

Interview with Erma Godbey, Wife of a Hoover Dam Builder, for Program One: “A Tale of Two Rivers”

Note: This transcript is from a videotaped interview for the “A Tale of Two Rivers” segment of “Great Projects.” It has been edited lightly for readability.

ERMA GODBEY (EG): Well, we were already living in Oatman, Arizona, 'cause we had moved down from Silverton 'cause all the mines had closed and there was a mine working in Oatman. But then my husband had gotten canned from that mine and so there was nothing else we could do but to come here, because [the Hoover Dam] was the only job that was going in the whole United States. And so we, my mother and stepfather, came down and they had a 7-passenger Dodge touring car. We had no transportation and I had to put all of my things that I had moved from Silverton in storage and we just brought what we barely could bring with us, a few clothes and a very few, oh, ah, cooking utensils and things. And we had 'em all tied onto the car every which way -- on top and on the sides and on the running boards and everything and we drove down from Oatman, Arizona, to Needles and around by Searchlight and on up here. And they were just building Railroad Pass Casino because the State of Nevada had just passed a law that gambling would be legal. And Railroad Pass Casino, they were building it outside of the government reservation because they couldn't have it inside the reservation, but they could have it in the State of Nevada. And so when we got there, we asked and they said, "Well, you go on this other way into where Boulder City's going to be." So we turned then and when we drove on over here from Railroad Pass. And we stopped at the Six Company camp and asked, you know, what we could do. And they said, "Well, you gotta go down to the camp at the river." And so we just had to keep a-goin' and then we drove to where you turn down to go to the wash down there. And we went down that wash to the river bottom, and that's where just everybody had moved in there just like us, with nothing hardly. So we called it Ragtown, Hell's Hole.

EG: They came from everywhere. They walked. They drove. They came from everywhere and nobody had anything but what they could either take on a car or what they carried. And so it was Ragtown. Everybody had pieces of cardboard and any piece of lumber or anything to make a shelter.

EG: Well, because this was the only job that was even goin' in the whole United States. It was the Depression and it was the only job and it was gonna go, you know, because it had been in the works for a long time. And, of course, they were gonna build the dam to keep it from flooding Imperial Valley. And then, you see, making the electricity was a second idea.

EG: Well, the first night, we got down to Ragtown and we just slept on the ground and slept. And then my mother and stepfather, they drove their car back to Colorado and left us there. And my mother said, "Well, I'll never see you again." But we were hardy folks and we had come from hardy folks. So, anyway, that's the way it was and so then the next day I got some clothesline, and I had a wool blanket that I'd had the woolen knitting mills make, and it was one of these that went under you and over you. It was a real long one.

And I had it fastened with horse blanket pins to the clothesline rope and poles stuck in the ground to try to make a little bit of shade, because it was so terribly, terribly hot.

EG: By 10 o'clock in the morning it'd be 130 [degrees]. It'd be clear past your 120 that your thermometer shown and on up further. And then it'd keep on gettin' hotter until 4 o'clock in the afternoon before it started gettin' cooler again.

EG: Well, Ragtown was just everybody from everywhere -- livin' the best they could with the little teeny bit of things they had brought with them. And, you see, it was started because they were going to drill the diversion tunnels to divert the rivers around the base of the dam so they could build the dam.

EG: I have an idea there was about a thousand there at the time, and they were all in these just any kind of shanties and, you know, with no more shade and stuff than I had and cookin' on campfires or whatever.

EG: Oh, absolutely. You bet I had my children with me. I had four, Torn and Jim and Laura and then Ila was the baby. She was 5 months old.

EG: Oh, yes. We had to stay together. I had been up in Silverton alone while my husband was tryin' to get work, you know.

EG: Oh, my mother, yes, but her husband, he had a job as city marshal. So that they had work back in Silverton.

EG: Oh, sure. Well, that's the best way to be is all together. My husband would see that we got some food, if he had to steal it.

EG: No. No. There was a lot of people that had been camped there for pretty near a year that had come earlier when the mines and everything had closed back East. Now my husband's uncle and aunt and a cousin, they had come up to Silverton to try to get work when the mines had closed in Oklahoma a whole year before, but they couldn't get work in Silverton either, because they weren't hiring, and so they had been down there camped for, oh, 6 months maybe waiting for this job to start.

EG: Hoping to get a job. And everybody didn't get a job even after they were livin' there. Just as many as they needed, but -- but there was everybody there. There were college professors. There were lawyers and everybody and -- and they didn't know a damned thing about mining.

EG: Everybody was tryin' to work in the tunnels. And he was so anxious that he just jumped off the boat and went into the tunnel too quick and there was a delayed blast in the tunnel and it went off just as he put his shovel in. And it hit the shovel and the handle of the shovel disemboweled him. Well then, all she could do was try to get his remains back home or bury him in Las Vegas and go back home herself. So then we bought her

little tent. So then we had a tent. And then I got two dynamite boxes . . . everybody used 'em for chairs or they would take 'em apart -- they were dovetailed -- and make a floor or anything with 'em. So I got a-hold of two dynamite boxes and I put 'em in this little tent and somehow or other, I had brought my ironin' board along. Couldn't iron a t'all, but I brought the ironin' board along and I put it across these two [dynamite boxes]. And then I had a bench in the tent that about 5 people could sit on, on the ironin' board, see?

EG: Well, we had to go to the river to bathe. And you'd hang onto your kids by their hand and you wash up underneath their clothes and everything -- nobody showed themselves. We would stand in the edge of the river and wash. And I almost lost Ila one day. I was hangin' onto her by her leg. I yelled for her dad and he grabbed her, because she was slippin' outta my hand and I was washin' the other kids.

EG: Why did I leave? I'll tell you why I left Ragtown, was on account of there were three women died right around me. On the 26th day of July, three women died right around me and they -- they took -- well, there were four that died. The first three, they got them takin' the bodies into the Las Vegas to the mortuary, or wherever, and this other woman was just three tents from me. And she had a big dog and she was sick -- they were from New York -- and her husband was on the afternoon shift in the tunnels and she was so hot, she had sent the dog with a note on his collar to Mr. Williams, who was the head of Williamsville [Ragtown]. He was the ranger. And to ask him if he would come and take her to the river so she could get cooled off. Well, anyway, when the dog found Mr. Williams and he went and he found her dead. And she was layin' cross the bed. Well, then he told some of us women that were close by and we went over and we lifted her up and put her in the bed, laid her down, and he, the ranger, went down to the tunnels to get her husband out of the tunnels to come home. And so when the husband came home, he jumped straddle of her and he starts to give her artificial respiration. Well, she had probably been dead an hour by then. So, of course, that didn't do very much good. And then he just turned real quick to some of us, we three women that were there, and he said, "Anybody want to buy a fur coat?" And we thought, "Oh, my God, in this heat?" And none of us had any money anyhow. He said, "You want to go to Alaska?" And we thought, "The man's gone crazy." But I'll tell you what, later on I figured what he was tryin' to do was sell her fur coat that they had brought with 'em from New York so's that he could bury her. I went back to my tent and I told my husband, I said, "We've gotta get out of here. I can't stay here any longer. I've got to get somewhere where I can get a doctor if we need one." And so we went to Cowboy Bill's camp in Las Vegas.

EG: Well, I was worried about my children 'cause we couldn't get a doctor or anything closer than Las Vegas, you see. And I didn't want us to die like this woman did, like these women did. And so we went into Cowboy Bill's camp in Las Vegas.

EG: Simms Ely? Yes, I remember him very well. [Simms was appointed Mayor of Boulder City by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.]

EG: I tell ya', anybody that crossed him, why, they got a floater out of town. There might be one woman maybe was letting her washing machine water run out and it would run

into another woman's yard and that other woman would fuss to Simms Ely about the water runnin' into her yard. And he might tell the people whose water ran into the other one's yard that they had to move. And he'd kick 'em out of town. He ruled with an iron fist. Anybody didn't cross Simms Ely.

EG: His job was protected by his son, and his son was working for the Bureau of Reclamation. And if anybody wrote anything in to the Bureau of Reclamation about Simms Ely, his son got the letter and then Simms Ely knew you wrote and then you'd get kicked out of town by Simms Ely!

EG: Well, everything was very, very hard because it was so terribly hot and no matter what kind of a job you were on, you had to contend with the heat. Now Turner Construction, they finally decided that they would have two groups of men working on the road to the dam and one group would go to work at 4 in the morning and work till noon. Nobody would work from noon until 4 o'clock. Then another group would go and work from 4 o'clock until midnight and they would use -- they had big, oh, ah, you know, lights that they worked by when it got dark. But -- but nobody could work -- the men were passin' out with the heat. But then they found out that, you see, you were sweatin' out all your salt. Then they started givin' everybody salt tablets. Any time you could get hurt and any time you could pass out with the heat. Now he used to go to work on that job at 4 in the morning and come home at noon.

EG: I was worried about him when he was at work and I was worried about the heat, 'cause, you see, he couldn't get sleep, except we'd wrap in the wet, wet things. And I'd take a dishpan when he got home to be with the children, I would take it and I would walk down to the store that Merl Emery had, and I would get 15 cents worth of ice and I would walk back. And that was a quarter of a mile from the store to our tent. And then we would have a drink of cold water and maybe lemonade, one cold drink of water in 24 hours.

EG: My husband made \$4 a day.

EG: Well, gosh, yes, we were happy to get anything! When you'd been out of work as long as we'd been out of work, why, you were glad to get anything.

EG: Oh, not until later, when we lived in the railroad Y. When we came back from Las Vegas, we lived in the railroad Y and there was a young boy who lived closed to us. And one day he came over and he said, "Mrs. Godbey, would you like to go and see where the dam is going to be?" And I said, "Sure." And he said, "Well, I'll carry the baby." And so we went down and we walked all through just on the rocks, you know, through where they have all of the wiring now, you know, where they bring the electricity and then send it out everywhere. But that was all just -- just bare rocks there. And we went over and they had white spots painted on each side of the canyon wall, round white spots, where the dam was going to abutt to the canyon wall. And we looked over and saw that and I scraped on a rock, with another rock, my Ila, that she was a baby just -- well, she was about 7 months old by then, see.

EG: Six Companies really wanted to have [Boulder City] built so they'd have a place for their people, the government and Six Companies both, for their people that were working for them, but, you see, due to the Depression, people came before they were ready. But they had really planned on having the town pretty well built so they'd have places for the people to stay.

EG: They started working because everybody was out of work and they wanted to work and they were already here before they were able to get the housing built. But they had planned on building the housing so's that they wouldn't be in a mess like that, but it was' cause there was no other work in the whole United States.

EG: I just wish my husband could be alive now and see all the new housing that has gone on in Boulder City and all the beautiful homes that are here, because after the dam was finished, they thought the town would go to pot. But by that time the Bureau of Mines had come in and started and there was enough -- so some of the people stayed and then there were jobs in Las Vegas that some of the people that stayed in Boulder worked in Las Vegas.

EG: I feel pride and I feel, "God, this is a marvelous job they did." And I think of all the men that worked on it and all of the figuring and everything that they did to do it, because, you see, now after they got the water diverted into the diversion tunnels and around the base of the dam, then they still had to dig down till they got to bedrock, which was about 100 or more feet deeper, until they could get good solid footing to put the dam. And then, you see, whenever there was any place that it was leakin' around through the mountains, why they grouted that.

EG: Well, I certainly do feel pride when I look at Boulder Dam and know all of the men that had worked on it.

EG: Oh, the 31ers, we're dyin' out. [The 31ers were the first to arrive at the site, in 1931.] There's very few of us left. There might be several men left, but very, very few of the women are left, because men came ahead of their wives and didn't bring their wives until after they got a job. You know, they left their wives and children back home, a lot of 'em.

EG: We call it the 31ers Club and we get together every year and have a dinner. Oh, it was very -- it was wonderful.

EG: President Roosevelt came and by that time we had our school started and we had a little orchestra at the school. And my oldest son, Tommy, he played violin. And they had the kids, the school kids played a piece or two for President Roosevelt at the dedication of the dam, and I was very, very proud of that.

EG: Oh, he did. Now I want to tell you, my husband -- we leased 40 acres below town and we had a ranch, the only ranch that has ever been here. It's now where the airport is and everything. And, of course, he always fussed and if our cows'd get up into town, he'd

raise holy hell. But one time, one of our cows got up into town and he called us to get it back down, and then when my husband went to get it, why, old Simms was watchin' it, too, and all of the school kids were watchin' the cow. And, you see, a lot of the kids that had come from cities and everything, they'd never even seen a cow. And he didn't realize that. And when he realized that some of these school kids had never even seen a cow, why, he wanted us to leave the cow long enough till the kids went back to school and then we had to get the cow back where it belonged.

EG: There were lawyers, doctors, everybody that hadn't committed suicide because of tryin' to get a job, any kind of a job. And that's the reason that -- that this man went in too quick and got disemboweled. I don't know what he had done before he came, but they were in so big a hurry to make their four bucks a day and have some kind of money after they'd lost everything, that they didn't know anything about mining, you see.

EG: Oh, yes, they were -- they were workin' in the tunnels and everywhere just right along as -- as common laborers. Yes, sir.

EG: My husband was a marvelous man. He was such a good man and everybody loved him. I think he was loved by all of the children that are my children's age, we were Mom and Pop Godbey to the whole town because -- then when they started the Legion, then we had the Sons of the Legion and the Daughters of the Legion. And he was the father for the Sons of the Legion and I was the mother for the Daughters of the American Legion. And, you see, the servicemen got priority for being hired. And so that's why we had so many servicemen in Boulder and we had nearly a thousand men in the American Legion when the dam was finished.

EG: He did everything. See, how here was the proposition. After we moved into Vegas, any time that he wanted to come in he'd have to quit the job he was on and draw his pay in order to bring me any money because they only paid once a month. And he'd have to try to come in once a week to see me and the children. And he'd have to quit his job. Then he'd have to come out and get a job somewhere else. So he worked on all kinds of jobs.

EG: Well, this is a picture of my whole family taken in the 3D-foot pinstock pipe ready to go down to the dam on the 32-wheel trailer.

EG: That was Christmas Day, 1934.