

DESERT LAND TRANSFORMED INTO CITY OF HENDERSON

--a research report by Christopher Currin

A STUDY GUIDE TO LOCAL, STATE, AND REGIONAL HISTORY

--prepared by Christopher Currin

These research papers were prepared at the Henderson District Public Library under the auspices of HDPL and the Friends of the Henderson District Public Library with funds from the Nevada Humanities Committee for a Humanist in the Library Project (1982/83).

Five months before the United States entered World War II, a small group of industrialists, politicians, and U. S. government officials struck a deal that would transform a few thousand acres of desert into Henderson, the industrial center of Nevada. Though the immediate aim of the government in funding this gargantuan project was to increase U. S. capacity for production of magnesium-- a light metal used in the fabrication of airplane parts and incendiary bombs-- political insiders knew from the outset that construction of the Basic Magnesium plant initiated a new phase in southern Nevada's history. It was an important step toward realizing the potential for industrial development which had existed in the region since completion of Hoover Dam, and it was one of the earliest examples of the role military spending would play in Nevada's future.

So far, no adequate history of Henderson has been written. What follows is a brief introductory sketch of Henderson's early years. Any one interested in learning more about the community's history will find a list of resource materials at the Henderson District Public Library.

One of the principal figures behind the founding of Henderson was Howard P. Eells. His Cleveland-based company, Basic Refractories, Inc., made heat-resistant bricks used to line the insides of high temperature furnaces. Eells held a patent on a particular type of refractory that could be made from magnesite or brucite. In the early 1930's his geologists analyzed deposits of these metals throughout the West. Eells acquired mineral rights to extensive brucite deposits on public lands in northwest Nye County and began mining ore for shipment to Ohio in 1936. With the out break of war, Eells recognized that growing military demands for magnesium would increase the potential value of his Nevada holdings, but his company had neither the facilities nor the technical knowledge needed to manufacture magnesium.

Early in 1941, Howard Eells was introduced to Major C. J. P. Ball, president of the British firm Magnesium Elektron, Ltd. Major Ball had been involved in the magnesium industry for over 15 years, having first become acquainted with light metals while working for the Disarmament Commission after World War I. Ball's company had first sold and then manufactured magnesium in Great Britain under licenses issued by the German firm I. G. Farben. Prior to meeting Eells, Major Ball had come to Canada with tentative plans to build a new plant there.

have done nothing to promote development of manufacturing in Nevada. The British firm's manufacturing process was far less efficient than American techniques, but other American companies were unwilling to share their trade secrets with new rivals such as Eells, whereas Ball would make his knowledge available in return for a share in the enterprise. In addition, the construction of a large industrial plant in the desert created formidable logistical problems; among them, materials shortages, and dreadful living conditions for the workers. None the less, the Defense Plant Corporation recommended approval of the project and Congress appropriated money to carry it out.

"It was a combination of personalities and influence that clinched the deal," recalls former U. S. Senator Berkeley Bunker. "The government needed magnesium. They got it, but at a terrible cost." Those costs were paid, in tax dollars and undue hardship, so that the industrialization of Nevada might begin.

The first unit of the Basic Magnesium Processing Plant was put in operation less than a year after groundbreaking ceremonies had been held below Black Mountain. Production continued without interruption for just over 800 days; during that time BMI would turn out 166 million pounds of refined magnesium, roughly one-fourth of the national output. Construction and operation of the Henderson plant funnelled about \$100 million into southern Nevada.

At the peak of employment, 13,000 people--more than ten percent of the State's population--were at work on the big job in southern Nevada. No plans had been made to assure adequate housing for so many workers. During the early phases of construction many workers and their families lived in tents or other shelters improvised in the bare desert, without power or running water or proper sanitation. Federal housing authorities who visited the site agreed that living conditions were deplorable, but a controversy arose over the manner in which the problem was to be solved. Howard Eells had plans for a separate "model community" to house BMI employees. Local business interests simply wanted the federal government to lift wartime restrictions on housing construction in Las Vegas. The eventual compromise solution called for more federal money to construct higher-quality temporary houses for workers--called "temporary" to reassure Las Vegas property owners that this was not a federally subsidized rival--and the granting of 1000 building permits in Las Vegas.

was smoothed over.

Perhaps controversy changed Howard Eells's attitude toward BMI. Another factor that surely influenced his view of the undertaking was the unforeseen growth of the job itself. Since its inception, the project had expanded to the point of straining the management capabilities of what was, after all, a small company. In any event, Eells met with representatives of Anaconda Copper, an organization more accustomed to large scale operations. Anaconda bought Eells's interest in BMI and assumed administrative responsibilities October 27, 1942, less than two months after the plant had begun to refine magnesium. Anaconda supervised the completion of plant construction and operated the facility until the War Production Board ordered a stop to magnesium production.

On New Year's Day, 1944, the Basic Town Site was officially renamed Henderson. This was one of the first outward signs that the community was achieving some degree of permanence, though the battle to keep the town in existence had begun much earlier. Nevada's business and political leaders saw the industrial complex at Henderson as the key to further development of southern Nevada, and working closely with elected officials of other Western states, they lobbied to keep BMI in operation after the war.

Nonetheless, having adequate supplies of magnesium on hand, the War Production Board ordered a halt to production at BMI in November of 1944. Nearly all workers were laid off, and most of them left the state: school enrollment dropped by two thirds; almost half the houses in Henderson were vacant. Though Stauffer Chemical and Western Electrochemical Companies signed leases for parts of the plant site in the following May, these two firms together employed about 1000 people, a mere echo of the wartime boom.

After the war, hoping to keep their stake in the future of the industrialized West, the Nevada legislature authorized the Colorado River Commission to negotiate with the federal War Assets Administration for the purchase of BMI facilities. The plant was transferred to Nevada on April 1, 1948, for the sum of \$24 million--one dollar down, the remainder to be paid from profits over a period of twenty years. The state sold the facilities in 1952, to companies that had previously leased sites at the complex. These firms formed a corporation called Basic Management, Inc. to maintain those parts of the complex all users share, such as water and power lines. Though its name is reminiscent of Basic

Sources for Study of Henderson Local History:

- I. Eells Collection, UNVL Special Collections Library. These materials, donated by the original president of Basic Magnesium, Inc., include several volumes of construction photographs, company documents and correspondence, and newspaper clippings. There is a company-prepared chronology of the project, with supporting documentation.

H. E. "Hap" Hazard Collection, UNLV Special Collections Library. Some of the correspondence and newspaper clippings in this collection pertain to the Basic Magnesium project.

- II. Newspaper Indices at the Nevada Historical Society's Las Vegas office and at the Las Vegas Public Library (on East Charleston) contain references to articles about Henderson and related issues. The two indexing projects are currently working on different periods of time, so if you know when the events you're interested in took place, call ahead of time.

Henderson Scrapbook, at the Henderson District Public Library, contains primarily clippings from the Henderson Home News dating from the time of the city's incorporation, 1953.

Addenda

- II. Complete runs of the Henderson Home News are available on micro-film at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

III. Other Written Sources

(A) Newspaper Articles and Pamphlets

1. Currin, Christopher "Desert Land Transformed Into City of Henderson" Henderson Home News and Boulder City News, April 21, 1983, p. 3A.
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2. Sadovich, Maryellen "Special Edition Dedicated to the Founder of Henderson, Howard P. Eells"
3. Stewart, Olivia "A Community Pitches in to Help Its Youth" The Nevadan magazine, January 26, 1975.

(B) Masters Theses and Student Papers

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VII. DeVoto, Bernard Augustine 1897-1955

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Cambridge, Houghton Mifflin, 1951.

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U. S. Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region. Report on the lands of the arid region of the United States, with a more detailed account of the lands of Utah. Edited by W. Stegner. Cambridge, Belknap Press of Howard University Press, 1962.