

SIXTY YEARS LATER: WHY GLEN CANYON?

Scott A. Miltenberger, Ph.D.

Principal Historian



"The Water That Connects Us"

Water Education Foundation's 2026 Colorado River Symposium

Thursday, September 24, 2026

Drury Plaza Hotel, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Glen Canyon Dam Dedication – September 22, 1966



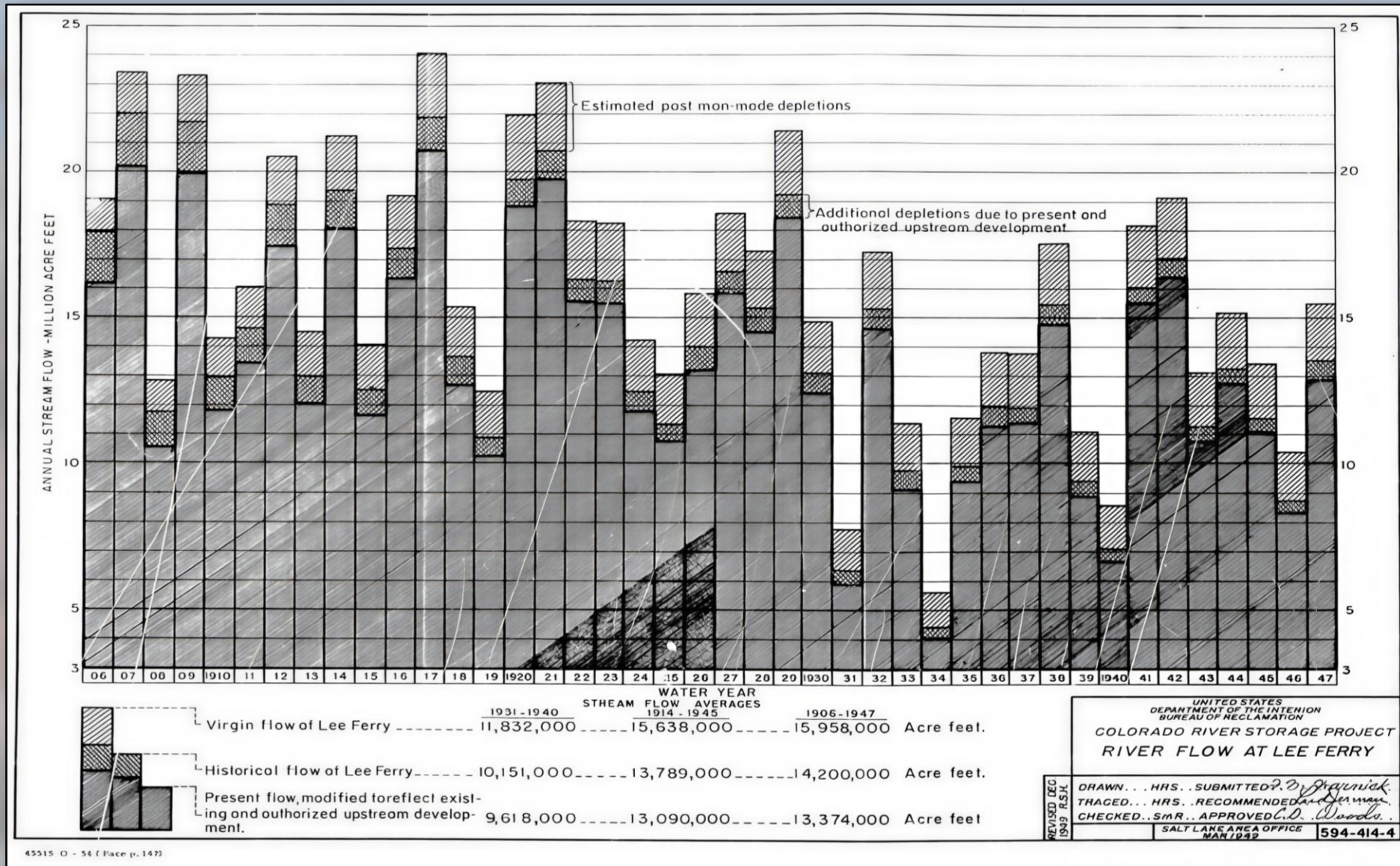
(Glen Canyon History & Colorado River Film Archives, <https://www.youtube.com/@GlenCanyonHistory>)

The Colorado River Compact, Santa Fe, November 1922



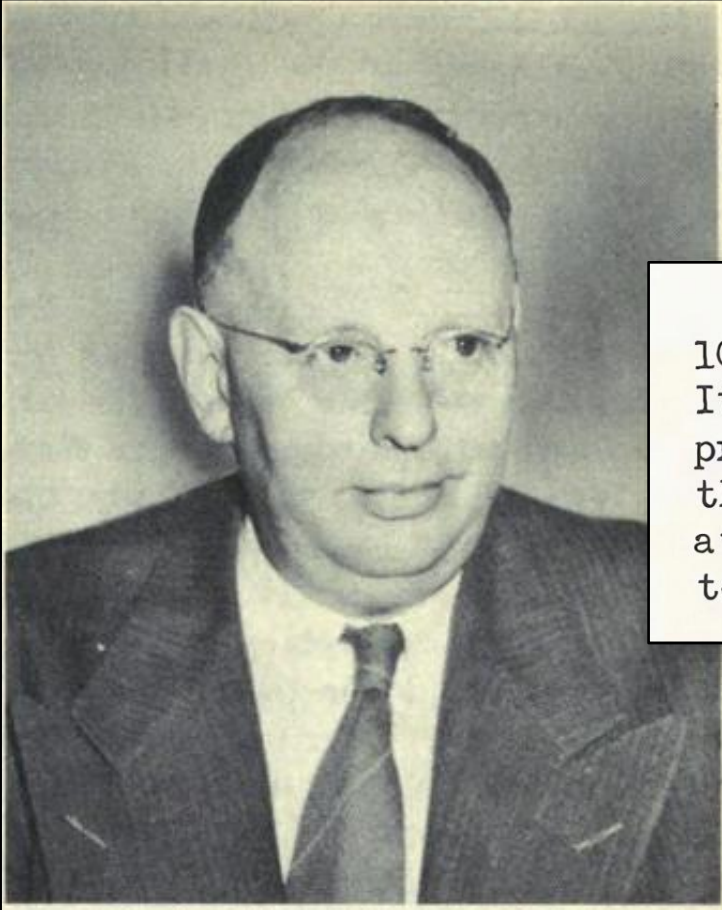
Colorado River Commission
(Clarence C. Stetson, "Making an Empire to Order," *World's Work*, November 1922: 93.)

Reclamation Assessment of Lee Ferry Streamflow into the 1940s



Colorado River Storage Project, H. Doc 364, 83d Cong., 2d sess. (GPO, 1954), between 146 and 147.

J. R. Riter: “...Necessity for Holdover Capacity in the Upper Basin ...”

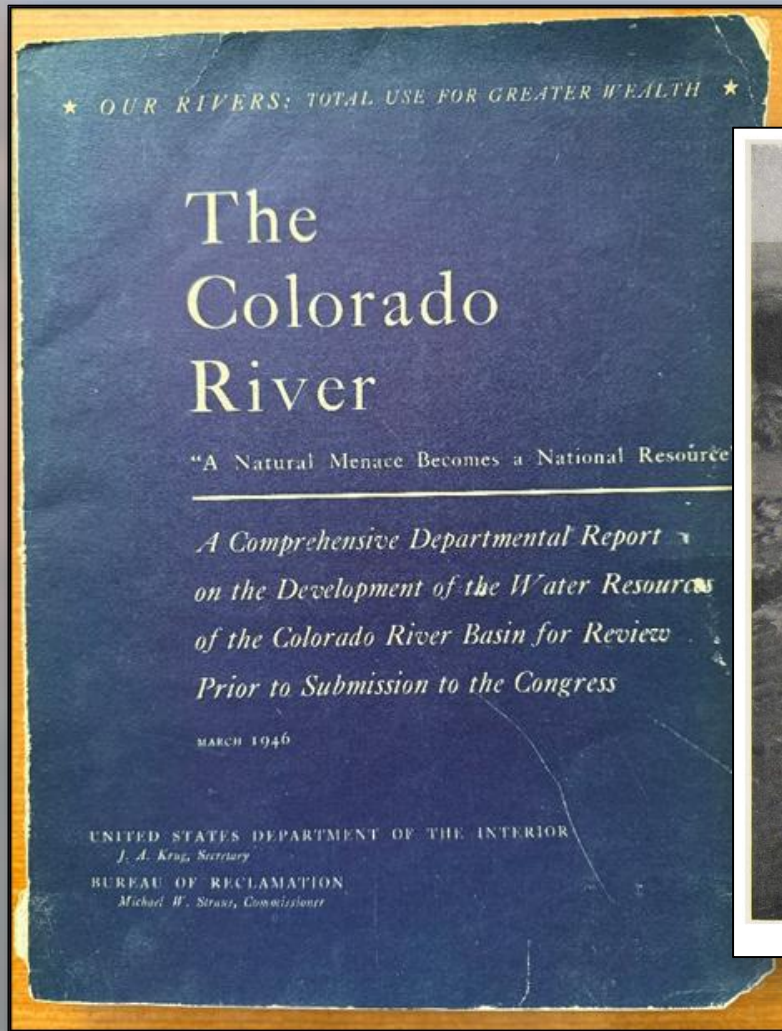


In my reference to Table 5, you will note that the minimum 10-year inflow under 1988 conditions was less than 75,000,000 acre-feet. It was the awareness of that situation in making the 1940 studies that prompted me to realize the necessity for holdover storage capacity in the Upper Basin to permit the Upper Basin to meet its Compact obligation at Lee Ferry and to concurrently utilize water allocated to it under the terms of the Compact.

Riter to Ival Goslin, Engineer-Secretary, Upper Colorado River Commission
November 10, 1959.
(Goslin Papers, Colorado State University, Ft. Collins)

J.R. “Randy” Riter
US Bureau of Reclamation
(*The Reclamation Era* 40:2 [May 1954], 33.)

The “Blue Book” (1946)



NEAR LEE FERRY—The dividing point

70. The following recommendations are made in view of the fact that there is not enough water available in the Colorado River system to permit construction of all the potential projects outlined in the report and for full expansion of existing and authorized projects, and that there has not been a final determination of the respective rights of the Colorado River Basin States to deplete the flow of the Colorado River:

(1) That the States of the Colorado River Basin, acting separately or jointly, recommend for construction, as the next stage of development, a group of projects, the stream-flow depletions of which will assuredly fall within ultimate allocations of Colorado River water which may be made to the individual States.

(2) That the States of the Colorado River Basin determine their respective rights to deplete the flow of the Colorado River consistent with the Colorado River Compact.

(3) That additional investigations, summarized below, and appropriations to the Department of the Interior for use by the various agencies within that Department for these investigations, be approved.

The Upper Basin Compact, Santa Fe, October 1948

Upper Colorado River Basin Compact

ARTICLE I

(a) The major purposes of this Compact are to provide for the equitable division and apportionment of the use of the waters of the Colorado River System, the use of which was apportioned in perpetuity to the Upper Basin by the Colorado River Compact; to establish the obligations of each State of the Upper Division with respect to the deliveries of water required to be made at Lee Ferry by the Colorado River Compact; to promote interstate comity; to remove causes of

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

OCTOBER 11, 1948



"President Truman signing Upper Colorado River Basin Compact, April 6, 1949."

**(Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum,
Independence, MO)**

**(Colorado River Compact Collection, Utah Division of
Archives & Records Service)**

Watson, Stone, Breitenstein, and Tipton



Edward Watson
UT Upper Basin Compact
Commissioner
(Utah Division of Water Rights)



Judge Clifford Stone
CO Upper Basin Compact
Commissioner
(*Greeley Daily Tribune*,
October 22, 1952.)

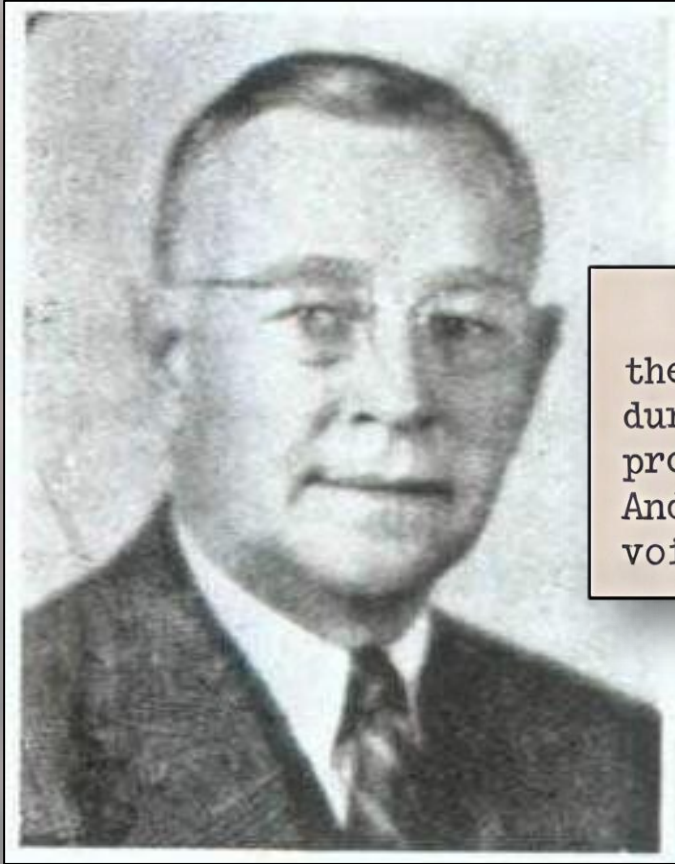


Jean Sala Breitenstein
CO Legal Advisor
(Tenth Circuit Historical
Society)



Royce J. Tipton
CO Engineering Advisor
(International Commission on
Irrigation & Drainage)

C. L. Patterson: “...Reservoirs to Make Good on the Obligations at Lee Ferry...”



Charles L. Patterson
Colorado Water Conservation Board
(Colorado Society of Engineers, *The Engineers Bulletin*, April 1944)

The same thing must happen here. The Upper Basin can't go far in the future without building reservoirs that will operate to release water during these drought cycles in order that irrigation projects and diversion projects upstream can continue to function. That is the purpose of them. And instead of shutting off projects, we are going to rely on these reservoirs to make good on the obligations at Lee Ferry.

“Meeting No. 5,” Denver, Colorado, Tuesday, December 2, 1947, Upper Colorado River Basin Compact Commission, *Official Record: Negotiation of Upper Colorado River Basin Compact, Signed at Santa Fe, New Mexico, on October 11, 1948*, Volume I, 30.
(Water Resources Collections and Archives, University of California, Riverside)

The Lee Ferry Obligation & the Design of CRSP in the 1950s

Regulatory storage

A capacity of 23 million acre-feet would be reserved in project reservoirs for long-time regulatory storage. The water stored would be released as needed in drought periods to meet the compact obligation at Lee Ferry. The reservoirs would be refilled during years of favorable water supply. In a dry decade such as that of 1931–40, release of the entire 23 million acre-feet would be necessary to meet the Lee Ferry obligation. A storage release in that amount would be neces-

Present flows in the upper basin are adequate to meet the 10-year Lee Ferry obligation. Within 20 or 25 years, however, the depletions are expected to increase to the extent that curtailment of consumptive uses will be necessary in protracted dry periods unless some storage water is available for delivery to the lower basin. If the required

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
DOUGLAS MCKAY, SECRETARY
BUREAU OF RECLAMATION
W. A. DEXHEIMER, COMMISSIONER
REGION 4
E. O. LARSON, REGIONAL DIRECTOR

REGIONAL DIRECTOR'S REPORT OF DECEMBER 1950 ON
COLORADO RIVER STORAGE PROJECT
AND PARTICIPATING PROJECTS
UPPER COLORADO RIVER BASIN

59

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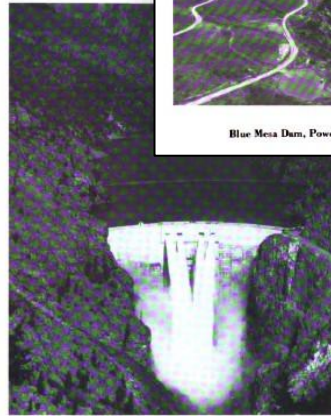
The Authorized CRSP “Upper Initial Units”



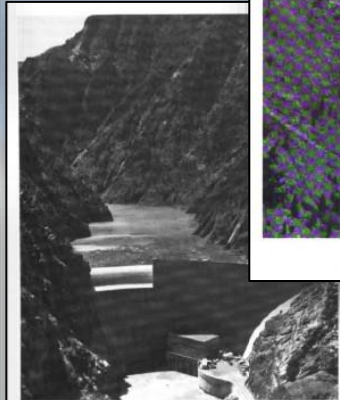
Flaming Gorge Dam



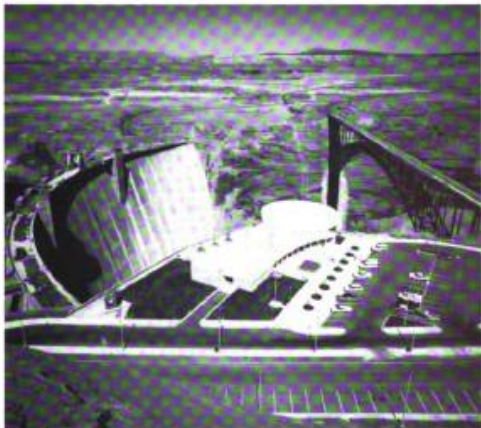
Blue Mesa Dam, Powerplant, and Reservoir



Morrow Point Dam and Reservoir



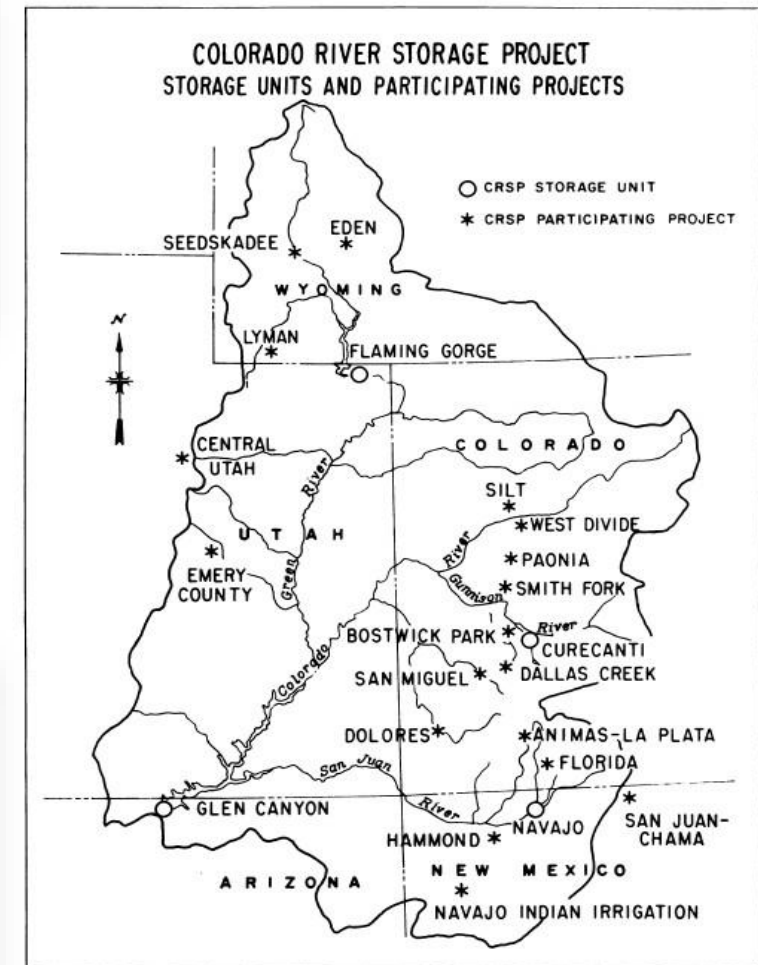
Crystal Dam and Powerplant



Glen Canyon Dam and Bridge



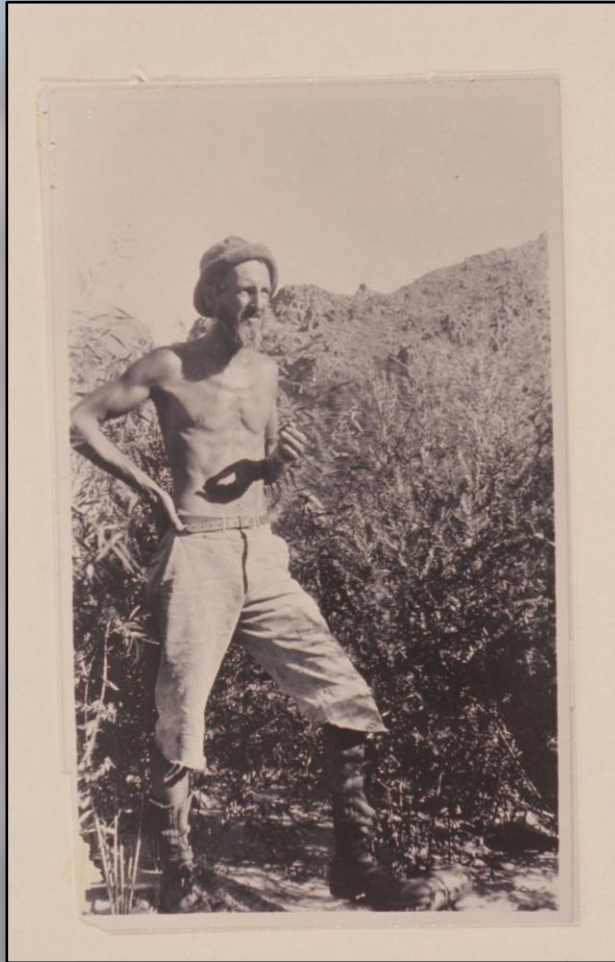
Navajo Dam and Reservoir



Colorado River Storage Project

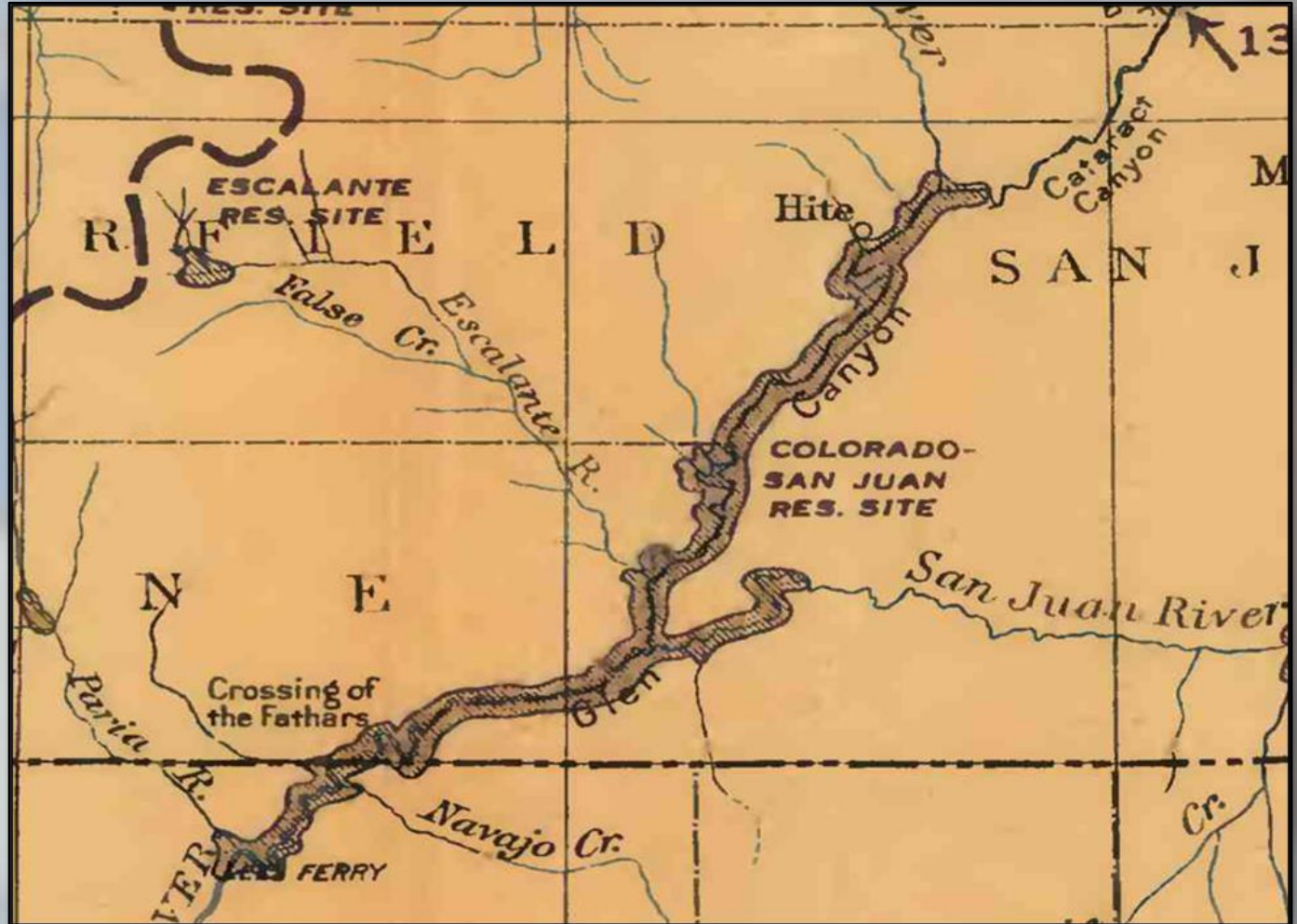
“Colorado River Storage Project,” Water and Power Resources Service, *Project Data: 1981* (GPO, 1981).

The Glen Canyon Reservoir Site



"E. C. LaRue at Diamond Creek,"
1923.

(Otis Marston Colorado River
Collection, Huntington Library,
San Marino, California)

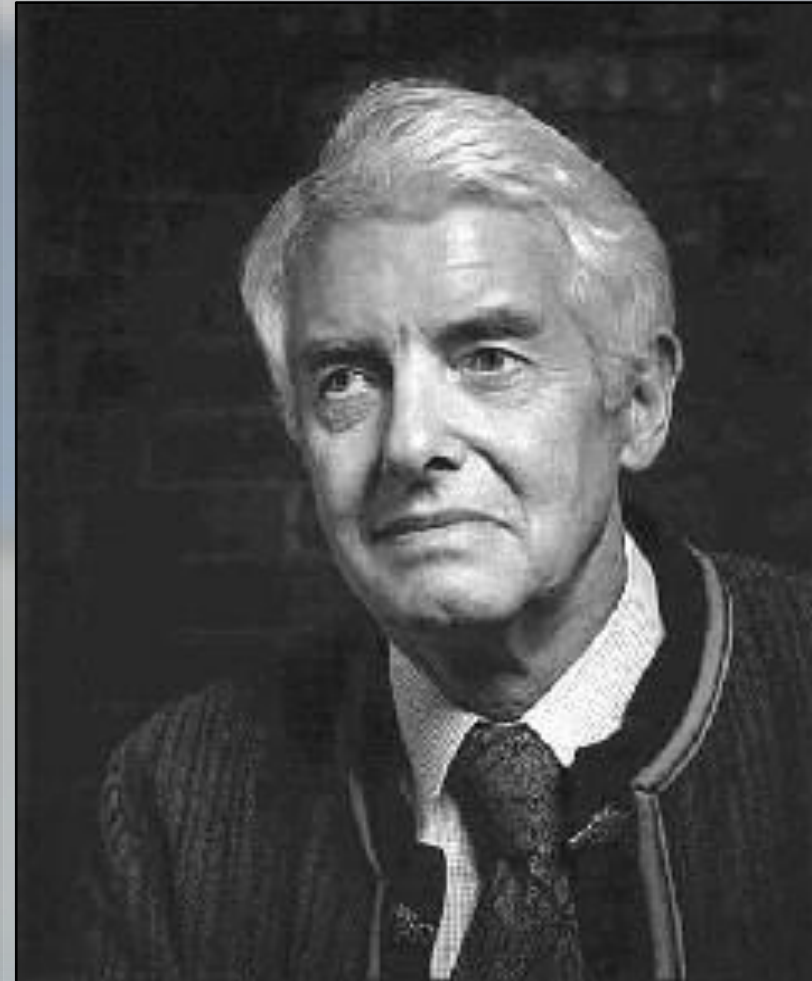


Excerpt of Plate XV, "Map Showing Constructed and Proposed Diversions from
Colorado River Basin to Mississippi River Basin," USGS Water Supply Paper 395,
Colorado River and Its Utilization (1916).

Echo Park and David Brower & the Sierra Club

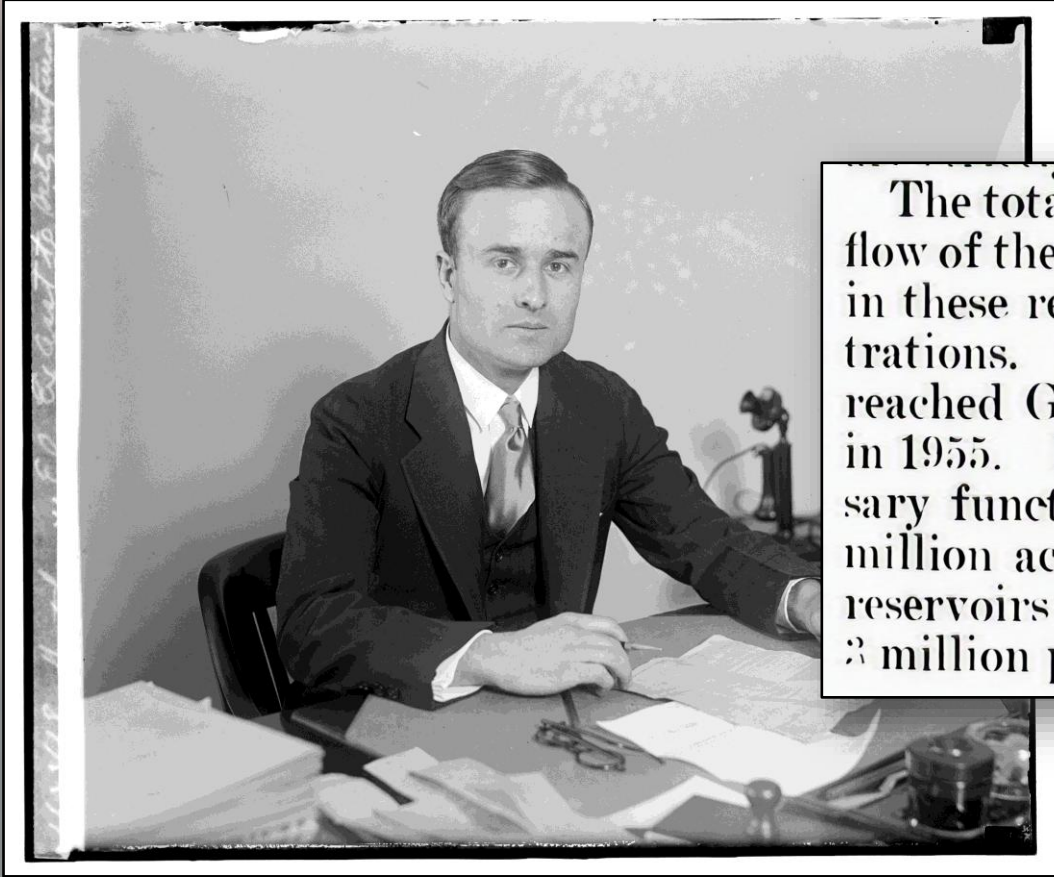


Artist rendering, from *Colorado River Storage Project and Participating Projects*, September 1950.
(RG 115, National Archives at Denver)



David Brower
Sierra Club Executive Director, 1952-1969
(Wikipedia)

Northcutt Ely's Criticism



Northcutt "Mike" Ely
Special Counsel for Colorado River Board of California
(Library of Congress)

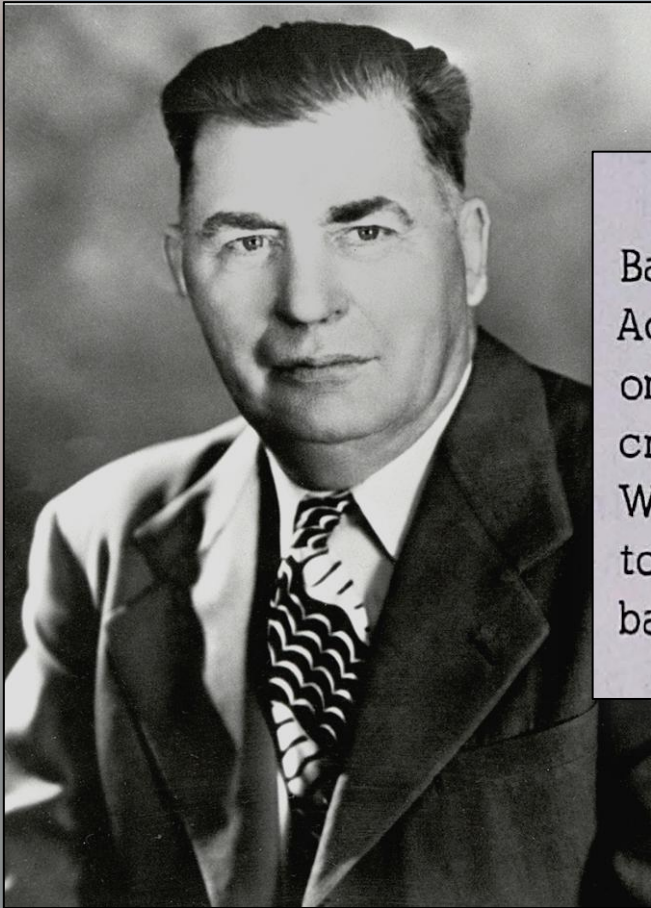
The total storage capacity proposed is enough to intercept the whole flow of the river for several years, and it is planned to hold over storage in these reservoirs for 20 to 35 years, or 5 to 9 presidential administrations. This is like holding back from the lower basin water which reached Glen Canyon in 1920 in order to release it to Hoover Dam in 1955. During the 50 years that these reservoirs will serve no necessary function except to generate power, they will evaporate some 30 million acre-feet of water. The evaporation loss from these power reservoirs will be over 600,000 acre-feet per year, enough for a city of 3 million people.

Colorado River Storage Project: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Irrigation and Reclamation of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs United States Senate Eighty-Fourth Congress First Session on S. 500, February 28, March 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, 1955 (GPO, 1955), 573.

Glen Canyon Dam Under Construction, 1960-1964



Edwin Johnson: “A Terrible Burden”



The Colorado River Compact imposes a terrifying burden on the Upper Basin. Before the people of Denver or Colorado Springs or the Air Force Academy can take a drink of Colorado River water, before Northern Colorado or the Arkansas Valley can turn a drop of Colorado River water on their parched crops, to say nothing of the Western Slope of Colorado, the State of Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico, 7,500,000 acre-feet of water must be delivered to the Lower States at Lee Ferry. Of course, we know that is on a ten-year basis, 75,000,000 acre-feet in those ten years, but that is a terrible burden.

**“Meeting No. 88, Denver, Colorado, April 14 and 15,” Upper Colorado River Commission,
Official Record, vol. 16 (1964), 72.**

(University of Denver Special Collections and Archives)

Edwin C. Johnson
26th & 34th Governor of Colorado,
US Senator, & Upper Colorado
River Commissioner
(Wikipedia)

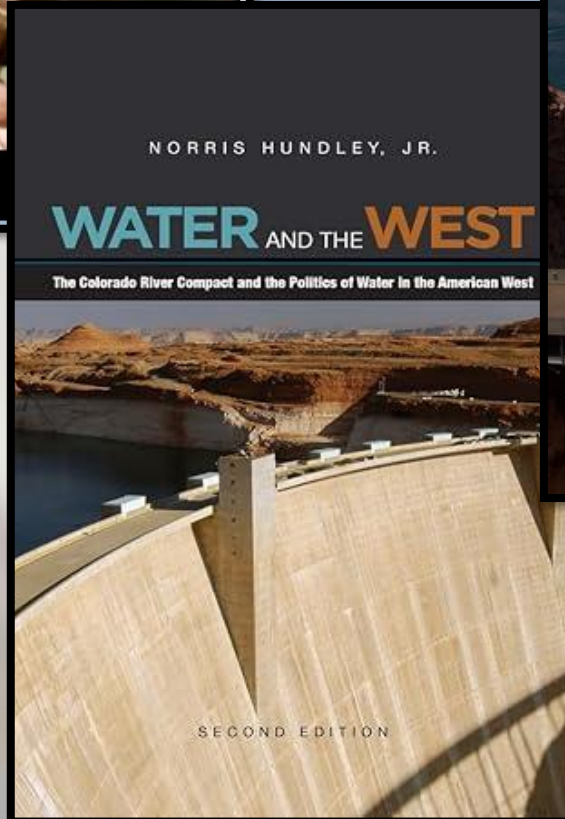
Glen Canyon Dam Completed & Dedicated



Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson read the dedicatory plaque after she and Secretary Udall had unveiled it. On the platform from left are Governor Goddard of Arizona, the First Lady, Senator Frank E. Moss, Secretary Udall (on right side of plaque), and Governor Rampton of Utah. Acting Commissioner of Reclamation Bennett applauds from his position near the podium. *Photos by Mel Davis*

“First Lady Dedicates Glen Canyon Dam,” *Reclamation Era* 52:4 (November 1966), 107.

Why Glen Canyon?



"Nation's Largest Reservoirs Are Drying Up, Threatening Life in the Southwest," *New York Times*, August 17, 2026.