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At age 50, dam still generates love, hate

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If Glen Canyon Dam were a person, it would surely suffer from low self-esteem.

It was born of a compromise, the second choice as a storage site for Colorado River water. It lacks the art deco flair and iconic stature of downstream sibling Hoover Dam. Edward Abbey imagined blowing it up in his classic eco-novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and environmentalists still clamor for its removal. Arizona's Sen. Barry Goldwater, once a staunch ally, said before he died he wished he'd never voted to build it.

That's a lot of angst for a 710-foot-tall hunk of concrete.

Fifty years after construction started at a remote site on the Arizona-Utah border, Glen Canyon Dam inspires an almost unexplainable mix of respect and hatred, all the while providing water and keeping the lights on for millions of Westerners from Wyoming to California.

On Friday, residents of Page will mark the 50th anniversary of their community, a true company town that sprang from dusty Manson Mesa for the sole purpose of housing workers on the nearby dam project. Their celebration will acknowledge none of the controversy and sing only the praises of a structure whose departure would take most of Page with it.

Glen Canyon Dam was built to store water for Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico, which seems odd given its location downstream on the Colorado River system of all four states. The lower-river states - Arizona, Nevada and California - actually use the water kept behind the dam in Lake Powell, which allows the upper-river states to divert more water directly from the Colorado at certain times of the year.

Not many people had heard of Glen Canyon when site studies began in the late 1940s and early 1950s. No roads led to it, and the only inhabitants were Navajos, whose land included the present Page town site.

"Back in 1948, before anything was there, *National Geographic* explored Glen Canyon and sent an expedition into what is now Lake Powell," said Barry Wirth, regional spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in Salt Lake City. "They reported on the absolute barren desolation and wrote about seeing only a few hogans and Navajos herding sheep. They said it was the most remote spot in the United States, that if it wasn't the end of the world, you could see it from there."

Remote as it was, it offered for engineers a good location for a dam and for water managers the deep canyon walls needed to form a reservoir.

Government officials scouted locations for a town and found a good water source on the Utah side. Arizona officials couldn't offer water, but they did have powerful Sen. Carl Hayden.

"Page is where it is because of Carl Hayden," said W.L. "Bud" Rusho, a historian who worked for the bureau during the

dam's construction. "In 1969, I heard him speak and say, 'I'm proud to say Page was on the Arizona side because I insisted on it.' "

The town was laid out atop a dusty mesa, one so thick in sand the bureau had to mix in tons of peat moss just to plant grass and trees. Rusho lived in one of the government-issue cinderblock houses and remembers wind blowing sand through cracks around the window, under the door, through electrical outlets.

Construction continued for another nine years. In 1966, Lady Bird Johnson, the president's wife, dedicated the dam and, after touring it, decided it fit into her campaign to beautify America. At her request, the bureau planted grass at the dam's base. It remains today and helps control dust.

The goodwill ended sometime after the grass started growing. Environmental groups never wanted the dam built there, insisting it would destroy a priceless ecosystem in Glen Canyon.

As years passed, they seized on another consequence: The water released from the dam back into the Colorado River was cool and clear, not the warm, muddy habitat needed by native species.

A series of lawsuits forced the government to conduct environmental studies and find a way to blunt some ill effects.

By the 1990s, several environmental groups began agitating for the removal of Glen Canyon Dam. In 1997, a reflective Goldwater stunned people with this admission:

"I have to be honest with you. I'd be happier if we didn't have the lake," the former senator said in a PBS miniseries based on the book *Cadillac Desert*. "I'd vote against it. I've become convinced that, while water is important, particularly for those of us who live in the desert, it's not that important."