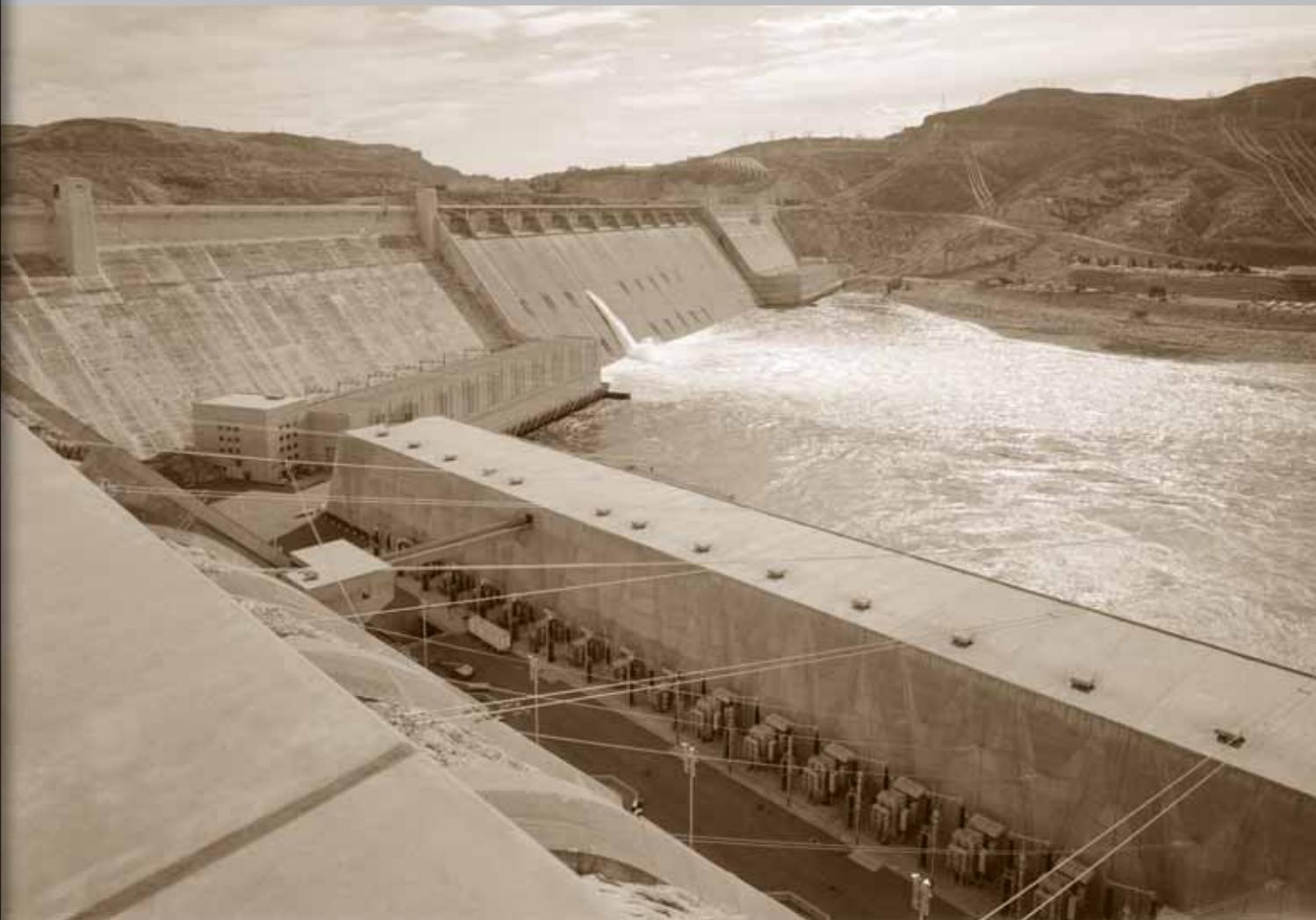


ARTI FACT

World in Awe



IT WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST PUBLIC WORKS of the Depression, employing thousands and awing the world with its scale and ambition. The Grand Coulee Dam, part of a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation project to irrigate the arid Columbia River Basin in Washington State, became an American icon. The federal government hired Woody Guthrie to write songs about it. At nearly a mile long and 550 feet tall, it is both the largest dam and the largest concrete structure in the United States. Its staggering size is emblematic of the heroic efforts the government took to lift the state of a demoralized nation. **THE DAM WAS PART OF THE LARGER COLUMBIA BASIN PROJECT**, which encompassed a host of dams. But the Grand Coulee was the centerpiece, completed in 1942 after nine years of herculean effort and virtuoso logistics. Its power plants, one of which is shown above, produce up to 6.5 million kilowatts—the largest generators of power in the country—while irrigating more than half a million acres. Because of this significance, the Historic American Engineering Record documented the project for posterity, a portrait residing on the shelves and online at the Library of Congress (at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/index.html). **TODAY, HOWEVER, ATTITUDES HAVE SHIFTED.** It is now known that dams have ill effects as well as benefits: they trap sediment and silt, slow down currents, raise water temperatures and, once they pass the 50-year mark, become dramatically more costly to maintain, a salient point given pressures to enhance their efficiency and environmental friendliness. Before the 1930s, almost a million fish coursed up the Columbia and its tributaries every year. Now, some 400 dams block their way—with many of the largest still run by the federal government—and fishermen, tribes, environmentalists, and others have sought change. **AGAINST THIS BACKDROP**, the Supreme Court has granted states more power over their dams, with the right to reduce discharge and allow fish to migrate. In the long run, other energy sources may prove less costly than maintaining these monuments to ingenuity, inspired by trying times.