

**Finding Aid for:  
Eugene Clyde LA RUE Papers  
The Huntington Library, San Marino California  
Introduction**

by  
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**SCOPE AND CONTENT OF THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY COLLECTION**

The professional and personal correspondence, documents, maps and photos of Eugene Clyde La Rue (1879 - 1947) were donated in 1950 to The Huntington Library in San Marino California by his wife, the late Mabel Elton La Rue. I was able to obtain Reader's Privileges and access this collection in August of 2007 and February of 2008.

The collection at the Huntington Library includes personal correspondence, diaries, work correspondence, organizational details for various river trips, written papers (published and unpublished), maps, photos and La Rue's testimonies before Congress in 1926. The correspondence includes letters between him and many of the famous figures involved with the Colorado River at that time, including the political controversy about the building of the first large dam at Boulder Canyon. Anyone interested in Colorado River history, alternatives to Boulder Dam (Hoover Dam), the Arizona High Line Canal, Arizona's position in terms of the 1922 Compact discussions and the political controversies in the 1920s over the control of the Colorado River would find the information interesting.

On-line sources: The E. C. La Rue material at the Huntington Library is listed on their online catalogue (<http://www.huntington.org/>). There is an unpublished finding aid available with the collection. An electronic finding aid is available on the Online Archives of California (OAC) website (<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/>). None of the items are available online; the Huntington Library must be visited in order to access the material. His published materials can be found at several libraries.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

The following information is based on family knowledge, the online description found on the Huntington Library website, the E. C. La Rue papers in this collection including the "Personnel

Statement of E. C. LaRue, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1911", and information from Damming Grand Canyon, by Diane Boyer and Robert Webb, published in 2007.

Eugene Clyde La Rue was born Rexford Clyde La Rue in Riverside California on November 11, 1879. Few people know that his birth name was Rexford. I was told by my aunt Roberta La Rue that he changed his name because dogs were called Rex. In spite of that, his father, brother and most everyone called him Rex. In terms of spelling his last name, even he was inconsistent, sometimes using La Rue and other times using LaRue.

He graduated from Riverside High School in 1900 and enrolled in Engineering at the University of California, where he received a B. S. Degree from the College of Engineering in 1904 (with Eugene Clyde LaRue as his name). From June 1904 to April 1907 he served as Engineering Aid with the United States Reclamation Service, within the United States Geological Service (USGS). When the Reclamation Service became an independent bureau in 1907, La Rue continued with the United States Geological Service (USGS) as Junior Engineer until January 1910 when he was promoted to Engineer. He was responsible for making field investigations for potential dam sites for water control, irrigation and power generation. He worked out of the Great Basin District in Salt Lake City until 1911. While in Salt Lake City, he married Mabel Ruth Elton, "went on a survey trip and called it a honeymoon". They had three daughters Merle (b. 1911), Roberta (b. 1913) and Annette (b. 1918). He then worked out of the USGS Water Resources Branch in southern California. He and his family moved to Pasadena, California at that time. He remained with the USGS until 1927 receiving several raises in pay. He was a well known and highly respected hydraulic engineer who strongly believed in his work to solve water resource problems.

As an Engineer with the USGS, he was instrumental in much of the work involved with controlling many rivers of the west for flood control and storage, including the Colorado River and its watershed from Wyoming to the Delta. He was instrumental in surveying most of the Colorado River (in the United States) and many of its tributaries. It is obvious he had a passion for his work - many of the handwritten pages in his personal journals are calculations on heights of dams, amount of water stored, evaporation rates, etc. He thoroughly researched sites for potential dams with historical information on floods in the area, precipitation records, stream flows - any data he could get his hands on that would be relevant for controlling water flow to prevent flooding and "waste" of water. He strongly believed in conserving water which meant storing it and controlling it so that it could be used for human activities. As was common at that time, water that reached the sea was considered wasted water.

La Rue believed in a comprehensive plan for the development of the water resources of the Colorado River basin and he believed that the seven States and the Republic of Mexico required an equitable distribution of the waters of the Colorado. He believed that before decisions could be made, the gathering of information including flow rates over time and potential storage (dam) sites was essential. Although he worked for the USGS, he was hired on contract to do Colorado River survey work for the Arizona Engineering Commission in 1922 and after W. S. Norviel was

let go, he became the Chairman of the Commission. He was responsible for all the data on irrigable water and land that was needed to present Arizona's case to the Colorado River Commission which was working out the details of a "Compact" to portion out Colorado River water amongst the States. Although La Rue's report was completed and presented to the Commission on time, the job itself was not initiated early enough to be completed in time for Arizona to clearly state its water needs to the Commission. The Commission refused to allow Arizona's requested extension, leaving Arizona in opposition to the allocation of the Colorado River water. La Rue also believed that the amount of available water to be allocated was being substantially over estimated.

As part of his work with the Arizona Engineering Commission to determine irrigable lands and potentially available water, he studied the river in terms of a High Line Canal which would irrigate all of Arizona by gravity. La Rue believed that controlling the river to prevent flooding in the Imperial Valley and other areas was of primary importance. He felt that by damming the river near Lees Ferry (Glen Canyon), the River could be controlled and the stored water could be used to irrigate by gravity. He believed in a plan for the entire river, not just a single dam and was very forceful as a proponent of a single plan for the entire river. His plan proposed 13 dams with 42,000,000 acre feet of storage capacity for control of floods, equalization of flow and storage of silt. He based his available water quantities on an annual figure that was less than the amount commonly thought to be available. And there were many who supported his views.

Although he participated in and led or supervised numerous Colorado River trips on the main stem and many of the tributaries, he is probably best known for his role in the Birdseye Expedition down the Grand Canyon. In 1923 this expedition was launched to survey the remainder of the River which had not yet been accurately surveyed. This 251-mile stretch of the Colorado ran through the Grand Canyon from Lees Ferry to Diamond Creek. The expedition leader was Claude Birdseye, who was the Chief Topographic Engineer of the USGS. The other 11 men on the trip were scientists, boatmen, publicist and cooks. La Rue was the expedition hydrologist and photographer; and not only took numerous panoramic and stereo black and white photographs, but was also responsible for taking movie footage, which was made into a 16 mm film. An excellent account of this expedition using the personal diaries of the participants and additional information can be found in the recently published book: Damming Grand Canyon, The 1923 USGS Colorado River Expedition, by Diane Boyer and Robert Webb, published in 2007 by Utah State University Press.

Throughout 1924 and 1925, he continued to advocate for the first large dam to be built near Lees Ferry and was vociferously against the Boulder or Black Canyon site. He was outspoken in his views and presented them wherever he could. In 1924 he presented his views to a Senate Committee on the Development of the Colorado River. He considered the controversial Boulder Dam a waste of taxpayers money and a waste of river water primarily due to the expected evaporation from the large surface area of the resulting reservoir. He felt that building the dam at sufficient height to produce power in order to pay for the construction was not in the best interests of anyone. In his papers and articles, he presented a good case in support of his ideas.

For years he promoted his plan for control of the Colorado River and adamantly insisted on a dam near Lees Ferry in spite of the 'official' emphasis on Boulder or Black Canyon for the main control structure. In addition to being clearly against the dam at Boulder or Black Canyon, he maintained that the amount of water being considered as available was based on recent higher precipitation rates, and that it was being vastly overestimated. In June of 1926 he received a telegram from the Director of the USGS ordering him to keep quiet because his views were in opposition to adopted policy. La Rue referred to this as his "muzzle telegram".

He resigned from the USGS in 1927 and went into partnership with B. F. Jakobsen as *La Rue and Jakobsen, Consulting Engineers*, based out of Los Angeles. He also spent some time working for Bray Productions, Inc which was filming a romantic movie to be called "Bride of the Colorado", which apparently was never finished. He provided river and guiding experiences and services in the Grand Canyon for the movie company. As consulting engineers, both Jakobsen and La Rue continued to be involved with the control and use of the Colorado River, as well as other engineering and water control projects. In the late 1920s they were both heavily involved with the controversy over the siting of an aqueduct to carry Colorado River water to the Los Angeles area. As proponents of a dam site at Bridge Canyon, they believed that a better dam could be built cheaper than that at Boulder (or Black Canyon). The dam site they proposed would store more water and because of altitude could deliver water to Los Angeles (as well as Arizona) using gravity flow and a minimum of pumping. Again, La Rue was involved in bucking the political system which continued to favor Boulder Dam, which was authorized by Congress in 1928. Jakobsen and La Rue dissolved their partnership in 1933, as each felt they could do better on their own.

La Rue then went to work for the Army Corp of Engineers in Los Angeles. He worked with the Los Angeles Flood Control District until his death in February 1947. With that job he was involved on various dam projects for flood control and power generation. He did what he was good at. He investigated sites for potential dams, did the calculations and recommended the best sites. He investigated a breach in the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which carried water from the Owen's Valley, at Olancho. He was also involved in water control projects in the Santa Maria and Ventura River watersheds in California, as well as everything concerned with water, rivers and dams in the Los Angeles area. By the early 1940s he still considered Boulder (now Hoover) Dam a bad decision and with fellow engineers, complained about the waste of water through evaporation.

As a professional engineer he was an active member of the American Society of Civil Engineers. He published numerous articles in engineering journals and two USGS Water-Supply Papers on the Colorado River. In addition to published works he wrote many unpublished articles, which are found in the Huntington Library material. His testimonies before Congress are also found in the Collection, as are his numerous speeches before various organizations where he was able to explain his proposals to larger audiences. In April 1924 he was elected an Honorary Life Member of The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society in recognition of distinguished service in connection with the USGS, and particularly as a member of the party which made the survey

of the Colorado River in 1923. Ironically, the survey was identifying sites for dams that if built, would have destroyed one of the most scenic areas of the world. He was an active member of the Lodges of the A. F. & A. M. (Ancient Free & Accepted Masons) in both Salt Lake City, Utah and in Pasadena, California.

He died March 22, 1947 (according to California Death Records; accessed online March 3, 2008) of a heart attack in Pasadena, California where he had lived with his wife since the early 1930s. Mabel Elton La Rue died in 1970. Their daughters Merle, Roberta and Annette died in 1974, 2003 and 2002 respectively.

## **INTRODUCTION TO THIS FINDING AID**

This Finding Aid was prepared by personally taking notes from the contents of the E. C. La Rue Papers at the Huntington Library. Some of the material was accessed in August of 2007 and more in February of 2008. Not all of the pieces are listed. I tried to concentrate on items that would be of interest to those who are interested in the political, legal and historical aspects of the Colorado River. I also wanted to provide an indication of how people thought about water, conservation and waste in the 1920s and 30s. And of course there is the personal aspect of actually seeing how my own concepts of conservation and waste were instilled by my family, even though my concepts are in the current trend of conservation of ecosystems and native flora and fauna. It has been interesting for me to see how I consider people as the wasters of water, and in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people saw nature as the waster of water.

The Huntington Collection consists of 10 manuscript boxes in three sections, maps and photographs:

- Section I, Correspondence - Boxes 1 - 3
- Section II, Reports - Boxes 4 - 9
- Section III, Biographical - Boxes 10 -11
- Photographs
- Maps

I looked through all manuscript Boxes except Box 9, which has material from his work in Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, Utah and Sonora, Mexico. I accessed the Collection by each envelope and folder in each Box. The photograph collection is currently archived in a different part of the Library and is organized differently from the electronic Finding Aid found on the Online Archives of California (OAC) website (<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/>). My notes are based on the organization as I found it and I may not have looked at all of it. The La Rue Collection also has a large number of maps, which I did not look at. A listing of them can be found in the Finding Aid on the OAC website.

As I looked through each Box and noted selected contents, I prefaced each with a list of the contents of a “finding aid”. This refers to the OAC Finding Aid. I used spellings that were used at

the time in the documents, e.g. dams site.

## **ABBREVIATIONS USED IN DLR SELECTED CONTENT SUMMARIES:**

### **PEOPLE:**

ECL	E. C. La Rue
DLR	Diane LaRue
BFJ	B. F. Jakobsen - Consulting Engineer
Grover	N. C. Grover - ECL's boss at USGS, who was based in Washington D. C.
Mulholland	William Mulholland (1855-1935) The 233-mile Los Angeles Aqueduct was completed in November, 1913 while he was head of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. He was very instrumental in California water politics of that time.
Norviel	W. S. Norviel - first chairman of Arizona Engineering Commission
Scott	Scott La Rue - ECL's brother, who had a dryland farm in Utah

### **ORGANIZATIONS**

AEC	Arizona Engineering Commission - Created in 1922 by the State Water Commissioner to survey the state of Arizona to determine how much land could be irrigated by the Colorado River. ECL became Chairman after Norviel was let go.
A. F. & A. M.	Ancient Free & Accepted Masons
Am. Soc. C. E.	American Society of Civil Engineering
Dept	Department
HLC	High Line Canal - ECL's work for the Arizona Engineering Commission involved irrigating Arizona by gravity flow with the initial dam to be constructed near Lees Ferry. Important in Arizona's claim for Colorado River water in the 1922 Colorado River Compact discussions.
U.S.	United States
USGS	United States Geological Survey
USRS	United States Reclamation Service (Established in 1902 within the USGS; became a separate Bureau under the Department of Interior in 1907)

### **TITLES**

Hon.	Honorable
Sec	Secretary