

RECLAMATION

Managing Water in the West

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation

Boomtown

Wilfred Woods: The Columbia Basin was sagebrush; there was nothing there. It was dryland farming. You could get irrigation water from the Columbia River, but we only get 10 inches of rain here, so we're a desert climate.

Cecil Scott: I remember when I was a kid and we'd have a 4th of July picnic down at Beulen's Eddy, and my dad and neighbors would sit around whittlin' sticks saying they didn't know how anybody could dam the Columbia River. They couldn't imagine it.

Skip Lael: My father homesteaded here on a ranch next to the ranch my mother grew up on. He was in the sheep business when the dam started. This was just sagebrush desert when people came from all directions.

Wilfred Woods: The first work done was excavation in the fall of '33. There was nothing at the dam site but sagebrush and sand. People would start coming in and camping in the sagebrush.

Inise Powers: In June 1935, my dad and I drove a 1929 car from Boulder City to Grand Coulee. We lived in shacks and tents attached to the car. The winters were bitter cold. We bought land at Delano, about 4 miles out of town. We built apartments but lived in a shack—and I carried water for drinking and washing clothes.

Rod Hartman: This was a boomtown like you'll never see again. There were fewer machines then, which required many more workers.

Jack Hilson: There were 7,700 people working on the dam. There is a cave across Banks Lake from my house that had workers living in it. Housing was terrible: it was mostly tarpaper shacks and tents.

Wilfred Woods: Grand Coulee was the center of the camping settlements. It was dust in the summer and mud in the winter. It had all the problems associated with a construction site: prostitution, bars, little control. It was really a frontier development from 1933 to 1935.

Cecil Scott: My sister and husband built a house where they lived and 8 cabins. They could rent and they were just big enough for a bed. I was going with a girl in Almira. I would sleep in a cabin but eat my meals downtown—and I'd take a shower and change clothes, eat my dinner and go out and see my girlfriend. Then I'd come back about 11 o'clock, go to sleep, get up and work the next day. I was drivin' a Chevrolet car at that time. I bought a brand new Chevrolet car, standard model, \$640. That wouldn't even make a down payment on one now!