

Working on the Hoover Dam

The Colorado River and the Boulder Canyon Project

In the early 1900s, farmers in California and the American Southwest used the Colorado River in many ways. The river irrigated their fields and provided drinking water. But the river was **unpredictable**. It flooded many times.

Residents tried to **divert** the Colorado River through a series of **canals**. In 1905, the canals broke. An inland sea called the Salton Sea was formed. Many communities flooded throughout the Imperial Valley in California. The United States Bureau of Reclamation had to step in.

In 1922, Bureau of Reclamation director Arthur Powell Davis made a plan to build a dam in Boulder Canyon on the Arizona-Nevada border. This plan was named the **Boulder Canyon Project**. The plan would control flooding and manage irrigation. The dam would also produce **hydroelectric power**, or electricity generated from water. This electricity could be sold in order to pay for the dam.

Future President Herbert Hoover created a plan to divide the rights to the water among the seven Colorado River states: Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and California.

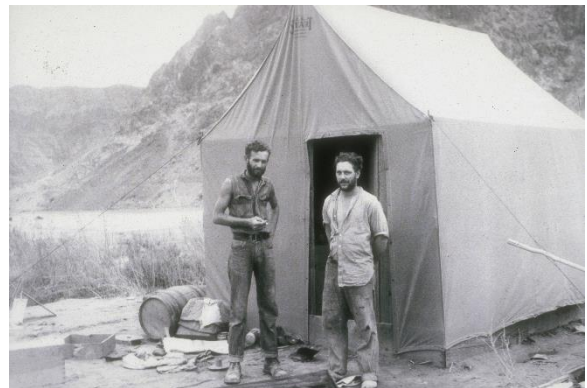
In 1928, President Calvin Coolidge signed the **Boulder Canyon Project Act**. Six Companies, a group of six companies working together, were contracted to build the dam. The bid was for over \$48 million dollars, the largest labor contract ever signed by the U.S. government up to that time.

Workers Arrive after the Great Depression

On October 29, 1929 (known as Black Tuesday), the stock market crashed.¹ This caused a worldwide event known as the Great Depression. During the Great Depression, prices and income levels dropped. Banks closed and people lost all of their savings. Many people also lost their jobs. In the United States, almost 25% of people became **unemployed**. There were about 13-15 million unemployed people across the country. In most places, African Americans lost their jobs at even higher rates.

Construction projects stopped. Mines were shut down. The men who had worked in these jobs their whole lives now needed new jobs.

Many men and their families arrived at the dam site before work was available. They hoped that they could find a job on the project. Most families came by railroad or car. They packed what they could into suitcases and trunks and left the rest of their belongings behind. A few families settled in Las Vegas. Most of them lived in **tent cities** next to the river. They set up tents and camped until Boulder City was built. Conditions were harsh. There was no running water or electricity. It was over 120 degrees throughout the summer.



Men in one of the tent cities near the dam site.
Photo courtesy of UNLV Special Collections.

Construction Begins

In 1931, the government decided to build the dam in Black Canyon instead of Boulder Canyon. Six Companies began working on the project. There were many preparations to be made. Six Companies built the town of Boulder City in 15 months to house workers and their families. They built dormitories and houses, a mess hall,² a general store, a movie theatre, a hospital, and more.

They began building railroad lines, highways, a construction camp, a gravel-screening plant, a concrete-mixing plant, air compressor plants, and a steel plant. All of these were needed before the dam could be built.

¹ A stock market crash is a sudden decline in stock prices across the stock market, which leads to a loss of monetary value.

² A place for the workers to eat, like a cafeteria.

In 1932, workers began drilling diversion tunnels, which moved the river away from the dam site. The river was temporarily diverted and the site was excavated. They could finally begin building the dam and the hydroelectric power plant.

The Hoover Dam is Built

Six Companies was given seven years to build the dam beginning in April 1931, but they finished early. Construction was completed in just five years. On September 30, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt came to see the finished dam and gave a big speech.

The dam was the largest in the world when it was built. It is an arch-gravity dam, which means that the water load is carried by both gravity and the horizontal shape of the arch. It was built with 6.6 million tons of concrete. It is 726.4 feet from the foundation to the crest of the dam. The intake towers rise an additional 40 feet above the crest.

In its planning stages, the dam was called Hoover Dam, named after President Herbert Hoover. The dam was officially named Boulder Dam in 1933, after President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office. Congress changed the name back to Hoover Dam in 1947 to honor former President Hoover.



The Hoover Dam in 1941. Ansel Adams Photographs of National Parks and Monuments, Department of the Interior.



Souvenir key made for the dedication of the Boulder Dam.

What Would You Bring?

Let's pretend it is the year 1930. In 1928, the United States government passed the Boulder Canyon Project Act to create a new dam in Southern Nevada. The Great Depression has hit. Your parents have lost their jobs. Your family decides to move to Las Vegas to find work on the Hoover Dam.

Help create a packing list for your family. You can only bring what fits in your car, so pack carefully!

Family Members

List the family members (including yourself) who will be moving to Las Vegas. You can only fit five passengers (people or animals) into the car. For each seat that you leave empty, you can bring 50 extra pounds of luggage.

Reflection Questions

1. Was it hard to select only five family members to travel with to Las Vegas? Why or why not?

2. Many families split up during the Great Depression. How would it feel to have to leave members of your family behind and move to an unfamiliar place?

Belongings

After you pack enough food for the journey to Las Vegas, your family has space for 400 pounds of belongings. If you do not have five passengers, add 50 extra pounds of space for each passenger that you do not have. *Example: If you have 3 passengers, you would add 100 pounds for the empty space, which means you could fit 500 lbs. of belongings into your car.*

Select the things that you want to bring with you to Las Vegas. Can you stay under the weight limit?

Item	How Many?	Total weight	Item	How Many?	Total weight
Bed sheets		x 4 lbs.	Shovel		x 7 lbs.
Blanket		x 6 lbs.	Ax		x 6 lbs.
Pillow		x 1 lbs.	Broom		x 3 lbs.
Towels		x 1 lbs.	Wash basin & wash board		x 15 lbs.
Change of clothing		x 10 lbs.	Laundry soap		x 5 lbs.
Coat		x 10 lbs.	Lantern		x 3 lbs.
Extra pair of shoes		x 3 lbs.	Lamp		x 10 lbs.
Boots		x 7 lbs.	First aid kit		x 5 lbs.
Hat		x 1 lbs.	100 ft. Rope		x 6 lbs.
Cooking supplies		x 30 lbs.	Electric fan		x 30 lbs.
Set of dishes & utensils		x 35 lbs.	Radio		x 10 lbs.
Water keg		x 50 lbs.	Books (including cookbooks, Bible, novels, comic books)		x 20 lbs.
Water bottle		x 3 lbs.	Toys & games		x 5 lbs.
Portable stove		x 40 lbs.	Journal/diary, notebook, pens & pencils		x 2 lbs.
Ice bucket		x 5 lbs.	Mirror		x 10 lbs.
Toolbox with tools		x 25 lbs.	Other: _____		
Total weight			Total weight		
Total weight from both columns					

You can also tie larger items onto the top of the car. You can fit an extra 200 lbs. on the top of your car.

Item	How Many?	Total weight
Tent (50 lbs.)		
Mattress (60 lbs.)		
Folding table (15 lbs.)		
Crib (50 lbs.)		
Rug (25 lbs.)		
Chair (8 lbs.)		
Total Weight		

Reflection Questions

1. How did you decide what to bring with you?
2. Was it difficult to choose what to bring? Why or why not?
3. Would you have changed your choices if you knew that you might not have a house or apartment to move into immediately? What if you knew that you would not have electricity?