

**Hoover Dam: A success
story that few remember**

By Charles Bowden

Citizen Staff Writer

Do wah do wah do wah ditty

Tell me about the girl from New York City.

— message from a portable stereo at Lake Mead.

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A Mayan pattern crawls across her skirt. She is 30, short hair. Breakfast has just ended. A thick silver bracelet flashes on her wrist as she pays the bill at the counter.

Outside an overcast sky hangs over Boulder City, Nev., a few miles from Hoover Dam. For 48 years the 726-foot dam has choked the Colorado in the narrows of Black Canyon.

Some have called the concrete slab the eighth wonder of the world. She has come to see this wonder.

She says, "I hear it is the next best thing to the Grand Canyon."

Under her arm she carries a copy of Fyodor Dostoevski's "The Idiot."

The dam itself is covered with people. They stare at the green water hurling over the spillway, they line up for photographs, take tours of the dam's vast core, peek over the edge at the sheer drop. Their license plates are from all over the United States.

They stand and share in the wonder. And then after a few minutes, they climb back into their cars and trucks and move on. They are 443 miles from the river's delta in the Gulf of California. This no longer matters. Hoover stopped the river cold; downstream dams took off the water for fields and cities and for decades the delta has been dead.

Hoover is a success story so complete that no one remembers the victory. The nation that went to the moon has forgotten the nation that went to Black Canyon and plugged a 1,400-mile-long river, created what was then the world's largest artificial lake, and finished the entire project two years ahead of schedule.

The Bureau of Reclamation likes to point out that Hoover is larger than the Great Pyramid of Egypt. The pyramid took 100,000 men 20 years. Hoover's basic structure took 1,200 men two years.

These facts are in a small booklet that few read. Instead, they pause and look and take photos. A busload of Japanese tourists takes in the dam. Five teen-age girls line up on the rail while a sixth takes the picture. They all wear tight designer jeans and smiles. No one brings up the Great Pyramid.

People are on their way to Las Vegas and the dam is a splash of water in a long drive through scrub desert. The desert makes them tired; the dam makes them pause for a few minutes.

Golden eagles perch on the telephone poles lining the road to the dam. No one notices them. The huge birds sit motion-

less waiting for the updrafts of day to begin. Two miles from the dam, six bighorn sheep graze 100 yards off the highway. Their white rumps drift across the brown and gray earth. They feed on burro weed and creosote next to the roar of traffic for 15 minutes.

No one stops and looks at them.

No one slows down.

Near the dam a road sign warns;
WATCH FOR MOUNTAIN SHEEP.

The contractors served 6.5 million meals; they built a town for 6,000. Boulder, Nev., was a federal community thrown up for the men who came to build the big dam. The dam itself was a dream. In a nation out of work, it was work. In a nation reeling with economic failure, it was power.

A man once told me how he tried to get

on at Hoover. He rode his motorcycle across the hot desert to the site. He said that would have been something, to have helped build the great dam.

His words are almost a mystery to 1980 ears. Today, five or six times as many people are working to erect Palo Verde nuclear power plant west of Phoenix. But the concrete bubbles for nuclear fire do not cause good dreams. When Hoover was going up, more than 300,000 people came to look in a year, 40,000 in a month.

The men came for money. Their average age was 32; about 40 percent were unmarried.

They worked like beasts. In the heart of the canyon, a temperature of 152 degrees was recorded. Thirteen men died from heat. One hundred and ten men were devoured by the great dam.

The construction went on day and night and visitors marveled at the dots of light moving across the rock walls in the blackness of the midnight hour.

During five years of work, only one major crime happened at Boulder City — the movie theater was robbed.

Callville was a Mormon outpost founded in 1864 by Anson Call. Brigham Young saw the town as a port where steamboats would offload onto wagons for the 450-mile haul to Salt Lake City.

Railroads snuffed the dream of a port and Callville fell into ruin. When Hoover was completed, Lake Mead drowned the ruins. Now the name lives in Callville Marina, a boat dock on the new shoreline.

Steve Stockdale is a seasonal ranger for

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the Park Service at the Lake Mead Recreational Area. He has picked Lake Mead for a reason.

"If you can work here," he explains, "you can work anywhere."

Mead ranks with Yellowstone and Yosemite as a leader in law-enforcement problems. People come here to get away from it all and part of their escape plan entails getting drunk. They drive cars drunk. They drive boats drunk. They get in fights drunk.

Kids go out to the cliffs on the north shore and get drunk and jump.

Things like that.

Night has fallen and the hot desert air hangs over the water. Bats dart above the docks. A boat pulls up to tie. In the prow, a fat woman sits and stares glumly at the water. Three kids and a spaniel frolic on the craft. At the wheel, a man with about three dozen sports tattoos, a red bandanna, Levi's, no shirt and a blank face. A man about 20 stands on the gunwale prepared to moor the craft. He steps off to the dock. The dock is 15 feet away.

When he comes up, he inquires of the fat woman on the prow about a rope. She looks down at the cleat on the gunwale and says, "Oh, it's all knotted up."

The boat drifts.

A portable radio blasts across the dock area. Roberta Flack is singing, "Killing Me Softly With Your Song."

Evening comes to Callville Marina.

They were roped onto steel rods driven into the rock wall. They drilled, pried and dynamited stone off the cliffs. When the rock came loose, it fell hundreds of feet into the canyon. The men were called high scalers. Four hundred men did the work for two years.

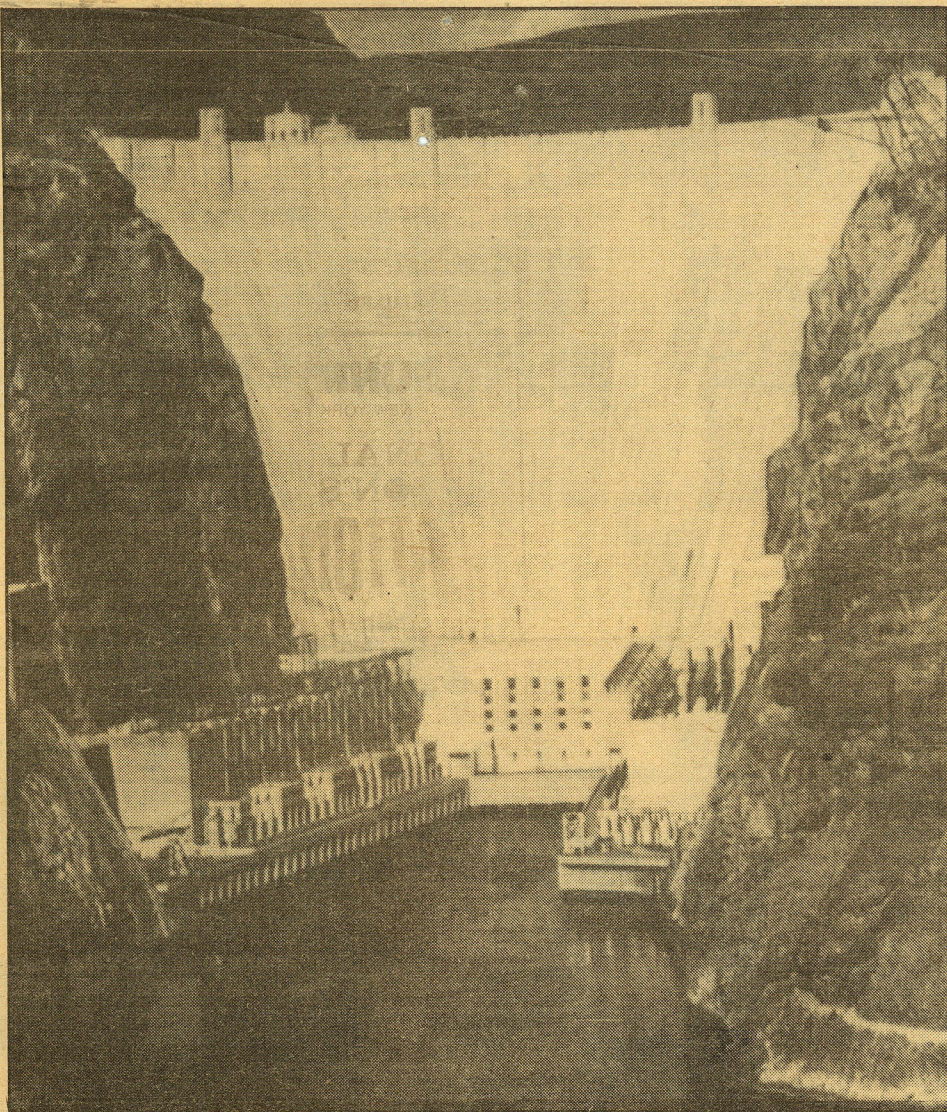
They wrenched 137,000 cubic yards of stone from the walls of Black Canyon. Seven men died as high scalers.

The houseboats rent for a thousand a week or more. The people come to fish, to water ski, to relax. They also come to learn about petroleum.

Often they run out of gasoline on the lake. The roar leaves the engine and the boat stops dead in the water. The Park Service sends out commercial tows for them and they are hauled to the dock.

It is midafternoon and an Arizona Game and Fish wildlife manager runs into a stalled boat on the lake. He reluctantly takes on the line and tows it to the marina. He says sometimes they leave them and tell the tow people at the marina to go get them. They let them drift for an hour or two so they'll learn a lesson.

The lake stretches more than 100



AP Laserphoto

Hoover Dam stands as a memorial to success by river planners

miles but people camp within a mile or two of the marina. The desire to get away from it all does not mean too far away.

At the dock, people cart goods to their boats. The gear is always the same. Two bags of grocery, an ice chest, and a big portable radio.

The concrete ran as hot as 138 degrees. The engineers shot pipes through the concrete and water chilled as low as 38 degrees coursed through the pipes. The huge dam cooled in 20 months.

Left alone, it would have taken Hoover Dam 150 years to cool.

There was no problem men could not solve at Hoover Dam.

The men scramble to unload a boat full of desert bighorn sheep. They have been captured in Arizona and will be hauled by truck to a new home in the strip country north of the Grand Canyon. Arizona Game and Fish has spent months plotting the capture. The sheep have been lured for weeks with apple mash, trapped in a net, wrestled, hobbled, and blindfolded.

The men handle them tenderly. They stroke their flanks and hold them. Cattle and domestic sheep and the fist called modern life have driven sheep away

from vast patches of land. Now they are coming back. In the Black Mountains across from the Callville Marina, 700 or 800 sheep live on the volcanic rock.

This morning 22 have been caught.

People stand around the truck at the marina as the men place the animals one by one in the back. The sheep struggle and moments of panic sweep the band like clouds drifting across the sun.

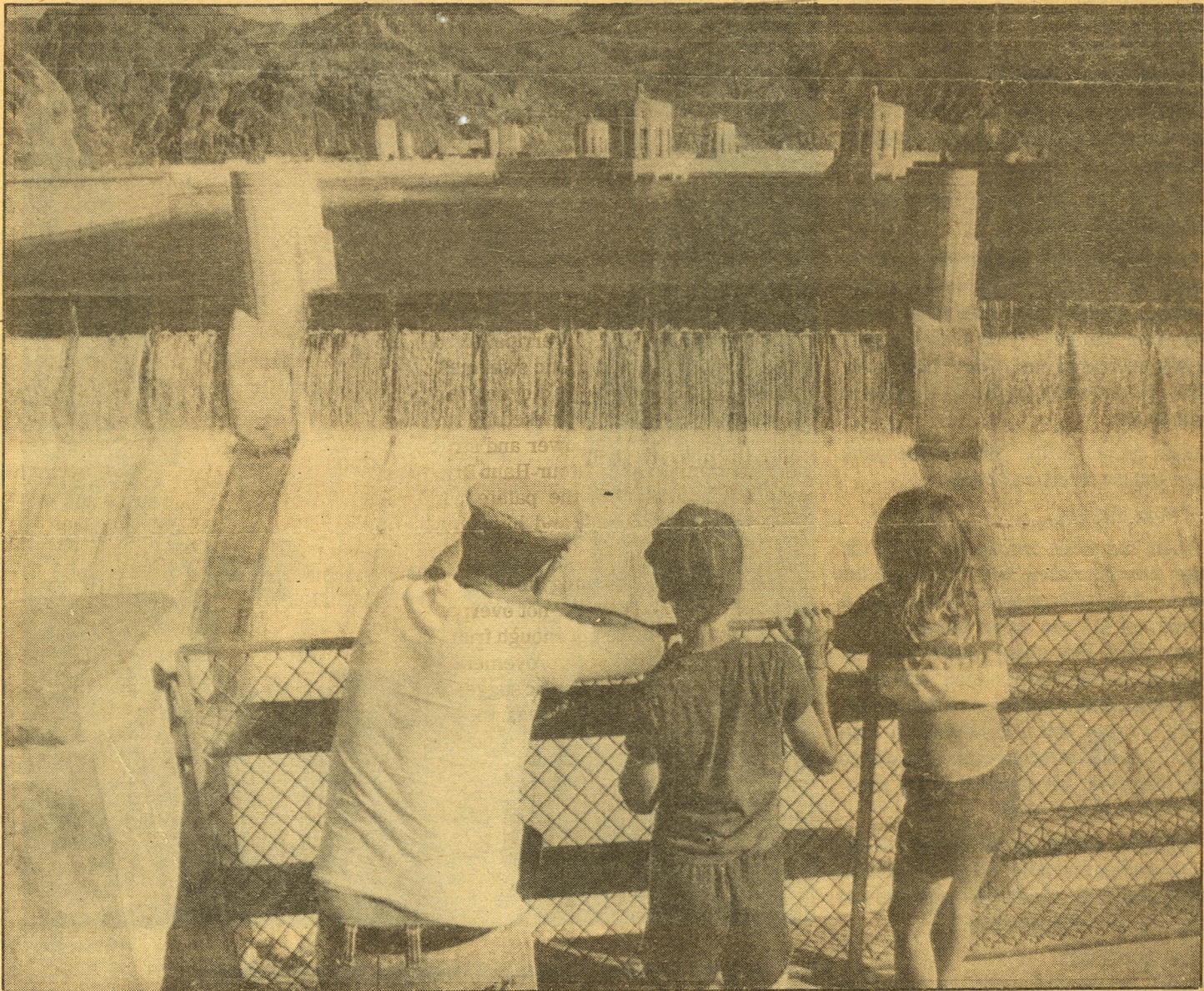
A woman in a pink blouse and pink pants moves against the truck. She reaches in through the netting and pets a sheep. The animal looks at her with huge brown eyes.

She says, "Take good care of these, they're part of my heritage."

The heat of a summer morning bakes the 9 a.m. air. The woman drains a can of Coors.

The lake was a silt trap, a reservoir for irrigation, a warehouse of water for electric power generation. The top skin, the surface, was an unavoidable reality. No one built Hoover Dam for boaters or bass killers or water skiers or marinas.

They built Hoover to stop the Colorado dead in its tracks. And the stalled river went from red to green and the roaring waters became a pond.



Tourists watch water cascade over Hoover Dam spillway

AP Laserphoto