Soon after the United States was awarded California, Arizona, and New Mexico from Mexico in 1848, Americans began talking about harnessing the great Colorado River that ran through this dry land.

In 1858, Lt. Joseph C. Ives led a survey party up the river from Yuma, Arizona. Their boat survived 400 miles, then struck a rock near Black Canyon. Upon his return, Ives predicted the Colorado River would be a “profitless locality,” that “seems intended by nature...[to] be forever unvisited and undisturbed.”
Fifty years after Ives’s prediction that the Colorado River would never be profitable, engineers knew he’d been wrong. They believed they had the technology to transform the river delta into rich, productive farmland.

At the time, the river delta was known as the “Valley of the Dead.” It would need a better name if it was to become a land of opportunity. So, it was renamed the “Imperial Valley,” and promised an irrigation canal that would make it the richest farmland in the country.

By 1904, the Imperial Valley was full of prosperous farms, but the river remained wild and unpredictable. Over the next two decades, cycles of flood and drought threatened the farmers’ lives and destroyed crops worth millions of dollars.
“A Big Dam”

A series of small earthen dams were built near the Imperial Valley in an effort to control the cycle of flood and drought that was common along the Colorado River, but the river was too violent. The dams repeatedly failed causing greater problems for the farmers than did the river itself.

In 1931, the government signed a contract with Six Companies, Incorporated, a “supercompany” made-up of six top Western construction firms. The Boulder Canyon Project, as it was called, was the largest construction contract in American history at that time. Six Companies agreed to build the dam for just under $49,000,000.
"Black Tuesday"

On October 29, 1929 – Black Tuesday – the stock market crashed, plunging the United States into the Great Depression. By the end of the 1930s, more than one-in-five of the nation’s banks had failed. Nine million American families lost their life savings. Many more lost their jobs, and then their homes.

By 1933 one out of every three Americans was living in poverty. Thousands lined up to apply for a handful of available jobs.

Farmers destroyed their crops because prices were so low they would have lost money by shipping their crops to market.

Food stamps and unemployment insurance did not exist. Local governments and private charities tried to provide relief, but could not meet the demand.
“The Dust Bowl”

As if the ravishes of the Great Depression were not enough, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s further complicated recovery efforts and brought a new set of problems to the American heartland. From 1931 to 1939, a five-state region of the Great Plains received little rain and experienced horrendous dust storms that stripped the land of its topsoil.

In 1932, 14 dust storms were recorded on the Plains. In 1933, there were 38 storms. By 1934, it was estimated that 100 million acres of farmland had lost all or most of the topsoil to the winds.

"The impact is like a shovelful of fine sand flung against the face," Avis D. Carlson wrote in a New Republic article. "People caught in their own yards grope for the doorstep. Cars come to a standstill, for no light in the world can penetrate that swirling murk... We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions. It is becoming Real."
Suppose you had to leave home in a hurry, knowing you probably would never return. Many families had to do just that as they searched for work or escaped the Dust Bowl. Once food and clothes have been packed into the family car, there is barely room for just a few treasured possessions. Think about what you would bring. Then, think about what you would have to do without.

“We put a mattress and two baby cribs on the top of the car and tied them on. Then all of us got in the car. We brought a few cooking utensils and very few clothes and some bedding with us—and that’s all.” – Erma Godbey

For many depression-era migrants, the search would end in a hot, barren corner of Nevada, where a monument was taking shape that would require the labor of thousands of workers.
“Ragtown Life”

When the first job seekers got to the work site, they learned why it was known as “a deadly desert place.” It was hot, windy, and desolate. There were no houses. An overcrowded squatters’ town sprang up on a barren slope.

More than 500 people moved to the flats along the river. Their homes were ragged tents and shacks made of cardboard, scrap wood, tarpaper, and burlap. This settlement became known as Ragtown.
“120 Degrees and No Shade”

The summer of 1931 was one of the hottest on record in southern Nevada. By July, the average daily high was 119 degrees and the average low was 95. On July 26, three Ragtown women died of heat prostration.

Temperatures in the canyon worksite could hit 140 degrees. “When somebody...became overcome with the heat, we dashed out there with these ice buckets and we’d pack them in ice. If their heart took it and they survived, OK. But if their heart stopped, that was it. We sent for the undertaker.” – Bob Parker
“Racing Against the Flood”

The wild Colorado, red with silt, was called “the red bull.” This terrifying river had to be turned out of its bed to clear a work site. That meant blasting four huge tunnels through the solid rock of the canyon walls.

Dynamite thundered constantly through the canyon as tunnel crews rushed to “hole out.” After each blast, the tunnel had to be “mucked out,” using specially adapted electric shovels. The operators were the highest paid workers on the dam, earning $10 a day.

Each tunnel was three-quarters of a mile long and 56 feet in diameter – large enough fit a present-day jumbo jetliner. The concrete linings were three feet thick.
“The Old Man”

The man in charge of the project was the 6-foot construction superintendent, Frank T. Crowe. During his 25 year career, Crowe had become America’s foremost dam builder.

“I was wild to build this dam. I had spent my life in the river bottoms, and [Hoover Dam] meant a wonderful climax—the biggest dam ever built by anyone anywhere.”—Frank Crowe
Dynamite, high voltage lines, searing heat, truck exhaust, and haste made for dangerous working conditions. Most of the men wouldn’t complain if their lives depended on it. Those who protested openly were often replaced from the huge pool of unemployed standing-by in Las Vegas.

“I’ll tell you it was tough. Were the dam built today…OSHA would have closed it down in 10 minutes.” – Tommy Nelson

“Before they poured the cement…every bit of gravel and dirt had to be off these rocks…The last thing you did was mop it off with sponges.” – Carl Merrill
The workers had strange names for their jobs.

Nipper: works beside the miner, keeping him supplied with drilling steel and dynamite.

Juicer: sets off the dynamite blast after the crew gets safely away

Scaler: uses a pry-bar to knock loose rock off the high canyon walls

Mucker: cleans the loose rock and mud out of the tunnel after the blast, using a short-handled shovel called a “banjo.”
“Monkey Slides and Joe McGees”

Workers were carried in and out of the canyon on “Joe McGees” like the one shown above. The small cableways reeled out over the canyon and dropped down to the job site.

“The signal man didn’t slow the operator quickly enough...and instead [the skip] crashed into the canyon wall...we bounced off then hit a second time and...some of the carpenter tools flew out.” – Marion Allen
“Every 78 Seconds”

On June 6, 1933, the first bucket of concrete was swung in, 800 feet above the canyon floor, then plummeted to within a few feet of the ground. Workers tripped the safety latches, and 16 tons of wet concrete slid onto the bedrock. **The pour continued day and night, seven days a week, for nearly two years.**

From a control shack jutting out over the canyon, the cableway operator could pick up anything from a wrench to a Buick-sized concrete bucket and move it to any point on the construction site in seconds.

Operators and signalmen used nearly telepathic teamwork to maneuver and dump the buckets. As their skill increased, they could dump a bucket every 78 seconds. The record one-day pour was 10,402 cubic yards.
Hoover Dam was by far the largest dam ever built at the time of the dedication in 1935. Though no longer the tallest, the dam still draws construction engineers from around the globe. They come to be amazed by, and to learn from, a dam that literally changed the face of the earth.

“The filling of the lake and the tremendous amount of weight from the water caused the crust of the earth to change position. We had a tremendous number of earthquakes...you could see the dust fly.” – Harry Hall
“The Name Game.”

After visiting Hoover Dam, some people want to know where Boulder Dam is. The answer: right here. Hoover Dam used to be called Boulder Dam. No wonder people get confused. It was originally named Hoover Dam, changed to Boulder Dam in 1933, dedicated as Boulder Dam in 1935, and, in 1947, permanently restored to Hoover Dam.
Boulder City was built with the single purpose of housing those involved in the construction of the dam. The government wanted Boulder City to be a model family town, where desert heat would not sap worker health and morale.

The town was under federal authority and gambling, liquor, and other vices were prohibited inside the Boulder Canyon Project Federal Reservation.

“There is a strong feeling that liquor and dynamite as well as liquor and the Nevada desert climate are mixtures likely to prove fatal to both health and the dam construction project itself.” – The New York Times July, 1931

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Life in Boulder City was not like life in the outside world. The City Manager, Sims Ely, had absolute control over the town. There was also a small advisory board to represent the government and Six Companies, but the residents had no say in how the town was run.

Sims Ely had a reputation for being brilliant, quirky, incorruptable, and frightenly stern. He commanded Boulder City’s U.S. Deputy Marshals, and was judge and jury for all lawbreakers. Ely could (and did) bar or evict permanently anyone he deemed undesirable.
“Kids Will Be Kids”

Many dam workers were married and had their wives and children with them. A kid’s life here was often full of fun and, as long as they didn’t get into any trouble, mostly free of adult supervision.

By December 1934, about 2,000 children lived in Boulder City. Babies were usually born ay home; the town hospital was just for the dam workers.
“Home, Sandy Home”

In the flat desert valley, Six Companies built rows of cheap homes for its workers. It took two men about twelve hours to erect each house, foundation to roof. In about six months, they built 658 of what the carpenters called “dingbat” houses. They were all virtually identical.

“I know of cases where people got up in the morning and found a man sleeping on their couch. But they’d just wake him and ask him what he was doing. ‘My gosh, this is not where I belong!’” – Rose Larson

Six Companies put the cost at approximately $725 to build each house. Carpenters said it was more like $140 each.
“The Rich and Famous Come to Boulder City”

Dozens of Hollywood stars and other notables came out to see the dam going up, including Shirley Temple, Bette Davis, Will Rogers (who also performed at the Boulder Theater), Howard Hughes, plus politicians, socialites, and royalty from Europe and Asia.

Boulder City attractions included the Boulder Dam Hotel, considered far nicer and safer than anything in Las Vegas, and the art deco Boulder Theatre. Both are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
“Messages from Boulder City”

Use this switchboard to hear memories of Boulder City life, in the voices of the residents themselves. Plug the “phone line” into the subject of interest:

- Life in Boulder City
- When I Built Hoover Dam
- On the Town
- I Remember the Depression