



2-9-1954

Letter from Representative Burdick to E. M. Arntson Regarding Garrison Dam Pool Level, February 9, 1954

Usher Burdick

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Recommended Citation

Burdick, Usher, "Letter from Representative Burdick to E. M. Arntson Regarding Garrison Dam Pool Level, February 9, 1954" (1954). *Usher Burdick Papers*. 257.

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February 9, 1954

Mr. E. M. Arntson
Tri-County Electric Cooperative
Carrington, North Dakota

Dear Mr. Arntson:

I have fought for R.E.A. in the past as my record shows — I will do so in the future, and I am simply amazed at the proposition you now put to me, namely, that I favor 1850 foot level for Garrison Dam. You know when you sent this wire that I would not do what you ask. I know all about this dam — right from the beginning. I wrote into the bill, along with others, the provision that:

"The construction of the Reservoir shall in no way affect the present or future beneficial uses of the Waters of the Missouri River West of the 98th Meridian."
(The 98th Meridian runs through about where Rugby is.)

Now what beneficial uses were the people of the Williston area making of these waters when this bill was passed? We had three irrigation projects going, and we had the water system of the City of Williston in operation.

The Army Engineers themselves, knowing this limitation in the law, have proposed that dikes be built around these projects and the City of Williston. Congress has not authorized dikes, but that makes little difference to Army Engineers. Anyone with an ounce of brains knows that dikes built on the quicksands of the Missouri River will not hold back the water, and seepage will gradually destroy the property to be protected. Congress has not had the question of dikes before it, and yet you now command that I work for an 1850 level. There are a few things wrong with this:

1. You don't know anything about it.
2. Someone has been scaring you. If you don't get an 1850 level you won't get enough electricity.
(Probably agents of the Engineers have contacted you.)

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3. You ought to know by this time that power can be produced cheaper by steam than from a dam. North Dakota has more coal than all of Europe, and from this immense field power for America can be produced for 800 years, and that is about as long as you will be concerned with power. The Garrison Dam cannot operate in the winter time without a supporting steam plant.
4. You apparently are not concerned with the big problem at all. That is getting cheap power. As long as no transmission lines are available to carry this power to Co-ops, cities and factories, we, in North Dakota, will never get a cheap rate on power. We have to pay toll to the private power companies because they have the transmission lines.
5. Private power companies are not foolish enough to attempt to build a dam across the mainstem of the Missouri River. They get the taxpayer to do that, and as long as they can get the power at the dam, that is all they want.

If the 1850 foot level was necessary for the public interest in the creation of power, the people of the Williston Basin would yield and let 90,000 acres of their best lands be ruined; their irrigation projects spoiled, and the City of Williston (16,000 people) condemned to live behind dikes. But it isn't necessary. This extra 20 feet is wanted to supply water for irrigation. This water is to be taken out of the dam, not out of the river below the dam, and up to this hour no plans for irrigation have been submitted to Congress, and no one knows whether the people of that area want irrigation. Yet you command that I get behind this 1850 level. If someone is thinking for you, I will say no one is thinking for me.

Sincerely,

Usher L. Burdick, M. C.