

Spokane's Falls and River Gorge

Evolving ties between a Community and its Wellspring

- By Richard B. Hastings

Disconnect

"I was enchanted -- overwhelmed -- with the beauty and grandeur of everything I saw. It lay just as nature had made it, with nothing to mar its virgin glory... I determined that I would possess it."

*- James Glover, "Founder" of the City of Spokane Falls, recalling his first visit to the river in 1873*¹

In the center of the City of Spokane flows a river and falls unlike any in the United States. Especially during Spring, when the pace of the river is at its peak, the falls provide a scenic and sonic backdrop as captivating as any one might find in a wilderness setting; yet they boil beneath curtained City Hall windows, and flow unacknowledged below a glistening new shopping mall.



Figure 1: Spokane's Lower Falls, largely as Tribes knew them and as Glover found them in 1873. The flour mill in the upper right marks the approximate location of City Hall today. (*Eastern Washington State Historic Society*)

¹ Reminiscences of James N. Glover, p. 20, Ye Galleon Press, Fairfield, Washington, 1985.

In 1974, the Falls were the centerpiece of the first environmentally themed World's Fair, drawing the unwavering praise of over 5 million visitors. Yet despite the accolades, the civic gains, and economic salvation derived from them, the Falls in 1992 were to be spanned by a new 90 foot-wide concrete bridge. As one city councilman put it: "We've got to find some way to get across *that ditch.*"²

Here, in the year 2002, Spokane's relationship with its river – at least as expressed through the built environment – continues on uneven footing. The city that helped mainstream the environmental movement still struggles to engage its most spectacular resource. What many define as a Western mindset – that nature's subjugation is an essential task for humanity – built the city of Spokane, but if time and circumstance have undermined the foundations of that city, attempts to rebuild in celebration of the river still struggle.

This chapter will first outline Spokane's largely exploitive relationship with its river; this to provide backdrop for a description of a process currently underway that may indicate - or at least foster - evolutionary growth in that relationship. In 1908, the sons of Fredrick Law Olmsted proposed a "Great Gorge Park" for Spokane's falls, and today, efforts are underway to realize some version of that idea. By all input thus far, the outcome will not attempt to shape or remake the land, but will instead simply facilitate use and access to an already captivating place. The initiative could signal, at long last, Spokane's "coming to terms" with its defining landscape. If culture and land truly are intertwined, such an outcome will be more than mere park: it may symbolize a growing resolution in a city's century-long struggle with its sense of self.

² Councilman Mike Brewer, "Bridge Threatened by Lack of Funding," *Spokesman-Review*, December 16, 1997. (*Emphasis added*)

Historic Backdrop: The Battle Ground

As scenic as
Glover may have
found them, the
falls and gorge area were
destined to suffer
massive alterations. The
young city had been
established at the
confluence of a number
of resource streams,
including mining and
timber to the east, and
vast agricultural income
from the north and south.
The presence of
waterpower to process

these no doubt ensured the arrival of rail in 1881, and also ensured that tracks would be laid as close as possible to factories along the river banks. Each fed the city's frenzied growth, which, already at 104,000 by 1910, made Spokane the second-largest city west of the Rockies without a seaport.

The industrialization of Glover's scenic wonder was accomplished with breathless pride. Much of the gorge below the falls was backfilled on both north and south banks to accommodate street and rail grades. In 1890, a dam was constructed above the cataract, and some of the falls' basalt features were blasted away to make room for hydroelectric penstocks. A large circular pool above the falls, itself the location of the city's first power station in 1885, was completely backfilled by 1934. The south bank west of the main falls was altered when Little Wolf Gulch, which led from the river to approximately Post Street, was filled in with debris from fires and construction projects. In the two-



Figure 2: Spanning the bridge that spanned the falls. By 1912, the Union Pacific Railway bridge was constructed over the hydro station, the Monroe Street Bridge, and the falls, barely visible in the lower right corner. Note the extensive backfill placed to accommodate the rail grade. (*Eastern Washington State Historic Society*)

block area around the falls, the river was bridged no less than four times. By 1911, this count included a third iteration of the Monroe Street Bridge – the first two had succumbed to the power of spring runoff – which for a short time was the largest concrete-arch span in the world. The symbolism of the powerful falls finally sublimated by the engineering feat of the bridge was by no means lost. A political cartoon published that year cast Spokane as a young girl being complimented by a grandfatherly globe figure, admiring the bridge as “most impressive, for someone so young.” The city logo to this day features the falls, wholly contained and framed by the concrete span.

The city's exuberant despoiling of the river shoreline quickly affected the treatment of the river itself. Water quality, once prominently featured in civic advertising, fell victim to the irreverent dumping of industrial waste, storm runoff, and raw sewage. By 1909 - fewer than 30 years after Spokane was incorporated - the State Health Department issued a "cease and desist" order, forbidding the city from dumping sewage into the river. In 1938, a state list of problem waterways ranked the Spokane River as the foulest waterway in the state of Washington.³

Preoccupied with profit, Spokanites nearly forgot about the river and the falls, so obscured were they by the railroads, bridges and industries lining the banks. Few ventured into the gorge to enjoy the river; the dirt, filth and garbage that filled the waters kept visitors to a minimum elsewhere along the shoreline. Salmon, which had arrived at the falls in staggering numbers only decades earlier became scarce even before dams eliminated them from the Spokane.

Where not forgotten, general disdain took over. Buildings rarely, if ever, took advantage of views of the river, and only the poorest residents – working class and below – populated its banks. Below the falls, a “shanty town” for transient squatters sprung up, and remained until the mid-1940's. The “Peaceful Valley”

³ *Spokane, the City and its People*, American Geographic Publishing, Helena, Montana, p. 15. (Untreated sewage continued to be dumped into the Spokane River until 1958, when the City's first wastewater treatment plant was completed.)

neighborhood, which exists inside the gorge below the falls, has historically been the city's poorest. Across the river to the north, the West Central neighborhood, in Washington State's Third Congressional District, today has the lowest per-capita income in the State. By historic influence, it seems, Spokane's prime riverfront neighborhoods suffer economically not only in spite of their proximity to the river, but because of it.

This for a river that in 1908 captivated John Charles and Fredrick Law Jr. Olmsted, heirs to Fredrick Law's famous Landscape Architecture practice. In a report to the city's new Parks Board, they proposed the falls be made the centerpiece of a "Great Gorge Park," itself the prize of the entire parks system. "Nothing is so firmly impressed on the mind of the visitor to Spokane, as regards its appearance, as the great gorge into which the river falls near the center of the city," they enthused, "Any city should prize and preserve its great landscape features, inasmuch as they give it individuality..." The Olmsteds also lamented the placement of rail yards, factories and ramshackle development along the shoreline, observing that frontier opportunism had clearly arrived in advance of long-range planning or vision.⁴ Though the city would choose to express itself in other ways, the concept did take root with the City's Parks Board, which began the slow process of buying properties as they became available. The Gorge Park idea would later foster a number of initiatives and proposals, including – indirectly – Spokane's 1974 World's Fair.

⁴ "Spokane - Annual Report 1891-1913," Olmsted Brothers, Landscape Architects, Brookline Mass., pp. 72-73, delivered 1908, pub. 1913.

Historic Backdrop: The World's Fair

inevitably, the fuel for Spokane's industrialism began to run short. By the late 1940's, mines and timber companies had exhausted much of the region's resources. Passenger rail usage was on the decline, and the automobile was enabling many to escape the sooty confines of urban Spokane. The veneer of profit no longer hid the aesthetic realities of rail yards, bridges, and factories along the river; some even proposed the downtown channels be completely covered over and converted to parking.⁵ Driven partly by fear for the life of its downtown, in 1961 the City adopted its first master plan, known as the Ebasco Report.⁶

Ebasco exerted a great deal of influence on the future of the city. True to its day, it proposed extensive "urban renewal" efforts aimed at restructuring the city into districts organized by function; these included a cultural district, a governmental district, a housing/residential district, and a commercial/service district. Significantly, Ebasco provided the first proposal for a grand city park, or green space, where rail yards then existed. This park was shown extending downstream past the falls and into the Gorge, much as the Olmsted plan had proposed. Ebasco also helped set the transportation objectives in Spokane for decades to come, proposing sweeping high-speed couplets in lieu of the two-way city grid then in place. It should be noted that Ebasco first illustrated a bridge over the river connecting the Lincoln Street alignment - though the plan razed the existing Post Street Bridge, as well as the Kirkland Cutter-designed Washington Water Power Substation - to ensure the path kept fully away from the Lower Falls area.

⁵ *The Fair and the Falls*, J. William T. Youngs, Eastern Washington University Press, © 1996, p. 118.

⁶ Ebasco, an acronym of the "Electric Bond and Share Company," once held ownership in Washington Water Power, now Avista Corporation.

The Olmsted and Ebasco proposals fed subsequent plans. In 1964, the city-adopted a statement on "Riverfront and Great Gorge Park Development." The statement urged park board and plan commission to compose:

"...a feasible riverfront development plan which...reflects the people's desire to capitalize on the spectacular river and which may include landscaped areas, vistas, commercial, recreation, cultural facilities, parks, river-drives, business offices, perhaps space for apartments, retail business and selected public buildings. A plan that will insure that each small riverfront improvement will help achieve one overall theme of riverfront development coordinated with the surroundings and the development of the city as a whole."⁷

Necessity, if not desire, was beginning to demand that Spokane clean up its mess. Necessity, if not desire, suggested that the community's prime resource – its river – be looked as a scenic resource, much as the Olmsteds had recommended. It was if the city had spent its formative youth in a type of drunken spree – and now bruised, dirty and broke - needed somehow to clean itself up and move forward. Yet how to undo what had been done? How to reverse the effect – if not the attitudes – that had so disfigured the city's point of origin? In the mid 1960's, long-held plans (the idea of a Gorge Park) joined with at least one example (St. Louis' "Gateway to the West" Arch project) - and driven by economic desperation, led to the conviction that Spokane could again profit from its river, even promoting it as a National Monument or "Gateway" to the region's parks and wilderness areas. So began the initiative for what evolved into the World's Fair of 1974, which cleared the central city rail yards in favor of a large urban park, and removed most of the clutter and bridges around the riverbanks.

Expo '74 was by all accounts a major milestone in Spokane's history. Largely cleaned up, the river and falls played extremely well on the world stage. The Fair

⁷ "First Report of Steering Committee - River Beautification Project, July 1964, King Cole Papers, Eastern Washington University.

drew over five million visitors, provided the community international recognition, and kept downtown alive at a time when most downtowns of similar size were being abandoned. The revival effort produced a remarkable civic landscape, with the river and upper falls made accessible once more.⁸ An entire generation of residents saw the river as if for the first time at the fair. Even the waste to glory transformation was made part of the Expo theme. The official slogans of "Tomorrow's Fresh New Environment" and "Man Living in Harmony with the Nature" carried an important subtext: that the industrial archetype had failed, and that *sustainability* could return prosperity. In 1974, the celebration of the river itself – not of heavy industry, nor turbines, or concrete bridges – brought Spokane its dreamed-for stature as global wunderkind.

But circumstances and opportunity may have preceded popular sentiment. Twenty-eight years after Expo, Spokane has done little to further its purported ideals; indeed, if the Space Needle symbolized Seattle's 1963 World's Fair, Spokane's corollary, the Lower Falls, and much of the river itself, languish today in relative obscurity. At Expo, a few key players in a "top down" style had created the vision. In essence, these players drove - not responded to - community desire. That type of political ability largely disappeared following the Fair, and lacking crisis or popular outcry, Spokane seemed to find little reason to extend Expo's vision; lacking same, the pragmatism of the city 's industrial past began to resurface.

⁸ "Expo's biggest show is its site: the crashing falls, the sound of water, the river overlooks." (The gondola ride over the lower falls)...was "the great thrill of the fair." *Sunset Magazine*, June 1974, Vol. 152, No. 6.

Catalyst – The Lincoln Street Bridge

In 1992, the Spokane City Council directed staff to begin the design and construction of a new four-lane bridge over the Lower Falls. The Lincoln Street Bridge, as it was called, was to extend the city grid across the gorge – completing a paired arterial system with the adjacent Monroe Street Bridge. The history of the proposal went back decades – at least to the 1961 *Ebasco* master plan, and perhaps even as far back as 1908.⁹

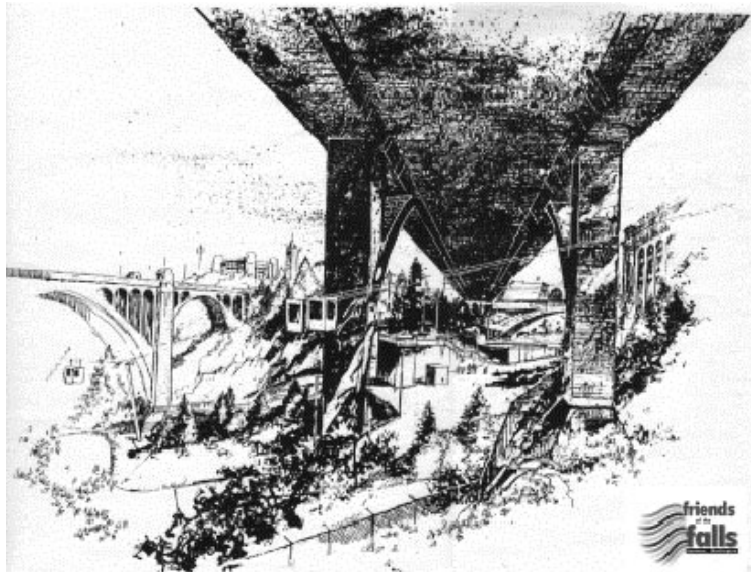


Figure 3: Artist's depiction of the Lower Falls area under the proposed Lincoln Street Bridge. Had the project been built, Spokane's point of origin would have featured three bridges, in addition to the hydroelectric facility's spillway, penstocks and power station. (Frank Sanford, courtesy Friends of the Falls)

The Lincoln bridge idea had been proposed and rejected for decades - but this time, engineers seemed to have compelling arguments for why the bridge *had* to be built: air quality, they said, would be improved if traffic were moved more quickly through downtown. One-way streets and couplets should replace “antiquated” two-way arterials, it was argued, and besides, most of the remaining infrastructure was already in place for a Lincoln Street/Monroe Street couplet - except a new bridge over the falls.

Many obstacles stood in the way of the project even from the outset. There were objections that it reversed the cleanup (and bridge removal) efforts undertaken

⁹ The Olmsted Report, prepared in 1908 and presented to the city in 1913, carries brief mention of city plans for a future crossing on the Lincoln alignment. *Spokane – Annual Report 1891-1913, Board of Park Commissioners*, Olmsted Brothers, Landscape Architects, Brookline, Massachusetts p. 82.

for Expo '74. Civic activist and attorney Steve Eugster mounted an early legal challenge. There were uncertainties about the structural qualities of the underlying bedrock, and negotiations were required with Washington Water Power (now Avista), whose hydroelectric facility would be directly impacted. There were other issues as well – engineers had mistakenly placed the bridge alignment directing the southern landing onto property not owned by the city, and clearance issues over the hydro facility forced the bridge up so high that its northern terminus would have effectively buried an existing upscale restaurant behind a 16-foot concrete abutment.

Yet design on the Lincoln Street Bridge - and a companion new Post Street Bridge, as the project developed - was nearly complete by 1997. That spring, a series of editorials by then-Eastern Washington University Vice Provost Robert Herold appeared in *The Pacific Northwest Inlander*, a new alternative weekly. Herold was highly critical of the impacts the bridge and its associated traffic lanes would have on downtown. Significantly, the articles called into question the “necessity” argument forwarded by the bridge proponents.

Herold claimed the implications of the bridge and couplet was so severe that only extreme conditions could warrant it. He observed that other, larger cities like Washington D.C. and others were able to thrive with far fewer bridges per mile than Spokane. He pointed out that higher speeds and more one-way streets were contrary to the pedestrian-friendly environment then being promoted by local planners and citizen advisory panels associated with the *Spokane Horizons* process. In addition, he said, impoverished neighborhoods to the north would suffer additional stress if torn by an eight-lane arterial developed through them – serving little other than to carry commuters away from the city as quickly as possible.

The articles caught the attention of a number of people with similar reservations about the project. In fact, beyond city staff and members of a city-convened Citizen's Committee charged with mitigating the bridge design, it seemed hard for opponents to find bridge supporters. One Architect, Jeff Warner, suggested

the “Abilene Paradox” was at work: that Spokane was agreeing to something contradictory to what individuals knew to be right. Given this, it was surprising that no serious review of the project’s basis – air quality and traffic capacity need - had occurred.

Perhaps one reason for this had to do with the popular impression that the Lincoln Street Bridge project had arisen in support of, or was integral to, another project then being redeveloped by the city’s powerful Cowles family: the River Park Square shopping mall. By most accounts, downtown Spokane was in serious decline in the early 1990’s, and the rebuilding of River Park Square – the original had been built in 1974 - was widely expected to aid in reversing that trend. If bridge and the Cowles’ mall were interrelated, it was understandable if many felt obliged to remain silent on the question of the bridge.

Certainly, it was easy to draw such a conclusion. Most obviously, the two projects shared nearly the same real estate – the downtown mall was to be situated adjacent to the southern terminus of the bridge, which was to carry northbound traffic from the mall’s garage. Spokane’s main east-west arterial, Interstate 90, already had a Lincoln Street exit ramp to funnel traffic northbound, where the mall’s anchor tenant, Nordstrom’s, was to be placed. Timing of both projects also seemed to coincide. As noted earlier, the bridge had been proposed and rejected on numerous occasions – once even blasted by the Cowles family newspaper, *The Spokesman-Review*, as late as 1985.¹⁰ But now, the paper was claiming the bridge was the right thing for Spokane, even going so far as to claim the concrete span would “enhance” the river and falls.¹¹

But were the two interrelated? In 1997, just prior to finalizing the mall’s design and financing, developer Betsy Cowles and mall manager Bob Robideaux hosted numerous public meetings to gather input and answer questions about the

¹⁰ “The council, commendably, is unwilling to clutter the view of Spokane’s treasured falls, the centerpiece of it’s newly beautified downtown, with an additional and expensive bridge.” *Spokesman-Review* Editorial Board, November 6, 1985.

¹¹ “New Bridge Would Enhance Favorite Place,” Chris Peck, Editor, *Spokesman-Review*, May 17, 1998.

project. At one such meeting in March of that year, the development team was asked about the mall and bridge connection. Robideaux replied that not only were the two unrelated, but that traffic studies commissioned by the developer showed River Park Square's exiting and circulation might actually perform better *without* the Lincoln span.¹²

Later, when the bridge seemed threatened, the developer began to hint at "reliance" lawsuits before the City Council, claiming that the garage had been designed with the bridge in mind - but Herold's articles and Robideaux's 1997 claim had already set loose fatal opposition to the Lincoln Street Bridge.

In overview, the Lincoln Street Bridge project failed due to the City's own Shoreline regulations - borne in the wake of Expo - which prohibited such encroachment without proof of absolute necessity. For this reason and others, the Washington State Department of Ecology denied the special permit required for the project to proceed, and despite several appeals by the City, the denial was upheld by the Governor-appointed State Shoreline Hearings Board. Ironically, the aesthetic portions of Ecology's claims were dismissed. Instead, the permit was ultimately denied due to inflated traffic count projections, and air-quality conditions that could not be shown to benefit from the project. By a three-to-three vote - the barest of margins for Ecology - the board ruled the city had not shown "absolute necessity" for the span.

Meanwhile, the threat to the falls generated hundreds of letters, phone calls, newspaper articles, prompted television coverage, became a radio talk-show staple, and developed into a litmus-test for political candidates. Many felt it to be the primary issue in the 1997 City Council and Mayoral races in which incumbent Jack Geraghty lost by only 433 of 57,337 votes cast to outsider and outspoken bridge critic John Talbott.¹³ It may be seen as ironic that Geraghty, who had risen to prominence in the wake of Expo '74's bridge-clearing of the

¹² Author's own questioning at a March, 1997 meeting in the Downtown Spokane Library, hosted by Mr. Robideaux and Ms. Cowles.

¹³ "Candidates Back Away from Bridge Battle," Kristina Johnson, *Spokesman-Review*, October 27, 1997.

Falls, in 1997 was driven from office while voting resolutely in favor of placing another there.

As if to punctuate their disapproval, the citizens of Spokane voted overwhelmingly in 1999 in favor of an initiative banning all new bridge construction in the Central Falls area without voter approval. The measure, popularly referred to as the "Lincoln Street Bridge Initiative," prevailed by an unheard-of (for Spokane) 75% margin. Even so, the remaining council minority vowed to continue legal appeals, ostensibly to show "due diligence" to State funding agencies. But the project was sinking too quickly to be saved: on February 15, 2000, the Spokane City Council unanimously withdrew its support for the Lincoln Street bridge project.

Whether Robideaux's claim that the bridge and mall were completely independent enterprises was factual or not, politically, they played as inseparable twins. For many, the bridge may not have been as objectionable for its ecological insensitivity as it was for its political insensitivity. Here, much of an impoverished community's wherewithal was being leveraged to fund an upscale shopping mall in view of the poorest district in the state. Expending \$40 million dollars for a bridge to the project – *over the falls*, no less – may simply have been a bigger political check than anyone could cash. Had Spokane finally embraced its river or simply rejected an expensive bridge? As with Expo, Spokane's motives for preserving its river seemed ambiguous

Confluence – The “Great Gorge Park”

“Look, if you’re going to do something for the City of Spokane, reclaim that river. Get the pollution out of it; get it back to its original state if possible. And it should be the feature of our city.”

-Kenneth Brooks, AIA

If the Lincoln Street Bridge project came to an end for reasons that only *included* a fuller appreciation of Spokane’s river, those groups closest to it showed stronger affinities. In early 1997, the citizen’s group *Friends of the Falls* held initial meetings to oppose the bridge, and quickly found that nearly



Figure 4: The first public meeting for development of the Gorge Park concept, “The Great Gorge Discovery Workshop,” drew over 200 participants on September 27, 2001. (Courtesy *Friends of the Falls*)

all those close to the river – whether by ownership, business, cultural, or recreational affiliation – felt the bridge would undermine the river’s potential.

At the group’s first meeting, Former State Senator Dr. John Moyer insisted that the bridge project should succeed or fail based on a larger definition of community merit; instead of opposing the bridge, he argued, Spokane should embrace its river, and let decisions about bridges fall into that context. Like King Cole had done prior to Expo, Moyer hoped the river could attain National Monument status.

The idea was pitched at scores of subsequent lunch meetings, breakfasts, and presentations, and seemed to receive unanimous support – though many expressed a desire to wait for the outcome of the bridge controversy. Few believed the bridge project would ever be stopped - regardless of need – given its momentum and strong political backing. If a theme emerged from those initial meetings, it was: “Great idea, but let’s wait and see about that bridge first.”

Research also led the group to a better understanding of the falls and river itself, including the area’s rich geologic history, Native American history, and of the Olmsted Brothers’ 1908 “Gorge Park” idea. Soon, the idea of promoting the river in lieu of a bridge seemed less and less like rhetoric and more and more like an idea whose time had finally come.

Friends of the Falls may have spent its first energies supporting the Department of Ecology permit denial, but when the Lincoln Street Bridge project was finally terminated in February of 2000, the group decided to initiate a meeting with the many organizations that had expressed an interest – albeit privately - in the Gorge Park idea. On April 10, 2000, Friends convened a meeting of key “stakeholder” groups – those with specific ties or interests in the Gorge area. That day, representatives met to see for themselves whether each, indeed, favored the concept. These included delegates from the Spokane and Coeur d’Alene tribes, the Spokane Parks, and Historic Preservation Departments, Avista Utilities, the Downtown Spokane Partnership, the Spokane Centennial Trail group, Summit Properties (owners of undeveloped land bordering the gorge), the Spokane Convention & Visitor's Bureau, The Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture, the City Council, plus two adjacent neighborhoods (Peaceful Valley and West Central). As a group, support for the Falls and Gorge idea was again – at least in concept - unanimous. Given the contentious political climate of the time, the idea that organizations with such widely varying interests – businesspeople and environmentalists, civic promoters and preservationists - could come together on *any* subject seemed impossible, yet the Gorge question was doing just that. Soon thereafter, the assembly adopted a name - the “Great Gorge

Group,” (abbreviated as “G3”) - formulated a mission and vision statement, outlined a study area, and, facilitated by Friends of the Falls, began work on a Concept Plan for the Gorge Park.¹⁴

The group applied for, and received a grant for aid through the National Parks Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program. A three-phase process was adopted – Phase One, the “Concept Plan” phase, would simply develop ideas and basic requirements for the Gorge Park. Phase Two would commission a planning or landscape firm to incorporate phase one concepts into a specific Master Plan, help identify the means for development of the plan, as well as engage the public more fully in the process. Phase three would fundraise, and bring the Master Plan work to reality.

Mike Stone, Director of the Spokane Parks and Recreation Department, suggested early on that the Concept Plan stage include at least three public meetings to inform the process. On September 27, 2001, just days after the September 11th terrorist attacks, the group hosted its first event: the “Spokane River Gorge Discovery Workshop.” Held at the former Salty's Restaurant downtown overlooking the upper falls, the event drew over 200 participants – and a great many positive comments. Among the exhibits presented were artifacts from the Spokane Tribe, an interpretive display from the City/County Historic Preservation Office, sketch ideas developed by the Gorge Group, and a 16-foot-long map of the Gorge, on which participants were encouraged to jot down their own ideas for the area. Another popular feature of the event was the “Memory Tree,” a centerpiece arrangement of bare branches with tags nearby that allowed people to write down a favorite thought or idea about the falls, and then decorate the tree with their concept.

In January of 2002, a follow-up meeting was held, the “Great Gorge Concept Workshop,” at the Downtown YWCA. Friends and the Gorge Group had spent time collating and incorporating the comments gathered at the September event and presented these findings back to the public, utilizing plan boards, charts

¹⁴ See Attachment No. 6 (Gorge Park Study Area map)

and maps. The city's Public Radio station, KPBX, was present to conduct interviews with anyone who had "stories of the gorge" to share, and City Cable 5, a city-run cable television station, recorded the interviews on video. Questionnaires were prepared to help gauge support for specific items or ideas mentioned at the September event - from paths and interpretive signs, to suggestions of water-slides, and an extended cable gondola ride from Riverfront Park through the Gorge all the way to the newly-opened Museum of Arts & Culture. From these it was clear the most popular Gorge Park concepts were for "native vegetation/restoration" and "wildlife conservation/restoration." Natural surface paths in the Gorge were also favored. "Vehicular loop roads," "pools/water slides" and the idea of extending the Expo '74 gondola ride into the gorge were favored least. It should be noted that even among the "Gorge Park" participants, some found the word "Park" from the Olmsted working title bothersome; this through fears of association with common ideas about parks. It was clear that the majority of participants thought the Gorge should be left largely natural; groomed soccer fields and parking lots weren't part of the vision.

On March 28th, 2002, Friends of the Falls and the G3 concluded the Concept Plan phase of work with a "Roll-out" event for community. Held at the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture, the occasion drew over 400 attendees, and featured Tribal drumming, and speakers including Mayor John Powers, Bob Brisbois of the Spokane Tribe, County Commissioner Kate McCaslin, and Parks Board Chair Steve McNutt. King Cole, out of town though still resident in Spokane, provided a letter of support for the Mayor to read.

Three of the "G3" participant organizations submitted specific proposals for inclusion in the Concept Plan: Friends of the Centennial Trail suggested their "Westlink" pedestrian bridge be included¹⁵, Friends of the Falls added a "Lower Falls Access Path" connecting Riverfront Park to the Lower Falls, and the

¹⁵ The "Westlink" Centennial Trail bridge is proposed to utilize the existing High Bridge abutments, left over from Spokane's pre-Expo days. At the time of this writing, the project lacks only \$200,000 of its \$1.6 million price tag.

Spokane Tribe incorporated the idea of a “Culture Center” near the falls. Other concepts included a loop trail to circumnavigate the Gorge area, better connections from adjacent neighborhoods to the river, connections to the Museum of Arts & Culture, historic research to help preserve the rich Spokane Tribal heritage once based in the Gorge, and relatively small, dedicated family recreation areas near the river.

As this is written, funding at both local and State levels is being sought to complete the Master Plan phase. Where words had sometimes failed to impress, the river itself helped demonstrate its value to jaded residents. The summer of 2002 found Friends of the Falls hosting a river float trip through the Gorge, taking legislators and opinion leaders from Peaceful Valley downstream to Riverside State Park just a few miles away. Through this, enthusiasm for the river as an economic driver seemed to take root – critical for a state and community facing economic downturn.

If crisis conditions prompted business owners to action in creating the 1974 World's Fair, then perhaps the Lincoln Street Bridge crisis prompted the realization within the community that the falls and river were the “common ground” for Spokane. In the Gorge, normally disparate interests came together for what was seen as common benefit. Metropolitan Mortgage, owner of the “Summit Property,” an 85-acre undeveloped section of riverfront to the north, participated in part to aid its development opportunities.¹⁶ Neighborhood support stressed the desire to forestall excessive gentrification. Downtown interests support the project for its economic potential. Centennial Trail advocates hoped the project would speed existing plans for a riverside pathway. The Spokane Parks Board nurtured the Gorge Park idea for decades through property acquisition, and Avista Utilities participated for the sake of its Monroe Street hydro facility, and to inform its Federal re-licensing process. Most

¹⁶ As of this writing, Summit Properties was in negotiations with a purchaser intent on mixed-use development for the site, with expressed enthusiasm for the Gorge Park concept.

significantly, Tribal representatives stay to convey wishes and concepts rooted in thousands of years of living by the falls.

Conclusion

“There is an historical moment in the development of every culture, and of every community, when that culture assigns a spiritual significance to their place...(it is) that moment when we name a place in our heart, and when we rename ourselves in response to our place.”

- Clark Stevens, Roto Architects

Spokane is a place already richly blessed with neighborhood parks. Why, it may be asked, add to a system with such strengths? The answer may be that the prime value of the Gorge won't be as a park at all, but as a civic emblem, a central landscape providing not only beauty but iconic value, and through that value, the growth of



Figure 5: A float trip through the Gorge, hosted by Friends of the Falls in the summer of 2002. Here, Rep. Jeff Gombosky and Gavin Cooley of NorthCoast Life discuss the river's place in community planning. Downtown Spokane is seen in the distance. (Courtesy Paul Delaney)

identity for a city sorely lacking in self-worth and pride. However cast, the Falls and Gorge define the heart of Spokane; when abused, they present an unsightly centerpiece; when cut off by dams, they convey disdain for nature; when celebrated, they may captivate the world. The condition of the river inescapably affects both visitor and resident.

Much of Spokane's history - lessons learned for it and others - may be put on display in the Gorge. Many of the deformities and injuries to the river are

present there – the heavily backfilled north and south banks immediately downstream from the falls, for example, and the pilings and abutments still in evidence in various locations within the gorge. This fact may be a source of some resistance to the notion of the park, though it should be seen as an opportunity to memorialize the city's prior conflict with nature. A version of such a memorial might involve the restoration of a swath of shoreline on the north bank to its former grade; perhaps a cut as wide as 200-300 yards removed from the rail grade, leaving a gradual, approachable connection to the river. In this cut, natural vegetation could be restored; here, a measure of the Eden the Tribes knew could be sampled in relative solitude. To hold back – and at the same time to illustrate – the incredible amounts of fill placed there during the city's railroad years, basalt, or perhaps an even more starkly contrasting material could retain the grade, expressing something similar to a Maya Lin incision into the earth, but actually an inverse – the revelation memorializing not a war not with other nations, but with nature; a descent not into death, but a revelation of life. Such a place could be appreciated for its utility in making the river approachable, for its qualities of refuge, for reflection on western expressions of power, and for the price we pay when so engaged.

Salmon once filled the Spokane River, and people with profound connections to both river and fish once populated its shores. Annual Chinook runs arrived in such quantities that tribes from throughout the region congregated near the base of the Lower Falls, able to put aside all rivalries in the face of plenty. For the tribes, the Gorge was at once home, sustenance, and sacred. Individual and tribal identities were bound fully in relationship to the river, and in turn, the river provided assurance, belonging, and direction.

The late Peter Campbell, a Colville Tribal leader widely credited with the formation of the Center for Plateau Cultural Studies at the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture, was interviewed about the region's character shortly before he died. After speaking about his habit of returning to the river for "his mental health days," when he'd stop along the shoreline just to listen, he added: "When

you talk to non-tribal people, there is something they're looking for - security and a place where they can belong." What they seek exists here, he said.

"There is a history and a culture and a law and a way of life that has always existed in this place," he said. "And they can link into that. All they need to do is listen."¹⁷

¹⁷ "Native Truths, " Rob McDonald, *Spokesman-Review*, March 28, 1999