

THE POLITICS OF WATER

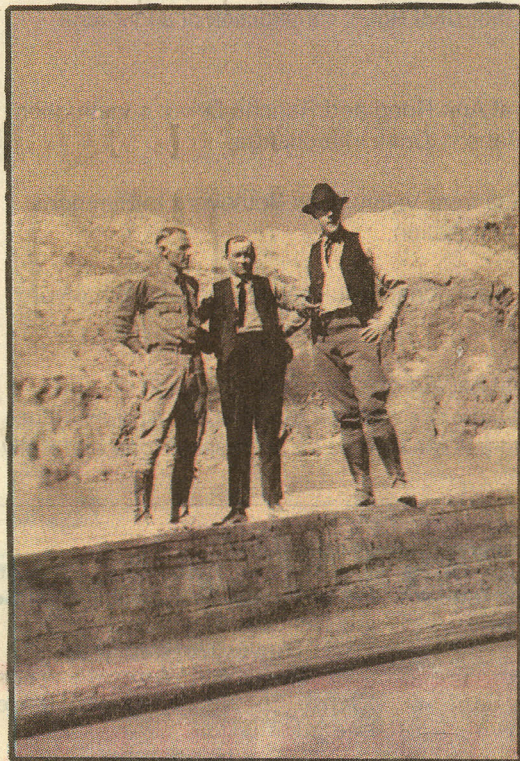


WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

By Ed Vogel
Donrey Capital Bureau

Above, Former Gov. James Scrugham spent a lot of time in Las Vegas in 1929, the year he founded the Las Vegas Review, one of the newspapers that became the Review-Journal.

At right, Scrugham, center, and two U.S. Reclamation Service employees toured Black Canyon in 1923. Hoover Dam was built in the canyon 1931-35.



James G. Scrugham carved out a career unmatched by any politician in Nevada history: He is the only person to serve as a Nevada governor, representative in Congress and U.S. senator.

But history has shown Scrugham (1880-1945) was a man of little vision. If he had fought harder for Nevada's interests during the meetings of the Colorado River Commission in 1922, Southern Nevadans today might not face impending water shortages.

From 1B

The demand for water in metropolitan Las Vegas could exceed the state's 300,000 acre-foot annual Colorado River allocation by 2008, officials say.

As Nevada's governor and representative on the original Colorado River Commission in the 1920s, Scrugham figured Nevada would do just fine with 300,000 acre-feet.

A check of documents and letters in the state archives in Carson City shows Scrugham praised the water division and never dreamed Las Vegas would become one of the top tourist attractions in America.

"The terms offered are generous and just," said Scrugham of proposed water allocations.

Pat Mulroy, general manager of the Las Vegas Valley Water District, isn't one to fantasize about what could have happened if Scrugham had been more of a fighter 70 years ago.

"We are a fluke," she said. "We are a product of Hoover Dam in many ways. Who was ever going to live out here without air-conditioning in the summer?"

Mulroy figures it is futile to blame Scrugham for his lack of vision.

"Who is to say we wouldn't make the same mistake," she said. "What would happen if you were to go into a small town in the middle of Nevada today and ask people how much water they would ever need?"

In 1920, Las Vegas was a railroad town of 2,300. Nevada was a state of all of 77,000 people, less than half of the population of the next smallest state.

Scrugham and other leaders of the era gladly left Nevada with 300,000 acre-feet because no one expected Las Vegas would ever use any of the water.

At the time there was no method of drawing the water out of the river and pumping it into homes 40 miles away in Las Ve-

gas. Not until 1971 would the Southern Nevada Water Project be completed and Colorado River water start flowing into Las Vegas.

In contrast to Nevada's tiny allocation, California received 4.4 million acre-feet, Arizona, 2.8 million.

Unsatisfied with the allocation, Arizona would fight legal battles for decades. Not until a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1963 would the water divisions be settled.

Even then, Justice Hugo Black wrote that Nevada leaders had concluded the state's "conceivable needs" never would exceed 300,000 acre-feet per year.

Rather than water, Scrugham and others in the 1920s wanted a hydroelectric dam built along Nevada's border with Arizona. They sought a source of cheap electricity and tax revenue and the jobs a dam project would bring.

Scrugham's work on the Colorado River Commission was widely reported in state newspapers. He was elected governor in November 1922 in his first try for political office. Previously he had been dean of the engineering college at the University of Nevada, Reno.

As governor, Scrugham was dubbed "Gasoline Jim" because of his habit of ending the work day in Carson City by driving all night to arrive in Las Vegas the next morning. Usually he carried cans of gasoline because there were few service stations along the way.

Defeated in a re-election at-

tempt in 1926, Scrugham never returned to the classroom. He bought the Nevada State Journal in Reno in 1927. Two years later, he founded the Las Vegas Review, one of two newspapers that later merged into the Review-Journal. And he later wrote a three-volume history of Nevada.

Then in 1932, he won the first of five consecutive terms in Congress. He took a seat in the Senate in 1942, but died three years later.

In his history of Nevada, Scrugham said he derived the most satisfaction as a public servant for the successive stages of work that led to construction of Hoover Dam.

In a letter stamped "confidential," Scrugham even asked Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover in 1924 for free power from the dam that would be built in Black Canyon.

Hoover, chairman of the original Colorado River Commission, became president in 1933. Boulder Dam would be renamed Hoover Dam in his honor in 1947.

Representatives from the other six Colorado River basin states who met with Hoover and Scrugham chiefly wanted guaranteed supplies of water with which they could irrigate crops. They feared California, certain even then to become a populous state, would gobble up water their farmers needed.

In an initial meeting, the U.S. Reclamation Service recommended allocation of the river water on the basis of three acre-feet for each additional acre of land that

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would be irrigated in each state.

In Southern Nevada, just 5,000 acres were being irrigated, far fewer than any of the other states.

The Reclamation Service calculated Nevada could bring another 2,000 acres under cultivation with Colorado River water. It proposed giving Nevada just 6,000 acre-feet of water, a small fraction of its proposals for other states.

Scrugham, appointed the state's representative on the commission by Gov. Emmett Boyle, argued Nevada would irrigate an additional 82,000 acres. He proposed a 246,000 acre-foot annual allocation.

His proposal, later pushed to 300,000 acre-feet, was accepted without protest by the other commissioners. As a farm forecaster, Scrugham proved egregiously wrong. Today, just 5,529 acres

are irrigated in Clark County.

State Archivist Guy Roach said Nevada had small agriculture communities along the Virgin and Muddy rivers, but nothing approximating farming in other states.

"I don't think we can hold Scrugham accountable," he said. "There was no sense that Las Vegas would be much more than a desert oasis."