who left the reservation and those who stayed, as well as the voices of my grandmother’s generation and my own. It doesn’t attempt to provide simple answers to the complex questions that brought me to this project but rather, it suggests that identity, history and our relationship to the land on which we stand is open-ended, plagued by ghosts, and by injustice and also, full of the possibility of renewal.

BY THE NUMBERS

Nearly 1,000 years	Length of time the Mandan called land along the Missouri River in North Dakota home
7 years	Length of time to build the dam that flooded their land
5 th largest	Garrison Dam’s ranking in size among 80,000 U.S. dams
3 rd largest	Lake Sakakawea’s ranking in size among more than 123,000 U.S. lakes
152,360 acres	Amount of Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara land seized for the dam
90%	Percentage of tribal membership that was relocated
\$300 million	Cost to build the Garrison Dam
\$12.6 million	Government compensation to Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandau, Hidatsa and Arikara) for loss of land
\$9 million	Shortfall of government compensation based on fair valuation of land

DELVE DEEPER

1. **According to Fred Baker, a Mandan tribal member, “The river was kind of the beginning of our origins, especially the Mandans....The creation story is how the river was maybe our grandfather. It also provided the river bottoms themselves. It was full of big trees, shelter. They provided wood for fires....it provided a habitat for game, and they had these fantastic gardens.”**

What constituents did the policymakers consider when they made the decision to build dams along the Missouri River? How might the Mandan view have altered the discussion? What relationship do you have to the natural world? How does your worldview shape how you behave toward nature?

2. **Reba White Shirt described growing up in Elbowoods, as “somewhat being in a cocoon, where you felt a sense of safety, a sense of security, a sense of belonging, and also a very strong cultural identification to the community because you heard the Hidatsa language being spoken.”**

How have the places you’ve lived shaped you or your family members? Where do you feel most “at home” and why? How does place and language impact culture, family, individuals?

3. **Devastating floods, an economic depression, prolonged drought and unsustainable farming practices all contributed to the passage of the Pick-Sloan Flood Control Act of 1944, which called for the construction of 110 dams, including the Garrison Dam in North Dakota. Author Paul VanDeVelder explained that those who developed the Act promised irrigation for farms, hydroelectric power, barge traffic and recreation. Instead, he said, farmers never received the water promised, the tribes, fertile bottomland and wildlife were devastated and he predicts that Lake Sakakawea will be silted into a “big mud puddle within 50 years.”**

What are some of the key historical events that influenced the development of the Pick-Sloan Flood Control Act of 1944? Who were the key players in getting the Pick-Sloan Act passed and what were they most interested in achieving? What development issues in your community are being decided now? What is the process for deciding these issues? What, if any, provisions are in place to include in the discussion those who will be most impacted? How might you get involved?

4. **Over 90% percent of the Three Affiliated Tribes membership was evicted and relocated as a result of the building of the Garrison Dam. The tribes ultimately received \$12.6 million dollars from the U.S. government in compensation for the loss of their land, \$9 million less than the land was valued by a private appraisal commissioned by the tribes.**

Based on interviews of tribal members in Waterbuster, what were the short and long term impacts of dislocation and relocation on members of the Three Affiliated Tribes? How did it impact their identity and their community? What other examples of dislocation and relocation of a people come to mind? Is there such a thing as “fair” compensation for dislocating and relocating a community? If so, how should it be determined?

5. **Dr. Biron Baker, a tribal member, expressed the generational anger experienced by children and grandchildren of those whose lives were impacted by the cascade of events that submerged their reservation: “Did flood control have to happen? Sure it did. Did it have to happen the way it did? No. The Garrison Dam could have been built at an alternate site just north of the reservation....even though I wasn't alive at the time it all happened. It was handed down to me, it's a generational anger....and it's something I've passed on to my own kids in my way. I've tried not to...but if you feel strongly about something, if you feel like an injustice has been done aren't we taught as American people to want to do something about injustice in the world?”**

Think about the injustices members of the Three Affiliated Tribes endured during this episode in history. Is there a present day situation you feel is unjust? Why? Is there anything you can do to make people aware of the injustice or help address it?

6. **“...There's a stereotypical image of Indian people as being drunkards, as being shiftless, or being always on the public dole....but I would challenge any American to go through what we went through and not come out of it with some effects, some ill effects,” said Calvin Grinnell about the traumas members of the Three Affiliated Tribes and so many fellow Indians experienced.**

Grinnell refers to trauma passed on through generations, known as “transgenerational transmission of trauma.” Other examples of this type of trauma are the internment of the Japanese, enslavement of Africans and natural disasters. We can see direct physical effects of the dam on the land, but what about the unseen or psychological trauma to the people effected? Is there an event in your family history or your life that is so traumatic that its impact is still felt? How does that impact you, your family and your community today?

IDEAS FOR ACTION

Identity and Place

Find out about the places your parents and other ancestors lived, how those places, natural surroundings or communities shaped them, and why they stayed or left. Talk with your relatives as well as researching places and events via the Web, books or videos. Share that history with others through a blog entry, social networking, a web site, letters to the editor of your local paper or in conversation.

Finding Out About Others' Experiences

Every person, family and community has stories to share about major events that have shaped and impacted their lives. **Waterbuster** tells one of those stories. Telling and sharing these stories is powerful. Who in your community or family carries stories that put a face on important historical events? Invite them to share their story at special events, meetings, family and other gatherings. Interview them and share it with others. Write a story, create an audio recording or a film of your own.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Paul VanDevellder, ***Coyote Warrior: One Man, Three Tribes and the Trial that Forged a Nation***, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007.

Michael L. Lawson, ***Dammed Indians***, The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.

RADIO

KUOW/Seattle interview with Paul VanDevellder about Coyote Warrior

<http://www.kuow.org/program.php?id=7764>
(interview begins at 6:30 into recording)

Three Affiliated Tribes: Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation

<http://www.mhanation.com/>

This is the official web site of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, also known as the Three Affiliated Tribes and includes a page on the history of the Garrison Dam and its impact on the tribes and their land.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

American Rivers

<http://www.americanrivers.org/>

American Rivers is the leading conservation organization standing up for healthy rivers so communities can thrive. American Rivers protects and restores America's rivers for the benefit of people, wildlife and nature.

Indigenous Environmental Network

<http://www.ienearth.org/>

Established in 1990 within the United States, IEN was formed by grassroots Indigenous peoples and individuals to address environmental and economic justice issues.

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