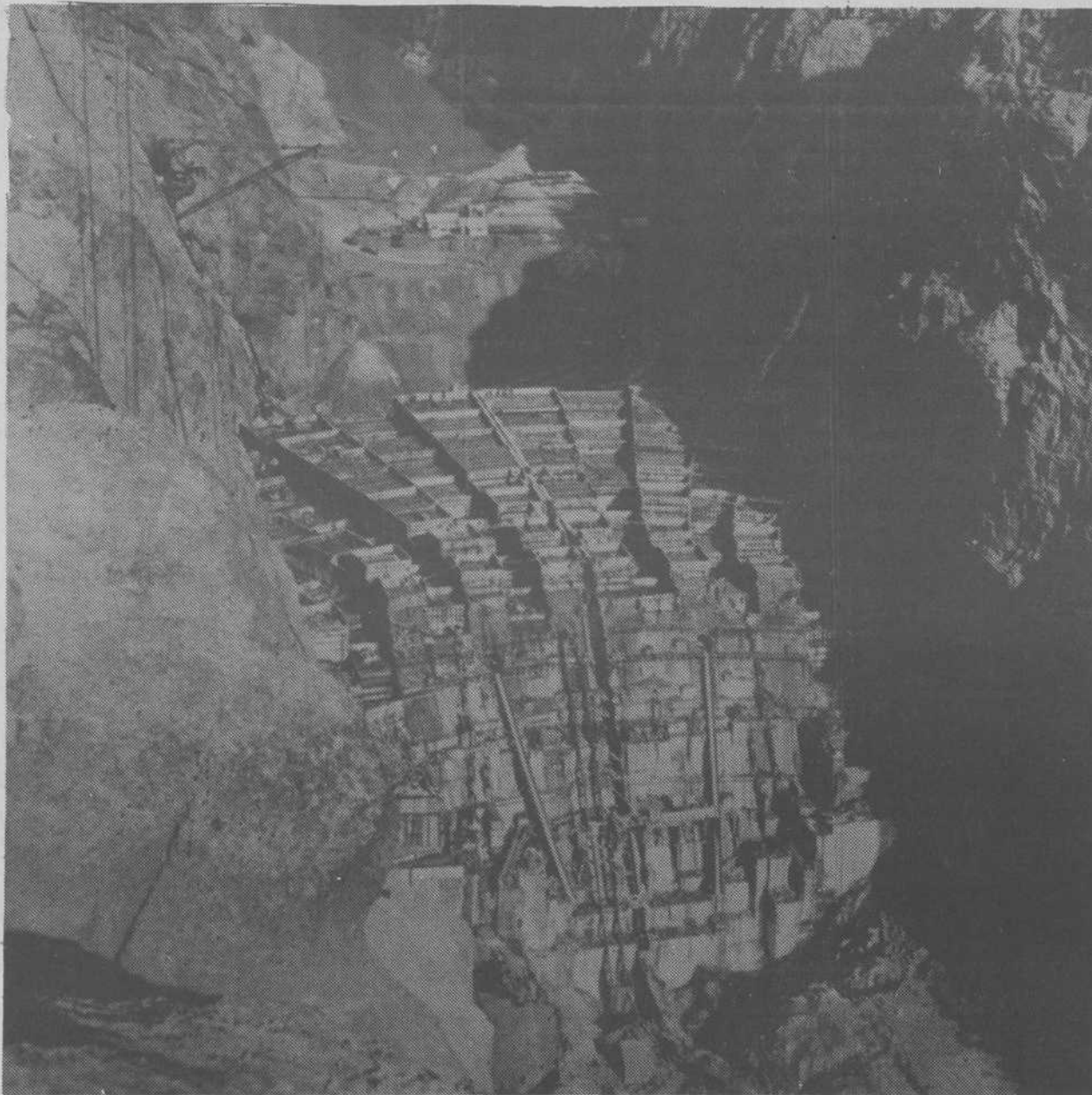


NAACP Forced 'Uncle Sam' To Hire Blacks In Boulder Dam Construction

...a shoddy tale hidden

in Las Vegas' historical closet

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald



In early 1932, it was reported that "when the Hoover Dam has been completed, an average number of nearly 4,000 employees will have rolled up the stupendous number of 71,500,000 mandays worked by the typical dam worker of 37 years of age, white, American born, and representing every state in the Union."

It was not merely a matter of oversight that Blacks were not working but it was a recognizable and an acknowledged fact. The above description is clear in its recognition that, at least up to that point, all of the workers were white.

"Experienced Only Need Apply" did not apply to workers interested in the dam project. Those who arrived here came from all walks of life. A section of the BOULDER CITY JOURNAL called "The Boys Of Boulder Dam" gave a profile of some of the men working there. Some had been salesmen, farmers, taxi drivers, gunnery sergeants and other totally unrelated to dam work, workers. Few had any experience in building dams. Few dams had been built prior to that on the lower Colorado. The 1930s and '40s were the years of dam building in the United States. Most were part of either the New Deal recovery efforts or the Tennessee Valley Authority. Those men who worked on the dam at Boulder became some of the best dam builders in the world.

Common laborers were used extensively. One long-time Boulder City resident reports that he "had never done that kind of work. From what I could see, nobody had. We just learned as we went along. When I started off they were still digging the tunnels. I worked there for a while. After that, I became a high scaler and that's what I did until I retired."

Arthur McCants, an early leader of the NAACP, recalled his arrival to Las Vegas and the difficulties in securing employment. Of himself and other Blacks, he said that "all we wanted was work." That is all that any of the men wanted. Times were hard and money was in short supply. No one was on welfare. One either worked or scrounged, did without, or starved. Printiss Walker recalled that when he arrived here in search of work that "they were not hiring Negroes on that project." A large number of black aspirants upon being denied employment simply

departed. Some of those who could not secure a legal means of surviving were forced to do so illegally. They ran rum, committed petty larceny and other acts. The results of this at least secured for them a meal and lodging. Being without a visible means of support was a crime and quite often they were punished for it.

In early April, 1931, William Pickins of the NAACP arrived in Las Vegas. The purpose was to point out that the dam project was a federal project and as such should not discriminate in terms of which citizens could or could not be employed. He placed the responsibility of rectifying the situation with the President of the United States, Herbert Hoover. He stated that if Blacks were "not good enough to work on the Boulder Dam Project we're not good enough to vote for President Hoover." He went on to remind the audience that there were over twelve million Blacks in the U.S. and that they had made their fair share of contributions to the country. He urged that they be given their fair share of jobs on the project.

W.A. Bechtel, President of the Six Companies (the conglomerate of companies which built the dam) said that "he had never heard of any refusal to employ Colored people and that he would take the matter up immediately on his return to Boulder City, and see that provision was made for their employment of the work when and if they had the necessary experience.

On the basis of the evidence, three conclusions may be suggested: (1) Mr. Bechtel was either not cognizant of the absence of Blacks from the work force or it did not matter to him; (2) Blacks were required to have experience and whites were not; and (3) affirmative action of any sort did not exist at that time. Which-ever the case, it is clear that in order for the rights of Black people to be protected, safeguards beyond those for whites were necessary.

It was charged that while Blacks were expected to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens of the U.S., their rights as citizens were ignored and not protected. Just as white Americans had, with the Spanish-American War and World War I, answered the "bell," the same was true for Blacks. "When the call to arms came in the Great War our government called for American citizens,