

Boulder Dam History

Year—1930

By FLORENCE LEE JONES

The new Beckley building, erected at First and Fremont in Las Vegas in 1929, was to become an important hub of activity on the building of Boulder dam, as the government signed a lease on July 19, 1930, for the third floor of the building to provide offices for the engineering staff. Up to that time, the Old Fort on North Fifth street, had served both as an office and a testing laboratory for materials which were to be used in the construction of the project. Walker R. Young, construction engineer for the bureau of reclamation, signed the lease with Will Beckley, building owner.

In late July, 1930, government officials were considering a proposal to buy Lower California from Mexico as a means of settling the irrigation distribution controversy arising from the construction of Boulder dam.

From Reno came an announcement on July 28, 1930, that Cecil

Creel, director of the agricultural extension service of the University of Nevada, had been appointed as one of an appraisal board to report on the lands of the Moapa Valley and other districts which would be inundated by the waters of the lake to be formed by Boulder dam. Levi Syphus, St. Thomas rancher, and Harry Crane of Cheyenne, Wyoming, completed the board. It was announced that the town of St. Thomas and about 2000 acres of privately owned land would be inundated, and \$500,000 had been provided by the government for the land purchase.

The character of Boulder City was pre-determined by the federal government in a report announced on July 30, 1930. The government stated that "The Boulder dam city will be a permanent community," and that land would be available only on a 20-year lease basis, with the leases to continue only "during the period of good behavior of the tenant." It further was stated that "it is the intention of the government that the bootlegger, the gambler or other law violator shall not interfere with the well-being of the workmen assigned to the dam project."

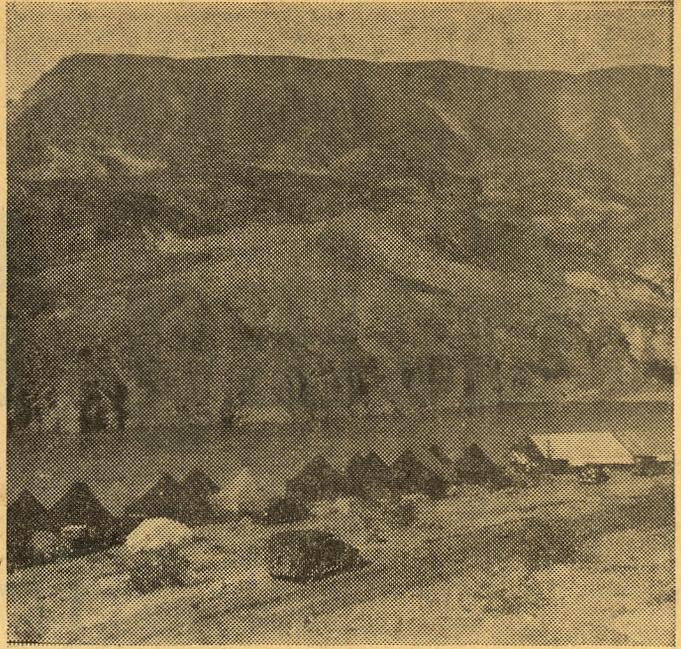
Contracts were signed on the branch railroad on July 31, and work was scheduled to begin on September 1, 1930.

The government "river camp" was started the last week in August, 1930, with a party of 40 bureau of reclamation surveyors and technical men taking up residence in the tent city. A mess hall had been established to serve meals for the workers.

"Beneath the glaring desert sun, before thousands of citizens of Las Vegas and the southwest, Secretary Ray Lyman Wilbur swung thrice, struck the silver spike and started actual construction of Hoover dam, formerly known as Boulder dam, by starting the dam railroad seven and one-half miles south of Las Vegas." Thus wrote John F. Cahlan in a by-lined article which appeared in the Review-Journal on September 17, 1930.

"The silver spike was passed from Governor Fred Balzar to President Carl Gray of the Union Pacific railroad, who in turn passed it to the secretary of the interior. Before placing the spike in the tie, Wilbur said that it was a privilege as secretary of the interior 'to start his project, in the name of the government, to continue without interruption until completed.'"

It was during his visit that the Secretary of the Interior said the name of the dam would be "Hoover," in honor of the nation's president. This was the start of the mix-up on the designation of the Colorado river project, named in its early day Boulder Canyon Project Dam, then Black Canyon Dam, then Hoover dam, then dedicated by President Franklin D. Roose-



RIVER CAMP — The government river camp, shown above, was started in the last week of August, 1930, with 40 bureau of reclamation surveyors and technical men. A mess hall, shown at the right with white canvas top, and tents for the workmen were set upon the banks of the Colorado, looking toward Fortification Mountain, shown in the background. In the summer of 1931, this was the hottest place on the map of the nation, and the workmen suffered from the heat. (G. L. Ullom photo)

velt as Boulder Dam, and later changed by act of congress to Hoover Dam. Throughout the years however, locally, the dam has continued to be known as Boulder Dam.

Plans were announced during Wilbur's visit for the construction of Boulder City as a "permanent model city," which would have a population of 4,000 during the dam construction.

On September 26, 1930, plans were announced by the Union Pacific Railroad and Western Union Telegraph companies to build a joint telegraph line along the right-of-way of the branch railway to the dam site.

The irony of the Boulder dam project was that the government had to expend a million and one-half dollars in the purchase of power for use in building the dam, which in turn would produce power. The contract to furnish the power was awarded to the Sierras Power company of Riverside, California, which was to build the transmission line from California to the damsite. The government was to pay \$17,106 monthly, plus the kilowatt cost. The contract was let on October 15, 1930.

Walker R. Young, construction engineer for the government, announced on October 24, 1930, that Boulder dam construction had been thrown into high gear in order that the big project might play its part in alleviating "the present unemployment condition existing throughout the United States." Work was to be rushed on the townsite, the railroad, and the highway from the townsite to the damsite.

Emphasis on the unemployment situation was given in the Review-Journal of November 6, 1930, under a bannerline, "New Pioneers Are Flocking to Old West Deserts." It told of hundreds of job-hunters who were swarming into the town, seeking work through the government employment office in Las Vegas or at the engineers' camp above

the Colorado river near the dam site.

Leonard Blood was appointed as deputy state labor commissioner on November 15, 1930, and opened offices on the Troy Laundry building on North Main street. Blood had the double responsibility of state official and as superintendent of the United States employment office of the department of labor. It was expected that preference in jobs would be given to ex-servicemen.

Employment was expected to take a big jump about March 1, 1931, when work was to start on the railroad and highway work from Boulder City to the damsite. The first contract for Boulder City was for a 2,000,000 gallon water tank to be erected on the highest hill in the townsite.

Bids for the construction of the dam were called for by the bureau of reclamation on December 10, 1930, when specifications became available in the Denver offices of the bureau.

The area soon was swarming with representatives of various big contracting firms, looking over the damsite. One of the big problems facing the builders was what to do with the waste material from the bed of the river, the canyon walls, and the tunnels which would be a big factor in the project.

SIGNS OF TIMES

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL—Oct. 16, 1931 — Mail Bag, Dear Sirs: Have you gone out Fifth street on the Los Angeles highway? Have you noticed the tent city? It is a disgrace to Las Vegas.

I understand the city had allocated a space called Hoover City for public camping. Why have they allowed this eyesore on one of the main highways?

Can Las Vegas cope with an epidemic which is bound to come with present conditions? Let's keep our highways as inviting as we possibly can. Mrs. R. S. Brennan.