

Joseph Vogt

On April 26, 1931, a massive construction project was started to control the unpredictable Colorado River. The project, known as the Hoover Dam, was located in Black Canyon, located on the border between Nevada and Arizona. The dam would control the flow of the River while providing cheap hydroelectric power and a regulable source of irrigation. During the height of construction, 5,130 men worked on the dam; the average monthly payroll included approximately 3,500 workers. The construction of the dam, while providing for the future of the West, also had a significant impact on the lives of the workers and their families.

Psychological Attitudes of the Workmen on the Hoover Dam

The workers on the Hoover Dam project faced many challenges, and the impact of the project on the lives of the workers and their families was significant. The lack of family and concern for women's safety also made the daily tasks more difficult. During the construction of the dam, 55 workers lost their lives; however, the project was a success in providing for the future of the West.

¹The Chronology of the Hoover Dam Project is available from the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, 1931.

²See map 1 for the location of Hoover Dam.

U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, The Hoover Dam, Construction Series No. 9, Washington, D.C., 1931, 13.

Whitewater, Wisconsin
May, 1998

In an attempt to protect themselves, workmen began to dip their canvas hats into tar to make them hard. Known as "hard boiled hats", this is thought to be the birthplace of the idea for the invention of the hard hat.³⁸

Workmen in the diversion tunnels had different worries. They had to cope with the constant presence of carbon monoxide gas and smoke. Trucks carrying debris entered and exited the tunnels twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. The carbon monoxide gas omitted lingered in the diversion tunnels, because there was little chance for it to escape. According to Thomas Nelson, a workmen in the tunnels, the carbon monoxide was "so thick you could cut it with a hacksaw, we used to come out of those tunnels with splitting headaches".³⁹ Many workers became seriously ill from the gases. However, Six Companies Inc. often refused to pay compensation; stating that the illness was pneumonia. According to many workmen, to receive compensation, a workmen had to die on the work site not in a local hospital.⁴⁰ A number of workmen filed suit against Six Companies Inc., but could not prove that the gases within the tunnels had caused their illnesses.

³⁸Lola Beardall, to Joseph Vogt, 25 February 1998, transcript in the hand of Joseph J. Vogt, Elkhorn, Wisconsin.

³⁹Shemelagian, 5D.

⁴⁰Dunar and McBride, 100.

In response to reports of illness due to carbon monoxide gas, the Bureau of Reclamation sent a team from Washington D.C. to investigate. Nothing of substance was gathered and not a thing was done to remedy the problem or provide compensation to workmen and their families.⁴¹ The constant presence of explosions in the tunnels to remove rocks also created large amounts of smoke. This, combined with the carbon monoxide gas, made work in the tunnels extremely harsh.

According to many workmen, the most dangerous condition they encountered was the lack of concern for safety, on the part of Six Companies Inc.; construction accidents were an everyday occurrence at the dam site. There was no safety officer and workers had to look out for their own safety.⁴² Supervisors were more concerned about productivity, rather than the safety of their workers.

⁴¹Dunar and McBride, 99.

⁴²Thomas C. Nelson, to Joseph J. Vogt, 25 February 1998, transcript in the hand of Joseph Vogt, Elkhorn, Wisconsin.