

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2000

Review of *Uphill Against Water: The Great Dakota Water War* by Peter Carrels

John M. Donahue
Trinity University, San Antonio

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Donahue, John M., "Review of *Uphill Against Water: The Great Dakota Water War* by Peter Carrels" (2000).
Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences. 501.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/501>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A
Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska -
Lincoln.

Uphill Against Water: The Great Dakota Water War. Peter Carrels. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. xv+238 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, index. \$25.00 paper (ISBN 0-8032-6397-X).

Students in my *Water, Culture, and Power* course must read Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* (1993), but Peter Carrels's *Uphill Against Water* will now become required reading as well. Carrels provides a grassroots

perspective on twentieth-century water policy in the United States that complements the more macro analysis in Reisner's work. Writing in his hometown of Aberdeen, South Dakota, Carrels tells the story from the vantage point of farmers who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the massive Oahe Irrigation Project in northeastern South Dakota. How over a thirty-year period they became its successful opponents is the story line of the volume's sixteen chapters.

Carrels reviews the historical and meteorologic climate in which the damming of the Missouri River was conceived in the 1930s, relating how the irrigation interests of the US Bureau of Reclamation and the flood control and navigation priorities of the US Army Corp of Engineers converged in 1944 and resulted in the construction of five earthen dams on the Missouri. The Bureau envisioned 137 separate irrigation projects, including one that would take Missouri water from Oahe Reservoir 120 miles east to the St. James River Valley.

Construction on the Oahe Dam at Pierre was completed in 1962, four years after the Missouri had been plugged and the reservoir began to fill. Carrels documents the stirrings of dissent among farmers in the late 1960s that quickened in the 1970s. A grassroots organization of local farmers, United Family Farmers (UFF), found themselves in 1972 in the forefront of a national environmental movement taking a hard look at the effects of dam building on river ecosystems.

Carrels tells the fascinating story of how the UFF ultimately brought the Oahe Irrigation Project to a stop. The way to that goal was marked by successive setbacks, beginning with an unsuccessful attempt in state and federal courts to block construction of the irrigation canal, followed by a failure to obtain a moratorium on further construction from the South Dakota Legislature. Taking their cause to Washington in 1976, the UFF appeared before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, but was unable to convince its members to cut off federal funding for the project "until a plan was identified for the James River." When the UFF won a majority on the Oahe sub-district board with oversight responsibilities for the Irrigation Project, the Legislature did an end run around these elected officials, creating a statewide Oahe Task Force whose majority consisted of irrigation supporters. In spite of these obstacles, the UFF had grown in numbers and influence. More importantly, the organization had brought to light and disseminated information that otherwise would not have surfaced, particularly studies of the St. James River Valley suggesting its soils were unsuitable for irrigation. Other studies showed the negative impact of canalization

of the St. James River on wildlife. The UFF demonstrated that knowledge can be power when in 1977 President Carter included the Oahe Irrigation Project on his "hit list" of eighteen water projects.

In spite of congressional resistance and with some last minute political compromises, funding for the Oahe Irrigation Project ended. Federal monies eventually went to a potable water system for rural South Dakota farmers covering an area of 5,200 square miles east of the Missouri. Carrels offers more than an institutional analysis of the conflict: having interviewed many of the conflict's protagonists, he weaves their stories into an account that is a pleasure to read. **John M. Donahue**, *Sociology and Anthropology Department, Trinity University, San Antonio*.