

Dam the Kiski River

by
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The Apollo Historical Society sponsored the reproduction of a book printed in 1916. It is the History of Apollo by Dr. T.J. Henry. We keep a copy of the book at Apollo Trust Company. I refer to it a few times each year because so much information is still applicable. There is one particular picture in the book that is mesmerizing. It is a picture of a man holding a 9 pound spoonfish and an 8 pound carp caught in the Kiski River.

The writer seemed to have a special affection for the Kiskiminetas River. He traces its beginnings with the Native Americans who believed that the river had a life of its own. He addresses the historical significance as it was once part of "the great canal system" that ran from Johnstown to Pittsburgh. And finally he laments over the river's demise as contamination from mines and mills destroyed all fish life in the 1890's.

Today the Kiski River is making a tremendous comeback as Mother Nature has begun to undo the damage that was done. Fish have begun to return in growing numbers after 100 years of annihilation. It is now common to spot green and blue heron along the banks in search of a meal. It is also becoming more common to see people fish along its banks. These scenes were unthinkable just 10 years ago.

There are still two abandoned mines where mine acid continues to pollute the river. One is located at the Pine Run tributary. The other is located at the Loyalhanna Creek. Before the great numbers of "bass, pike, salmon, catfish and perch" as Dr. Henry described return, we need to remedy those problems.

However there is also a small window of opportunity to take advantage of this river's total potential. The Kiski should be made a navigable waterway for small boats from Apollo to Schenley where it empties into the Allegheny River. The window is small because accomplishing this feat requires the endorsement and considerable influence of Congressman Murtha. After he retires one day, we lose a powerful force.

Damming the Kiski with the proper flood controls would bring about an economic resurgence that would ripple through all the small towns along the river. Implausible? This idea was proposed as far back as 1878 in Congress. It was the first thing I heard from a consultant when we held an economic summit for the Apollo area in 1994.

Imagine being able to go from Pittsburgh to Apollo in a boat. Imagine a marina in Leechburg. Imagine a floating restaurant in Hyde Park, river tours of our historical past and fishermen casting from their bass boats. Imagine parks along the banks not to mention the Roaring Run Watershed Association trail explosion.

Now stop imagining and take a shot at making it happen. Make something happen within your own sphere of influence. The small towns along the Kiski Valley desperately need a shot in the arm. I am going to ask Congressman Murtha if he would dispatch the Army Corps of Engineers to examine the feasibility and the practicality of realizing this proposal. Improbable? It has the support of Armstrong County Commissioner Jim Scahill.

Dr. Henry notes that one translation for the Native American word "Kiskiminetas" was "make daylight" being the impatient exclamation of a warrior in haste to take the warpath. Today, we in the Kiski Valley have to be on an economic warpath to find good jobs to keep our people working. Groups like the Apollo Area Economic Development Council and the StrongLand Chamber have been asked by elected officials to make things happen ourselves. We have. The time is right for government to step up to bat too.

Congressman Murtha was extremely instrumental in seeing that the locks and dams were repaired and maintained up along the Allegheny corridor to Kittanning. The Armstrong County Commissioners rave about its impact in their County. It is my hope that Mr. Murtha would deem this idea worthy of consideration as well. Maybe one answer to our economic rebirth has been right in front of us the whole time. Impossible? Dam it and they will come.



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