

Hoover Dam

Teacher's Guide

Rising more than 700 feet above the raging waters of the Colorado River, it was called one of the greatest engineering works in history. Hoover Dam, built during the Great Depression, drew men desperate for work to a remote and rugged canyon near Las Vegas. There they struggled against brutal heat, choking dust and perilous heights to build a colossus of concrete that brought electricity and water to millions, transforming the American Southwest.

Time Period: 1901 to 1935

Themes: The Great Depression and unemployment, working conditions and labor policies, racial discrimination, and the growth of the American West.

Before Viewing Discussion:

1. Ask students what they think were the biggest obstacles to developing the West.

When and how do they think these were overcome?

2. Have your students share their prior knowledge about dams: what are they used for, what are the benefits, what are the costs?

After Viewing Discussion:

1. Hoover Dam employees worked under dangerous conditions 7 days a week with 2 days off (unpaid) a year. Split students into two groups, one to find out about the work week, the other to research working conditions. Students looking at the work week should find out how it has changed over the past 100-150 years and what has led to those changes.

What legislation has been put into place?

How has it changed Americans' lives?

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What are some current issues (increased demands for flex time and part-time, the flexibility of telecommuting)?

They may also want to look at changes in the European work week (fewer hours, more vacation time) and what led to those changes (in many cases, high unemployment). Students looking at working conditions should find out about how worker safety issues have changed and been resolved.

What legislation has affected working conditions?

What federal and state agencies have a hand in overseeing safety in the workplace?

What are some current issues?

2. Water is a very important issue in the management of the West. Students could do projects on any number of subjects related to water: conflicts involving water rights, including among states, between the U.S. and Mexico, and between cities and states and Native Americans; pollution of rivers and groundwater created by farming and cattle ranching; depletion of local aquifers; appropriate water use and balancing economic and environmental issues (e.g., in a desert, should water be used to create lush farm land, golf courses, and green lawns); xeriscape landscaping; water rationing, etc.

3. Many people believe that the negative impact of dams on the natural environment outweighs the potential benefits. As the leases on many dams come up for renewal, some are being challenged and plans are being made to remove them. Have students research the controversy around different dams, both ones under development as well as those up for renewal. Have them consider the perspectives of the various constituents. How do you balance the benefits and costs?

4. The creation of dams, waterways, etc. has impacted the population growth in many areas in the U.S.

What is the history of your area's drinking water supply? Have students conduct research on where their drinking water comes from.

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Has the water supply changed over the years or remained consistent?

What dams, waterways, re-routed rivers, treatment facilities, etc. were needed to be built to provide water to your area? Working in teams, students could share their results by drawing a map that depicts their school in relation to the water source, and how the water is transported. Or, students could develop a brochure outlining the history and development of their potable water supply. In addition to local history books and newspapers, try contacting your local or county water agency for information on your water supplier.

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