

BY JEFFREY WINTERS

Filling America's Great Reservoirs

The ongoing drought in the Western United States has alarmed residents who have relied on the region's vast reservoirs to provide water for industry, agriculture, and drinking. The drying up of Lake Mead and Lake Powell in particular has reversed a grand engineering project in the middle part of the 20th century to construct giant reservoirs. There are 129 reservoirs in the U.S. with more than 1 million acre-feet of capacity, and they cumulatively can hold nearly 400 million acre-feet of water.

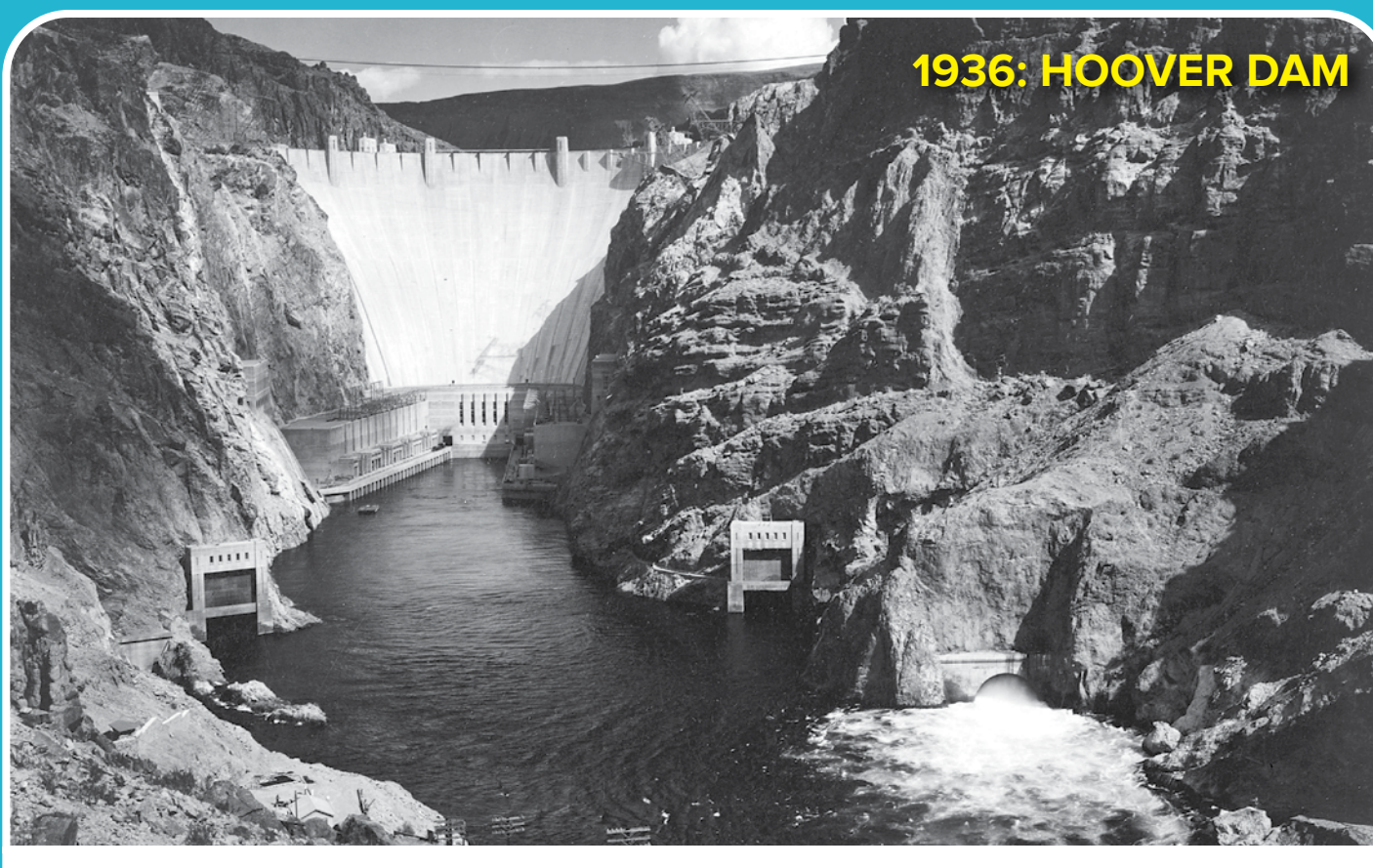
1884



1884: LAKE WINNIBIGOSHISH

The first great reservoir was Lake Winnibigoshish, constructed by damming the Mississippi River near its headwaters in 1884. Over the next 40 years, only a few other large reservoirs were built for flood control.

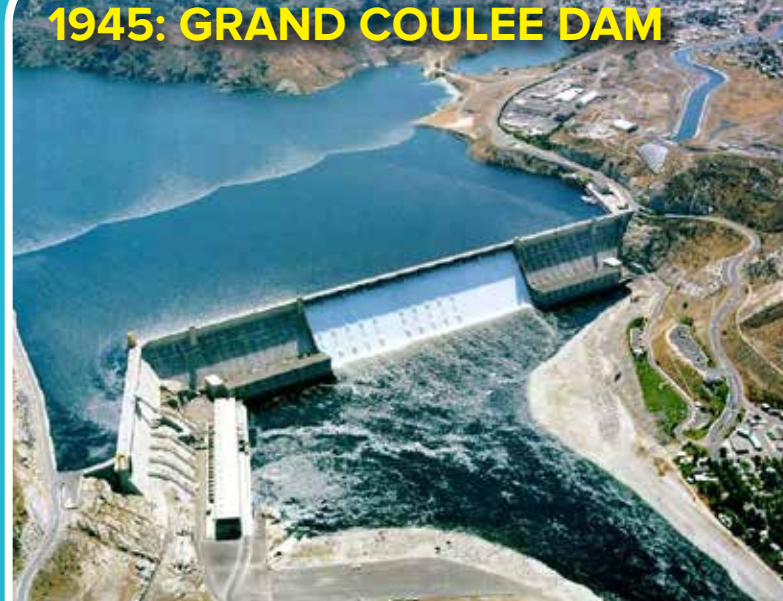
1936: HOOVER DAM



With the Great Depression, the Federal government was looking for large infrastructure projects that could employ otherwise idle workers. Large dams, used for both flood control, irrigation, and hydroelectricity, were constructed in a great spurt throughout the western U.S. The largest was Hoover Dam between Arizona and Nevada, which was completed in 1936 and impounded nearly 29 million acre-feet of water in Lake Mead.

1936

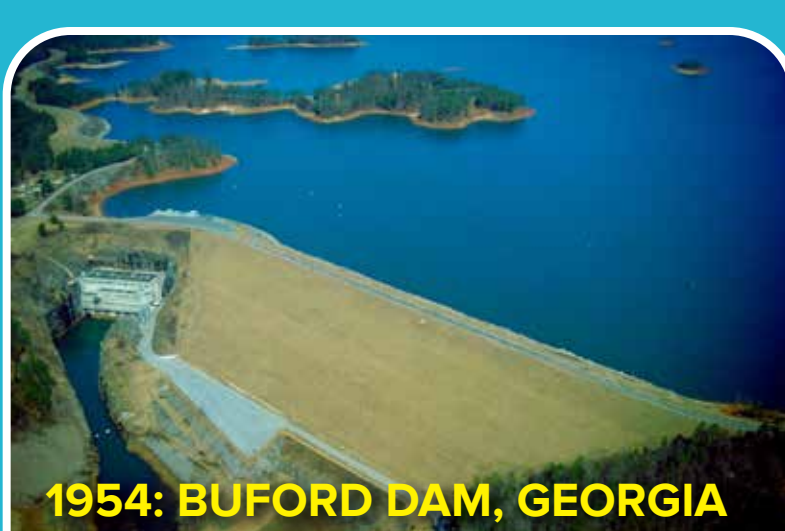
1945: GRAND COULEE DAM



Work on the great reservoirs continued through World War II. By 1945, some 121 million acre-feet of water was impounded behind Hoover Dam, Fort Peck Dam in Montana, Grand Coulee Dam in Washington, Kentucky Lake, and more than two dozen other large water projects.

1945

1954



1954: BUFORD DAM, GEORGIA

More than 30 more grand reservoirs were completed in the late 1940s and 1950s, impounding another 100 million acre-feet. Many of these were built in the South to provide flood control and recreational sites for a part of the country that started to boom in the Post-War years due to defense industry jobs and air conditioning.

1966



1966: LAKE OAHE

The last era of reservoir building lasted from 1960 to 1976 when 50 more projects were built, impounding nearly 150 million acre-feet of water. Two reservoirs from that era, Lake Powell in Arizona and Utah and Lake Oahe in North Dakota and South Dakota, are two of the four largest reservoirs in the United States. But the pace of building began to slow down as fewer rivers were left to dam and citizens began to question the environmental impact of the projects on wildlife.

1994



LAKE POWELL

Since 1976, only ten reservoirs of more than 1 million acre-feet have been built in the United States and only one in the past 35 years. In many places, there are efforts underway to restore existing dams to eliminate these reservoirs and return rivers to their natural conditions. And drought threatens the future of some of the largest reservoirs in the Western U.S.

100

200

300

Million acre-feet