

High Scalers Provided Color

By John F. Cahlan

High scalers!

To a majority of residents of this area, those two words probably connote the people who are in the upper income brackets and have to shell out large lettuce to Uncle Sam every time March 15 comes around.

But to those who were here during Boulder dam days, the words bring back the romance of the early construction days when a high-scaler was the fellow who worked on the face of the canyon with nothing but a small piece of board and a heavy rope between him and eternity.

The high-scalers were the boys who swung over the sides of the rim of the canyon on bos'n seats, attached to the top of the cliff by a heavy rope, and worked on the face of the sheer walls to cut away all the loose rock so there would be no chance of rockslides either during the time the dam was being erected or after it had been finished.

When you visit the dam and see the finely chiselled walls of

the canyon around the structure, then you are looking at the handiwork of these human flies who did everything a steeple-jack can do, only did it better.

The high-scalers were a motley crew. They were former acrobatic stars of circuses, they were former steeple-jacks and they were just plain Joe Doakes who had a yen for danger and loved the spectacular part of the work they did. They all had plenty of what is politely known as intestinal fortitude, and they displayed it on many, many occasions.

The riggers and the high-scalers on the "big job" had the toughest jobs of any of the early day workmen on the dam. They were just like a batch of high trapeze artists working in the heights without a safety net below. One drop and the end of the trail!

They came in early and stayed fairly late for their job was not completed until the last loose rock had been scraped off the face of the canyon. And if you think those "coyotes" — the big

dynamite shots which ripped away half a hillside in a single blast — couldn't loosen a lot of rock elsewhere in the canyon, then you should have been down there under that hail of stone. That was one reason all of the workmen in the canyon were required to wear "hard hats". These were sort of a fabric material which would ward off any ordinary blow, and many times came through an especially extraordinary wallop without much of a dent in the top. A lot of people are still walking around the earth today just because they wore those hard hats in Black canyon.

But, as I said, the high-scalers were a motley crew. Stout-hearted, utterly fearless and they played as hard as they worked. That is why, when the riggers and the high-scalers came to town on a pay day, the ordinary people of Las Vegas stayed home and sought relaxation in a good murder mystery.

There were many stories of heroism which were told about the workmen at Boulder dam,

and the majority of them were true. Some of the "big shot" newspapermen who came here from the east dreamed up a few phonies, but for the most part the heroics as performed by those Boulder dam workmen were the real McCoy.

The reason the eastern newspapermen had to dream stories was because they were sent to Boulder to cover the story and when they arrived the thing was so immense it awed them. They couldn't find anything to write about. So they dreamed their own stories, which made good reading, and no one knew the difference.

One of the most thrilling of all the stories written about Boulder dam and the high-scalers, I think, was the one written by this writer on November 21, 1932, three years after the dam first started.

It was copied from the files of the Review-Journal, and reads as follows:

"Acrobatics of a type never dreamed by the high trapeze performers of the big circuses of

another day, played the main part in a dramatic battle with death in mid-air at Boulder canyon yesterday (November 21, 1932). They were credited with saving the life of B. R. Rutledge, government employe, as he hurtled head down to almost certain death on the rocks some 1,000 feet below the rim of the yawning chasm where Boulder dam is to rise.

"Oliver Cowan, high scaler, played the main part in the drama, snatching Rutledge from the very jaws of death as Rutledge plunged downward from the rim of the precipice, having lost hold on a rope a moment before.

"There were no gaping crowds to cheer Cowan on for his display of high trapeze work, but a man's life was at stake and Cowan didn't miss.

"Swinging out into mid-air, 600 feet above the bottom of the canyon and seizing Rutledge by one leg as he swept by him, Cowan gambled his own life and that of the apparently doomed man, on the slim bit of hemp rope which

held him in position as he labored. He gambled and won!

"No wartime act of heroism ever surpassed that of this hardy-fisted son of toil, who literally pushed himself into eternity, and brought back to the land of the living a man whose brain was burning with the tragic thought—'this is the end.'

"Rutledge, high scaling inspector for Six Companies builders of Boulder dam, was working on Lookout Point, on the rim of the canyon, where a valve-house was being painted yesterday at about 10 AM. One of his hands had been slightly injured previously, and it is believed this injury caused the near-tragedy. The weakened hand was believed to have been unable properly to grasp the rope which protected his life, and he started to slide over the side.

"Rutledge went over the cliff and started to plunge toward the bottom, head-first.

"Cowan, who is known among his fellow workers as 'Loud Speaker,' was sitting in his swinging 'bos'n's chair' about 25

feet below the rim of the canyon. He looked up and saw the man start to fall from above and knew that he would fall out of his reach.

"Timing himself with the precision of a veteran high trapeze artist, he gave himself a push, away from the canyon wall, with his feet, at just the right moment, swinging clear of the canyon and placing himself immediately in the path of the falling man.

"He seized Rutledge by one leg, as the man fell past him, and, with a terrific jerk, Rutledge's body came to a halt. The sudden weight on the ropes which held the bos'n's chair in position was not sufficient to snap the strands and together the two men swung back to the canyon wall.

"Arnold Parks, scaling boss who was in the area and saw the whole heroic deed, seized Rutledge around the neck and, together with Cowan, held him suspended until he was able to get hold of the rope and clamber back to safety.

"Rutledge did not appear nervous at all, at first, but after he got back onto solid ground up there at the top of the cliff, contemplating his experience, he became shaky as a leaf, according to witnesses, when the full realization of his close call finally hit him.

" 'I didn't feel excited at all while I was falling,' Rutledge told B. A. Peters, another worker who was on the cliff. 'I just thought it was the end and had no feeling even hardly to fright. It was after I had gotten on top again that I got scared, thinking of those rocks away down there below on the bottom of the canyon.'

"A year ago Frank T. Crowe, superintendent for Six Companies, remarked that he had about 75 former acrobats working for him down in the canyon, and yesterday one of Crowe's trained scalers, almost nonchalantly, threw himself out into space, grabbed a doomed man, saved his life and figured it all was in a day's work."