

Thursday, March 29, 1990

SAN DIEGO TRIBUNE

C-3

Hoover Dam is not only impressive, it's also good-looking

By Catherine Watson

Scripps Howard News Service

Walking from the parking lots to the ticket booth at the crest of the dam, almost everybody does the same thing — stop near the railing and take a quick look over the side.

It's a stomach-wrenching shock.

The concrete parabola of the dam drops away so far and so fast that just looking at it pulls you with it, in a kind of visual vertigo.

Hands tighten automatically on the railing and on the arms of companions, especially if they're little children.

Like everything else about this 1930s architectural wonder, the railing was built to last.

Hoover Dam straddles the border between Nevada and Arizona, blocking the Colorado River to create Lake Mead, now a recreation mecca that stretches 110 miles upriver and attracts 8.8 million visitors each year.

But the dam draws a sizable crowd of its own. About 760,000 people take one of its guided tours every year — 3,000 a day in summer.

From its top to the bedrock at the bottom of the river, Hoover Dam stands 726 feet tall. On the tours, you'll get to drop just about all of that distance. Happily, it'll be by elevator.

"This is Disneyland in concrete," a guide said, grinning, as he punched the buttons to plunge the tour group 528 feet from the surface into the dam's poured-concrete innards.

The drop is equivalent to the height of a 53-story building, and it's impressive. Of course, you're prepared to be impressed.

Hoover was "the greatest dam constructed in its day," according to the Bureau of Reclamation's brochure, and it's still the biggest concrete dam in the Western Hemisphere.

It was designed to stop devastating floods along the lower Colorado as well as to provide water and electrical power for seven surrounding states.

One flood in 1905 was so bad that the river changed its course, diverting into California's Imperial Valley and the Salton Sea.

"The river flowed into the valley for 16 months," the brochure states. During that time it damaged houses, farms, highways and railroads, and it "increased the Salton Sea from 22 to 500 square miles." (The salty lake has shrunk slightly since then.)

Despite the urgency of the project, it took years to pass the necessary legislation.

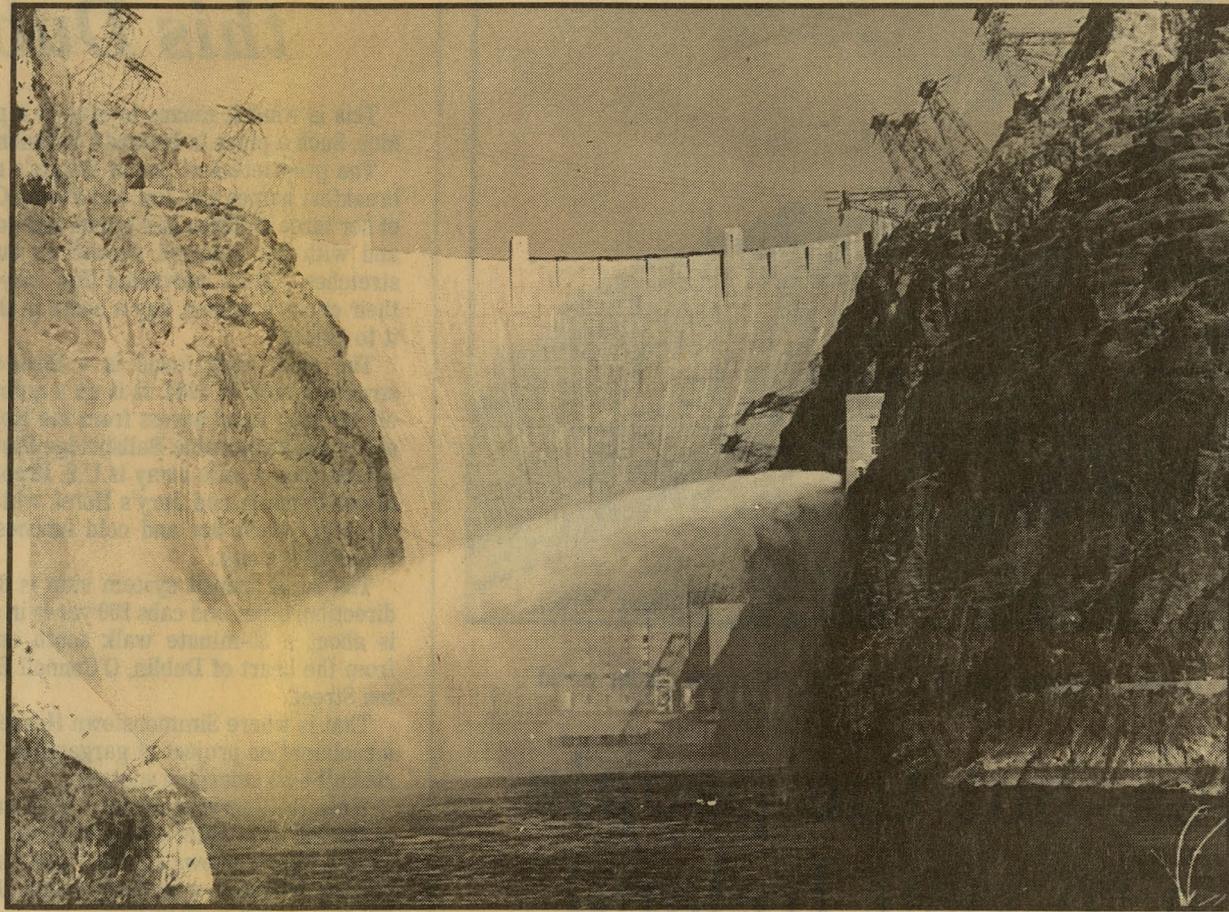
Along the way, the location was changed from Boulder Canyon to Black Canyon, 30 miles downstream,

and the name bounced from Hoover Dam to Boulder and back to Hoover again.

"It was called Hoover Dam from the start, in honor of President (Herbert) Hoover," another guide explained. But when Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the dam in 1935, he referred to it as Boulder Dam "because he didn't think Hoover was worth a dam." That name stuck until the next administration, when Harry S. Truman ordered that its original name be used.

Construction on the dam began in

The concrete parabola of the dam drops away so far and so fast that just looking at it pulls you with it



Hoover Dam contains enough concrete to pave a two-lane highway from San Francisco to New York

1931, and the first electricity was produced in 1936.

At peak, 5,200 men worked on the project, most at 50 cents to 75 cents an hour. It took 23½ months to pour the concrete — with men working on it 24 hours a day.

It cost \$175 million to build — not bad, when you figure that the concrete alone would cost \$700 million today.

Most of the men were housed at a nearby work camp called Boulder City, Nev. The first planned community in the country, it is now a national historic district and the heart of a

town of 11,000.

The tour takes visitors down on the Nevada side, out at the bottom for a look at the tailrace, across the river to the Arizona side through an old diversion tunnel, and back up to the surface.

While you expect the dam to be big — it's 45 feet thick at the top and 660

feet thick at the bottom and contains enough concrete to pave a two-lane highway from San Francisco to New York — what you don't expect is how the dam looks.

It's gorgeous — more like the inside of an art-deco hotel lobby than a utilitarian power plant. Even the generator rooms have aesthetic ap-

peal.

The first hint of its style comes on the Nevada side, where towering winged sentinels in patinated bronze flank a monument commemorating the project. They symbolize "victory over the elements."

Inside the dam, 600 feet below the top, even ordinary hallways boast

black, gray and white terrazzo floors inlaid with bronze strips, and the staircases have brass handrails.

Handsome though it is, the most memorable characteristic of the dam really is its size, as the statistics poured out by the tour guides stress.

The generator room on the Nevada side, for example, the first main stop on the public tours, is two blocks long and eight stories high. The room houses eight turbines, each seven stories tall (though only the top 30 or 40 feet are visible).

The combined output of the plant is 1,700 megawatts. To produce it, Nyman said, 4 million gallons of water a minute goes through the turbines, or "the equivalent of 121,000 six-packs."

Hoover Dam sells its electricity (two-thirds of it goes to the Los Angeles area), and the profits paid off the last of its construction costs June 1, 1987.

"Hoover Dam does not cost the taxpayers a cent in any way, shape or form," another guide said. "In fact, it returns money to the federal government."

Tours of Hoover Dam cost \$1, take 35 minutes and are given continuously from 9 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. in winter and from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. in summer. Tickets are sold at the crest of the dam on a first-come, first-served basis. Lines move quickly: Tour groups of 23 people leave the top every three minutes, twice that often at busy times. For more information, call the Hoover Dam Visitor Center, at (702) 293-8367.

Watson is travel editor of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune.