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Fort Peck- A Half-Century and Holding

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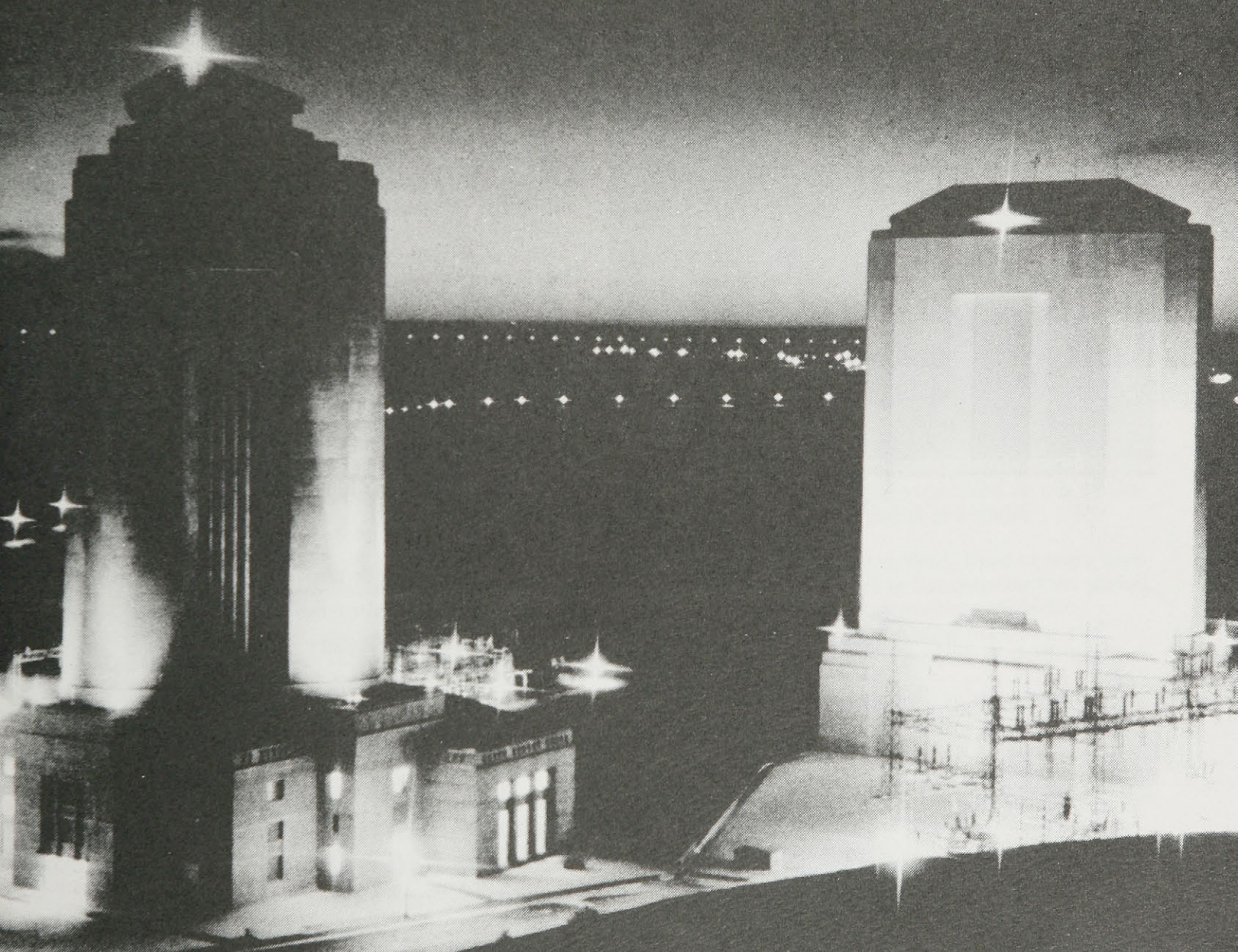
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50th Anniversary Commemorative Issue

Fort Peck — *A half-century and holding*



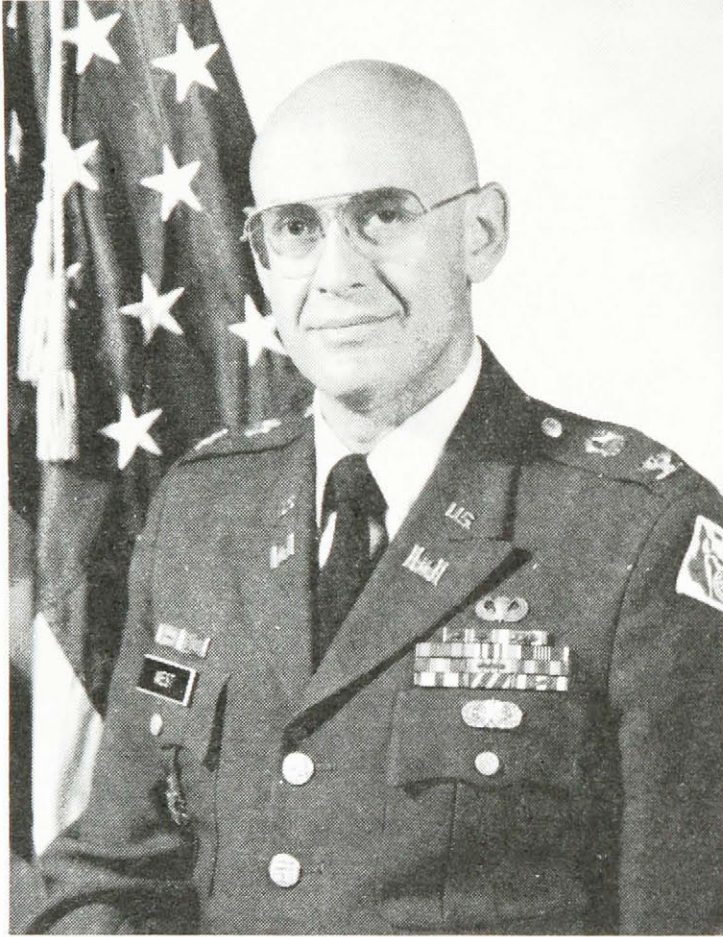
**district
news**

Vol. 11, No. 2
Summer 1987

Special edition

*A monument to
human spirit, like a
beacon in the night.*

Human will forms core of Fort Peck Dam



Fifty years ago, thousands gathered on the Fort Peck Dam to witness its closure—a major milestone along the road leading to completion of the largest hydraulic fill dam in the world.

That moment was the symbolic beginning of the great legacy known as the Pick-Sloan Plan, which includes the six mainstem dams on the Missouri River.

Many of those who were party to this great undertaking will join with us in this Golden Anniversary year to reflect on the opportunities provided for employment during the Depression, and as the beginning of successful careers that led them across the country.

These people embodied the pioneer spirit as they sought opportunity in a remote area of our nation.

They are symbols of dedication, hope and achievement to those of us who now carry the torch, ever mindful of the proud heritage of the Omaha District.

The 50th Anniversary of the dam's closure is an appropriate time to reflect on the magnitude of what was achieved in those early years on the barren prairies of northeastern Montana.

The builders overcame the suffering synonymous with the Great Depression, not to mention brutal weather and engineering obstacles that might have discouraged those with less backbone or mettle.

Fort Peck stands as a symbol of what made our country the greatest country in the world—determination, drive and the ability to overcome all obstacles.

The mightiness of human will is the real core of the Fort Peck Dam.

Steven G. West
Colonel, Corps of Engineers
Commanding

This commemorative issue . . .

is dedicated to all Americans who soar on the wings of hope.

It is they who will truly appreciate the legacy passed on by Fort Peck's spirited creators.

Special thanks to:

*Ron Wallem
Harry Dolphin
Alice Wallem
John Johnson
Jo Ann Solem
Mark Calamar*

*Mick Shea
Chuck Johnston
Manson Bailey Jr.
Lloyd Jackson
Jan Ronnfeldt
Gary C. Whetstone*

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(Editor's note: The author of this foreword is the Chief of Natural Resources at Fort Peck. A relative newcomer to the area, Shea and his family have lived at Fort Peck for three years as of this publication date.

Although Shea is neither more or less qualified than the other Fort Peck residents when it comes to expounding on the virtues and significance of their community and its history, he was the one whose suggestion led to this publication.

It is deemed fitting that a Fort Peck resident, as a representative of the entire community, past, present, and future, should write the foreword to this 50th Anniversary Commemorative Issue,

by Mick Shea

Montana is a state with a dual personality—Rocky Mountain Montana in the west and the Great Plains Montana in the east.

Eastern Montana, according to some who have traversed its breadth, is largely lacking in demarcation. Perhaps because of the physiography or vegetation or sparsity of inhabitation, this eastern half has an indistinct identity.

But, a closer look reveals an emerald on the Great Plains called Fort Peck. It has a personality all its own and an identity unique in the subculture of the western states, for it is intertwined with the identity of thousands who prospered during construction of the Fort Peck Dam.

President Roosevelt authorized work on the great dam in the fall of 1933. An economic boom followed, as thousands of jobs were created. In fact, 10,546 people were employed at peak construction.

The government built a town and barracks for single and unaccompanied workers, and the overflow population erected boomtowns—18 in all—in the vicinity of the damsite.

Fort Peck became a mecca to the Depression-era jobless. The boomtowns, also called ragtowns or shantytowns, bore names symbolic of the hope people came to find—names such as New Deal, Square Deal, and Roosevelt Heights. Others were named Delano Heights, Park Grove, Wilson and Wheeler, the most notorious of them all.

Hardship was commonplace, with biting cold winters, difficult working conditions and humble living quarters.

But the people had jobs and complaints were few.

The construction work, which involved countless projects varying in size, significance and scope, was an engineering feat of note.

Projects overlapping and tracking at the same time were numerous, difficult and many times even

treacherous, especially with weather, geography and capabilities of the day being considered.

They included:

- building the townsite;
- building railroad lines and spurs;
- running a 288-mile electric line to Great Falls;
- building dredges, barges and other watercraft;
- conducting dredge work;
- clearing the damsite and work on the dam structure;
- blasting, digging and building the flood control tunnels;
- building the intake structure; and
- excavating for and constructing the spillway.

Coordinating these ongoing projects called for precision and a solid communications network.

Innumerable problems were encountered, studied and solved, a tribute to the ingenuity and innovation of the people employed by the Corps of Engineers. The hydraulic fill method of dam building itself has inherent difficulties built into the process, while more normal obstacles—percolation, blasting through shale and consequent landslides—posed problems as well.

Impounding the Missouri River was a gargantuan task which resulted in the world's largest dam up to that time. (It is now the third-largest in terms of total volume fill.)

One powerhouse was built in 1943, in time to aid the war effort, and a second powerhouse was added in 1959 to supplement increasing power demand. Though recreation was not one of the main reasons the dam was built, the Water Resource Development Act of 1986 officially added recreation as one of the project's main purposes and it is a major consideration today.

For the thousands who worked, lived or were born in the Fort Peck area during the construction period, the place holds a special magnetism attracting people back to reminisce, drawing offspring and grandchildren alike to see a portion of their origin and family roots.

So many, many people return to Fort Peck, with a dozen questions and 100 wonders.

There has long been a need for a publication such as this, to help answer some questions, to attempt to explain the mystique of Fort Peck and to satisfy the wonderment many retain after one visit to this special oasis on the prairie.

With so many capable contributors, it is the hope of this writer that this need, at least in part, will be met.

The editor's notes . . .

'Fort Peck experience' offers class

by **Kevin R. Quinn**

Nothing less than volumes could even come close to fully describing the magnitude of what occurred in Fort Peck, Mont., between the years 1933 and 1940.

Researching and writing such a work, assuming that it lived up to the worthiness of the subject, could easily consume the lifetime of the most gifted author.

The reason for that is simple—there is just too much to tell.

I contend that no visitor of average curiosity in the areas of history, anthropology or human development can visit Fort Peck without sensing the rich history and soaking up the vivid color splashed in the memories of workers, observers and residents, past and present.

Like the cumulative ghost of the thousands who worked there, something inside the visitor cries out hauntingly, urging that person to reach for and attain the absolute highest level of understanding and expression possible, simply so others might see

That is what I have felt on each trip to Fort Peck.

And for a writer, that very feeling is challenging, intriguing and, simply put, scary as hell.

Humbling

Just piecing together this publication in honor of Fort Peck's 50th Anniversary was terrifying and humbling.

Filled with awe, I was compelled to do all that I



could to help people understand the beauty, significance and ongoing impact that the Fort Peck experience—in and of itself and as a microcosm—has had on America.

There are many people who sincerely believe that what took place at Fort Peck is what America is all about.

I'm one of them.

I have walked the battlefields at Gettysburg, studied each room in George Washington's home and cried at John Kennedy's grave.

But that same surge of historical excitement and importance, challenge and love that I felt on my first visit to Fort Peck is equal to or greater than any that I have felt.

My one hope is that those who dedicated, enriched, renewed and even gave their lives in the building of this landmark may simply reap the recognition they deserve, for they carved a piece of history that stands as a symbol of hope's ultimate victory over despair.

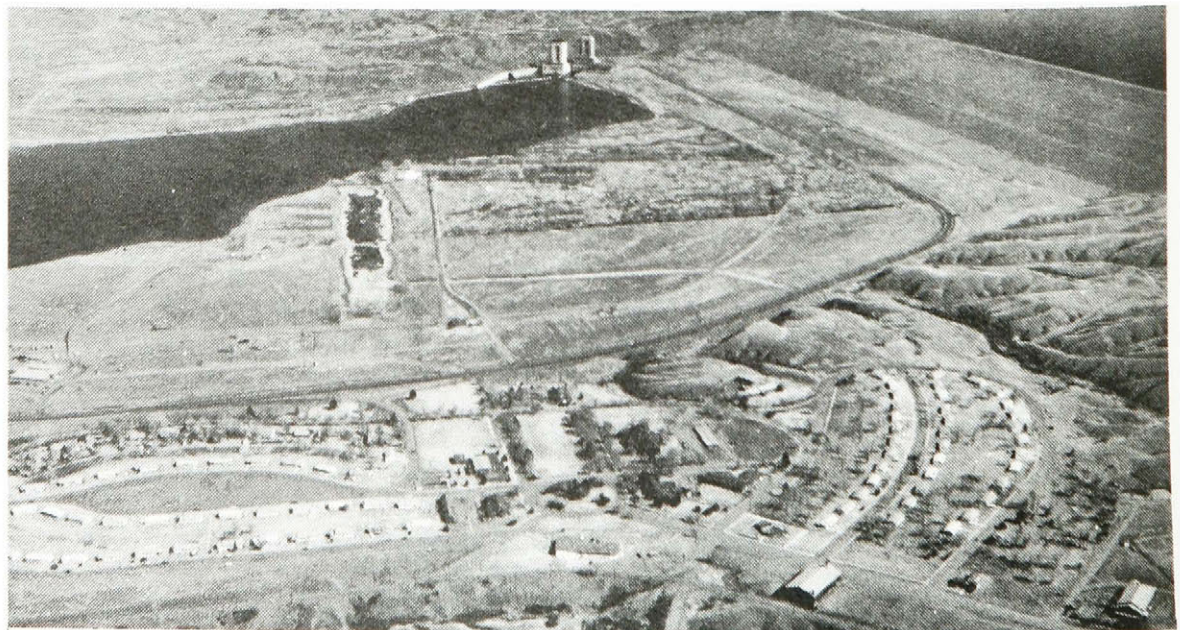
This publication will not attempt to serve as an all-encompassing document of history. Hopefully it will re-create the flavor of a time gone by, while pounding home elements of significance which, when totaled, illustrate all that is truly represented.

Link in a chain

I also hope this publication lends a clear perspective to that mammoth challenge leveled at a despairing people, with hopes that it would ultimately forge a mighty link in a chain which could pull a troubled nation together.

If it highlights the hard-fought battle won by the people who built Fort Peck Dam, while illustrating the ever-present character of this monumental kingdom, then all the better.

For the sake of balance, it must be pointed out



The Fort Peck community numbers about 300 residents today — less than one percent of unofficial population figures from the mid-'30s.

sic definition of America

that the people who came from all over the continent to build the dam played as hard as they worked.

One can just picture men and women with no hope for a brighter future being given a new lease on life.

As one man said, "There were 10,000 people here to work on the dam and 10,000 more who lived off the first 10,000."

Up sprang 24-hour beer parlors, pool halls, barbershops, brothels, bathhouses, grocery stores, hotels and hardware stores, the aggregate of which were called boomtowns and shantytowns, both merciful terms.

Just to think that a sparsely populated, barren patch of earth that few had ever heard of could become such a bustling region of communities . . . well, few living at the time would have ever dreamed it. Some estimate that 35,000 people once lived within a few miles of the government town of Fort Peck.

Firetrap

And residents enjoying employment, decent wages and housing—albeit the common tarpaper firetrap—was much more than anyone expected in that day of Depression.

Today Fort Peck, no longer a federally owned and managed townsite, belongs entirely to its 300 or so residents.

The Fort Peck story is one of the intangible built from that which is tangible. It cannot be told with mere statistics, staggering though some may be, although surely they shed strong light on the ultimate achievement.

For instance: The fact that 34 million pounds—or 17,000 tons—of steel went into the sheet pile cutoff wall almost defies perception or relativity. That cutoff wall, located in the center of the dam, runs from end to end. It was driven into the shale below, piece by piece, to an average depth of 100 feet, by deafening trip-hammers which ran day and night.

Much easier to relate to are two pictures taken in 1935 of the same outdoor thermometer. In one photo, the thermometer reads 60 degrees below zero, while in the other photo it reads 120 degrees above zero.

Those two examples—considered individually and in conjunction with the other—may help to illustrate the magnitude of the effort put forth, the severity of the obstacles faced and the enormity of the accomplishments.

Dual purpose

The Fort Peck Dam project was authorized in late 1933 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who hoped it would serve the dual purpose of providing jobs for a Depression-plagued workforce and

providing flood protection that had been a concern since the 1860s.

One of the most formidable obstacles faced by the rough-and-tumble workforce is subtly referred to by a man who spent a good number of years at Fort Peck.

Major Clark Kittrell, who arrived at the project in 1934 and served as district engineer from 1937 to 1939, wrote that "no engineering job of this magnitude had ever been attempted with so short a time for planning."

Indeed, the work on the dam began 10 days after its authorization in October 1933.

By the time closure of the dam was made in June 1937 and water was being diverted through tunnels, so many hardships had been conquered that some who worked on the dam consider it first and foremost a monument to perseverance, hope and persistence.

In short, a tribute to the American spirit.

Later to become part of the famed Pick-Sloan Plan, which includes six dams on the upper Missouri River basin, Fort Peck was not thought of by its creators in the same way it is thought of today.

Salvation

In those days, it was considered a project of salvation which breathed new life into a wilted populace desperate for work.

They could not see, nor did they care, that one day it would be seen as a memorial to human skill, guile, savvy, stamina and the ability to overcome hopelessness.

But that is what it is.

If this commemorative edition sparks a memory or coaxes a tear from one who has worked at Fort Peck, or if it somehow intrigues, enlightens or answers a question of a first-time visitor, it may be deemed a functional publication.

It has been a labor of love for this editor because, like so many who have experienced Fort Peck, I have been mesmerized by its enchanting past as well as the town's delightful residents of today.

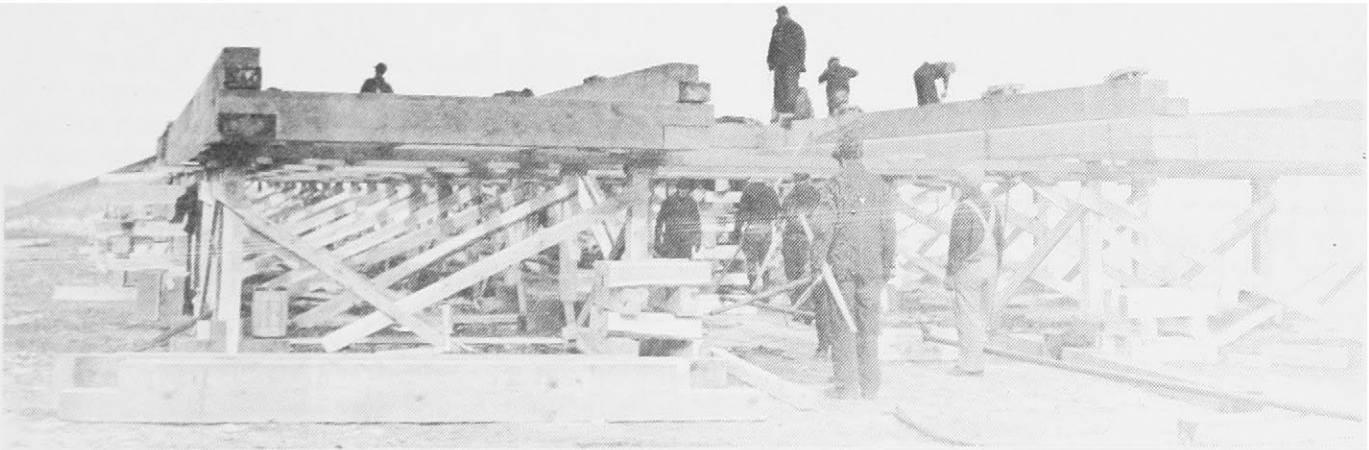
Painted in my mind's eye and etched in my memory is one big picture of Fort Peck; so prominent and lasting, so vivid and powerful, it is almost eerie.

No one sees it, for it is mine alone, and it exists above and beyond all that clamors in the clutter surrounding it.

Engraved in that large comprehensive image, on a simple, hand-cut wooden plaque, centered at the bottom, is one word.

America.





In the beginning

There were many tasks to be done in the early days of the Fort Peck project. Clockwise from lower left:

While the clearing work was being done at the damsite, other crews were busy building a railroad bridge across the Milk River to connect with the railroad line from Wiota. It was over this line that materials for the dam would be hauled; horsedrawn sleds were used for hauling at the damsite; the dredge timbers were so large it took several workmen to move them; construction of the first dredge hull began in 1934.



Early days

A bit of rough going

Wintertime in Montana. Early 1934. Hauling materials on the roads surrounding the damsite.

These words might still make grown men shudder.

Regardless of the fact that Army halftracks might not have been able to grip some of the roads in those parts, the show had to go on. There was a dam to be built.

Sure it was cold, miserable and snowy. That was a given, something to be expected.

Somehow, though, it still seems mind-boggling to think that timber was cut and hauled and materials transported year 'round over bad roads, and that blasting, excavating and even concrete work went on continuously.

And when the frost cleared, there stood the world's biggest dam, closing a major North American river only three-and-a-half years after the project was authorized.

Clearly, they weren't horsing around.



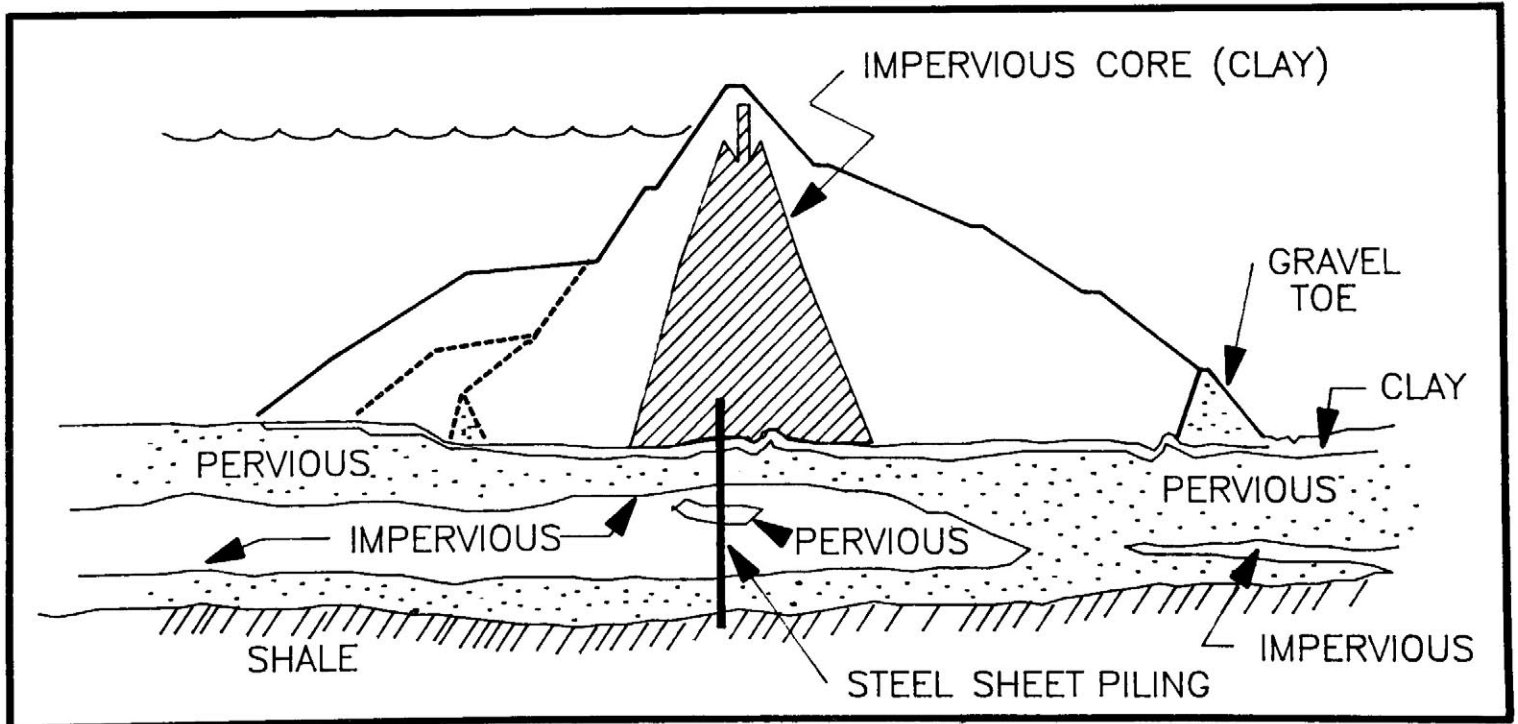
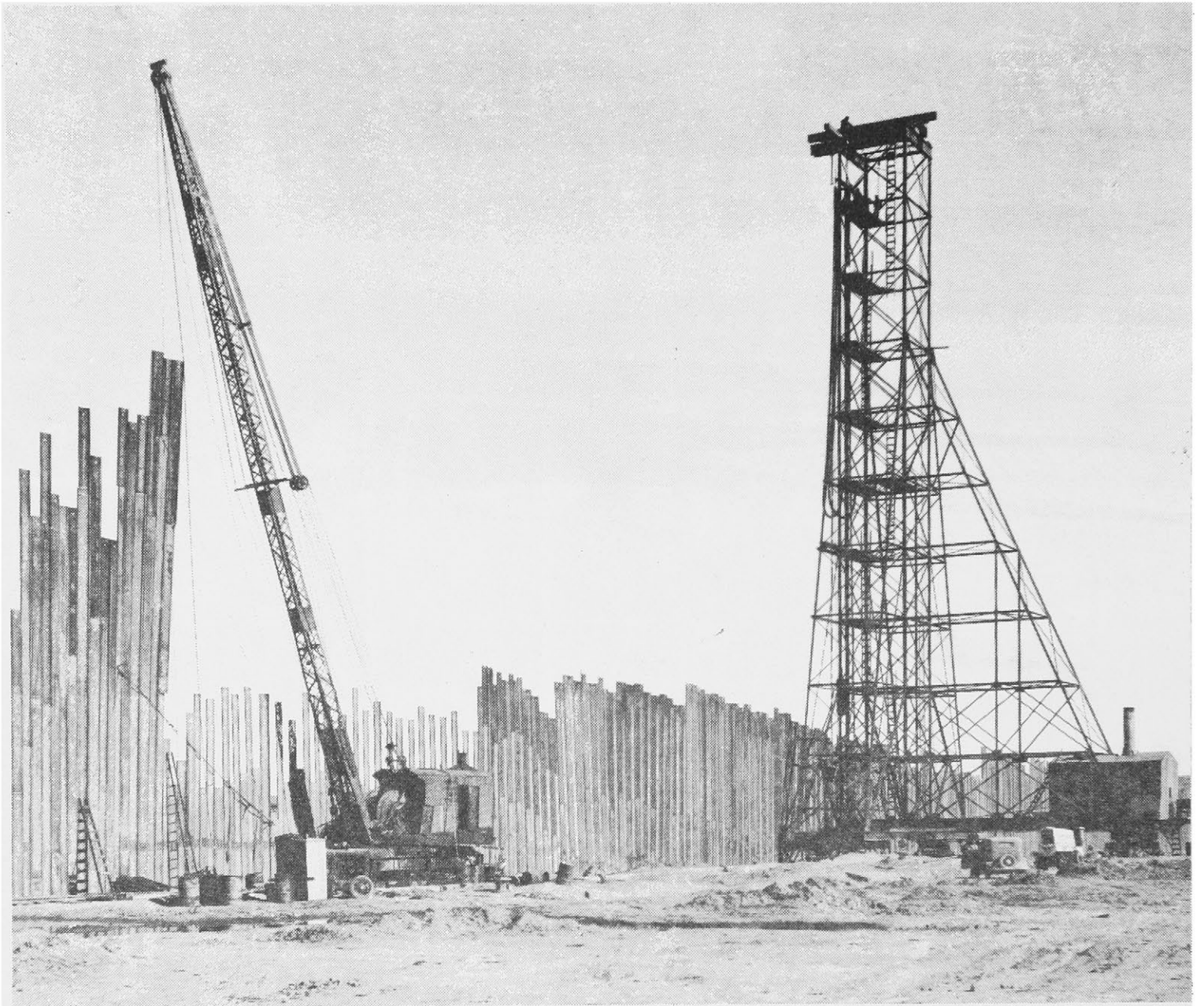




FDR— *Montana's savior*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew much about what it was like to be popular. Had he ever experienced lingering doubts about his popularity as president, though, the solution would have been to hop on the train and visit Fort Peck, Mont. in the '30s.

For FDR was a savior whose mere signature put nearly 11,000 depression-bled workers on a payroll, thereby allowing thousands of families—not to mention thousands of merchants, landowners, and saloon keepers—to eat once again.



Steel wall won't rust

How does that steel keep from corroding? What if it would rust away?

Those questions might be the first things to pop up when one considers the fact that deep in the bowels of Fort Peck Dam stands a cutoff wall made from 34 million pounds of steel sheeting (left).

It relieves most people to hear the answer: since the steel was pounded, jammed and crammed deep into that floor of bentonite and shale below, and since it was heaped on by impervious clay, and since air is hard to find down there, little if any rusting takes place.

What does take place is the subsequent prevention of underseepage and its potentially disastrous effects.

That adds up, of course, to a safe, secure feeling for those downstream of the dam. In photo at lower right, note the location of the townsite (centered and to the right) and the dredge cuts (left foreground).





The quarry

Of men, rocks and snakes

Beginning in 1934, the Army engineers searched throughout the state of Montana for the large, dense stones needed for riprap on the upstream face of the dam. This riprap provides protection against the eroding effects of pounding waves and high water.

Finding the kind of rock needed at Snake Butte, some 30 miles west of the damsite, the engineers began building a railroad spur which would take off from the main line of the great northern railway tracks just east of Harlem. Two-and-a-half miles of switches and spur tracks were also required for loading and car storage.

The stone was loaded on flat cars handling 36 tons each. Individual quarry stones weighed from two to 10 tons each, and trains were 70 to 80 cars long. Field stone and gravel were also hauled on these tracks from the quarry and various sites in the vicinity.

High line

To provide the electrical energy needed, it was necessary to build a transmission line of 50,000 kilowatts capacity from the high line of the Montana Power Company to the quarry.

Pneumatic drills, large compressors and 110-foot-high derricks required much electrical power, not to mention countless floodlights necessary for night work.

Approximately 250 men—each a specialist in his particular line of work—manned the quarry 24 hours

a day, drilling, blasting, breaking down the rocks and loading them on the flat cars.

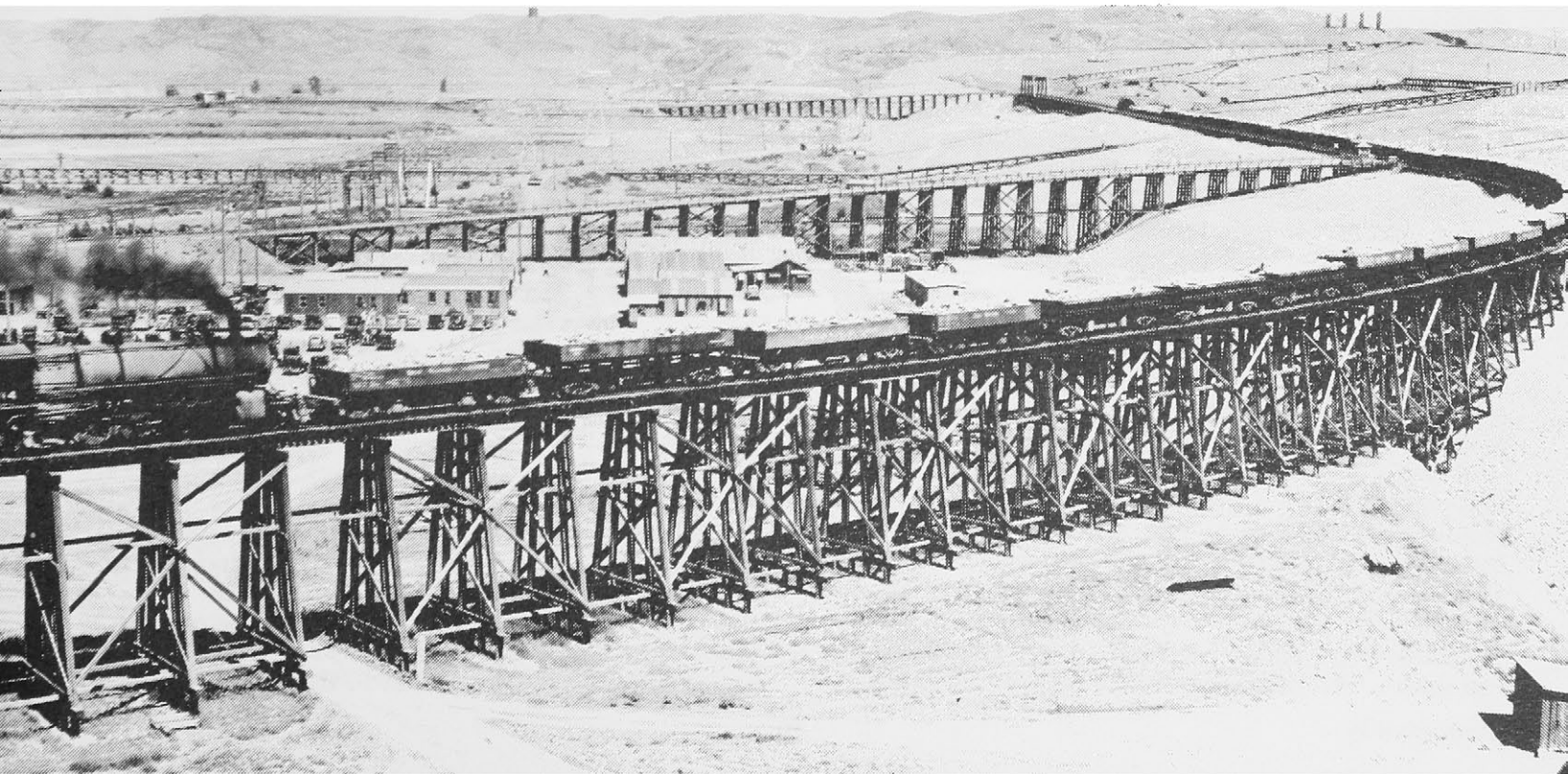
Snake Butte, just one of the quarries used by the engineers, was named for the many snakes—mostly rattlers and bull snakes—which made it their home. The quarry was also supposedly the home of a monstrous snake which made its home deep in the crevice of the butte.

Legend has it that roving Indian parents “buried” an infant’s body on a high cliff in Snake Butte. Before moving on, the parents visited the burial site twice, and came one last time before moving on. To their horror, the body was gone.

Unbelievable

In the dust near the spot where they had left the child’s body, the father discovered a trail such as might be left by a snake, but it was so big as to be unbelievable. More than a foot wide, the track led from the burial site to a deep crevice.

The Indian parents related the story to nearby villagers, and the frightened tribe pressed its leader move on quickly. A famous medicine woman was consulted and, following a night spent on the butte, she returned to the village proclaiming a huge snake with evil powers had taken the child’s body far down into the earth as a warning to all that anyone who would frequent that spot would disappear in a like manner.



King of the boomtowns

Tales of notorious Wheeler . . . a

Editor's note: The following is a reprint of a story published in the Washington Daily News on Sept. 18, 1936. The author, the famed Ernie Pyle, was a roving correspondent for the Scripps-Howard news chain whose columns appeared in some 200 newspapers nationwide.

Pyle's inimitable style rings true in this widely read article, which introduced the legendary boomtown of Wheeler to readers throughout the nation.

Pyle later earned fame as a war correspondent reporting from World War II battlefields. His work earned Pyle a Pulitzer Prize in 1944, and led to his death in 1945 under a hail of machine gun fire while reporting from an island in the Pacific.

by Ernie Pyle

Wheeler, Mont.—You have to see the town of Wheeler to believe it.

When you drive through, you think somebody must have set up hand-painted store fronts on both sides of the road, as background for a western movie thriller. But it's real.

Wheeler is today the wildest wild-west town in North America. Except for the autos, it is a genuine throwback to the '80s, to Tombstone and Dodge City and Goldfield.

Wheeler is a slopover from the government-built city at Fort Peck Dam. It is not on government property, hence is free to go its own way. These boomtowns always mushroom up around a big construction project. There are 18 of them around Fort Peck.

They are shantytowns proper. They have such names as New Deal and Delano Heights. Their houses are made of boxes and tin cans and old boards and tar roofing. They look just like Hoover's famous Bonus Army camp of 1932 on the Anacostia Flats.

All except Wheeler. It is the metropolis of the mushroom villages. It has 3,500 people, and real houses and stores. It has 65 little businesses lining either side of the main street. Such places as "Buckhorn Club" and "Rooms—50¢" and just "HOTEL."

It has nearly a thousand homes scattered back behind the main drag. It has half a dozen all-night taverns, and innumerable beer parlors. The taverns open at 8 in the evening and run 'til 6 in the morning.

At night the streets are a melee of drunken men and painted women, as they are called in books. Gambling and liquor by the drink are illegal in Montana. But Wheeler pays no attention. You can sit in a stud game, or keep ordering forty-rod all night.

The taverns don't have floor shows. You just drink and dance. The music goes 'til long after daylight.

You don't have to pay to dance with the girls, but they get a nickel a glass for all the beer and whiskey they induce the boys to buy.

Back behind Wheeler is a separate village where the women of easy virtue live. This town has an unprintable name. Everybody calls it by this name. They say a thousand women have heard the call and drifted in for the easy reappings among the dam workers.

Wheeler is two-and-a-half years old. It started with Fort Peck Dam, when some guy brought in a trailer, built bunks in it, and rented them to dam workers at \$4 a week.

Ruby Smith was the first real settler. She started an eating place along the road, and within 30 days the town had sprung up around her almost to its present size.

Ruby now runs the Wheeler Inn, one of the biggest all-night hot spots. She goes to bed at daylight and gets up late in the afternoon. She's coining the money.

Joe Frazier is the entrepreneur of Wheeler. Twenty years ago he homesteaded a batch of practically

Wheeler's medic

Editor's note: The following article consists of excerpts from an article written by the late C. C. Lull, M.D., former resident and medic in Wheeler, the most famed boomtown to spring up around Fort Peck. These observations offer some blunt insights into life in the most notorious of shantytowns.

The article from which these excerpts are taken is titled "The Last Frontier." There is no evidence that it was ever published.

by C. C. Lull, M.D.

"Montana can no longer pose as the 'wild west,' harboring such characters as Buffalo Bill or Wild Bill Hickok, but it can still claim a frontier, perhaps the last, not personified by the cowboy, riding into town at full gallop, a ten-gallon hat in one hand and a six-shooter in the other.

"It is contrasted by the modern frontiersman, driving in at a 70-miles-an-hour rate, swinging a whiskey bottle and gripping the meager remains of a paycheck just received. This frontier to which I refer is Wheeler, a boomtown of the Fort Peck area.

"Wheeler started with a bang and that's the way it will finish. After all is said and done, these people are not here for the pleasures they may derive. They are here for the work they get, to maintain themselves honestly, with the spirit of the pioneer. There were new fields to conquer, new friends to find. Much to do . . . to gain . . . the chance to make

new kind of old frontier

worthless land here on the bare Montana knobs. It never did pay its way. Joe Frazier became a barber in Glasgow, 20 miles away.

Then God sent Ruby Smith and the Army Engineers, and they say Joe Frazier will come out of it easily with \$100,000. He owns all the land Wheeler is built on.

Wheeler won't exist six months after the dam is finished in 1939. So Joe Frazier doesn't try to sell lots. He just rents them. His income, they say, is \$2,500 a month.

* * *

Wheeler is all wood. There isn't a stone or steel building in town. It has no water system. They have had 16 fires since New Year's. One side of the town has wells. The other side hasn't any. There has been, fortunately, no epidemic.

Prices are typical boomtown prices. Rents aren't bad, but food is high. There is one small wooden church and there are two gospel missions.

Quite a few of the boys indulge in holdups. Motorists on the road, and cashiers behind the cash

register, have looked many times down the barrel of a six-shooter.

There has been considerable gun-waving, but little pulling of the trigger. The thieves take their swag and beat it. Wheeler has not developed any spectacular individual bad man, such as "Curley Bill" of old Tombstone.

And whereas the cowboys used to get drunk and ride down the main street yelling and shooting up the town, nowadays the process is to get drunk and drive down the main street at 70 miles an hour. They've killed and maimed as many people that way around Wheeler as the tough characters used to with their bullets.

It was the wild criminal driving that finally brought a little law and order to Wheeler. They have a deputy sheriff and two constables now. They don't go to extremes, of course, but they pull in the drunken drivers. They say the two justices of the peace have a very good thing.

Wheeler will be gone in three more years. There may never be another one. Somebody had better record it for posterity, before it's too late.

kept record for posterity

a living for their families, to dare to be dependent upon no one for their support, not even the government.

"The time will come when Wheeler will be but a ghost town of the past . . . the memory of this town and those who lived here will leave indelible marks across the pages of their biographies. To some it has been an obelisk, marking the grave of their ambition—to others, the dawn of success."

Excerpts of Lull's observations concerning various aspects of life in the boomtowns surrounding Fort Peck include:

Reason for writing the article:

"The thing that prompted me to make these notations was occasioned through an acquaintance with a young Englishman whom I knew as 'Curley.' He said, 'Say Doc, ain't this a hell of a place?'

"I asked, 'Why?'

"Well, he answered, 'here we are out where there is nothing but thistles, black widow spiders, ticks, rattlesnakes and heat. We're living in pasteboard boxes and eatin' dirt, with nothin' to do when we're not workin' but guzzle beer and wake up with a headache. Don't you think we're all crazy?'

"To that, I said, 'Yes, in some instances, but no for most of us.'"

Weather

"Winter comes with all the fury of the arctic; fine, blinding snow that drifts very high in the sub-zero

weather covers the landscape. Summer comes with its heat, like that of the tropics. Sometimes it rains, accompanied with a wind of 60- or 70-mile velocity, like a tropical hurricane. There are times when this part of Montana seems like a desert, with its hot drifting dust, which completely blocks visibility. Spring is a welcome relief from the icy cold of winter, and autumn is received with the same welcome, like a bulwark against the torrid heat. These weather conditions are torturous to the people.

"Temperatures range from 61 degrees below zero on Feb. 15, 1936 to 114 degrees in July 1936. For intervals as long as five consecutive days, the temperature has remained as low as 50 degrees below zero. This intense, sub-zero weather, of course, paralyzes activity almost completely."

Housing

"People moved in fast and furious, and since the space allotted them in the government reservation area was jammed, the mad scramble to obtain materials to build homes, such as they were, began.

"All the way from one to a dozen persons lived in these houses, usually one or two rooms, which were unsanitary at best. They clustered on the flats of the Missouri, and on the hills overlooking the site of the dam, all overflow from the model town.

"Slab houses, tarpaper shacks and log cabins are the frontier dwellings revived. They constitute an up-to-date Dodge City, Cody or Virginia City

Wheeler medic remembers . . .

resuscitated, with not a tree. The wooden shacks of old siding, the flimsy pasteboard and dirt roofs, and the converted auto trailers will be sufficient to the last boom through. They will then be abandoned.

"I have attended people with green cottonwood timbers burning in a one-room shack. When it was cold, snow would blow through cracks in the walls and floors, and it was impossible to keep a person warm. Often, there is a fire on one side of the room and two inches of ice on the walls at the other side of the room.

Business

"The metropolis of Wheeler, where the gigantic overflow took place, has a population of 4,700, with 80 stores and business places lined up either side of the highway just a few feet from the government reservations. There, 20 all-night saloons, which dispense unlimited red-eye, some in open defiance of Montana law, may be found. There is also the 'taxi dancer,' who gets a nickel for every glass of beer she can persuade the tired, pleasure-seeking shovel runner or tunnel worker to buy.

Undesirables

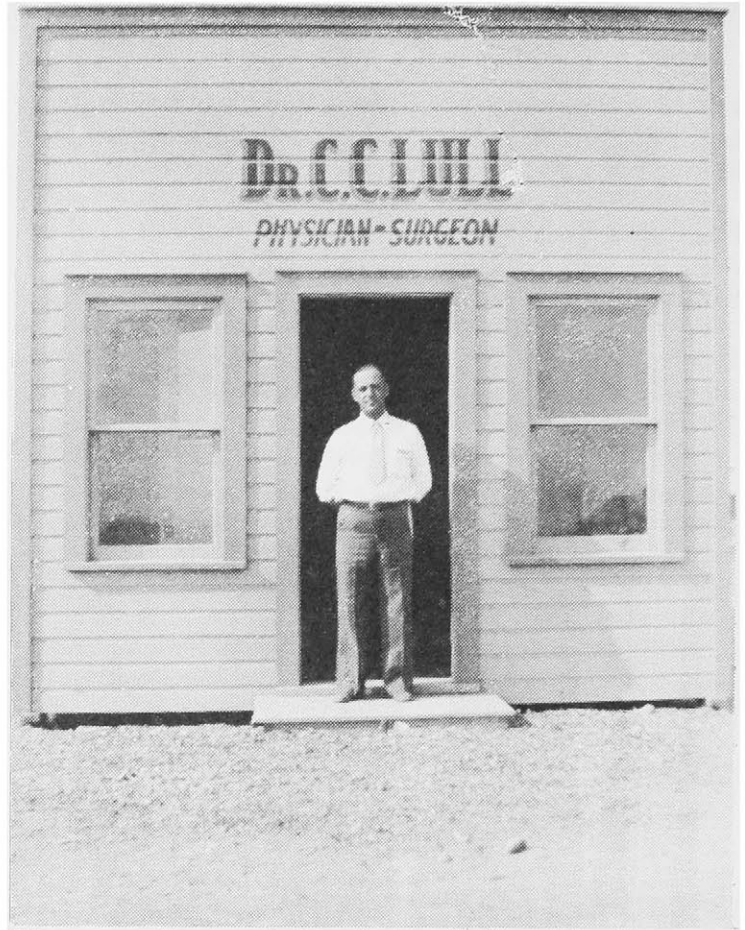
"The natural result of this desire for recreation and entertainment when not on shift of work was that these places became a fertile field for the professional gambler and those of questionable reputation, both male and female, who live off the 'sap' and his hard-earned money. Bootlegging became rampant and a 'red-light' district was established.

"There were gamblers, bootleggers, women of questionable income, and the men who associate with them. Professional dancers, grafters, robbers and morphine addicts and not a few wanted by the law sought refuge in this area. As time passed, the better and more substantial citizens became acquainted with each other, casting their influences against these undesirables, and made it too hot for them to remain any longer to plunder on the strange public without detection.

His practice

"The Saturday night spree winds up in a mad 70-mile-an-hour rush down Main Street in an open car, instead of a shooting match, as was Montana's fashion. The result is that many wind up for repair in my office, or in the hospital 16 miles away with a broken leg or broken neck. Some have gone directly to the coroner, who happens to be an undertaker, but most have landed in jail on such occasions.

"Cases I have dealt with involve childbirth, frostbite, suicide attempts, venereal disease, knife and gun wounds, pneumonia, food poisoning, snake bite, spider bite and smallpox, among others.



Many a patient ended up in Dr. Lull's office 'for repair.'

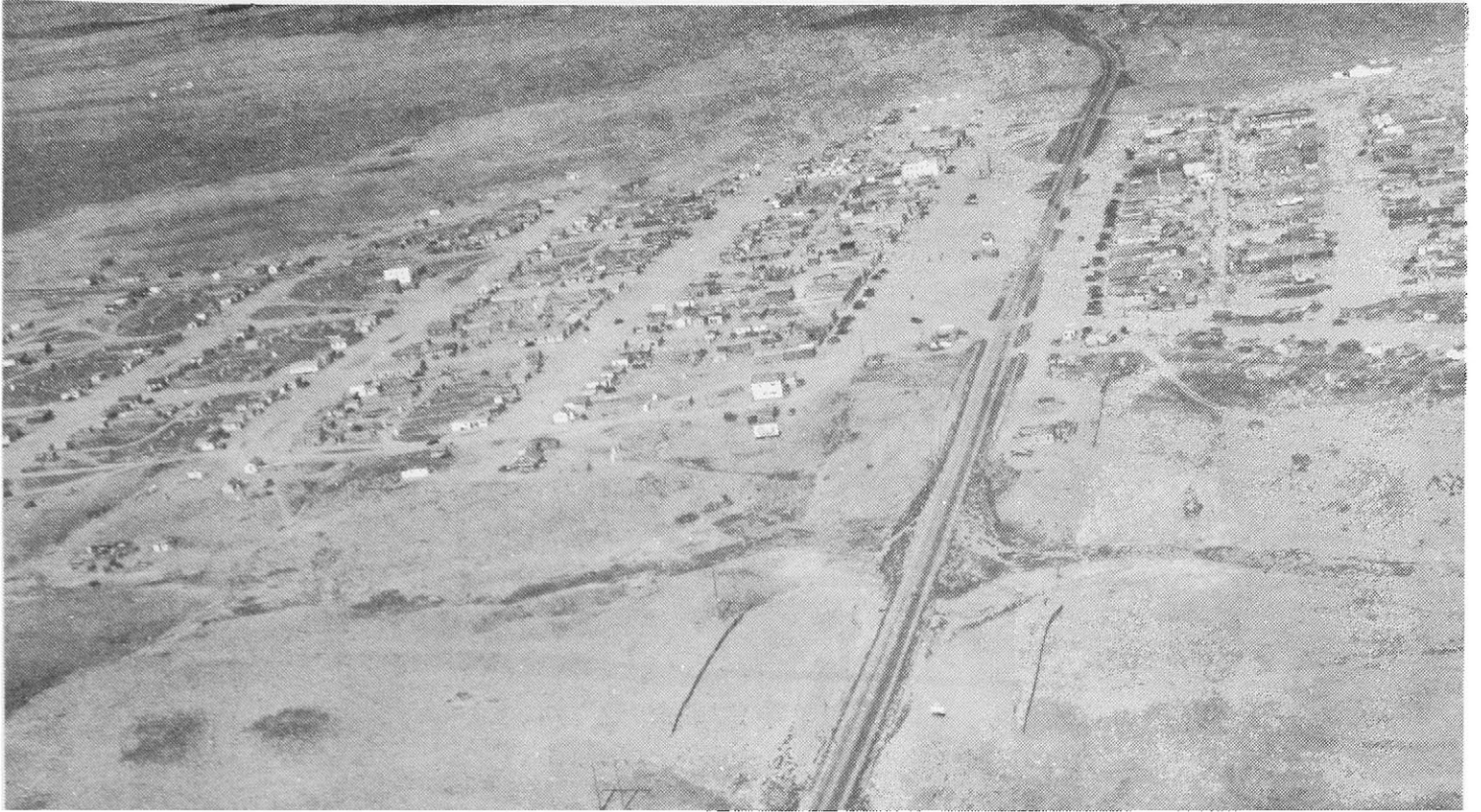
Law enforcement . . .

"Law enforcement was negligible, until recently (1937), for the towns are outside federal jurisdiction and remote from county and state authority. Robberies were frequent, although there was little shooting.

"There is more law enforcement now in Wheeler, represented by two justices of the peace, a deputy sheriff and two constables. It was reckless, drunken driving rather than robberies that brought in these officers. Wild recklessness at the wheel has killed and injured more people than the free hand shooting of the 'bad men' of the old boomtowns.

"The liquor store in Wheeler took in over \$2,300 last July 3. I have seen many men get crazy drunk . . . and not know what they do for a period of several hours; going around in a stupor (often leads to) the most peaceable of the workers wanting to fight.

"Now the worst drunken drivers are hauled before a justice of the peace for a little fining and are often jailed."



The sprawling boomtown known as Wheeler was located west of the dams site.



A sample of the 'architecture' of the day.

Dredging: A complex technique

Hydraulic fill dams are hellacious things to build. That's why there are so few of them.

But with a dam the size of Fort Peck—the entire populace of the state of Tennessee could stand on the surface of the dam and not rub shoulders—it was deemed that conventional earth-moving devices couldn't do the job.

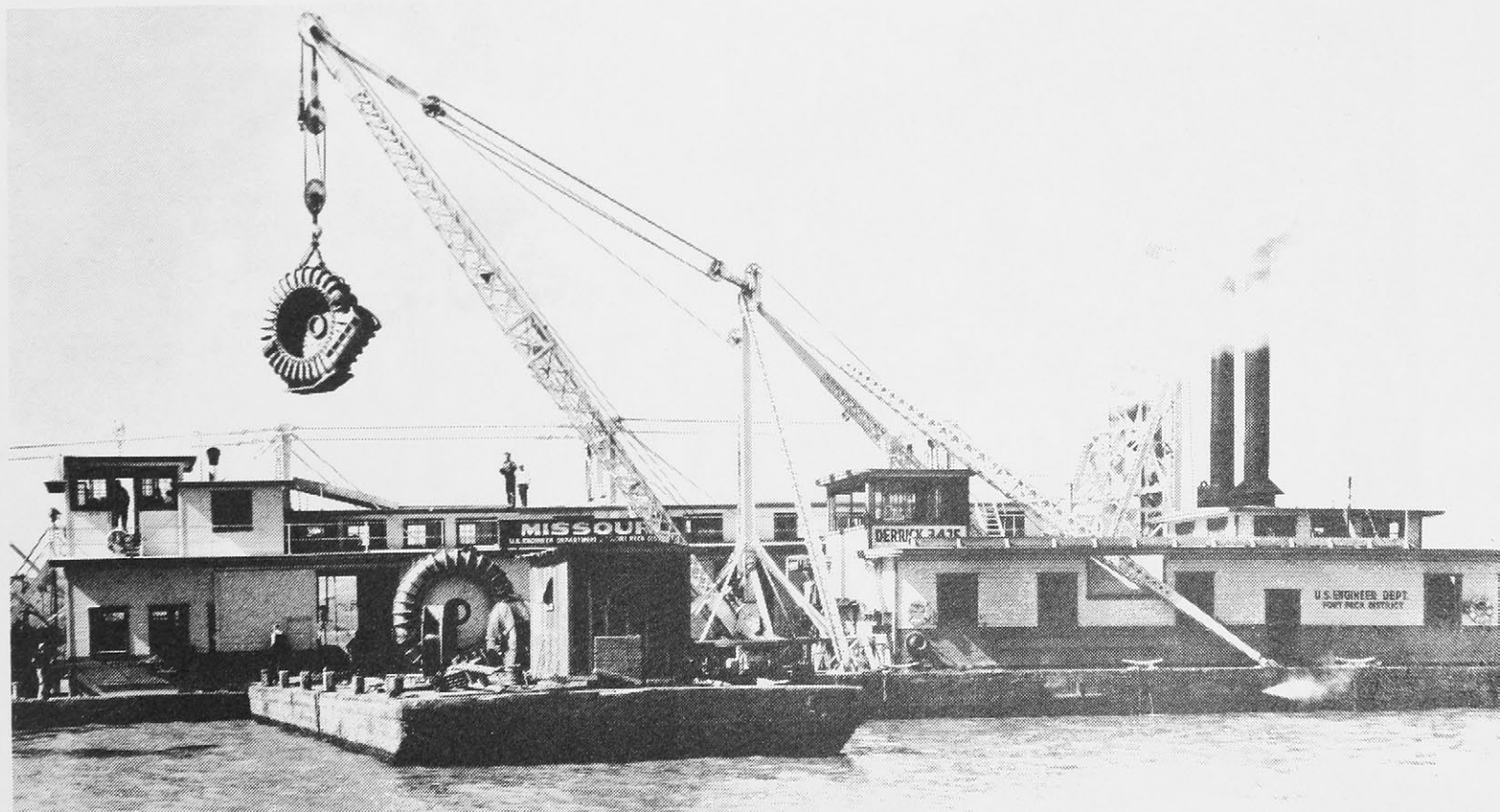
Another consideration was that by dredging from the upstream area, the lake could then be larger.

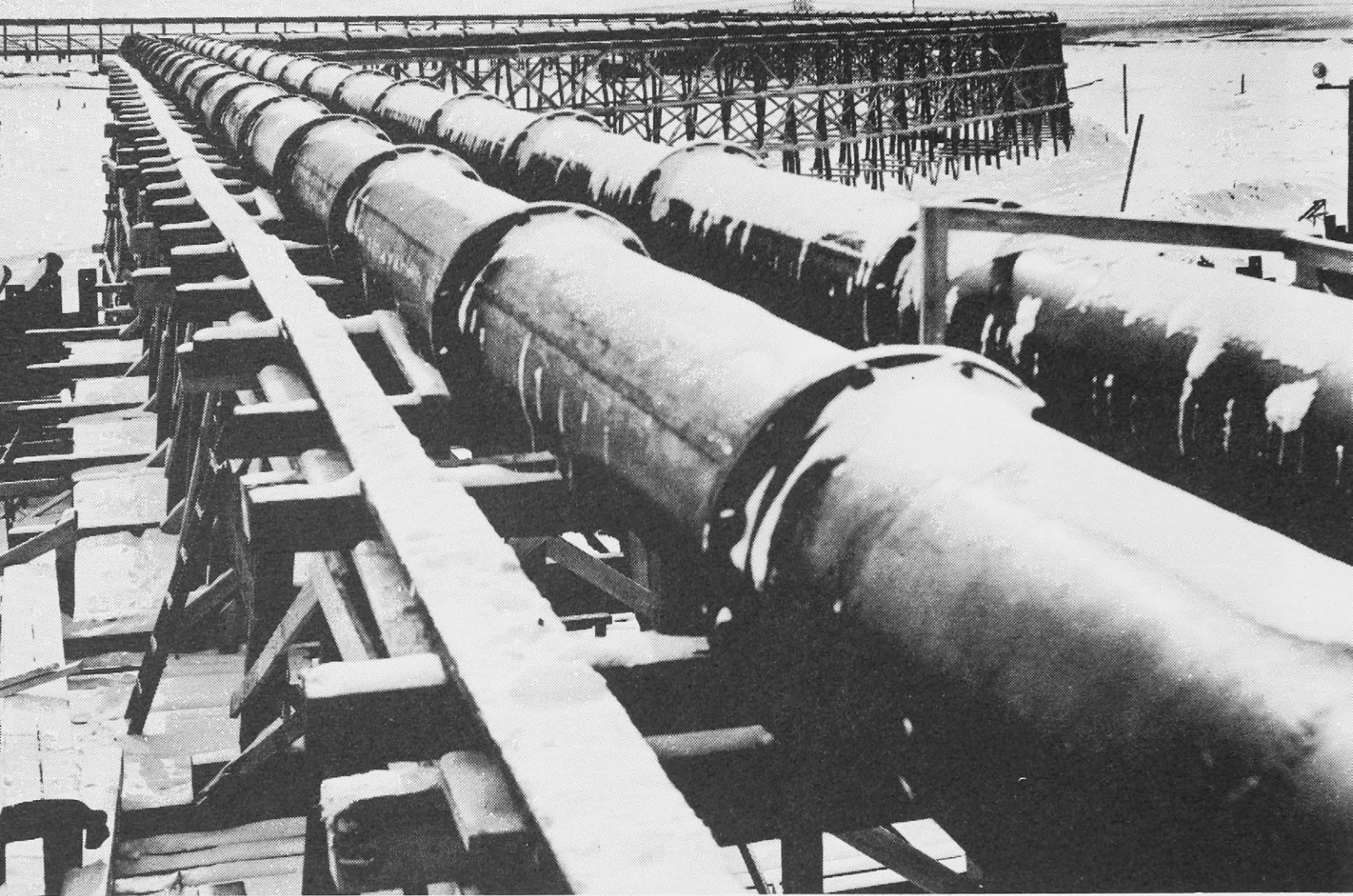
The decision to build from hydraulic fill meant that dredges would be needed to scoop and suck a watery mixture of sediments from the bottom of the river on both the upstream and downstream sides of the damsite. That material would then be poured through a pipeline to the damsite.

Where would they acquire dredges, booster barges,
(Continued)

From upper right, clockwise: The Dredge Jefferson, taking bites of a "silt sandwich" four and one-half miles from the damsite; a derrick boat delivering a 2,500 horsepower centrifugal pump to the Dredge Missouri to replace one that's worn; building supports and hooking up the dredge pipeline was an endless task.







Dredging units built on site

pontoons, derrick boats and other units? The decision was to build them at the damsite.

Shipbuilders from all over the country flocked to Fort Peck, and thus was born the biggest shipyard in Montana, which begat the "Fort Peck Navy".

Four dredging units had to be built, each with more than 12,500 horsepower, and each could dig more than 50 feet below the water surface.

With the aid of booster pumps, material could be pumped through 20,000 feet of pipeline with a maximum 250-foot lift. The complex hydraulic fill

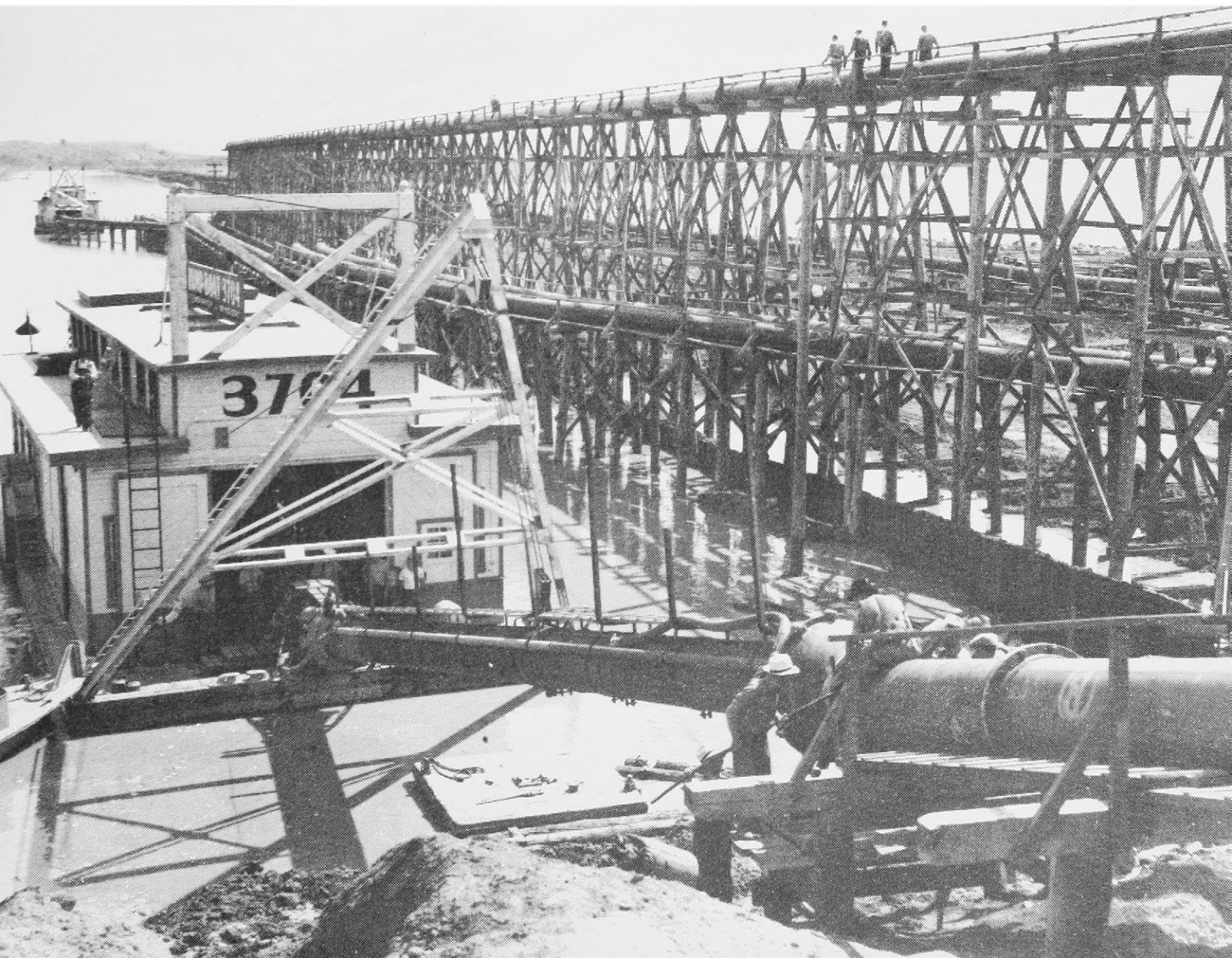
method also necessitated that huge wooden platforms be built to support miles and miles of 28-inch-diameter pipeline, through which the fill material would be pumped.

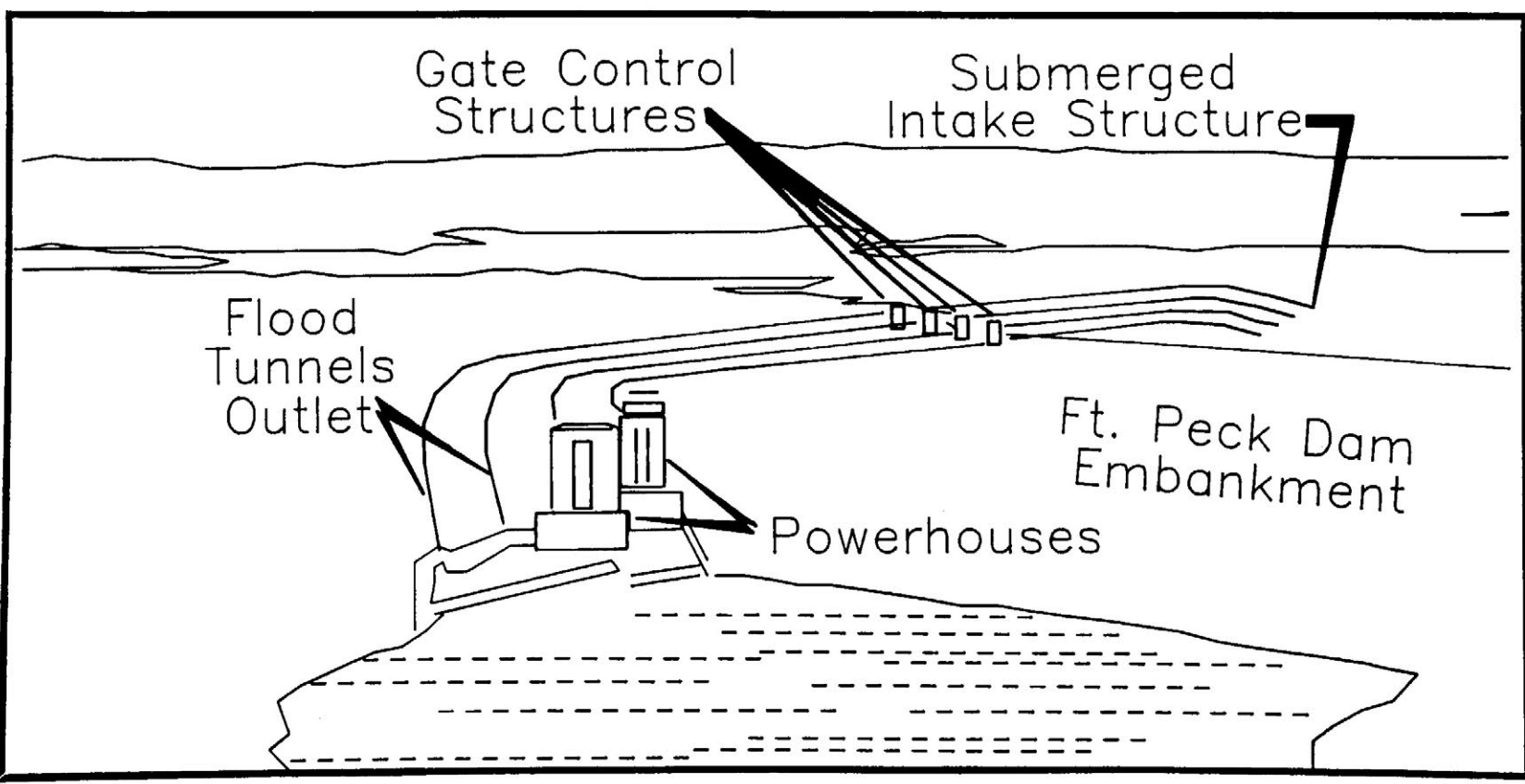
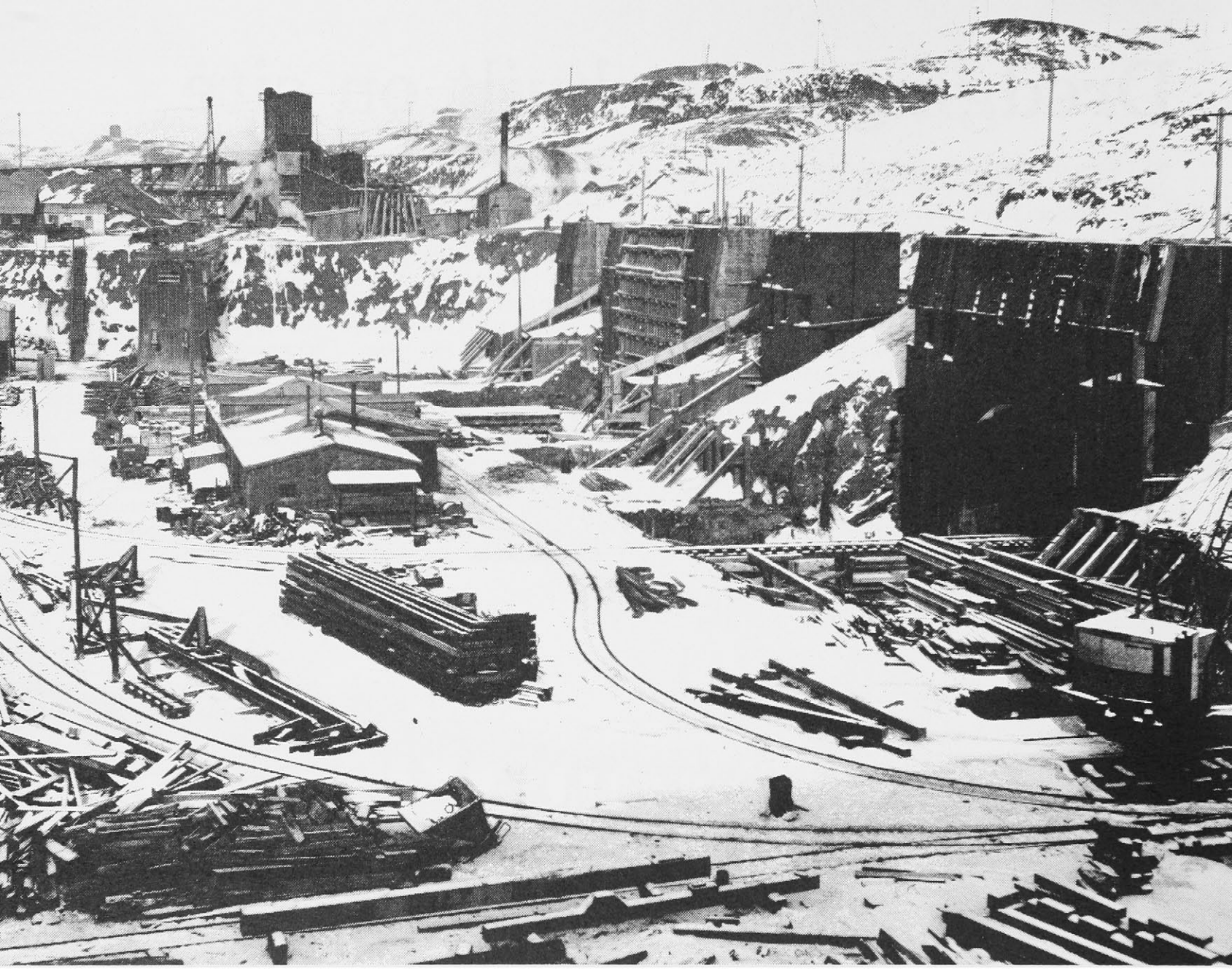
The mixture pumped consisted mostly of sand and water, with just enough clay and silt to form an impervious core in the middle of the fill.

The material was pumped just inside the slopes of the dam and was deposited between that line and the "core pool," which was a large, still body of water in the center zone which was maintained for settling out the finer material.

This material then formed the most impervious part of the dam—the core. Extreme caution and care went into selecting the "borrow pits" from which the material was dredged, so that the materials forming the core and the shell of the dam met the design requirements.

From bottom left, clockwise: A 1937 photo of the dredge maintenance crew, day shift; timber cut in reservoir area supported these double sections of 28-inch pipeline; pump boat 3704 in the core pool, located on what is now the top of the dam.





Tunnels and hydro power

The Missouri River flows through four diversion tunnels running under the east abutment of the Fort Peck Dam. How they got there is quite a story.

Gangs of workers took turns cutting into the shale with coal saws that would pivot about an axis to make a 15-foot cut.

Then the material was blasted out of the tunnel, scooped into railcars and removed while more digging commenced.

This happened day in and day out. Three shifts totaling 4,000 men worked on the tunnels day and

Clockwise from lower left: Sketch illustrates location of diversion tunnels; work on the tunnels continued through the winter of 1935; Fort Peck's first powerhouse became operational in 1943.

night, removing about 5 million cubic yards of material to make way for the tunnels. Residents grew used to the constant noise of the blasting.

Serious landslides occurred during the excavation, due to bentonite fault seams in the bedrock. The bedrock itself, known as bearpaw shale, was extremely high in water volume and some 300 yards thick.

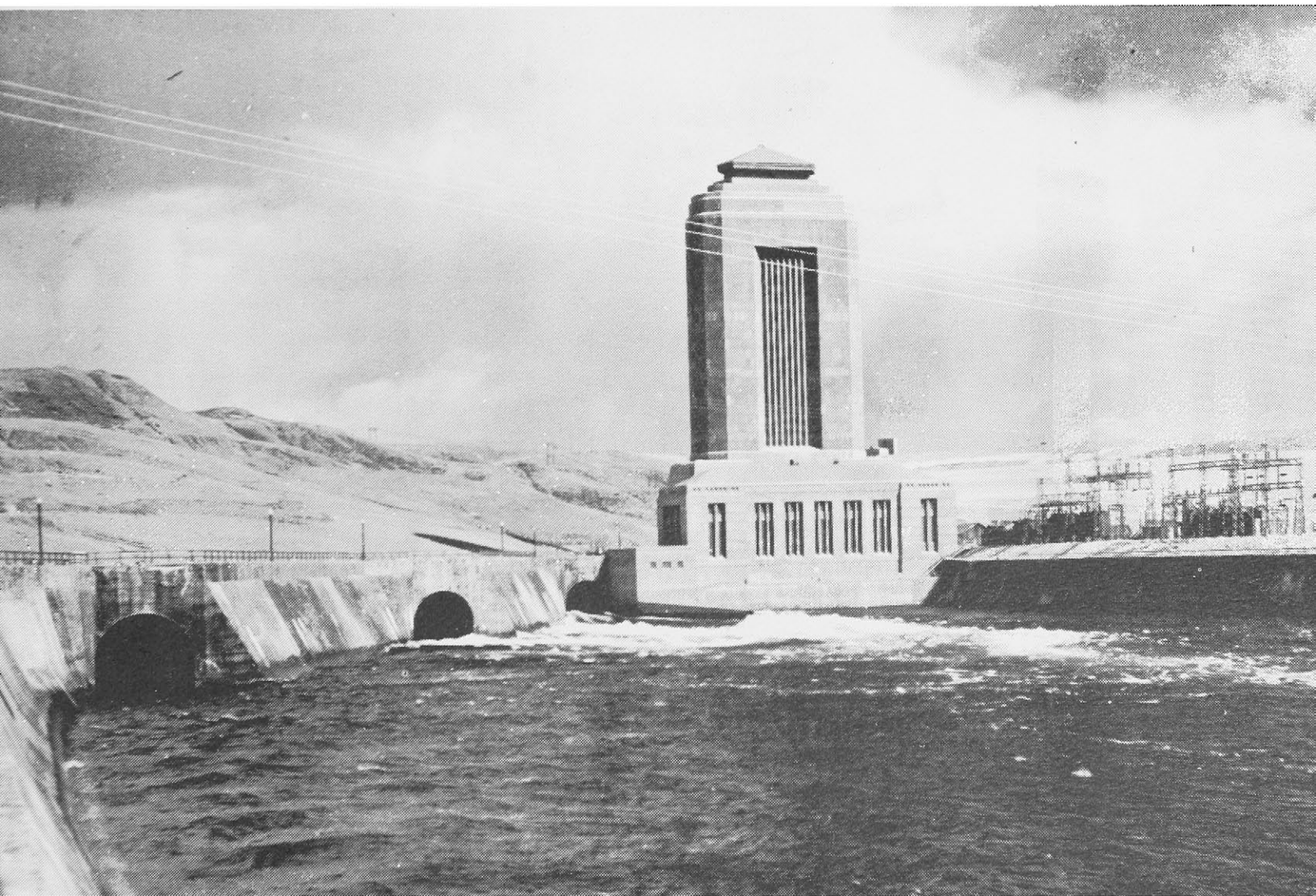
Bag of marbles

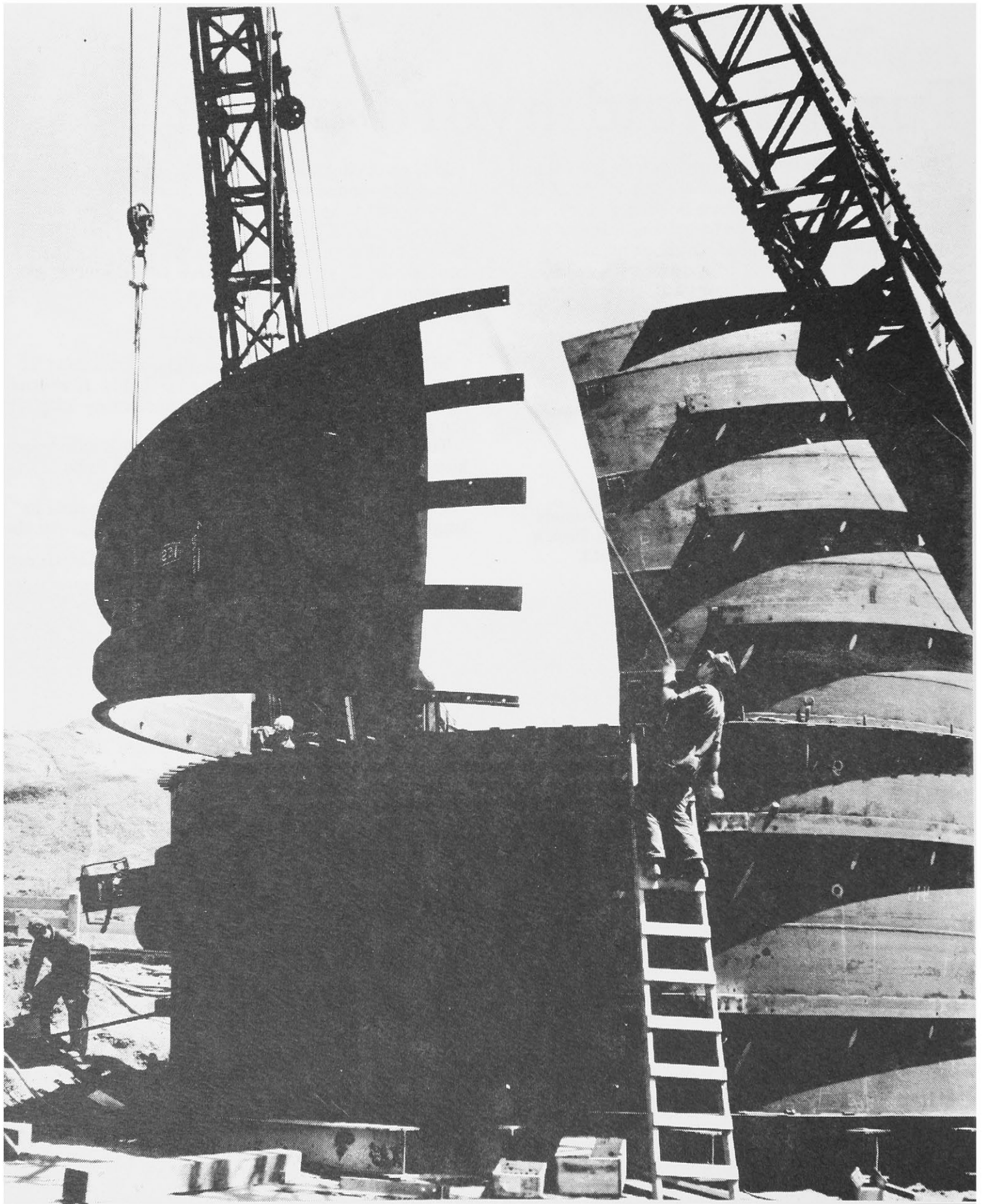
When this unique, ultra-moist shale was dried by the arid Montana air, it began to crumble. If wetted again, it took on a slick, muddy consistency with all the stability of a bag of marbles.

To keep the shale in its original state, a subsurface humidity level of at least 90 percent had to be maintained by using atomizing sprays.

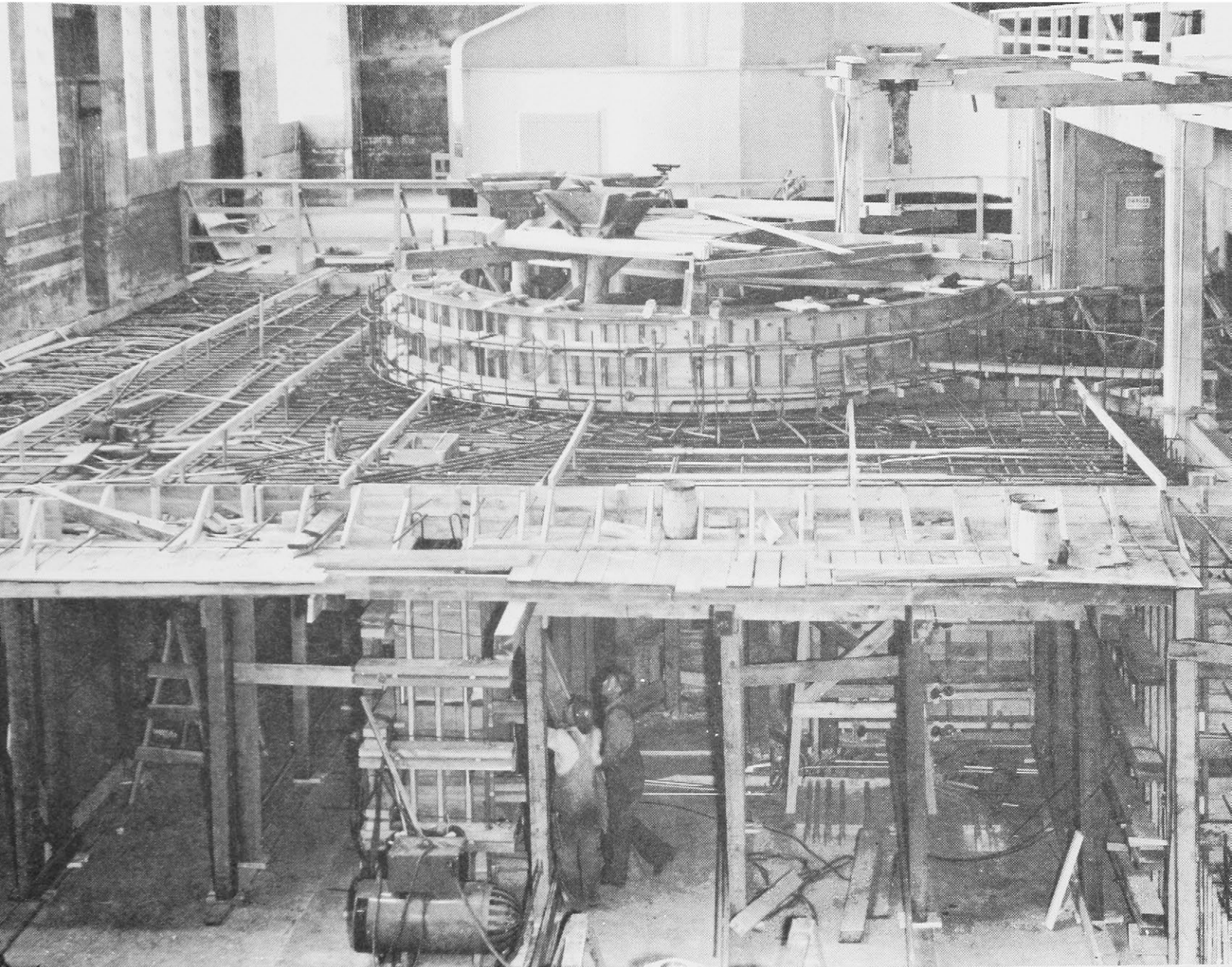
The diversion tunnels are all more than a mile in length and are more than 24 feet in diameter. All the

(Continued)





Above, a steel plate liner for control gate installation is assembled, while at the right, forms and concrete placing are set up for generator pedestal in first power plant, 1946.



Tunnels and power

(Continued)

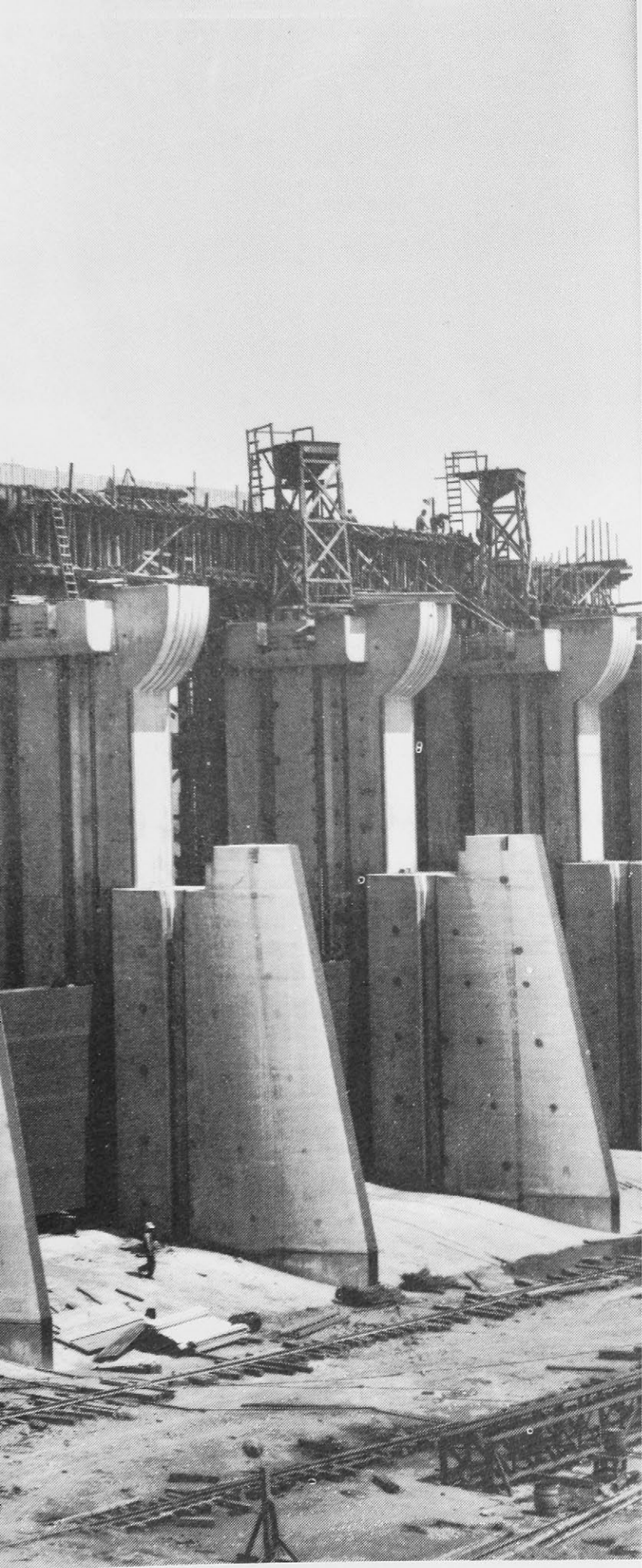
steel tubing used for the tunnels was bolted and welded together and a 3-foot concrete lining placed outside of them.

Each tunnel has an intake tower and is capable of carrying the normal flow of the river without help from the other three.

Each tunnel has an emergency control shaft and a main control shaft. Control gates are located near the axis of the dam, housed in reinforced concrete shafts that extend upwards to the ground surface. Concrete structures house the electrically operated control machinery.



This is how the spillway looked in 1937; at right, the cover of the first Life magazine.



Graceful dominance

It would not be wrong to describe the Fort Peck spillway as mammoth.

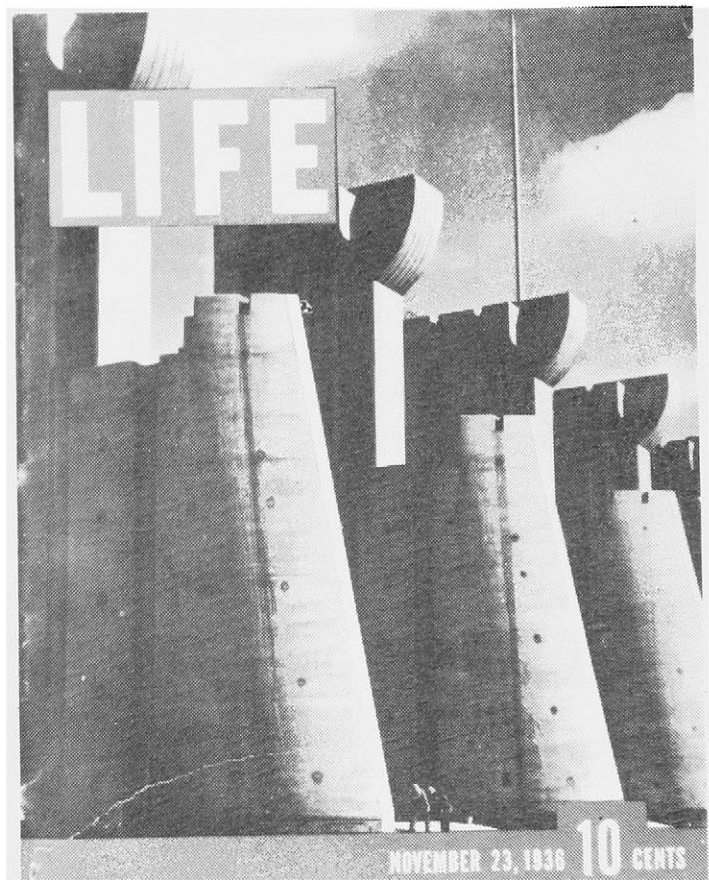
At the same time, however, it is stately, a gracefully dominating concrete structure which stands tall and boldly defiant, like a row of sentinels.

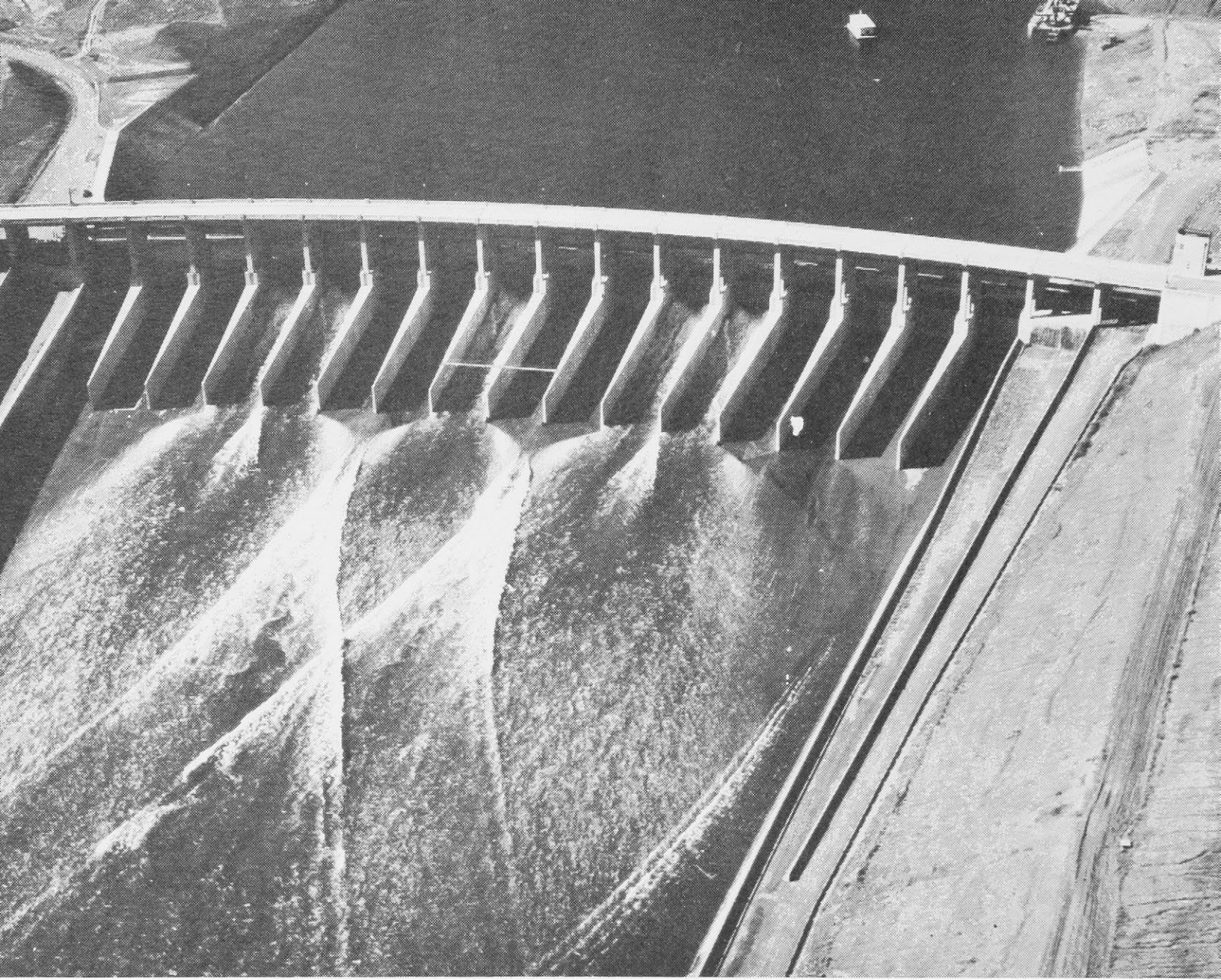
Designed to discharge 250,000 cubic feet per second, the spillway is wedged between the edges of a man-made valley which came to exist when 14 million cubic yards of the dry, lumpy terrain was sliced up and hauled away.

More than 800 feet wide with 16 monstrous steel gates, the spillway's mile-long, concrete chute tapers to a width of 120 feet at the bottom of a 5.23 percent grade.

The great stoney gates are 25 feet by 40 feet and weigh 80 tons each. Some 54,000 cubic yards of concrete and 26,500 tons of steel went into the spillway structures.

If it seems odd that the spillway is located 3 miles east of the dam, the reasoning is sound. Engineers of that era weren't too keen on running a spillway over a 240-foot-high earthfill dam. The terrain at the present site was deemed most suitable, and the large quantity of floodwater it was designed to discharge was another factor in determining its location.





Above, a geometric pattern is created when five of the 16 spillway gates release water; at right, a view of the man-carved chute in 1936.



Closed : *River cut off June 24, 1937*

June 24, 1937—a day of reflecting and putting the preceding 1,340 days before it into perspective.

The Missouri River had been cut off.

As the most meaningful carload of gravel fell from the Missouri River Bridge overhead (upper right), it was assured that history's pages would indeed pay tribute to thousands of people who invested millions of hours in a godsend project blessed by a "savior" known as FDR.

One week after closure, the downstream gravel toe (lower right) was gaining height as bulldozers and draglines spread gravel dumped from railcars. This downstream section of the dam now serves as a burial ground for the Missouri River Bridge.

Although closure took place in mid-1937, the dam was not totally finished until 1940 and the final topping wasn't complete until June of 1947.

A feat

The four-mile-long dam was considered the engineering feat of its time. The dam contains 125.6 million cubic yards of fill, 97 percent of which is

hydraulic fill. The remainder consists of rolled earth sheared from the abutment, which makes up a 3,000-foot section on the west end. Glacial till from that same abutment formed the core of the final raise of the dam.

The dam also contains nearly 4 million cubic yards of gravel, more than half a million cubic yards of quarry stone and a third of a million cubic yards of field stone.

Underseepage control is provided by a sheet steel cutoff piling driven into the shale below. Relief wells and french drains allow for possible through seepage, which is normal. Such through seepage reduces the pressure on the foundation materials.

The width of the base is 4,900 feet and was widened considerably following the slide of 1938. The top of the dam is 50 feet wide and stands 250 feet above the base. Damming height is 220 feet.

The reservoir contained by the dam runs 134 miles long with some 1,600 miles of shoreline. Total storage exceeds 19 million acre-feet of water. (An acre-foot is equal to an acre of water one foot deep.)



Then came the slide of '38



The builders of Fort Peck Dam will never forget Sept. 22, 1938.

The slide.

No one has forgotten it.

It was a quiet day, Sept. 22, 1938, and work on the dam was going at a rapid pace. The dam had been completed just two weeks before, but there was murmuring among some of the men that something was wrong with the dam.

The daily inspection of the embankment hinted at a problem. Survey crews were deployed to assess earth movement and to inspect the core pool. (The core pool was the pool on top of the dam, into which dredge material was pumped. As the water slowly drained out of the core pool, sediment settled below, thereby forming the dam.)

Although the pool hadn't moved, the upstream pipeline shell ran lower than it should have.

The day before the slide, the railroad tracks showed no signs of movement, so the work continued in the area.

By evening, the situation had changed.

At least two men suspected a problem was in the offing the night before the slide.

Lewis F. Kao recalls putting in his 4 p.m. to midnight shift on the south (upstream) side of the dam.

"That night the dam had started to shift. There was a 6-foot bow in the railroad track," he remembers.



The next shift discontinued dredging in that area. James W. "Monty" Montfort also recalls the night before the slide.

"I was foreman of a crew laying quarry stone on the four to twelve shift," wrote Montfort. "We were completing a tier of stone at the extreme east abutment and were to move the dragline . . . the dike section at the west end of the dam.

"Water was coming up through the gravel and we could hear gurgling sounds beneath us. At 7 p.m., we began working off the mats; and as the weight of the machine was transferred onto the gravel, it began to sink and water rushed up around the tracks.

"We moved in a bulldozer and a loadmaster and began building up with small mats. At about 11 p.m., we had managed to reach solid ground. The graveyard shift relieved us and moved out with the dragline. Our crew was muddy, wet, exhausted and glad to go home. The next afternoon, the slide occurred and the east upstream section of the dam was gone."

On that tragic day at 1:15 p.m., even as District Engineer Maj. Clark Kittrell inspected the problem area from his passenger seat in a sedan, something strange and terrifying occurred.

Suddenly, the earth started shaking, dredge pipes and railroad tracks started shifting and sinking and a massive section of the dam swung out into the

upstream as if a great earthen gate hinged on the east abutment.

Machinery and men alike were swallowed up in the moving, muddy hell and 5 million cubic yards of earth slid out into the Missouri River, forming its own island.

Eight men lost their lives, and six are still buried somewhere in the dam.

Some who lost friends in the slide consider the dam a large gravestone for those men whose bodies were never recovered.

Word spread through the area quickly that the "dam was going to give," and people packed belongings quickly and headed for higher ground.

The Slide of 1938 is the single most memorable event to occur during construction of the dam, according to dam workers employed on that fateful day in 1938.

What caused the dam to slide?

To this day, many say the core pool was too deep. Others say the dam was being filled too fast and there was not enough time for the water to drain out. Some blamed the bentonite seams beneath the dam.

Soon after the rescue efforts were halted, engineers conducted a battery of complex tests to determine the cause of the slide.

Samples were taken from as deep as 300 feet. A board of blue chip consultants was formed to study



The slide of '38 . . .

the problem, and it was their decision that work should continue on the dam.

The board, which consisted of Joel D. Dustin (chairman), Arthur Casagrande, Irving W. Crosby, William Gerig, Glennon Gilboy, W. H. McAlpine, C. W. Sturtevant, Thaddeus Merriman and Warren Mead, met for a total of 20 days over a five-month period, studying 26 sets of technical data.

On March 3, 1939, the board returned its report, which said the slide's occurrence was "due to the

fact that the shearing resistance of the weathered shale and bentonite seams in the foundation was insufficient to withstand the shearing forces to which the foundation was subjected.

The board's seven-man majority recommended completing the dam, and work began once more.

The base of the dam was widened, thereby flattening the slope, and the embankment was raised with rolled earth. A berm was added and sheet pile joined the old and new cores. A reinforced concrete wall was placed in front of the intake structures, and a protective two-mile dike was built.

Piezometers and relief wells were installed in the dam.

The slide delayed completion of the dam for a little more than a year, but on Oct. 11, 1940, the last load of material was dumped on the dam, topping it out at 250.5 feet.

At left, an overhead view of the dam showing the damage caused when the dam "opened like a gate hinged on the east abutment," during the slide. Below, a view from the gatehouse area on the east abutment.



How they remember that day

“It made a great impression . . .”

Some excerpts of accounts submitted by dam workers who remember the slide of 1938:

ARCHAMBEAULT, LEWIS C., 1103 Valley View, Glasgow, Montana 59230. “I was to go to work at 1:30 p.m. on the day of the slide in that area, setting out stakes in the core pool. When I arrived there was nothing left, so with a long probe I started looking for dead bodies.”

EPPERSON, ROY S., P.O. Box 565, Mill City, Oregon 97360. “Beans to Bullets—Sept. 22, 1938 began as a normal clear, calm day at the Fort Peck Dam project. It was my day off as oiler on the dredge JEFFERSON. My wife Clara, a teacher in the Fort Peck School, had returned to school after having been home for lunch and started a pot of beans to cook, giving me orders to see they did not burn. About 2 p.m., I heard my next door neighbor rush into his apartment and in a loud voice call out to his wife, ‘I am all right. The dam is gone.’ He was a surveyor working in the area when an upstream portion of the unfinished dam began to slip. Another neighbor and I jumped in a car to see what we could do. When we got back 2 hours later, the apartment was full of smoke. The beans had boiled dry and looked like buckshot. The construction of the dam had been set back one year.”

FLAHERTY, ERMA BELL, 983 Robin Drive, College Place, Washington 99324. “I remember putting in a 12-hour shift the afternoon of the slide, cleaning mud, sand and water out of ears, eyes, noses and lungs of patients who were fortunate enough to have survived the catastrophe.”

GANNON, PHILIP E., 86 Broadacres Road, Atherton, California 94025. “In mid-afternoon in September 1938, I was working as a striker on a booster pump station about halfway down the downstream face of the dam on the tunnel side. After telephoning in my hourly meter/gage readings, as was my custom, I looked toward the crest of the dam. The first thing I noticed was that sections of the dredge-fill line running parallel to the main axis were slowly disappearing from view, as was a long boom crane. Immediately our booster station was shut down and the dredge (MADISON, I believe) was notified, and then myself and the other two members of the booster station watched more of the pipeline and more pieces of equipment move slowly out of sight, over a length of what must have been 2,000 feet. Some personnel were in evidence scurrying to safety as we saw some of the fill drop in towards the core pool. Later, of course, the ‘slide at Fort Peck Dam’ and its repair became a major part of USA dam construction lore. As a young engineer it made a great impression on me.”

KLEIN, JEAN, 125 Klein Lane, Columbia Falls, Montana 59912. “Norbert was working in the shop

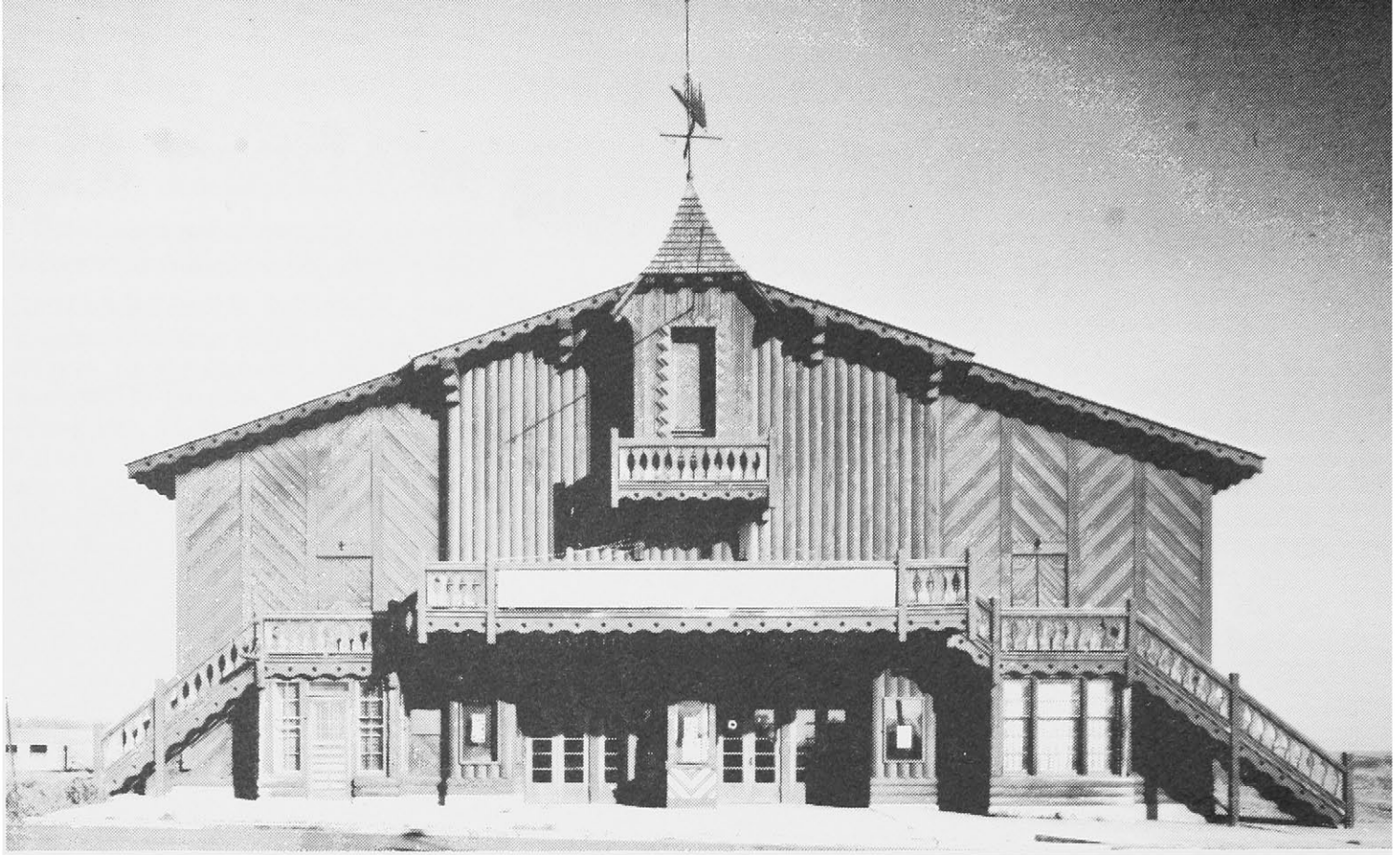
below the dam at the time of the big slide. I spent a very terrifying day not knowing if he was safe and getting a few things together, ready to take our baby to higher ground if the siren blew so many times (for the alert sign).”

O’CONNELL, DONALD R., N. 5710 F Street, Spokane, Washington 99205. “It was such a terrible loss of life, and of course, the loss of valuable equipment. In conjunction with this, I helped a surveyor who lived next to me at the hotel (I can’t recall his name after all these years) write his thoughts after being caught in the slide. He was in the onslaught of equipment, debris, water, etc., but miraculously survived. He came through this terrible accident holding onto his transit and with only his shirt collar left around his neck. All the rest of his clothes had been torn off. I guess God was looking over him. Wish I could recall his name, but I can’t after all these years.”

RUCKMAN, HAROLD J., 2175 W. Southern, Box 113, Apache Junction, Arizona 85220. “An experience of Manson Bailey: On the day the ‘dam went out,’ Manson Sr. was doing his work as a survey chief, on the area which slid out into the lake. I must refer to some of the engineers that were present in that work at that time for a full description of the magnitude of that disaster which moved a mountain of earthfill some 3/4 of a mile long and 1/2 mile wide. I was among the first crew which was chosen to investigate the area, this under the supervision and leadership of N. N. Fuller, the safety engineer. We walked over the area looking at everything visible which might reveal factual information. We passed the bed of a truck which had been torn from its truck, then above that some 200 feet there was a pair of tan trousers with the belt attached and fastened that had a set of tool checks attached and a leather purse in the rear pocket containing cards and ID belonging to Manson Bailey Sr. (Manson Bailey was a very well known person—he was a personality). The next day Manson Bailey showed up for work, however, he was a bit reluctant to talk of his experience. N. N. Fuller related that Bailey admitted that he had gone down under the sand several times while the earthfill was shifting and moving. He stated that he found himself on the top and was completely naked. His ears and eyes were packed full with sand. Then he climbed the west end of the slide and walked the road toward Glasgow. On arriving on a portion of the road where traffic was moving, he thumbed a ride to his home in Glasgow. An interesting thing brought all this back to my attention after I retired. I was visiting the Glasgow museum, say in the 1970s, and found Manson Bailey Jr. attending the museum. On mentioning the above incident, he seemed surprised and said he was unaware of any of the above stated facts.”



Brains, backbone and determination reduced the catastrophic effects of the slide of '38 to merely a frightful, if tragic memory. This 1940 photograph represents victory for the dam builders, who once again overcame adversity to achieve the final goal. Fort Peck was there to stay.



The Fort Peck Theater is listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings.

Fort Peck's buildings are lasting treasures

The buildings that remain from those early days of Fort Peck are replete with rustic memories that almost emanate from the rough-hewn timbers in the Fort Peck Hotel, or sing out from the stage at the Fort Peck Theater, or echo in the hallways of the Administration Building.

These sturdy structural survivors, along with others, such as the Recreation Hall and permanent houses on "Big Shots Row," are links to another era, rich in mystery and wonder. In addition, they are both a symbol and a source of the residents' keen sense of history and their fierce pride in community as well.

The Fort Peck Theater was once a hot spot, with the time's most popular plays and shows running 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings, the theater is still operational, although most of its 1600 seats remain empty for the live drama productions, ballets and dance troupes which play there each summer.

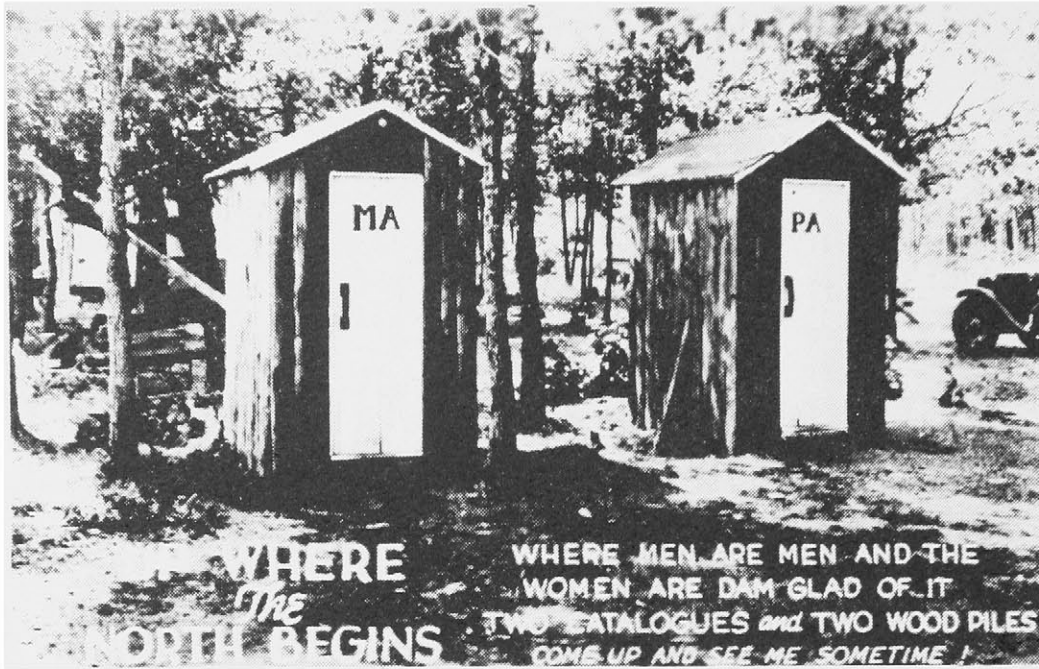
The Fort Peck Hotel, with 70 rooms and a popular restaurant, is not covered with latex paints or wallpapers of today. Its look of rough timber, stained wood and carpeting from yesteryear stand out in the memory of those intrigued by the good old days, and never mind that there are no TV's in the rooms.

The Recreation Hall, with a well kept basketball court indoors and busy tennis courts outdoors, is still a popular place. Volleyball and basketball leagues, as well as new facilities for racquetball and a rec program also draw crowds throughout the year.

The Rec Hall and the hotel were both nominated for a place on the Register of Historical Buildings.

Just as significant as the buildings which remain,





From upper left, clockwise: a whimsical look at housing availability; a 1937 photo of the Administration Building, compared to one taken 50 years later; three of five bunkhouses and one of two mess halls under construction in December 1933.



Buildings . . .

in terms of judging human and "architectural" character, are some of those buildings which didn't survive. These included the bunkhouses, mess halls, lean-tos, tar-paper shacks and 8-by-16 one room "houses" pounded together with lumber which cost roughly three to four weeks' pay.

A city to house the dam workers was built in the summer of 1934, with most of the housing being of the temporary bunkhouse or dormitory variety. Some 260 temporary homes came in seven sizes and in any one of 36 floor plans.

Unfortunately, a problem cropped up when the corps assumed most dam workers would be single. Thus, only 300 family residences were built. Considering that Montana state law gave hiring preference

(Continued)





The dusty winds of northeast Montana only thinly veil the rustic beauty of Fort Peck; clockwise from lower left: a dust storm blows in over Fort Peck in the mid-'30s; a shot of four of the original 11 permanent houses; the Fort Peck Hotel.



Photo by Kevin Quinn

Buildings . . .

to married men with dependents, it was quite a goof up.

In that first year, about three-fourths of the work force consisted of family men. So, with no room in the town and workers making 50 cents an hour, many families threw together dwellings which were neither sanitary, safe nor spacious.

Thus were born the "shanty towns," 18 of which sprang up in the vicinity of the damsite. Residents lived without electricity and took their water from raunchy wells which were often contaminated.

Save for old buildings here and there which evoke visions of the past—like Wheeler's Buckhorn Bar, or Park Grove, which still exists—the old buildings, shacks and beer parlors live only in photographs and memories.

It never hurt to laugh

Laughter has long been considered a good way of coping with life's stresses.

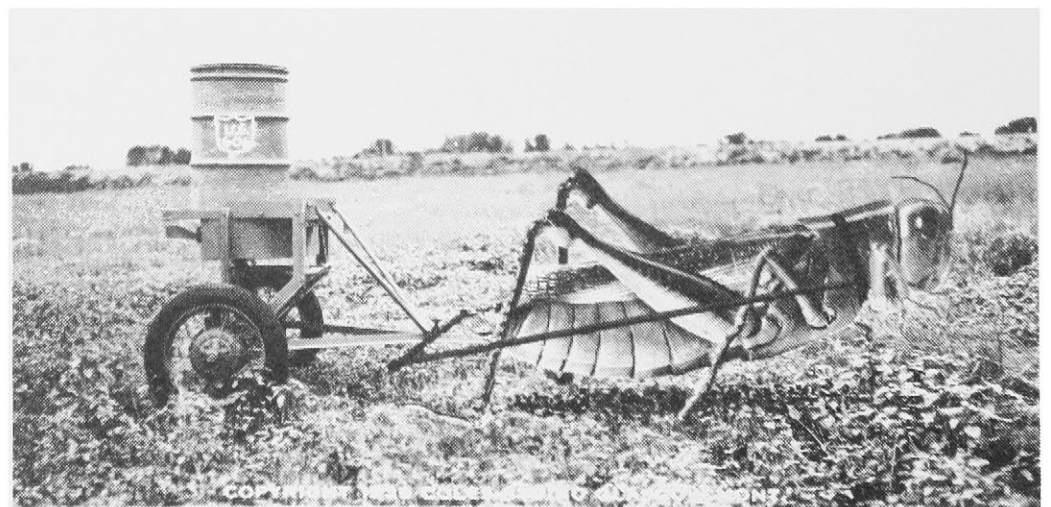
The Fort Peck Dam builders allowed a little therapeutic humor to creep into their lives, poking fun at some distressful situations like grasshopper hordes that made a quick snack of nearby vegetation, or the absence of posh ceramic plumbing fixtures of the indoor variety.

The postcards reproduced on these pages were in circulation in the late '30s and early '40s. Contributed by Edwin D. Blair of Anchorage, Alaska, they help shed some light on the character of the folks who weathered the discomforts of life in the New Deal days on the Montana plains.

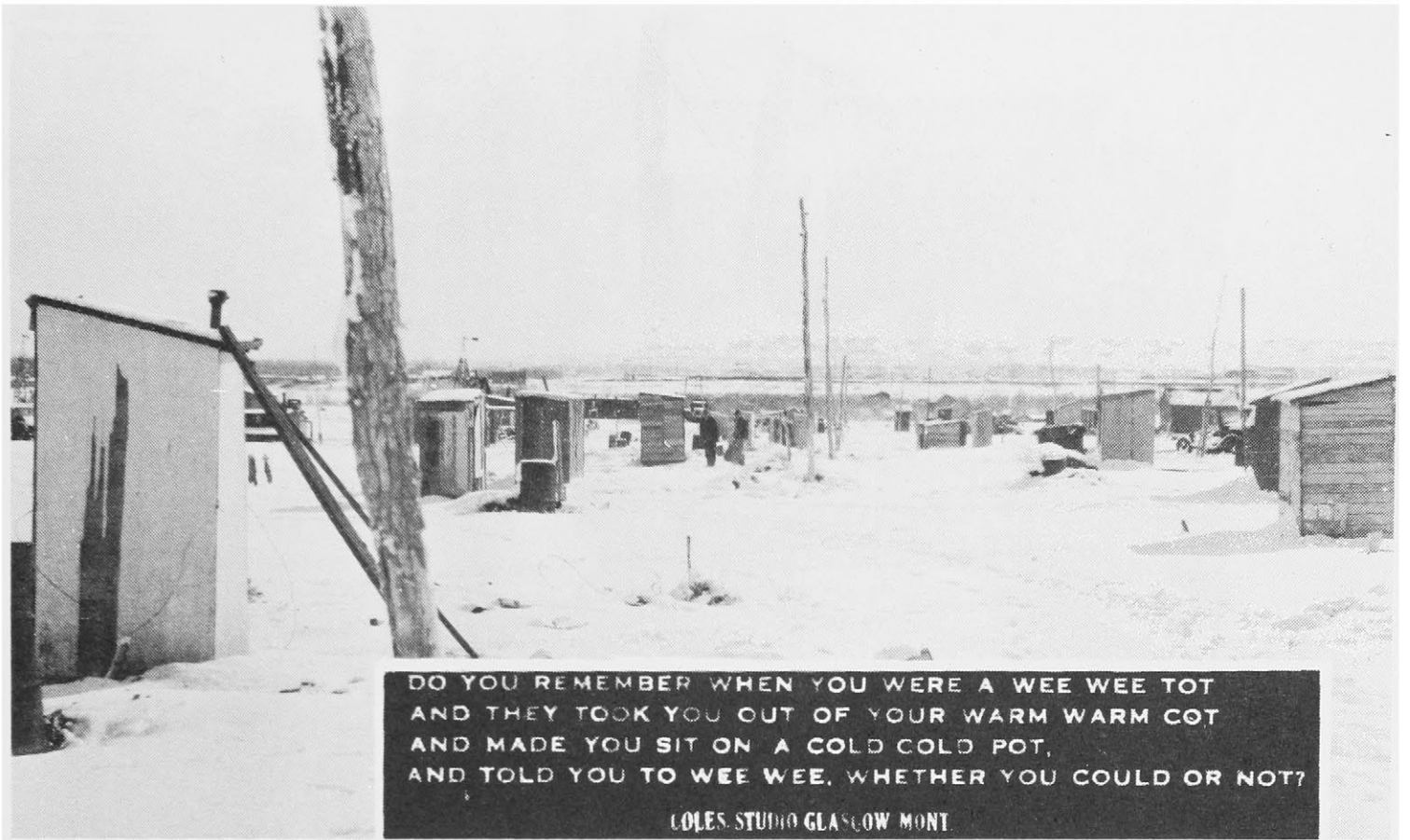
Still, compared to what lay behind in a heap, life was better by a dam site.



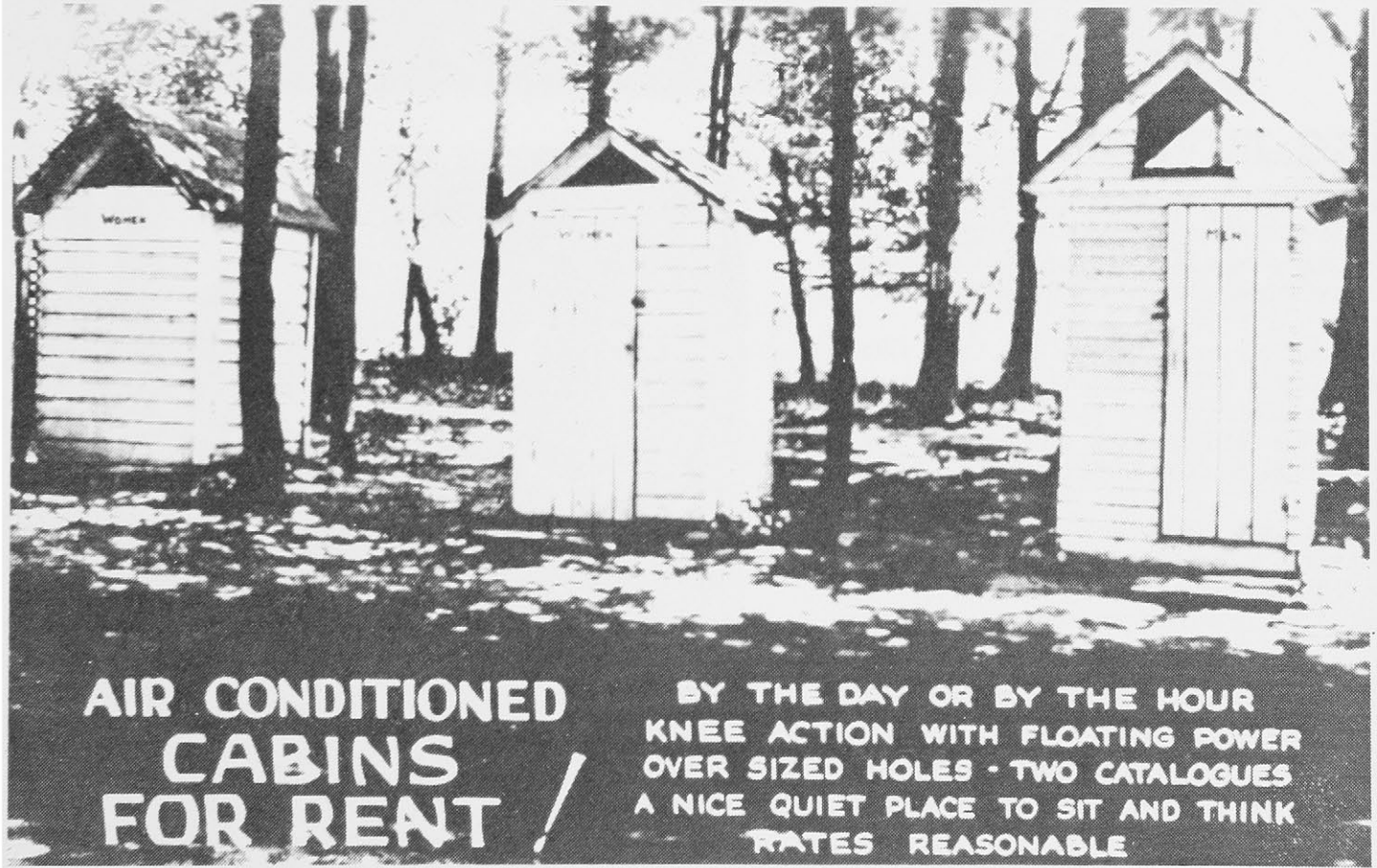
**Giant grasshopper shot near
The Vornholt Drug Store at
Fort Peck Dam**



SPreading hopper Poison near Fort Peck Dam



DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU WERE A WEE WEE TOT
AND THEY TOOK YOU OUT OF YOUR WARM WARM COT
AND MADE YOU SIT ON A COLD COLD POT,
AND TOLD YOU TO WEE WEE, WHETHER YOU COULD OR NOT?
COLES STUDIO GLASGOW MONT.



AIR CONDITIONED
CABINS
FOR RENT !

BY THE DAY OR BY THE HOUR
KNEE ACTION WITH FLOATING POWER
OVER SIZED HOLES - TWO CATALOGUES
A NICE QUIET PLACE TO SIT AND THINK
RATES REASONABLE



Like rays of the sun

As with that spinning sphere called earth, and its endless rotation around a burning sun, it is intriguing to occasionally measure the effects of that revolution, gauging the influence of the rays as well.

Such was the motivation of Col. C. H. Chorpening one day in 1947. Chorpening served as Public Relations Officer, among other positions, during his five years at Fort Peck, and had numerous articles published concerning construction of the dam.

District Engineer of the Tulsa District in 1947, Chorpening, now a retired major general, put out the word that he wanted to meet with everyone in the district who had worked on the Fort Peck Dam.

The unexpectedly large turnout—24 men gathered in his office—necessitated that two photos be taken.

One of the pictures is reprinted at right.

Whatever else it may represent, it somehow symbolizes the infectious nature of success, and how a positive accomplishment of great magnitude can gleefully lead to infiltration of the whole system by those with experience, knowledge, savvy and the kind of expertise acquired only in the trenches.

That's how revolution breeds evolution, and how rays take hold and retain a lasting effect.

And that's how organizations grow and become great.



From l. to r. Luther Hoham, John Soderberg, Earl Meier, Paul White, Col. Chorpening, Donnell Love, John Larksbury, Frank Bosche, Frank Moore.
(Photo courtesy of Floyd C. Moore.)



Just the thought sent them fleeing

It may be standard operating procedure for the U.S. government to fingerprint its employees, but that doesn't mean it set well with all the dam workers at Fort Peck.

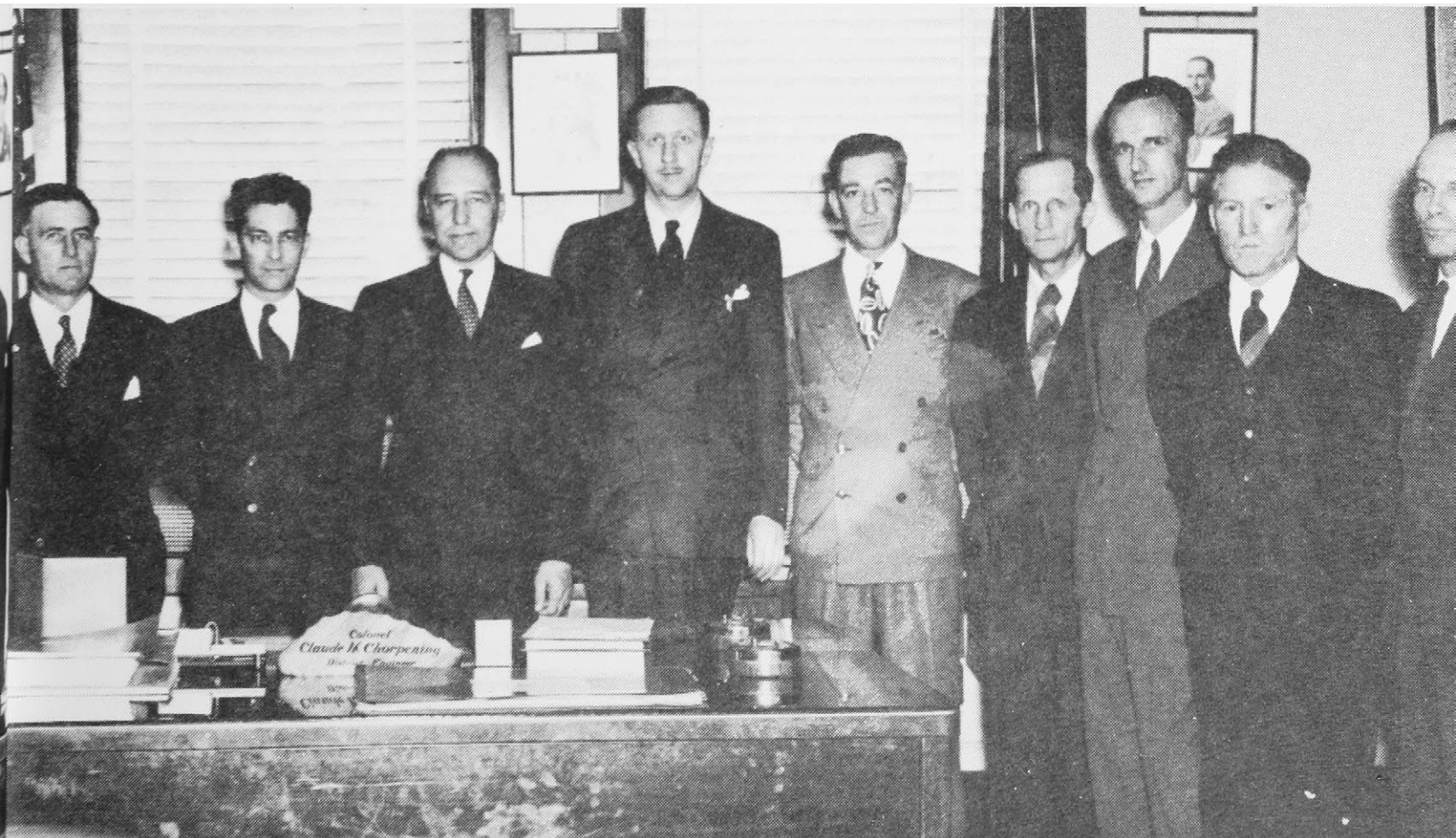
"There were all kinds of men at Fort Peck," recalls a man who worked there in the '30s. "Some were troublemakers, thieves . . . no one is sure where they came from."

No one knows where some of them went, either, for a good number of them got out of town when it was announced fingerprinting time was near.

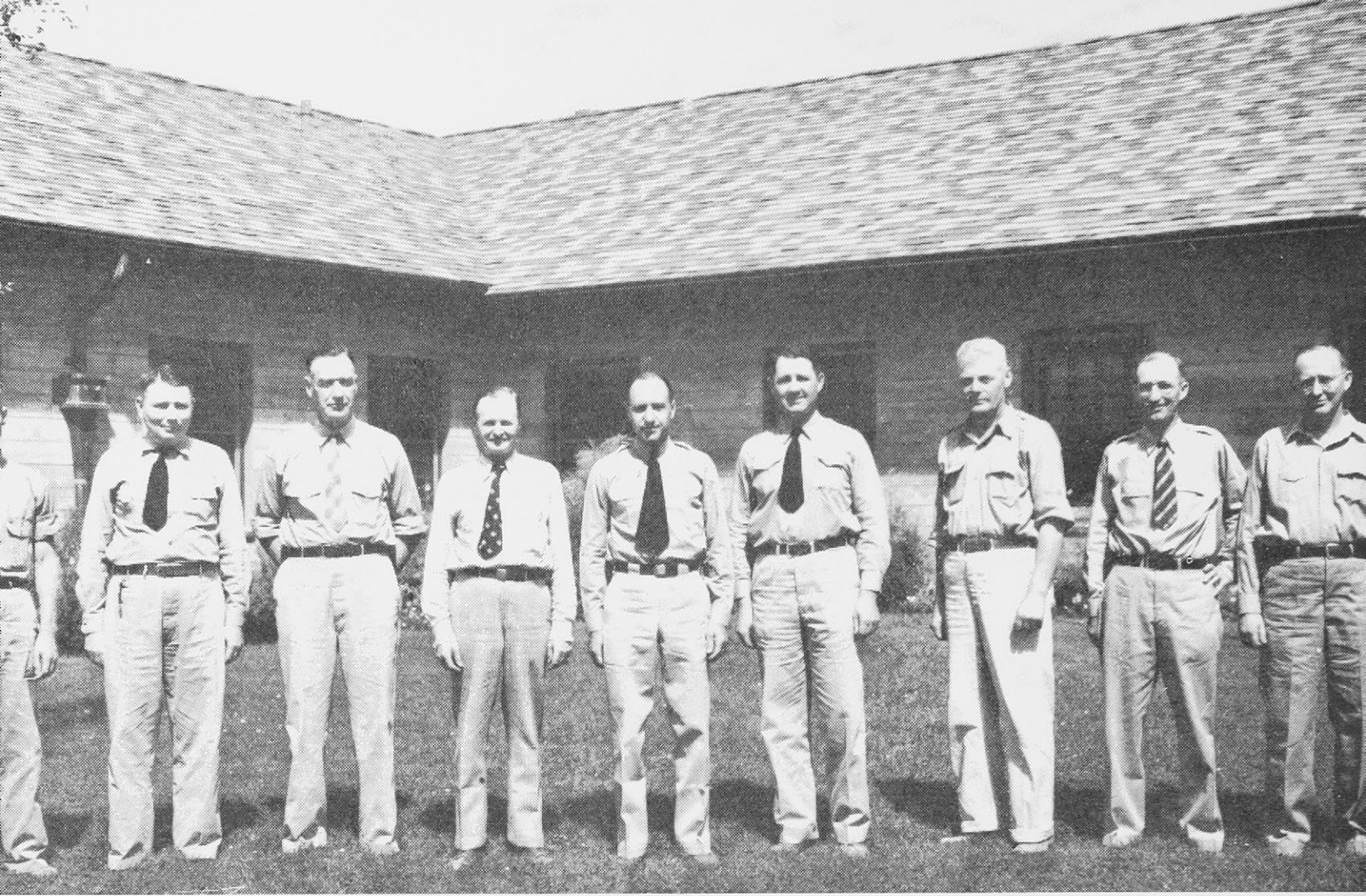
At left, employees gather in July 1936 to be fingerprinted in the Personnel Office, which was then attached to the Administration Building.

Knowing resistance was useless, many just got up and left, perhaps to protect their secrets of the past.

Some estimates put the desertion rate at 10 percent, and one foreman claimed he lost more than 100 men overnight following a fingerprinting session.



Noah Childress, Floyd Moore, Maj. R. W. Noble, Robert Lyons, Leffie Snider and Carl Pittinger.



They came to see 'the' dam

There are literally tens of thousands of pictures from the construction days of the Fort Peck Dam, but relatively few which focus directly on people.

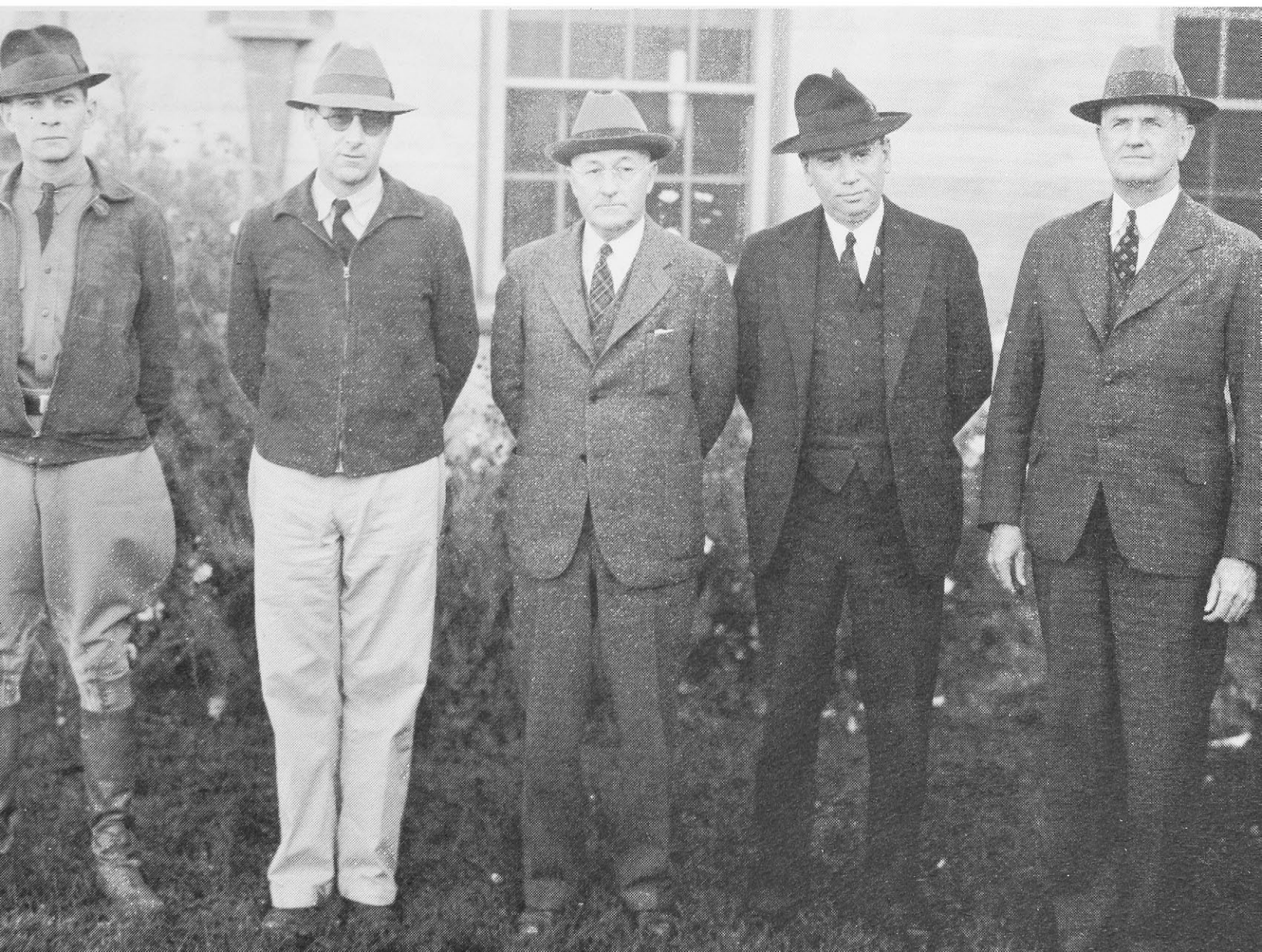
Visitors and some of the men in charge of the project were asked, on rare occasions, to pose for the cameras for the sake of posterity.

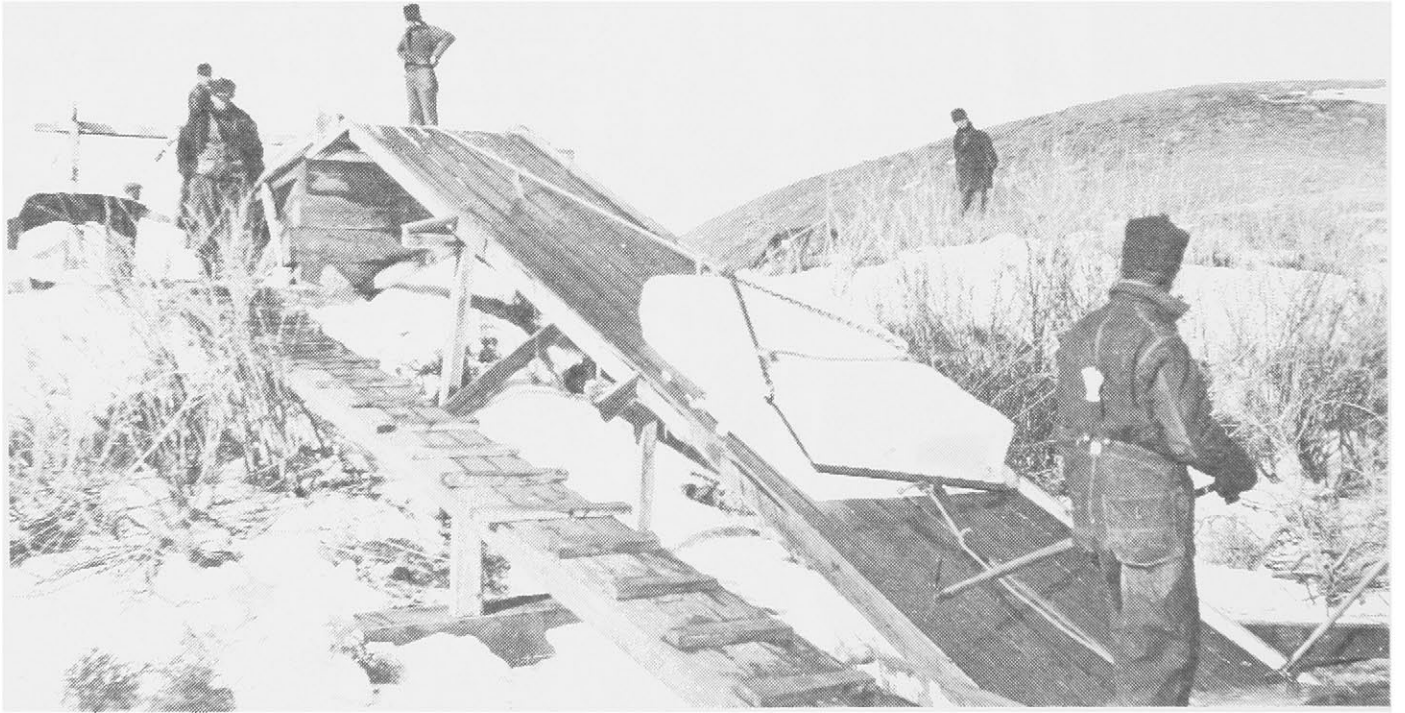
Starting with the photo below and moving clockwise, we have a visit from the Chief of Engineers in 1940;

l. to r., Maj Bud Iry, executive to the district engineer, Maj. Clark Kittrell, district engineer, Maj. Gen. Julian Schley, chief of engineers, Maj. Gen. Max Tyler, assistant chief of engineers, and Brig. Gen. C. L. Sturdevant, division engineer, Missouri River Division.

In January 1935, Philadelphia's District Engineer, Lt. Col. J. C. H. Lee, visits Fort Peck to observe operations.

At upper left, part of the Fort Peck staff poses in front of the Administration Building. From l. to r., William P. Bushnell, Frederick C. Kendall, Frank Gichard, Clarence S. Smith, Capt. C. H. Chorpening, Samuel G. Neff, Joseph Bowers, Allan Wyman and Luther Hoham.





Things weren't always on track

To think that a four-mile-long dam constructed of hydraulic fill could be closed in the short span of three years implies that all must have gone smoothly.

As if learning to effectively operate the “modern equipment” of that day wasn't a big enough challenge, sometimes even the best laid plans—like the train below—jumped the track. These gravel cars overturned at the spillway site in September 1938 when a string of 37 unattended cars rolled down a grade near the gate structure.

For the most part, the “Fort Peck Navy” (upper left) stayed afloat, except for those memorable occasions when, say, a booster pump gave out and the sludge backed up, filling a dredge or booster barge with silt.

And of course there were times when draining a pond simply couldn't be done with a pump (lower left).



Wib Dolson

Some kind of cowboy . . .

A big man even into his 90th year, Wilber “Wib” Dolson still sports a cowboy hat and handlebar mustache. He’s one of America’s last true cowboys.

From his comfortable apartment in a nursing home in Glasgow, Wib’s memory intermittently kicks in and out, piecing together the part he played in the Fort Peck experience.

His eyes shine as he recounts the old days, occasionally clouding over with doubt as the bottom drops out of his memory.

Wib came to work on the dam in 1934, hauling steel to the center of the dam for the cutoff wall, and also moving lumber with a Caterpillar. He later pushed a wheelbarrow in and out of the tunnels, but quit because his height made it uncomfortable there.

Great chance

He also remembers hauling water and selling it to area residents. “Those were hard times . . . it was such a great chance for me, getting that job at Fort Peck . . .”

Born in Omaha, Wib was a Montana rancher living near the Canadian border when he heard what was happening at Fort Peck. Wib settled with his family in Wheeler.

It’s hard to picture him leaving a ranch for a construction job, but he says the lingering drought was difficult for ranchers to contend with.

“Maybe someone above wanted his children to do well,” is how he explains his appearance on the Fort Peck scene.

Wib recalls there were “lots of fights,” and “some real rough characters” working at the dam.

He laughs as he tells of the day the government announced it was going to fingerprint all the dam workers. “Hundreds of men left camp and never

came back. Ten percent of my crew upped and vanished.”

Wib remembers a friend or two from days past.

“I had one friend . . . Frank was his name. He was a nice guy, but with a temper,” he recalls.

“I heard that he once intended to shoot a lawman while robbing a train but the conductor stepped in front and got killed,” he says. “He was a nice person who wanted to get married. He could cook, but he might’ve been hard to live with, I don’t know . . .”

He remembers one of his own fights, when he was talking to a girl in a saloon and a “guy named Talbott” asked me outside.

“I took after him but couldn’t catch him. He went to get his rifle.”

Whip him

He also remembers a guard at the damsite. “He was big, quite an Irishman. I always felt like tryin’ to whip him.”

Wib laughs as he talks about the whiskey they had sent down from Canada. “We had three 55-gallon barrels of it. We bored holes in the barrels and drank it. It was good.”

His laughter turns quickly to tears and he calls out his wife’s name. “Ahh, Sue . . . I miss Sue . . .”

A schoolteacher, Sue died in 1984. She was Wib’s wife for 56 years and together they brought five children into the world. (One daughter, Alice, is married to Ron Wallem, project manager at Fort Peck at the time of the 50th Anniversary.)

Wib begins to fade. He is *fighting* terminal cancer, which is different than just *having* terminal cancer.

If it wasn’t for his years, one might give the old rancher even odds of whipping the disease.

He’s that kind of cowboy.



When Wib wasn't celebrating another birthday, he was leading parades and branding cattle as a mere octogenarian.

New life meant mischief . . .

For a boy raised by strict parents on a Missouri farm, A. B. "Walt" Waltenspiel's discovery of freedom at Fort Peck in the exciting '30s was a most refreshing change of pace.

Well, at least for him it was.

Whether Fort Peck or Waltenspiel were ever the same after sharing some memorable years together one can only guess at, for it is not recorded in official historical documentation of the time.

It would appear from his own written account, however, that "Walt" did nothing but raise hell during the early years at Fort Peck.

Now 74 and retired in La Mesa, Calif., Walt, who worked at Fort Peck for a total of five years, wrote that he also worked in the Pittsburgh, New Orleans and Fort Worth Districts, as well as in the Southwest Division following his days at Fort Peck.

He also transferred to the Navy with the Naval Air Station in San Diego and held military commissions and civilian positions in both the Army and the Navy.

In a letter written to the District News, Walt

wrote of "life in the barracks" as only one of the boys could.

He writes that prior to his hearing of the big dam being built in Montana, he was burdened with plenty of chores to do around the farm. When the family moved to a small town after his eighth-grade year, Walt, who was "rather shy," noticed no improvement in his social life, even during his college years.

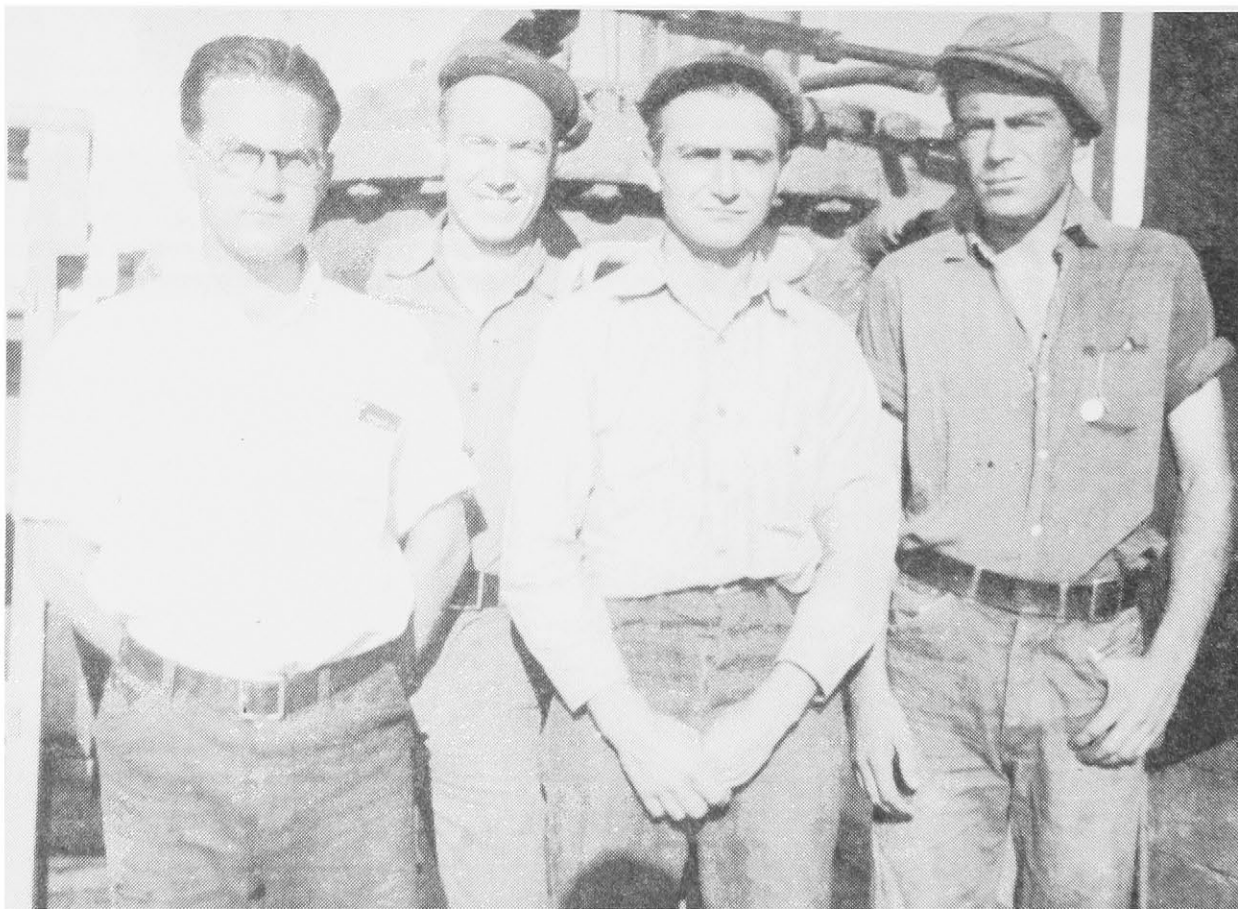
Lord, did that change when he got to Fort Peck.

Reading down the list of pranks pulled by Walt on his barracks mates and colleagues at the dam site is an exhausting experience, and frustrating as well, for few are appropriate for the printed page.

You know, boys will be boys kind of stuff.

Assigned to a room in the barracks, Walt recalls the sheer "enjoyment at being totally on my own, with a job and a regular paycheck for the very first time." Being housed with a group of single men varying in age, one can begin to imagine how a shy but spirited youth might grow wild and worldly in a hurry.

Among some of the recountable adventures initiated by the Missouri farmboy with the friendly



Floating booster crew #4 (swing) consisted of (from left) striker Henry Markowitz, shift engineer A. B. "Walt" Waltenspiel, and oilers A. E. Schmidt and Harold "Curley" McCue. This photo was taken aboard pump boat 3701, Sept. 5, 1938.



Never one to let weather put a damper on fun or frolic, Waltenspiel (right) and Dick Osenburg demonstrate the art of turning the other cheek in the 40-below temperatures so common in January 1935.

face, Walt recalls his practice of nailing roommates' shoes to the floor while the unsuspecting "pal" was sleeping off a rough night in town.

Walt's words spring almost gleefully from the page as he tells of the victim slipping into his shoes while still fuzzy-headed and attempting to waltz his way to the outhouse in a fit of necessity. The reader almost hears Walt laughing at the part about one victim "falling forward on his face."

Cutting up rubber bands and mixing them in the pipe tobacco of a stubbornly incessant smoker may have put a bad taste in some mouths, but it usually persuaded smokers from further fouling the air of tightly sealed barracks, which were often crowded on

days when it was too cold to work.

"It cured the habit and ruined some good pipes," allows Walt.

Placing the hand of a sleeping—and soon-to-be-embarrassed—party pal in warm water was a common practice, as was extensive short sheeting of roomies' beds.

Walt also writes of bash-the-wall-in football games played in the barracks, which abruptly became extinct when management withdrew the damages from the checks of all the residents. "Naturally, the players were well oiled before the games," he writes.

"And then there were those Glasgow girls . . ."

The only thing he hasn't done is

There is a roaring flame in Chuck Johnston's restless soul, not the mellowing embers one might expect considering his 72 years.

You can tell that he'd like to go hunting again, or jump in his plane, or grab his camera and shoot a photo essay for Life Magazine, or send a curve ball screaming over the head of a helpless shortstop, or take his post on a battleship, or sing at a neighbor's wedding.

He has done all those things and more.

But these days a stroke deprives Chuck of the free-flowing mobility that might allow him to expend some of the pent-up steam which originates deep in the souls of men like him.

Nevertheless, Charles J. Johnston will not be subdued, and partial paralysis is nothing more than inconvenient.

His energy reigns, his mind leaps, and his memory paints a vivid blue streak before, alas, it falters.

His eyes lock on yours, pleading desperately to relay his message. But you don't need to hear his message, for once his gaze locks you in, you just

know

You know that it took men like Chuck Johnston to build the Fort Peck Dam.

He is cooperative, sometimes meek, always convinced and sometimes feisty.

"Spell my name right," he orders a reporter. "Make sure the 't' is in Johnston so folks know I'm Irish."

He is a straightforward man of definite opinions, never checking the direction of the wind before he speaks.

His power of recall is intermittently captivating, marred only by the effects of "that damned stroke."

The interview takes place in the living room, where Chuck's "station" is all set up—a couch, tape recorder, radio, candy, water, and a TV, among other things.

Through his front picture window, the sun hangs high in the sky, sending rays that whitewash his living room.

When the visit comes to an end hours later—too soon, in other words—the last pink and orange streaks of sunset splash across the sky.



'Sis' still has her memories.

—Photo by Kevin Quinn

'We never worried'

Her memories of the early days at Fort Peck bring a flicker to her ever-smiling eyes, and Thelma "Sis" Bondy will tell you that raising her five children in Fort Peck was a grand experience.

"We never had to worry; the kids would come and go as they pleased. There was so little crime because it was a government town. It was really good living and it was so clean," she says as she sews.

The widow of Orville K. "OK" Bondy, who served as a corps mechanic for 38 years, "Sis" likes the "strong sense of community" Fort Peck is known for. "There are such beautiful people here"

In days gone by she did sewing for her family and friends, worked in the cafe and helped with Girl Scouts and Cub Scouts.

It is a great source of pride to her that her son Kenneth is the only native son to ever return and teach at Fort Peck.

Her days now are quiet, with her main focus on her children and grandchildren.

"When you're all alone, you just don't get out as much," she says, although she does play bingo in town occasionally.

"I remember when people were everywhere and it was like a beehive. Things never shut down. I especially remember the workers going 24 hours straight everyday, and the pounding on the steel was constant. All night long it was bangedy-bang and no one could sleep."

"I have my memories . . . I had so many good friends. Some are dead now and most have moved away"

But her dancing eyes still see them.

fade away

He came from Nashua, where he struggled to keep his aunt's farm productive after his uncle's death in '32.

"It was a helluva poor farm year. Those were real tough times," he says.

When word of the big dam circulated, Chuck's father ventured that direction and was one of the first 50 hired at the project site. A World War I veteran, he took a job on a dredge, and Chuck would follow in his footsteps a short while later.

To improve on his half-dollar an hour wages, Chuck later took a job with a contractor and helped clear the damsite.

After two years of that, he took a job carrying mail on a rural route, relying on horses and bobsleds to cope with weather obstacles.

Then he hooked on for good with the corps as photo lab supervisor. His career was interrupted only when he enlisted with the Navy during World War II.

He was assigned as the photographer on the battleship SOUTH DAKOTA, and he talks with pride about the day he photographed the Japanese surrender aboard the USS MISSOURI.

One of his photographs from World War II earned him a compliment directly from the lips of none other than Admiral Halsey, who told Johnston personally that his photo of cloud-encircled Mt. Fujiyama was easily the best Navy photograph of the year.

"He was just feeling good because the Japanese were about to surrender," says Chuck. An enlargement of that photo hangs over the couch, and Johnston's modesty can't conceal the obvious pride.

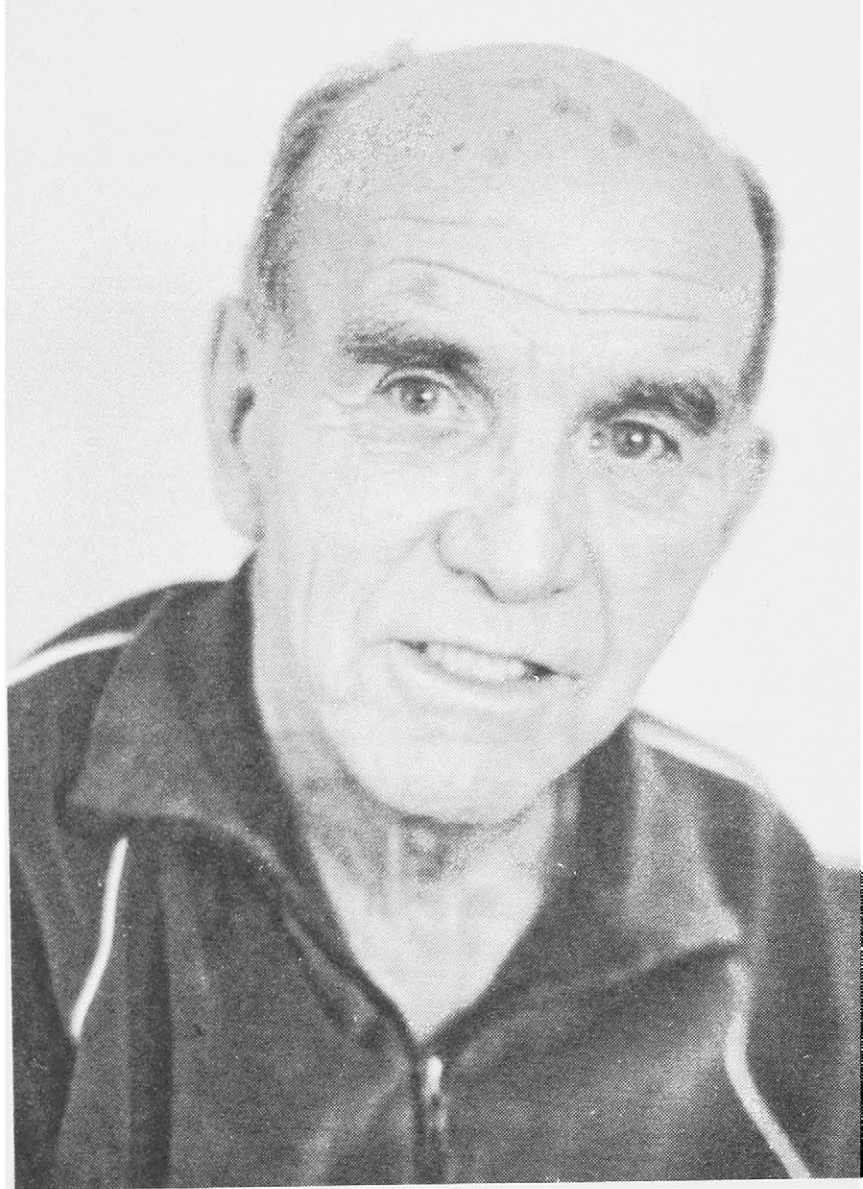
Photos he took at Fort Peck turned up in Life Magazine more than once, with one memorable spread showing the attempted rescue of a confused deer running amok in the spillway chute after accidentally jumping the side walls.

Many of Johnston's memories center on friends who shared the good times with him such as Don "Bing" Burns, who did the best imitation of Bing Crosby anywhere.

"Everyone in east Montana knew Bing," says Chuck.

A baritone of considerable talent himself, Chuck sang at countless weddings for friends and neighbors.

"Since the stroke I haven't been able to sing," he says, but one can imagine how he would sound by



Johnston: Fort Peck was built right.

—Photo by Kevin Quinn

listening to his resonant speaking voice.

He listens daily to tapes of barbershop quartets, including the one he sang with for many years.

Mary, his wife of 52 years, returns from a shopping spree in Glasgow as he finishes talking of his experiences with the Fort Peck flying service, which he founded.

"He's been very active over the years," she says. "He's done about everything."

His proudest feat, however, seems to have been playing a role in building the dam, and he is adamant about the dam's place in history. He calls it "one of the greatest dams ever built."

"Hell, you couldn't bomb it out, it's so strong. And it's by far the safest dam around . . . I wouldn't trust a concrete dam . . . this one was built right."

“I was happy to have a job”

“Any job was better than none. I didn’t know anything else but work.”

That’s how Samuel Ellsworth “Sam” Richardson Jr. came to take a job at the Fort Peck Dam in 1934, and “that’s what got us through the Depression.”

Sam and his wife Josephine still live in Fort Peck, and they plan to die there. Their spirited interplay is nearly as interesting as their memories.

At one juncture, Sam says, “We lived in Wheeler in a 9-by-12 house. It was our first home”

“Oh, was that a home?” chimes in Jo.

“Damn right,” says Sam without a blink. “There was a bed and a place to wash”

The two were married in 1936 and have five children. One son, Sam, is the power plant manager on the Fort Peck project.

Jo chides him for being away when their first child was born.

“I was duck hunting. If I recall, that’s about the time the Finns were raising hell with the Russians,”



Richardson made this diamondwood cane from timbers cleared from the damsite in 1934.

Photo by Kevin Quinn

he says.

The 13th and last child in his family, Sam, now 78, recalls his years as a laborer in the '30s.

"I was working in the material yard of a construction contractor in 1934. We were working on the railroad trestle on the east side of the river.

"I joined the corps as a tractor operator and I drove a pickup. Eventually, I worked into a civil service clerk job," he says.

He remembers loading materials on barges because there were no bridges. "Better than bein' a bum, knockin' around," he says. "I was happy to have a job and I wasn't too particular. If you didn't want to work, there was someone behind you that did."

He remembers carrying gravel bags until his shoulders ached.

He also recalls his foreman. "He'd stand up above us and watch us slave away all day hauling gravel . . . I never hated a guy so much. He was a real good guy once you got to know him, though."

The day of the slide in 1938 he spent his entire shift searching for bodies and helping the ones who survived. "I knew two or three of the men killed that day."

Jo also worked, serving as housemaid of the district engineer, Maj. Clark Kittrell and his family. "They were nice people, and I was supposed to work as a nursemaid, but I did housework, cooked for them and cooked for the dogs. They raised big Labradors."

In their neat and comfortable home, the Richardsons share small talk over coffee. They are as content a pair as one will find, and they've come a long way from that 9-by-12 shack in Wheeler.

Something Sam said earlier comes to mind as they proudly mention that they've been in Fort Peck for more than 50 years.

"The loafers didn't last very long."

"Everyone felt it"

Fort Peck was a special place

Editor's note: The author of the following article now lives in Tulsa, Okla.

by Nancy A. Johnson

I was at Fort Peck not as a worker, but as the small daughter of O. M. Confer. My father worked on the tunnels—maybe as the supervisor, I can't remember.

I was eight years old when we moved from Vinita, Okla., to join my father, who had been working at Fort Peck for a year. We remained in Fort Peck for two glorious years before Dad was transferred to Harlem to supervise the quarry that supplied Fort Peck with rocks.

I vaguely recall the trip to Fort Peck, but the outstanding event that I remember was a snowstorm that blew in as we neared Fort Peck, and it was the Fourth of July! Quite a change from the record-breaking heat wave in Oklahoma where it was 117 degrees in the shade.

I don't recall the exact details of the town as we drove in, but the houses all looked pretty much the same except for different paint on the window trims. The porches were screened in and some were on the side, some on the front. The exterior siding was rough wood that was treated with some kind of oil, I believe. The inside had beaverboard for walls.

Agates, arrowheads

My brother and I did our part to decorate by filling in the nail holes with putty. Our parents must have done the painting while we were playing in the coulees. We spent hours and hours there, eagerly exploring for Indian arrowheads and agates. Both were bountiful.

We went on our own and our parents never worried. That in itself made it a truly fine experience and we loved those times dearly.

We spent a lot of hours at the coulees during the winter, too. These foothills were just right for sledding and skiing. Again, we went on our own and stayed until we were about half-frozen. We'd return to our snug little house and warm up over the floor furnace with a cup of hot chocolate.

We lived across the street from the Recreation Center. It was a perfect setup—a large building with a fine gym for basketball games in the winter.

I remember once when the House of David played an exhibition basketball game. Each player was well over six feet tall, and they looked like giants to us. They also had thick, heavy, black beards and were striking looking as well as fantastic basketball players.

There were many local games between the different departments. I remember one particular star who was our idol. And we yelled our lungs out for him.

Ice rink

I also remember the playground equipment on the grounds of the Recreation Building. We spent a lot of our time on the swings and the slide, and I think there was even a merry-go-round. Behind the building were some great tennis courts, and the grounds adjacent to the tennis courts served as a baseball field in the summer and as an ice rink in the winter.

Many times we would skate by the light of the moon after dinner. The air was so crisp and so clear. It was like a little slice of heaven on earth. We could play unattended no matter where we went, day or night, and both the children and their parents enjoyed a freedom and sense of security beyond compare, especially by today's standards.

It was joyous.

Although I don't recall the entire downtown area, I remember we had a grocery store and a drug store.

Fort Peck was a special place

(Continued)

There was also the theater, where we attended inter-denominational Sunday School.

The inner lobby was graced with a complete skeleton of a dinosaur which had been discovered at the job site. Such discoveries were fairly common, I recall.

In fact, I believe the area was referred to as an archeologist's paradise. There must have been a post office because we received mail, but I don't know about banking arrangements . . . almost all the transactions were in cash.

Upon our arrival at Fort Peck we drove to Glasgow to buy furniture. Our clothing came primarily from Montgomery Wards in Glasgow.

Dressed alike

My mother elected to dress my brother and I alike for those cold, cold winters.

First, we put on our long handles, then some long ribbed stockings, held up by garter belts or by elastic bands that always slipped.

Then came our outer garments, a wool dress for me and a sweater or shirt for my brother. Then came our black corduroy jodhpur breeches, followed by three or four pairs of knee-high wool stockings. After that, we laced on our boots from toe to knees.

The outer layer consisted of a black corduroy jacket lined with sheepskin. Earmuffs covered by a knitted wool cap protected our heads while wool gloves covered with sheepskin-lined mittens protected our hands.

Last but not least, was the all-important scarf to cover the face and neck.

Thusly layered, we took our books and trudged through the large snowdrifts to school, which was on the far side of town from my house.

I especially recall one morning when it was unusually cold. The wind was howling, snow was coming down so thick and fast you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Mother hesitated to let me go to school but finally decided it would be all right.

It was an uneventful walk through the blinding snow and I was very happy as I neared the school. The principal rushed out to greet me. Several anxious mothers had called him and he was busy checking each arrival for frostbite.

Frostbite

Only one girl had a rosy frostbite on her cheek, but I don't recall that she had any permanent damage. The temperature had plummeted from 40 degrees below zero to 64 below—and 74 below was reported at the dredge cuts.

The memory of that day is the reason I smile when

I hear someone here in Tulsa, Okla. say "It's too cold to snow" when the temperature nears zero.

I remember Dad and his fellow workers used to confer frequently during those cold wintery blasts. They worried about whether or not to pour concrete, because if it was too cold, the concrete might crack as it cured. I guess they must have figured it out pretty well—no major cracks in 50 years.

Yes, those winters were cold. Nothing unusual about 40 below. Funny, you could feel the difference as it neared zero, and then again when it hit 25 below. But one got used to that and dressed for it. The next noticeable weather change was when it got down to 40 below. The 64 below didn't feel a whole lot colder—the blizzard was mostly a nuisance.

And the summers were hot, dry and dusty, but never much over 100 degrees. One summer we were infested with grasshoppers—all sizes and kinds—some of the biggest I'd ever seen.

Grasshoppers thick

I remember going to a friend's house and having to cross a field of tall, dry grass. The grasshoppers were thick, everywhere. It was not frightening, but it was a big hassle. I spent the whole time brushing off the grasshoppers; some were so stubborn they had to be picked off. The trick was to pick them off without getting 'hopper juice' all over your fingers. That was about a 50-50 proposition. Yuk!

Fort Peck was unique. We lived there in 1934 and '35. There was a zest about it that cannot be matched. People came from all walks of life and from all over the United States. There was an unbeatable bond, for all had known the hard times of the Depression, and many had suffered separation from husbands and fathers, off seeking work—in vain, for the most part.

All were delighted to have a job at last and to be reunited with their loved ones. It was a happy, bustling community, a truly delightful town, blighted on occasion by an injury or a death at the job site. These were kept at a minimal rate, all things considered.

Lifelong friends were the result of the Fort Peck experience. Everyone agreed that Fort Peck was special. It was super how doom and despair were replaced with joy and hope.

It brought people together for one purpose and one purpose only—a way to survive, a way to do something of great magnitude, a way to once more be constructive and productive. Everyone felt it, everyone lived it and everyone loved it. The construction of the Fort Peck Dam, the largest earth-filled dam, at that time, in the world, deserves a special place in our history.

Power of memory, tower of pride

It was many years ago that Manson Bailey Jr. vowed that the power of his memory would always serve the people he dearly loves—the people of Montana.

His official title is Executive Director of the Valley County Development Council.

But Bailey's avocation is his true love—that as curator of the Valley County Museum in Glasgow.

His passion for history—particularly that of northeastern Montana and Fort Peck—is apparent as he leads you through the museum, describing each display with eloquence and relating its symbolic significance to the development of the area.

One of his favorite topics is the Fort Peck Dam, not only because three generations of Baileys worked on the project, but also because his "proudest moment" occurred as a result of his work on the second powerhouse.

Bailey, who describes himself as "somewhat of an engineer," served as safety engineer and field layout engineer in the late '50s. "For someone with no formal training, I was proud to have been selected in those capacities," he says earnestly.

His father worked on the construction spillway in the early days. "Dad was in the Materials Section and was responsible for figuring and ordering materials for the spillway," he says. "Dad was proud because there was very little in the way of materials left when the job was complete."

Then when Manson Bailey Jr.'s son served as a carpenter's helper on new housing at Fort Peck, he worked with Jack Wiley, who had worked alongside Manson Bailey Sr. in the early days of the project.

"He called my boy ol' man Bailey's son's son," says Bailey with pride.

Bailey's career has been successful and demanding but never boring. He started out with the Bureau of Reclamation as a surveyor and later worked his way up from a member of the Montana Highway Department's survey crew to its chief.

In 1952, he was appointed by the governor to serve as commissioner of the Montana Fish and Game Department. He later served three terms in the State House of Representatives representing Valley County. He also served as the layout engineer of the central heating



Bailey's 'proudest moment' was at Fort Peck.

—Photo by Kevin Quinn

system at the airbase in Glasgow in the '50s.

A longtime farmer and rancher, Bailey says almost apologetically that he "never got too big because I was involved in extensive public service."

Through the years he has written many historical articles and papers on Fort Peck and northeast Montana. To see him in the museum and to hear him expound on each display is to know what he doesn't have to say, but often does anyway.

"I am proud to be a Montanan."

