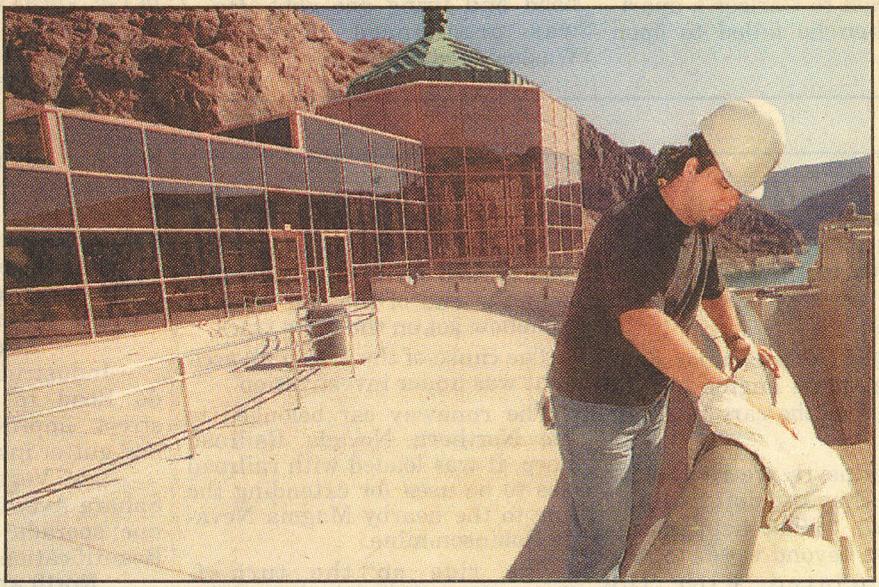
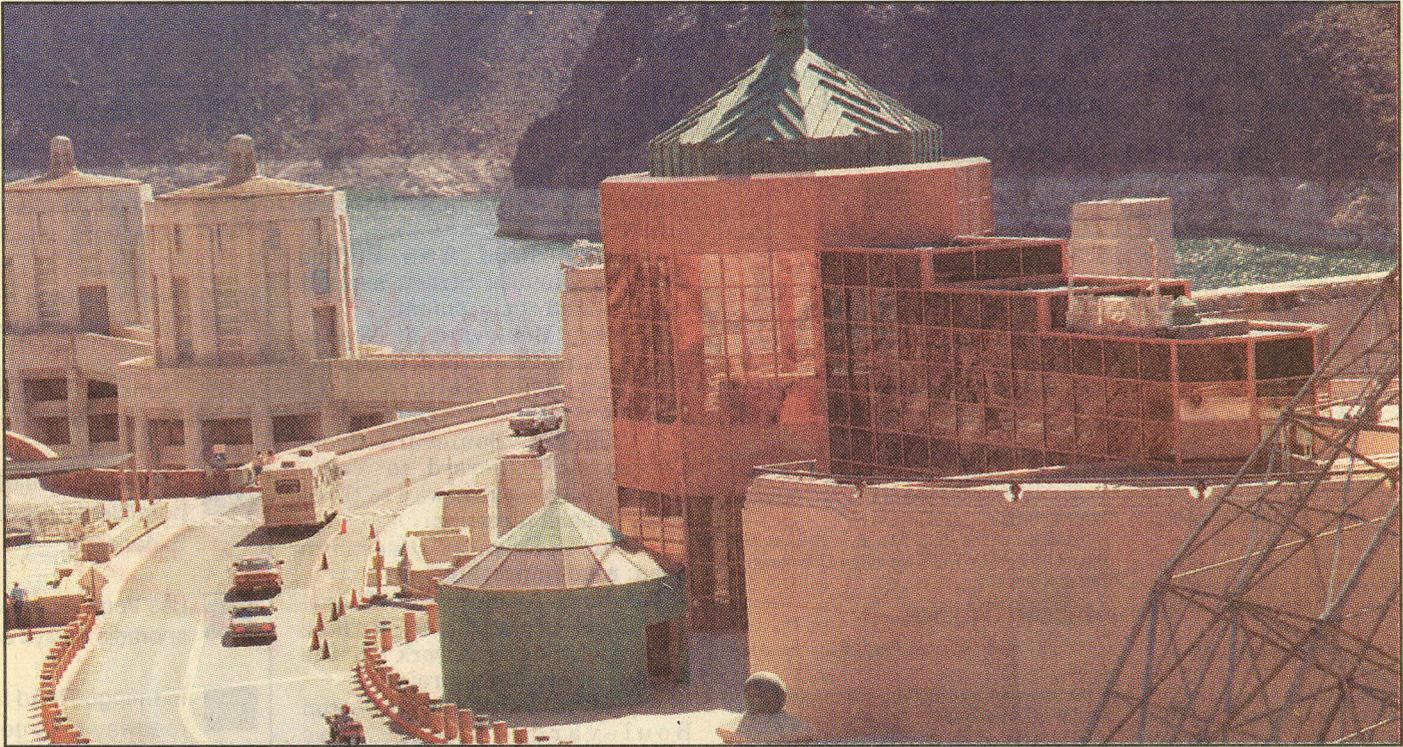


DAM'S NEW DIGS

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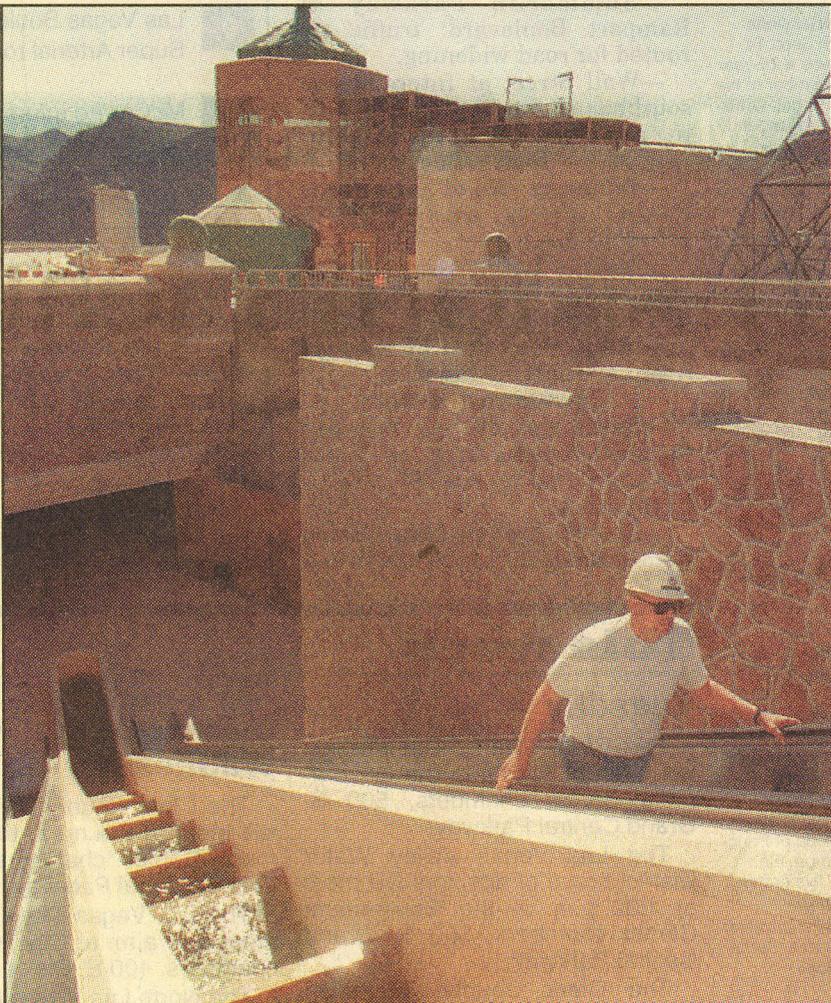
Gary Bartusch polishes a rail at the Hoover Dam visitors center where tourists will be able to view the dam from the Nevada side.



Jeff Scheid/Review-Journal

Hoover Dam's new visitors center is set to open Wednesday after nine years of construction and a price tag of more

than \$123 million, which will be repaid over 50 years by power users in Southern Nevada, Arizona and California.



Ken Howell rides an escalator that will carry visitors to and from a five-level parking structure near Hoover Dam. The center opens Wednesday.

Long road to opening nears end

□ After nine years and millions of dollars in cost overruns, the Hoover visitors center and parking facility are ready to go.

By Keith Rogers
Review-Journal

It's a short walk from the cavernous, five-level parking garage to the escalator that leads to Hoover Dam's new visitors center.

Water cascades down a stair-step channel that disappears in a pool that sits in a shadow at the bottom.

A man-made rock wall blends into the volcanic tuff that makes up Black Canyon. For the most part, it blocks the view of cars and trucks rolling on U.S. Highway 93. Occasionally, though, there's a glimpse of the massive, concrete arches that brace the highway and hold it tight to the canyon wall.

That's the scene visitors will absorb at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday when the \$123 million center and parking facility opens after nine years of construction.

Please see CENTER/6B

Center

From 1B

No longer will visitors have to wait in the hot sun to see the highest dam in the Western Hemisphere, where the temperature is often 7 to 10 degrees above what it is in Las Vegas, 30 miles away.

Instead, there is an air-conditioned lobby and a display of a wooden boat, Marble, one of four that the U.S. Geological Survey and Southern California Edison used to explore the Colorado River for a dam site in the early 1920s.

"They open that door and they're in a whole new environment," said Gene Schultz, who first worked at the dam 51 years ago.

While visitors wait to take the 70-second elevator ride down to the base of the dam, they can sit in one of three, 145-seat theaters to view a video about the structure. The theaters eventually will rotate on a turntable to keep a steady flow of visitors — up to 3,000 a day — moving on the tour.

Upon returning from the base of the dam, visitors will have a chance to meander through an exhibit hall, which is empty now but by the fall of next year will be stocked with displays.

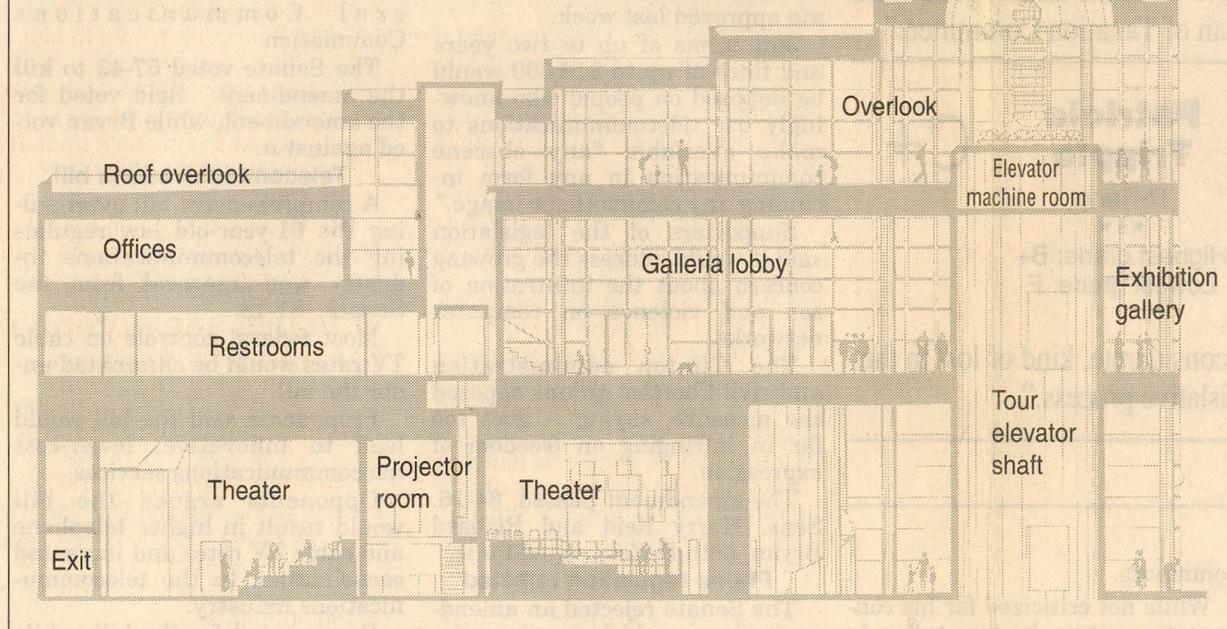
Until then, Bureau of Reclamation spokesman Bob Walsh said, the bureau intends to display 59 paintings of dams done by several artists, including Norman Rockwell. The paintings are in storage in Colorado. The bureau operates Hoover Dam and others along the Colorado River.

It took half as long and cost about half as much to build the dam in the 1930s than it did to build the new visitors center.

But that was another era, and conditions were much different,

New visitors center

A cross section of the Hoover Dam visitors center shows at the bottom left theaters that rotate on a turntable, and an elevator shaft to the right that will carry tourists from the base of the dam to exhibit areas. The center also features restrooms, a nurses station and offices for guides.



Source: Bureau of Reclamation

REVIEW-JOURNAL

explained Jack Delp, the bureau's construction engineer for the visitors center project.

In 1933, there weren't hundreds of thousands of vehicles and people crowding the construction site during the year.

In 1992, he said, "We had to close traffic to one lane."

In the 1930s, energized power lines from the dam's hydroelectric plant weren't strung overhead. But the hazard posed by the lines during construction of the visitors center prohibited the use of cranes to put precast concrete slabs in place. That meant,

the more difficult task of pouring concrete became the common practice.

"When you're talking the visitors center cost, the 1983 estimate didn't cover a lot of details, location, difficulty and logistics of the site," Delp said last week.

"In a nutshell, that's it," he said.

Delp said much of the work was similar to the construction of the dam. It required blasting into the canyon wall and installing a 23-foot-diameter machine to bore a tunnel down a 530-foot vertical drop.

"The excavation was right on the edge of the canyon," he said. "There's no other way to do that other than put people on ropes."

Blasting with dynamite, up to three times a shift for 10 months, was done at night. Debris was contained by placing mats over the blast site. Then all the displaced rocks had to be hauled out, Delp said.

Because of limited space

during the excavation phase, only 50 to 60 workers could be on site. Once concrete pouring began, the work force increased to 200, he said.

The project's safety record was excellent," Delp said. He said the worst injury was a fractured leg suffered by a worker unloading materials.

By comparison, during construction of Hoover Dam 96 workers died at the site and another 16 deaths were linked to accidents away from the dam site. Most of the 112 deaths resulted from falling rocks and heat exhaustion, but some workers drowned and others were run over by vehicles, Walsh said.

He said the \$123 million in construction costs will be repaid over 50 years. Counting interest, that means power users in Southern Nevada, Arizona and California will shoulder a \$436 million repayment bill.

"We're trying to help the power customers repay the construction cost by generating revenues from the visitors program itself," Walsh said.

The bureau hopes, he said, to generate \$3 million per year in excess of costs for maintaining the program and operating the facility via a \$5 fee charged adults for the tour. Initially, he said, the fee will include parking, but that could change.

Lake Mead Cruises, Walsh said, has offered to build a dock at the dam to bring in more visitors from its tour-boat operation.

"They've guaranteed us 90,000 passengers for the first year" after the dock is built, and 150,000 for the second year, he said.