

245 steps inside fabled Kinzua Dam

by HIX

Without benefit of elevator, the 245 steps inside the Kinzua Dam hard by the Allegheny National Forest pose a problem to a visitor with high blood pressure, or to anyone on crutches. The ascent and descent is for the young and resilient, not for the elderly.

The elevator is reserved for personnel.

Residents of the Warren area, who three years ago referred to the dam as the dam-dam, have now reconsidered. The 27-mile long lake which flooded the Complanter Indian Reservation had been stoutly resisted by local folk and by many others in Pennsylvania, who held that evicting the Complanter Indians from lands granted them in perpetuity by treaty with the United States Government was unthinkable.

Residents who had annually been flooded out by swollen headwaters of the Allegheny River took another look at the situation, and noted that the Indians had been relocated in modern homes, their rights preserved, though their lands had been inundated.

Complanter Indians were not the only persons who were affected by the rising waters. A whole community, dating from pioneer times, was wiped out, Kinzua, from which the dam derives its name. Land-owners were compensated, if anything can compensate for irremediable loss of land where great-grandfathers had battled the wilderness.

Whites and Indians alike gave up their holdings in the face of forces of nature which annually burst their bounds and contributed to disaster far downstream as well as in the immediate area.

They did not do this willingly. There was bitter opposition to the flooding of fertile bottom land, and of small villages and outlying farms which have now disappeared forever from the map of western Pennsylvania.

There was a feeling of outrage among the people of the Commonwealth that the government should propose taking of the land long sacred to the Indians, granted them in a treaty signed by the Government of the United States of America.

There was opposition, but there was the pressing need for flood control, and the doctrine of the greatest good for the greatest number prevailed.

The Kinzua Dam harnesses the flood waters of the upper Allegheny River and its tributaries, storing it safely until the time is ripe to open the flood gates and let it go downstream.

Already, in this year of 1969, the water level has been lowered, revealing muddy banks, in anticipation of winter snows and spring rains which must be stored to prevent flooding downstream in March, when the snows start melting along the high Alleghenies and the freshets come.

Many small inlets, covered by water during the summer months, are bare, and marinas show small boats grounded. There are many such, for over the years since flooding of the bottom land was started, with the water relentlessly engulfing farm after farm, the new lake has proved its value as a recreational center, a mecca for tourists.

Visitors find good fishing, good boating, and an unspoiled countryside. Allegheny National Forest borders the lake for miles, its roads and trails guileless of cheap highway signs, its somber pines lighted in October by flaming maples and golden hickories.

The dam bridges two frowning promontories, the only logical spot for such a project in the entire headwater country of the upper Allegheny. The winding road which used to cause cars to go into low gear when approaching the lofty lookout from far below in Kinzua, has been obliterated, vanishing along with the little country church and the parsonage of the old M. E. congregation, and the country graveyards, and the pastures and the towering elms.

The lake has already claimed its human sacrifice. Two years ago a car plunged over its steep bank, drowning an elderly man and his wife.

The dam itself is open to the public, but only until 3:30 p.m. After that hour, the access gates are locked, though the lookout and parking spots are still open.

It is a remarkable bit of engineering which the Pittsburgh District Corp. of Engineers has accomplished, employing all the latest techniques in the control of a mighty river.

Looking over the railing far below where sluiceways spill the water, there is visible the hydroelectric plant and the site where eventually the state will build a fish hatchery to supplement the output of the other trout hatcheries in the Commonwealth. A recreation area is also planned for this side of the river, opposite the power plant.

It is an unbelievably sheer drop from spectator platform to the gushing water roaring from the main sluice into a whirlpool of foam, but the railing is stout, and there is no feeling of insecurity.

Deep in the bowels of the dam itself, the ascent and descent by flight after flight of stairs gives the impression of entering a medieval fortress, stark stone walls with no view of the outside world, footsteps clattering on the steps, impatient children elbowing their way past their more cautious elders, down and down and down, 151 feet below the top of the dam, with elevations marked on the walls.

The lobby floor, reached after the last breathless flight of stairs on the return to the sunshine, is 1376.2 feet above the level of the sea, or about the altitude of College Misericordia.

It is good to be back in the open air after the tour of the interior. A sudden rain squall blotting out the sun, looks like a bit of heaven, and the trees are twice as beautiful, fresh washed and glowing with October.

Kinzua Dam is just about 230 miles from Dallas, driving along Route 6 or joining Route 6 from Route 15. The distance is approximately the same. Route 6 is still detoured in the Wyalusing Rock area, cheating the tourist of one of the most impressive scenic views in all of Pennsylvania, but now affording a close-up or worm's eye view of Azilum on the other side of the Susquehanna, the spot which was readied for Marie Antoinette at the time of the French Revolution, and abandoned when the ill-fated queen was captured in midflight and returned to Paris.

There is a good bit of construction work where Route 15 is being rerouted north of Williamsport, but no real obstacle except for considerable dust and rough surfacing in spots.

The trip to the Kinzua Dam is well worth the effort. There are plenty of good hotel or motel accommodations at this time of year, the off-tourist season. There are also good campsites close at hand for families which travel with campers. Information is available from the forest ranger assigned to cover the region.

Leave Route 6 at Smethport, taking Route 59 direct to the dam over improved highways, the final stretch a beautiful new road through Allegheny National Forest. Route 59 continues, after passing the dam, over a not so improved road, and rejoins Route 6 just east of Warren. Winding and scenic, this is the old road along the Allegheny River, minus the precipitous climb to the lookout which once baffled motorists. The grade has been gentled where it meets the road passing the dam.

Coming back to Dallas, drive through Kane and see where Pennsylvania first discovered wealth in the oil fields of a growing new nation, hungry for fuel and power.

Upland meadows, sleek cattle, red barns, tall silos, brawling brooks, wooded hills, this is Pennsylvania, dedicated to conservation of natural resources, proud of its history, confident of its future.

The annual hoagie sale of the Dallas Junior Woman's Club will be held Saturday, Oct. 18. Mrs. Benjamin Roberts, chairman of the event, announced orders will be taken until Oct. 14. Orders may be placed with any club member, who in turn is asked to place her orders with Mrs. Clifford Culver, Mrs. James Thomas or Mrs. John Labows.

Other committee members are Mrs. Frank Wagner, Mrs. Robert Yarashus and Mrs. Harold Haefele.

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