

Myth # 1: Workers Buried in Hoover Dam by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist and Dennis Myers, Journalist

**"What people think is, is more important than what actually is so."
Abraham Lincoln**

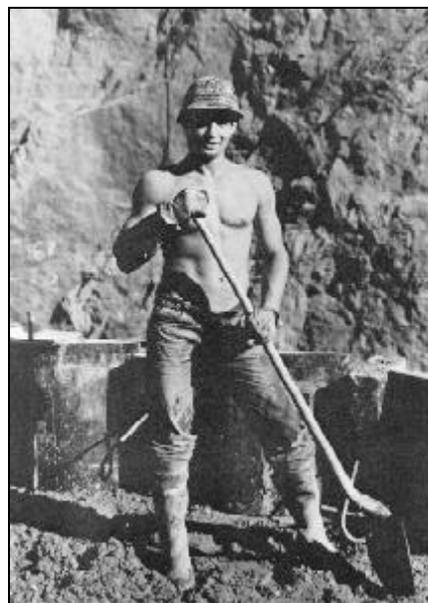
Lincoln should know. A lot of people think he participated in the Lincoln-Douglas debates when he ran for president, that Ann Rutledge was his great lost love, and that he wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope. None of which is true.

From Betsy Ross's mythical needlework to Ronald Reagan supposedly never getting the girl in the movies, our history is filled with "facts" that everyone knows are true--except they aren't.

Such folklore seems to grab the public imagination more tenaciously than the usually more interesting reality. Year after year, stories with no substance are repeated and retold while the facts remain buried.

In Nevada a number of tall tales have become accepted as truth and have in some cases resisted all efforts at correction. Here is one of the best known:

Workers Buried in Hoover Dam. This long-standing urban myth is the despair of Hoover Dam tour guides. Someone in every group taking the tour is sure to ask how many men are buried in the concrete of the gigantic dam. According to the story, on several occasions during the dam's construction in the 1930's a worker slipped, fell, and was covered by concrete as it was being poured. Unable to stop the cascade of concrete before the worker suffocated, supervisors had no choice but to allow the concrete to continue flowing--covering the worker and sealing him in the dam. This happened seven times during construction, according to the tale's most popular version.



In 1986, Tom King, Director of the University of Nevada Oral History Program, interviewed several men who had labored on the construction of Hoover Dam that told him a number of bodies lie buried in it. "These stories were made somewhat plausible by the authority of the tellers, themselves dam workers, and by our knowledge that building the dam was indeed an extremely hazardous enterprise," according to King, "however, further questioning revealed that none of the storytellers had actually witnessed such a tragedy or knew the identity of any of the victims. This was not surprising: the tellers believed what they were saying, but their stories were folklore--there are no bodies in the dam."

"The idea of workers forever entombed in the giant structure that they had helped build was so irresistibly poetic, so deliciously macabre," wrote Joseph Stevens in his award-winning book *Hoover Dam: An American Adventure* (1988), "that it became the basis for the most enduring legend of Hoover Dam, and article of faith for millions of visitors who down through the years would insist, despite the firm denials of tour guides, Bureau of Reclamation engineers, and historians, that the great arch was not only a dam but a sarcophagus."

Actually, the dam was poured in relatively small sections, so about all a fallen worker had to do to get his face clear of the rising concrete was to stand up. Officially, 96 dam workers died of various causes, and 112 persons unofficially, but none were permanently buried in concrete.

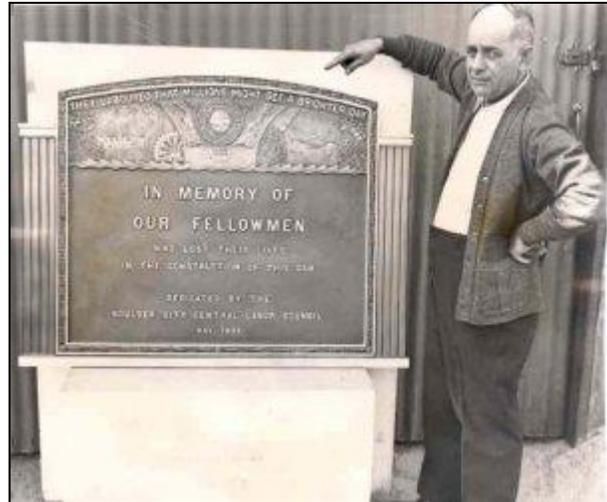
The closest any worker came to being buried was on November 8, 1933 when the wall of a form collapsed sending hundreds of tons of recently-poured concrete tumbling down the face of the dam. One worker below narrowly escaped with his life, however W.A. Jameson was not so lucky and was covered by the rain of debris. Jameson was the only man ever buried in Hoover Dam, and he was interred for just

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16 hours before his body was recovered. His remains were shipped to Rock Hill, South Carolina, where a brother and sister lived.

A structural engineer interviewed for a Discovery Channel documentary on Hoover Dam argued that it would be sheer folly to leave a worker buried in the dam. A decomposing body would jeopardize the dam's structural integrity and risk the multi-million dollar project including property and lives downstream on the Colorado River.

Suppressing information documenting workers buried in Hoover Dam would have required a colossal cover-up involving the federal government, the states of Nevada and Arizona, Clark and Mohave counties, two Las Vegas newspapers, and the many contractors who built the dam.



A similar myth surrounds the construction of Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River in the state of Washington. While more than 12,000 people found work on the project between 1933 and 1942, and 77 died on the job, none were buried in the concrete.

Perhaps people confuse a catastrophic event during the construction of the Fort Peck Dam in Montana with Hoover Dam and Grand Coulee Dam. On September 22, 1938, a section of the earth-filled dam broke loose and slid into the reservoir below. The debris buried eight workers and only two bodies were recovered. A monument pays tribute to the dead including the six men forever entombed in the Ft. Peck Dam.

1st Photo: Library of Congress
2nd Photo: Union Pacific Railroad

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