

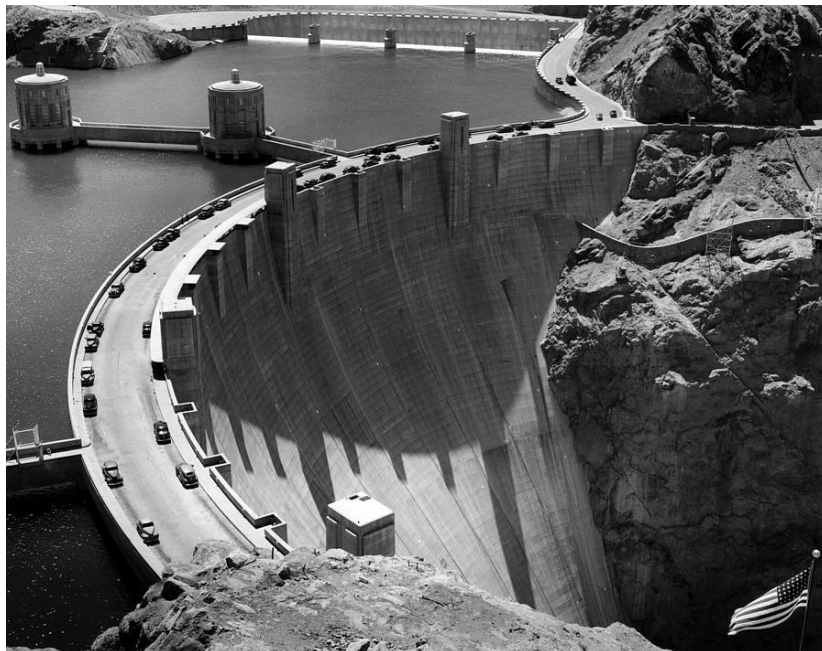
1-19-99

Hoover Dam

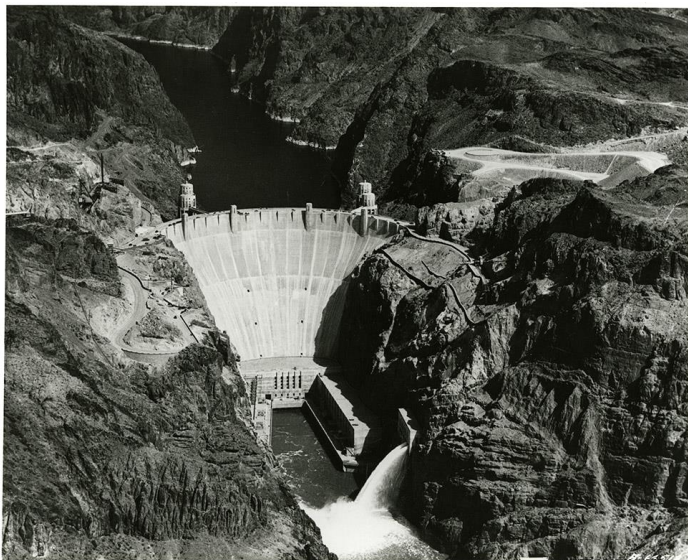
Last night an hour-long documentary about Hoover Dam provided me with information and inspiration for a memoir I've been trying to write for some time. Paul and I crossed the dam in 1944 when he was transferred from Portland, Oregon, to Washington, D.C. It was an exciting experience among many other exciting experiences on that trip. In more than half a century, I had forgotten many of the details and didn't think I remembered enough to write a memoir about the experience. I really enjoyed the documentary and found that it helped me retrieve many lost reactions.

At the time Paul received his transfer, the only way we could finance my move to the east coast was to take advantage of the first-class train fare Paul alone was given for his move, using his travel allowance to get the two of us across the country by car. Ironically, soon after we had completed our move, the Bureau reversed its policy and supported the cost of the transfer of the spouse. Alas, it was too late for us, except that a train trip couldn't have been as good an experience as our drive was.

We bought our first car -- one of the few second-hand cars available in Portland (needless to say, in wartime there were no new cars). It was a 1938 blue Chevrolet sedan, in reasonably good shape, with four acceptable tires. We packed the trunk and the back seat of the car with all our belongings: minimal household goods, books, our collection of 78-rpm records, and clothes. Armed with our emergency D-ration gasoline sticker, we headed south through Oregon and into Nevada. Our first sight-seeing destination was some fifty miles from Reno, the recently completed Boulder Dam. At the ground-breaking ceremony in 1931, it had been designated "Hoover Dam," but with the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and the appointment of Harold Ickes as Secretary of the Interior, the name was changed to "Boulder," using the local name of the area through which the Colorado River cut after it emptied from the Grand Canyon. The name change was regarded as a political act, since Ickes was not an admirer of Herbert Hoover, the just defeated President.



The area approaching the dam, which straddles the border between Nevada and Arizona was flat, virtually featureless desert sand, extremely hot and dry. Needless to say, the dam with its hydroelectrical power production was considered highly strategic during World War II, and we had to stop at the security station at the beginning of the approach to the dam. Paul's transfer by the Federal Bureau of Investigation presented no problem except that, as a Special Agent, he had been issued a weapon. Guns of any variety were not allowed over, on, or about the Dam. The alternatives we were offered were not satisfactory: Paul could leave the weapon at the security stop, a move his regulations did not allow, or we could turn around and make a tedious and lengthy detour of some two hundred miles around the dam on less than first-class roads, not a pleasant prospect on an already long drive. Out of lengthy reasonable discussion among the security personnel and Paul, a satisfactory solution was reached: Paul emptied the loaded trunk, placed his padlocked briefcase containing the gun on the floor of the trunk, and reloaded our possessions on top of it; then we were allowed to proceed over the impressive roadway on the top of the dam. Paul was warned to maintain the required speed of thirty-five miles an hour with no stops until he reached the security station at the other side of the dam. That speed at least allowed us to look to our left and see vast Lake Mead punctuated by small islands projecting from its five-hundred-foot-deep water, admire the magnificent contrasting colors of the blue water and the bleached vertical shore which the water reached during its high stages, and take in the beauty of the cloudless deep blue skies. Looking to our right, we could see the six-hundred-foot drop of the dam and the insignificant-looking Colorado River flowing across the narrow bottom of Boulder Canyon. Either way we looked we were aware of the heart-stopping story of the building of the dam. We knew that, beneath us, there was impressive hydroelectric equipment producing mega-watts of electricity for the city of Los Angeles and many sites between, but of course we simply had to imagine what lay below us. We could see the tall but fragile-looking intake towers in the lake, sending millions of gallons of water through the interior of the dam in the production of that electricity. Once we were safely across the dam, the security people allowed us to pull off the road and look down at the awesome canyon crested by the huge dam. The scale was such that the dam itself looked infinitesimal, incapable of holding back the weight of all the water in Lake Mead, and the river looked far too small to provide the power for manufacturing electricity and for irrigating the fertile lands through which the river ran.



It was hard to imagine the awesome task of drilling four enormous diversion channels in order to divert the river and make possible the pouring of the powerful dam that spanned the canyon and towered six hundred feet into the air. The genius involved in planning the diversion channels and planning the secure attachment of the sides of the dam to the solid rock canyon walls might have occurred momentarily to us, but the documentary emphasized the engineering achievements with vivid pictures and statistics. The mere pouring of the massive amounts of concrete had to be staggered in such a way that the concrete could cure in a reasonable length of time. To have poured the entire mass at once would have meant requiring over a hundred years for the concrete to cure properly to assure strength.

We also had no way of knowing about the extensive art work on interior walls and walkways and on the dam itself. That such a mammoth engineering project could include provision for art may have been the most amazing aspect of the documentary, project management being so obsessed with meeting deadlines and making profits for the contractors, to the neglect of safety, health, and working conditions of the laborers. Construction over the years cost the lives of 165 workers.

We also hadn't been able to consider the tens of thousands of men who labored over ten years to prepare the site and erect the dam. Even before the beginning of the project, armies of men made desperate by the lack of employment at the height of the Great Depression moved themselves and their families to this area which had no accommodations for living and which was brutally hot. The men had no assurance that employment would develop. There was no place to live. Eventually a city was built with elementary housing -- enormous barracks for single men and tiny houses for the families. Transportation to the work site for the three shifts to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (July 4 and Christmas off) was another necessity which management added. The engineers devised fantastic machines to blast through the rock for the diversion channels. All of this work came at enormous price at the time, some fifty million dollars for wages, equipment, and materials. Not to mention life. Ironically, of the many deaths over the years, the first and last fatalities were father and son.

The documentary included interviews with some of the laborers from that amazing job as well as a few of the women who supported their families. Their simple words about their experiences were impressively poetic, showing great pride for their participation in and survival of the building experience.

The building of the dam influenced the construction of future dams, altered forever the ecology of the land both above and below the dam, and created a booming agricultural economy in the desert. But despite the many advantages reaped from its existence, there is today dissatisfaction with the environmental destruction that it brought about. These arguments will probably go on forever, but Paul and I are grateful that we were permitted to see the structure in its early years. And I'm happy to have seen the documentary and had my memories revived and reinforced. For the record, Congress changed the name back to "Hoover Dam" in 1947.