by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

No, the hard hat was not invented for construction workers on the Hoover Dam project in the early 1930s. It's another legend associated with the modern wonder of the world, much like the story of workers permanently buried in the dam. While workers wore safety helmets and hard hats to protect their heads, the hard hat had been available years before construction began at the Black Canyon dam site on the Colorado River in April 1931.

Actually its inventor, Edward W. Bullard, introduced the original "Hard-Boiled hat" in 1919. While working for the E.D. Bullard Company, established in San Francisco in 1898, the son of the founder began working on a helmet that could protect miners. Among the many hazards in the mines were injuries to the head. Bullard's experience with the doughboy helmet as a soldier during World War I inspired young Bullard to fabricate a hard hat similar in shape to the helmet. The original hard hat was manufactured out of steamed layers of glued canvas painted black. A suspension device was built into the hard hat for comfort and protection. According to the Bullard Company, now based in Cynthiana, Kentucky, the patented "Hard-Boiled Hat" was the first industrial head protection sold commercially in the world.

The Bullard Company asserts that the first official "Hard Hat Area' was the Golden Gate Bridge project in San Francisco. The project's chief engineer, Joseph B. Strauss, beginning on January 5, 1933, directed all the workers to wear hard hats to protect themselves from falling rivets and other materials.

However, the Six Companies constructing Hoover Dam first required all its workers to wear hard hats by November 1931. The *Las Vegas Review Journal* in its October 28, 1931 issue wrote, “Nobody will be allowed in the canyon bottom without one of the helmets, henceforth, according to Ed Brockman, supervisor of insurance and safety for the Big Six.” The story continued, “And Six Companies is paying the bill. A helmet for every man! And more than fifty dozen already have been issued. Others are en route from the factory, enough to protect the craniums of the army in its entirety.”

From all indications, the hard hats were purchased from San Francisco’s E. D. Bullard Company. According to a Review-Journal article on April 20, 1932, a carpenter wearing a hard hat survived a blow to the head from a four by six timber. Although the hat was dented, the carpenter quickly returned to work. The newspaper story referred to the headgear as “one of the ‘hard-boiled’ hats for which Hoover dam workers in Black Canyon have become famous.”

While the hard hat had been invented more then a decade before construction began on Hoover Dam, in all probability it was the first major public works project in the United States requiring use of a hard hat.

Photograph of "Hard Boiled Hat" courtesy of Bullard Company.

Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, April 2005 edition)