

Biography
Elwood Mead
Chairman of the Bureau of Reclamation
HIST 380

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Studying engineering is hard. The courses are difficult, they require many hours of study, which flattens the social lives. The classes are not diverse, mainly enrolling white or Asian males. Why then, do people study engineering?

For the glorious projects! For the opportunity to be on the crew that sends a man to the moon, or to watch the Trinity test. Engineers live to look up at a newly built skyscraper of their design, or to watch their F1 car blast around a track.

Or, possibly, to build the Hoover Dam.

Elwood Mead was an engineer, born on January 16, 1858 in Patriot, Indiana. The son of a farmer, he attended Purdue and studied Agriculture and Science. After Purdue, he received a doctorate from Iowa State College of Agriculture. His first professorship was at Colorado State Agricultural College teaching Irrigation Engineering, a new field at the time.

After a time, Mead was hired by the territory of Wyoming to serve as territorial engineer. When Wyoming became a state in 1890, Mead wrote its water code. That water code was the template for water codes around the world.

In 1899, Mead resigned as state engineer, and went to work as the leader of the Office of Experimental Stations in the Department of Agriculture. Two years later, while returning from a baseball game, his right arm was amputated after being crushed under a trolley. Still, Mead was awarded an honorary doctorate from Purdue in 1904, and continued his work with the Department of Agriculture until 1907.

In 1907, Mead was asked to travel to Victoria, Australia to help with irrigation there. During his eight year stay, Mead honed his approach to rural irrigation and community planning around water. According to an Australian biography: “novelty was rather in Mead’s salesmanship, in the very scale and complexity of the commission’s operations, and in the bureaucratic web in which the new settlers became enmeshed” (Powell 1986).

Mead’s work in Australia worked to differentiate and cement his status as an expert. When Mead returned in 1915, he was given a professorship at University of California, Berkley. While there, he worked on a number of projects, including one to settle returning soldiers on western farming land.

In 1924, Mead became the Commissioner of the Department of Reclamation. Previous to his appointment, the Bureau had been undergoing severe financial problems. In 1923, the Bureau had spent \$135 million but only reclaimed \$10 million from the farmers the dams supplied. Mead was on the investigative committee before his appointment and critically was not involved in the previous monetary problems.

As Commissioner, Mead began to move away from his original goals of facilitating small farming communities and began working towards urban water and hydroelectric power. The Hoover (then named Boulder) Dam was to be financed through the sale of it’s power generated.

In a booklet celebrating the 100th year of Wyoming’s statehood, Mead’s contribution to the Hoover Dam was described:

It was also the most carefully planned undertaking the Bureau had ever attempted; years went into the preparations for the giant structure. Mead had primary responsibility for its overall direction and assembled an excellent staff to handle the operations. Still, he took an active role, especially in areas of direct interest to himself. For example, Mead was concerned about the welfare of the workers on the remote, hot and dangerous construction site. He attempted to provide living conditions to make their task as comfortable as possible.

Mead died in January 1936, four months after the dam was completed. In February 1936, the reservoir created by the dam was named Lake Mead, in honor of his contributions.

Most men leave a tombstone when they die, Mead left a man-made lake that powers and waters the West.

References

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