

Tramp  
A True Steam Adventure  
by  
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Chapter One  
The Journey Begins

Boulder Dam  
August 1st, 1934

Ex-Third Mate Russell Belt powered off his jackhammer, letting it swing below the bosun chair he dangled in seventy feet from the lip of Black Canyon of the Colorado. Falling rock from other high-scalers working above bounced off his tarred hardhat. The rubble fell 700 feet to the unfinished dam at the bottom. He wiped sweat from his eyes. The 118 degree desert heat baked the strength from him. Work went on seven days a week, three shifts a day. It only stopped for the brutal heat in the afternoon. An hour, or so, the break would come.

Thousands had diverted the Colorado River into four tunnels around the dam site. High-scalers polished the sides of the canyon wall for the concrete arch-gravity dam to bond against. Russell smiled at being one with these men. Some high-scalers did acrobatics on the end of their rope for the tourists. Russell declined to join in. It was enough to have a job he enjoyed during The Great Depression.

He was bracing his body to retrieve the jackhammer when the snap of a large cable above drove him into another action. Russell shoved over to an outcrop on the canyon wall. One of the large buckets for pouring concrete shot past. The man hanging onto the bucket calmly waved as he passed to his death. The crash on the deck below moved Russell to raise his hand in return. His other hand yanked on the rope to be pulled up.

Men were stripping their gear off as Russell came topside. They looked as shaken as he. Aboard ships he had seen men fall to their deaths before. It was the wave that soured his insides. The dam would tame the Colorado River. Water and hydro power would change many lives. This life just passed altered nothing for them. Russell sighed. Another soul given to build a Wonder rising in the desolate desert. A person he never knew, yet never to forget.

The foreman drove up in his Dodge M1918. He bounced out of the war-surplus vehicle, "You have work! Back at it!"

Only a couple men turned about to the canyon lip. The rest, including Russell, started for the road. The stocky foreman barred his way. Russell took his hardhat off and shook the sweat from his dark hair. "That canyon will be there tomorrow. I and my mates here are going into Las Vegas to drink a few to the man who just died."

"You do and all of you are fired!"

Russell thought a moment, then tossed the hardhat at the foreman's feet. The foreman's mouth twitched. His hand started to cock to slam the young seaman. Russell smiled, took a step forward. A few men gathered. This would be a good fight. Odds on the outcome were even. "We can", Russell whispered, "I've already quit. Kathleen, the men and I will drink to your good health tonight."

As the foreman gathered to strike, he saw a delegation of big wigs stopped and watching fifty yards away. Turning on his heel, fury in his eyes, the foreman stalked to the truck. Dirt thrown from his tires sprayed the men. They continued home, laughing, to clean up for Las Vegas tonight. Russell looked around the desert for the last time. Kathleen and he would leave today for a better life.

A year ago Kathleen talked him into leaving the sea for her. They met in New York City where she was a taxi dancer. Russell had just finished a six-month voyage as Third Mate on an American

cargo liner. Walking down a harbor street, he spied a slim redhead entering a dance hall. He bought a roll of tickets and danced every one with her. The next day he took her to lunch. By the time her evening shift as a taxi dancer began, they were snuggled in her bedroom. Two train tickets to Las Vegas were bought. A week later his sea pay was nearly spent.

Jobs during The Great Depression were hard to find. Thirty miles from Las Vegas a dam was being built on the Colorado River where it divided Nevada and Arizona. Men, women and children by the thousands went there hoping for work. Ragtown along the river below the dam site sprouted for them. Tents, tarps and blankets provided shade as they waited for the call.

Boulder City, built in 1931 by the Bureau of Reclamation and Six Companies, Inc. as housing for workers, lay up on top of the canyon. Five thousand workers inhabited the hierarchy town. The most important employees' residences were on up the hill nearer the apex of a V. Then managers, followed by manual laborers furthest away from the public buildings and parks. Power from Las Vegas ran lights and air-conditioning to every house

Russell's size singled him out for hire right off. Six Companies turned him into a high-scaler when one quit. Kathleen turned her hand to homemaking. Life delighted them for months. The snakes, scorpions, dust and heat daily wore her down though. Time to leave happened weeks ago. The loss of conversation he missed first. He worked on, saying they would leave soon. Then the lovemaking became less heartfelt. Russell sought other comfort. Boulder City was a clean living establishment. Russell began driving into Las Vegas to drink beer and whiskey with other workers more often. The stake saved for a California start was more than enough now. She would be glad to move on.

Walking into the house, Russell saw the letter on the kitchen table. He shivered as cold came over him. He strode straight to the bedroom. The room lacked her things. Sitting heavily on the bed, he sighed. Now Kathleen was gone. He ran a hand through his hair and considered.

The shoe box on the night table caught his attention. Half their savings were inside when he looked. Rising he pulled his seabag out of closet. He removed \$100 from the box, shoving the rest in the seabag. The box was cast upon the dust covered floor. Soon his personal belongings, food from the kitchen, two blankets and a single photograph of Kathleen filled the bag. Russell bathed, dressed in jeans and a good shirt. He left the only house he had known for many years. All that mattered was the weight and balance of the seabag on his shoulder. The letter was still on the table when the next family moved in.

In the river down by Ragtown a 1926 Ford Model TT was for sale. It sat in the river to swell the wooden spokes in the wheels. The desert heat had shrunk them loose. The owner took \$50. Russell drove up to the company store to buy supplies for the trip. As he entered the store an angular boy with a bindle slung over his shoulder went out. Rope, a tarp, motor oil, gas cans, wrenches, matches, more coffee and food cost him company script and \$20. Three trips to the Ford truck had his goods stowed. The tarp covered them on the flatbed. After tying it down he pulling over to the gravity-fed gasoline pump. Russell filled the truck's fuel tank and gas cans. He left town shifting gears fast.

The downcast boy from the store had his thumb out. Russell pulled over. "Give you a lift as far as Las Vegas."

"That's fine by me." The boy tied his bedroll to the ropes tying down the tarp. He entered the narrow cab eagerly. "Looking for work in Vegas. They would not hire me back there." He jerked his thumb towards the dam site.

Russell brought the truck up to speed, shifted up to speed fifteen miles per hour.. The boy looked like seven miles of bad road. His overalls were dirty and torn at one knees. A good meal would kill him. Russell motioned to the sack between them on the bench seat. "Baloney and bread in the sack. Help yourself to mustard too."

Russell pulled the stopper out of the water jug, took a deep drink and passed it to the boy. He took a long drink and passed it back. Russell placed it on the floorboard between the boy's feet. Russell reached into his jeans for the Case pocket knife and handed it to the boy. "Cut the meat, bread and cheese with this. Clean it before you give it back."

The boy fell asleep with three sandwiches inside before the hour was up. He woke in Las Vegas. Russell had pulled over in front of a nondescript bar. Outside dam workers were filing in. "I'll spot you a meal and cold pops. Tonight we'll get a room."

The boy looked this hard man over suspiciously. "I ah..."

"You won't find work here. All the dam rejects have them". Russell left the cab. The men going into the bar waved. He waved back. Opening the passenger cab door, "Tomorrow, we head for New York City. Lots of work around ships and the harbor."