



Matt Reimann [Follow](#)

Contributing writer, Timeline (@Timeline_Now); reader and excavator of generally good things.

Apr 26 · 6 min read

There used to be salmon as big as golden retrievers in the Columbia River, but dams killed them off

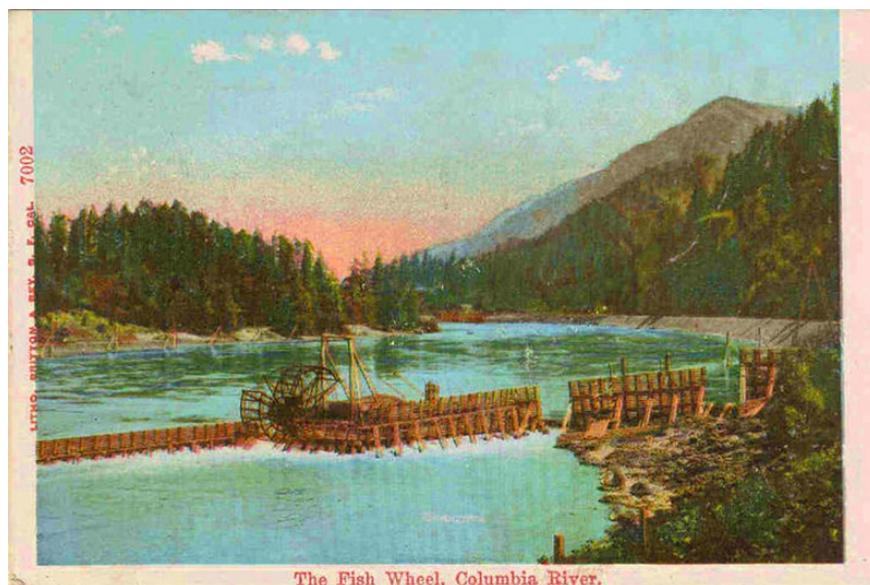
The ‘June hogs’ often weighed more than 100 pounds



Fishermen pose with net and catch while salmon fishing on Columbia River, Oregon, c. 1895. (Library of Congress)

If you cast a fishing line into the Columbia River in 1920, you'd better be ready for a fight. The Pacific Northwest was once home to an enormous strain of Chinook salmon, with specimens weighing 70 to 80 pounds—reaching as high as 125. These earned a hefty moniker: they were called “June hogs,” signifying both their size and the season to catch them.

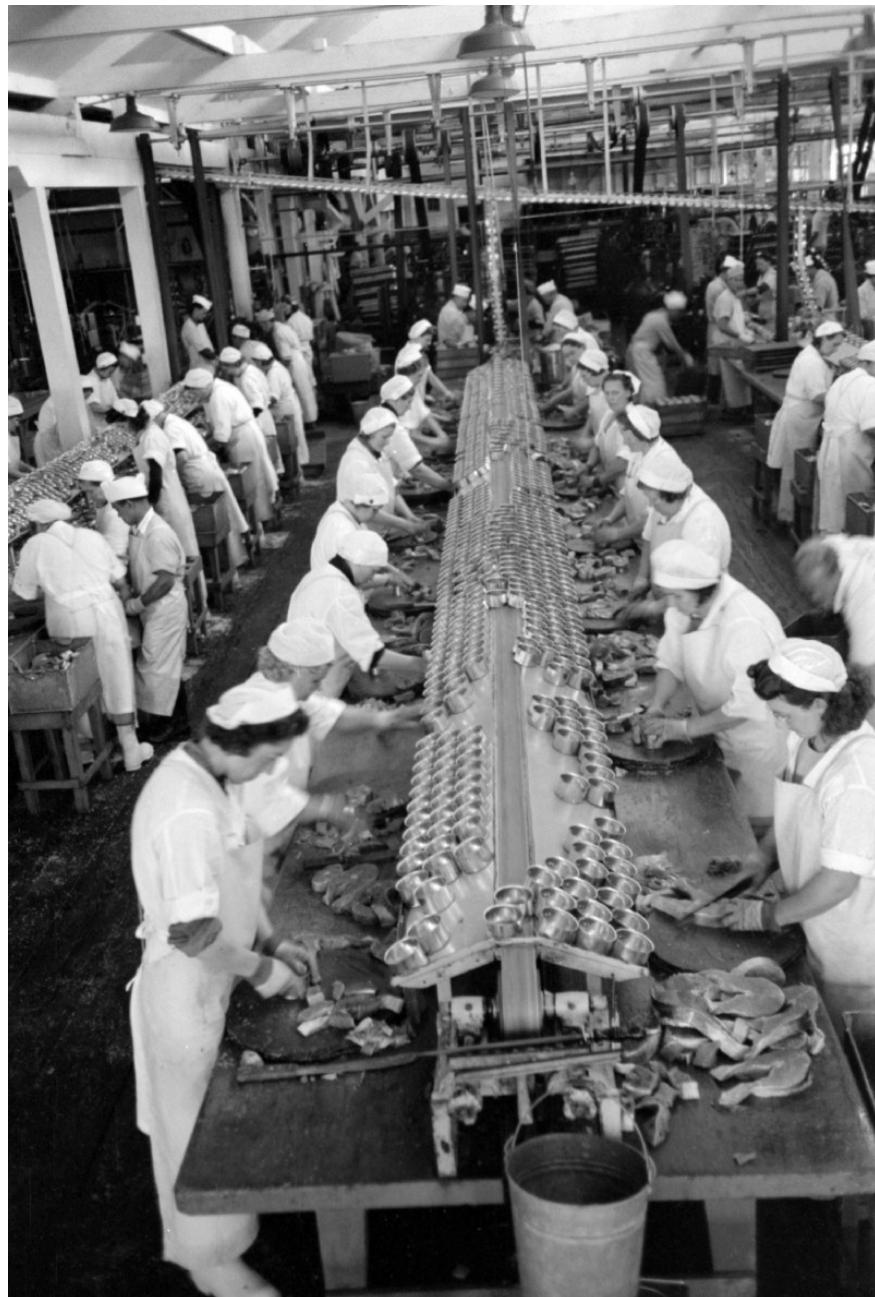
Before the arrival of settlers, Native Americans lived off the salmon supply of the Columbia River Basin for thousands of years. According to the *Oregon Encyclopedia*, “For millennia, mid-Columbia tribes who caught the fish at Celilo Falls used them for food but also for spiritual, ceremonial, and trade purposes.” On his expedition, William Clark described indigenous populations who took advantage of an abundant and ready food source. “The number of dead Salmon on the Shores & floating in the river is incredible,” he wrote on October 17, 1805. “At this season they have only to collect the fish, split them open, and dry them on their Scaffolds on which they have great numbers.”



A hand-tinted postcard image of a fish wheel on the lower Columbia River around 1910, facing upstream. Fish are channeled by weir into the pathway of the wheel. (Wikimedia)

In 1866, the first salmon cannery was constructed by Hapgood, Hume and Company in the Washington Territory. In the coming years, the area would become the salmon breadbasket of the United States, with cities like Astoria in the Oregon Territory prospering along with the industry. Beginning in 1879 the installation of fish wheels along the river enabled companies to enjoy supercharged yields. Canneries

would construct wooden weirs to funnel fish through a small swimming passage, where fish wheels—large, rotating trapping mechanisms that would turn using energy from the river—scooped up migrating salmon. Thanks to slanted chutes at the bottom of each basket-like aperture, the turning device deposited writhing fish in a reservoir, where a worker would spear them and prepare them for the cannery.



Workers at the Columbia River Packing Association, a salmon cannery in Astoria, Oregon, in 1941. (Russell Lee/Library of Congress)

Fish wheels eventually proved too effective, and fish populations began to deplete, with gillnetters and fishermen downstream claiming upriver machines gobbled up all the fish. In 1928, they were outlawed in Oregon, and Washington followed suit eight years later.

But that didn't quell the appetite for June hogs. In 1895, the *Portland Oregonian* recorded the capture of an 83-pound salmon, the largest caught that year. Angus McDonald, a Hudson's Bay Company official from 1852 to 1872, posted near Kettle Falls, wrote, "Salmon as heavy as one hundred pounds have been caught in those falls." And unlike many fish stories, there is photographic evidence. One picture from 1925 shows a fisherman in Astoria, Oregon, with his 85-pound catch. An older photo, also taken in Astoria, shows a pair of fishermen with two June hogs appearing to approach five feet in length.

The scramble for salmon in the Columbia River Basin created a boom that quickly plateaued. Thirty-nine canneries in the area saturated the market as early as 1883, as corporations who blocked off river passages with fish wheels met opposition from fishermen of modest means. Standoffs over prime fishing got tense. Historian Joseph Taylor mentions a fish wheel owner named I.H. Taffe, who "had a reputation for shooting Indians he caught fishing near his wheels or cannery at Celilo Falls."



'June Hogs' from Astoria, Oregon, in 1910 (left) and 1925 (right). (Wikimedia)

The fabulous and perhaps fabricated lore around salmon fishing was apparently notorious enough to warrant parody, explaining a Swiftian editorial from *The New York Times* in 1885. “Men, women, and children have often been chased for long distances by salmon on the lonely Oregon roads, and an enormous number of sheep and cattle have been killed and devoured,” the author wrote, suggesting that the “only way in which to meet this great evil is for the State Government to offer a reward of say, \$100 for every salmon killed within its borders.”

But humankind of course had the upper hand. Overfishing altered the industry and ecological landscape. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt remarked that “the salmon fisheries of the Columbia River are now but a fraction of what they were 25 years ago,” and encouraged the federal government to intervene in order to conserve fishing stocks. Yet what led to the demise of the June hog and the heyday of the Columbia canneries was not overfishing, but dam development along the river.

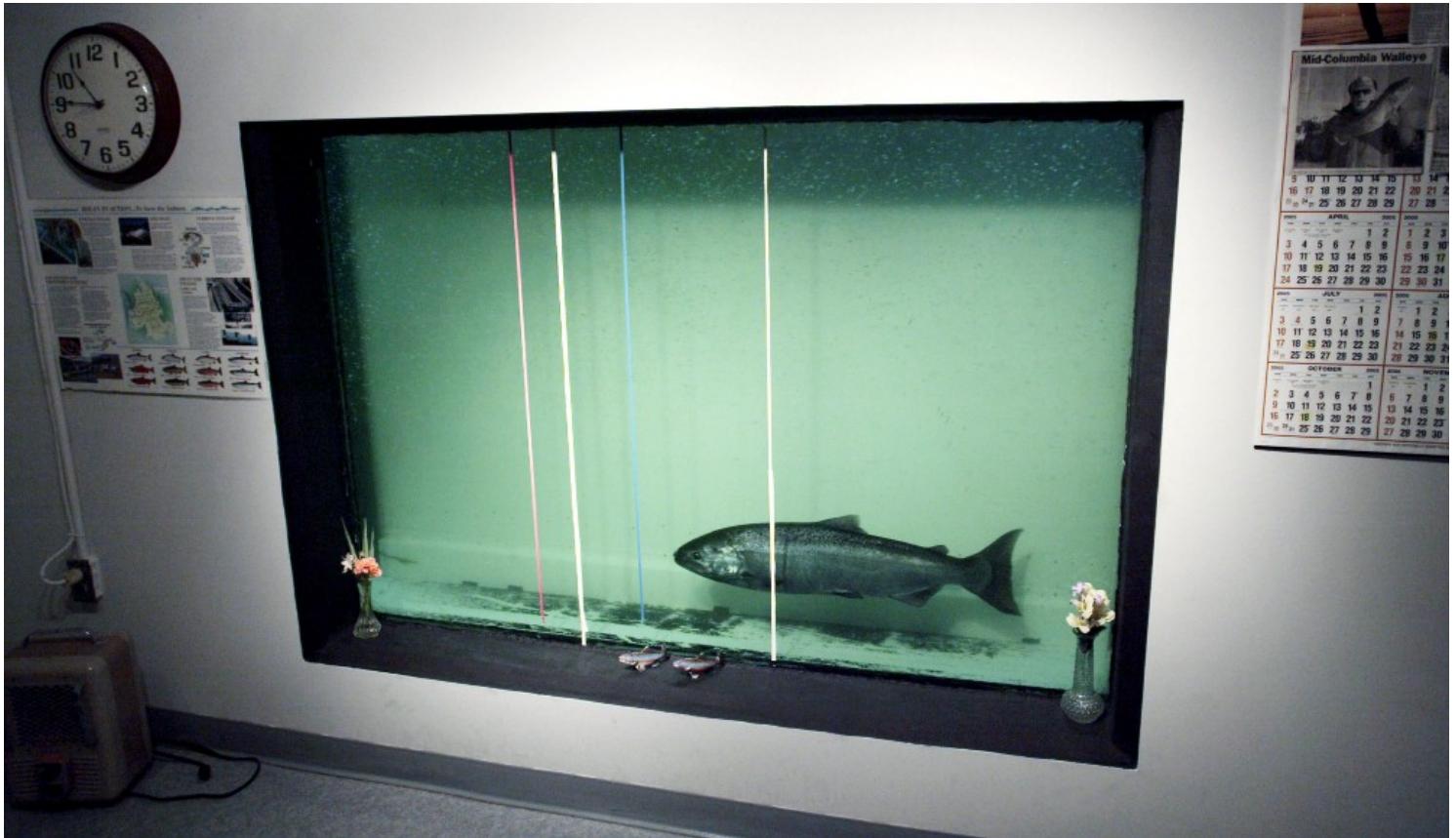


Native Americans fishing for salmon at Oregon's Celilo Falls in 1941. The ancient tribal fishing site would be submerged by 1957—a result of damming. (Russell Lee/Library of Congress)

As part of their annual spawning run, the salmon would swim up the 1,200 miles of the Columbia River, up to the multitude of tributaries in British Columbia. But from 1900 to 1930, around 100 dams were raised along the river system. In 1933, the Fish Commission of Oregon estimated that dams had cut off about half of the salmon spawning habitat within the Columbia River Basin. By 1938, the Grand Coulee dam blocked the salmon's access to the upper third of the river where they migrated to reproduce. The Depression-era public works project was even immortalized by Woody Guthrie in a song commissioned by the U.S. government.

The June hogs virtually disappear from the record in 1939, the year after the Grand Coulee Dam reached high enough to block their migration. The 500-foot dam was ultimately determined too tall to

permit the construction of fish ladders, disrupting the habitat the species had relied on for millennia.



A Chinook salmon swims in the counting window at McNary Lock and Dam on the Columbia River in 2005. Rampant damming of the river and its tributaries in the 20th century greatly depleted the population—and size—of the native fish species. (Jeff T. Green/Getty Images)

The Grand Coulee dam—since 1974 the largest electric-power facility in the U.S.—also displaced 3,000 Native Americans, who were relocated as the resulting reservoir flooded their ancestral lands. And some 77 workers were killed during its construction.

Today, salmon fishing on the Columbia River is healthy, but a far cry from its prosperity over a century ago. In 2015, salmon run populations made a promising bounce back, reaching levels comparable to those during the height of dam construction in the late 30s. Still, a Columbia River angler will have difficulty hooking a salmon over fifty pounds—not exactly a June hog.

In the meantime, the fallout from the Grand Coulee's construction still remains unresolved. A few years ago, American Indians of the

Pacific Northwest began lobbying for a renegotiation of the Columbia River Treaty to support the reintroduction of the salmon that were once essential to their people, in both nutritional and sacred significance. It is evident from their protests, and the changed community around them, that much more than spectacularly large fish have been lost.

Sign up for Timeline's weekly newsletter!

yourname@example.com

Sign up
