
Raising Arizona’s Dams does not neatly fit into the class-and-community or labor-process genres of labor history, but nonetheless by tackling a difficult project in an innovative way this book may suggest new themes and new methods for writing about workers in locations outside industrial cities. The book was funded in part by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation as the result of public concern about the negative environmental impact of the $4 billion Central Arizona Project. The bureau responded to concern in the early 1980s that adding 60 feet to the height of Roosevelt Dam, located 60 miles east of Phoenix, would destroy historical and archaeological evidence by commissioning a research study on the threatened sites. This book, focusing on the historic dam construction camps that the new dam project threatened to obliterate, thus took shape as an interdisciplinary effort of public historians, local archivists, and historical archaeologists.

It is a signal merit of the book that the authors have avoided most of the pitfalls of writing narrowly conceived local history. The authors locate their study in the tradition of writing the history of “ordinary people” from the “bottom up.” But even more influential in this book is the emerging model of the “new Western history,” and especially the work of Donald Worster and Patricia Limerick. The new Western historians reject previous approaches to that region’s history -- including most promptly the ethnocentric heroism of the “winning of the West” as well as the models of Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb -- and instead direct attention to the historical themes of conquest, continuity, complexity, and convergence. (Essays in William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past [W.W. Norton, 1992] suggest the scope and range of the “new Western history.”) In this present book, the dam construction workers are engagingly conceived as “cowboys of construction,” not portrayed mythologically as independent souls seeking their destiny under starry skies, but depicted realistically as wageworkers struggling to put food on the table and even to form communities.

Another welcome result of this model evident in Raising Arizona’s Dams is the close attention to the multicultural makeup of the dam construction communities, as well as to their social and ethnic stratification. Anglo males were nearly always the supervisors and engineers, while Mexicans, recent European immigrants from a dozen countries, and Apache Indians served as road builders, cement makers, stone masons. The most numerous workers -- given the near absence of labor-saving machines and even the surprising rarity of dynamite for rock-breaking -- were heavy laborers. Small numbers of African-Americans and Chinese also contributed their labor. Women constituted as many as 20 percent of the residents of one camp, and were important members of the communities, as community builders and as entrepreneurs running restaurants, laundries, and stores. The authors carefully and sensitively analyze the surprising success of the Roosevelt Dam constructor in employing a large number of Apache Indians. His innovative and flexible hiring practices included hiring for a single job as many as three
Apache laborers, with the men sharing the work and the wage within their traditional family and clan structure. His practices effectively shelters them from the intrusive, culture-breaking efforts of the contemporaneous Office of Indian Affairs. Remembered one Apache (p. 147) of the dam construction camp, “We were happy. We were well fed. We took care of each other like families were meant to.”

Given the shortcomings of local archival evidence, the authors have made extensive use of historical archeology. This aspect of the research may be the most intriguing but it is certainly also the most daunting. The project surveyed 39 sites and located 83,000 artifacts, many in fragments. A painstaking analysis of tin cans, broken glass, and ceramic containers revealed several notable patterns of daily life. Recovered tin cans from trash dumps suggested the diversity of food eaten in the camps; preponderantly, this was general food and evaporated milk (respectively 46 and 42 percent of the recovered totals) but extending through coffee, lard, mayonnaise, pineapple, Tabasco sauce, and 24 other identifiable products. The presence of alcoholic beverage containers, malt extract cans, patent medicines, and Chinese ceramic liquor containers testify to the pervasiveness of strong drink. A careful investigation of the faded remnants of tent site housing, corroborated with maps and documentary accounts, helped the authors to infer patterns of spatial and social organization.

Given the authors’ wide-ranging and imaginative research, I was somewhat disappointed in their brief treatment of the actual work of building the dams. The authors devote fewer pages to the building of the dams than to recounting the dangers that off-duty workers faced from drinking excessive alcohol or getting in the way of quick-shooting law enforcement officers. Even if the archival, newspaper, and archaeological sources at hand were not forthcoming about the work of building dams, the many dramatic pictures of dam building included in the book tell a story themselves. It would have been welcome if the authors had chosen to treat these images not merely as illustration but as evidence. Readers interested in the construction history of dams should consult Andrew J. Dunar’s Building Hoover Dam: An Oral History of the Great Depression (Twayne, 1993) or Donald Jackson’s Building the Ultimate Dam: John S. Eastwood and the Control of Water in the West (University Press of Kansas, 1995).

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