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Rolling Rivers

An Encyclopedia of America's Rivers

Richard A. Bartlett

EDITOR

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drinking water, and irrigation for farms and homes.

As early as 1539 the Spaniard Fray Marcos de Niza crossed the White Mountains and the headwaters of the Salt in his quest for the Seven Cities of Cibola. He called the Salt the Rio Azul (Blue River). A year later the Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, accompanied by Fray Marcos, marched to the Colorado Plateau. To cross the Salt his men built rafts. Later reports referred to the river as the Rio de los Balsas, or the River of Rafts. Eighteenth century Spanish maps showed it as Rio de la Asuncion or Rio Asuncion, the River of Assumption. However, by that time other maps used Rio Salada or Salinas—Salt River. Some saline quality can be detected at the mouth of two of the river's lesser tributaries, Salt River Draw and Canyon Creek. Salt deposits at the mouths of these two creeks had served Indians for some time.

When Anglos came to trap the Salt River basin in the early nineteenth century, they found Apache Indians living there. This tribe was successful, for a time, in defending the region against white settlers. Mormons, coming in from Utah in the 1870s, settled along the upper Little Colorado River tributaries on the leeward side of the White Mountains. They made only one attempt to occupy land drained by the Salt River system. In 1877 Mormon Oscar Cluff discovered a small timbered valley with a number of springs which formed the head of Carrizo Creek, a Salt tributary. He called it Forest Dale. A year later, eighteen Mormon families moved into this idyllic site. But in 1881 the Apaches claimed Forest Dale as their rightful property, and the Anglos were forced to leave. The Mormons made no other attempts to settle in the Salt River basin.

Since the region appeared to be so inhospitable, little other Anglo settlement took place and the land was left to the Apaches. In 1871 the federal government established the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, to which in 1897 the San Carlos Indian Reservation was added. In 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the Tonto Forest Preserve; this was designated a National Forest in 1908. Two-thirds of the Tonto National Forest is located in the Salt River Basin.

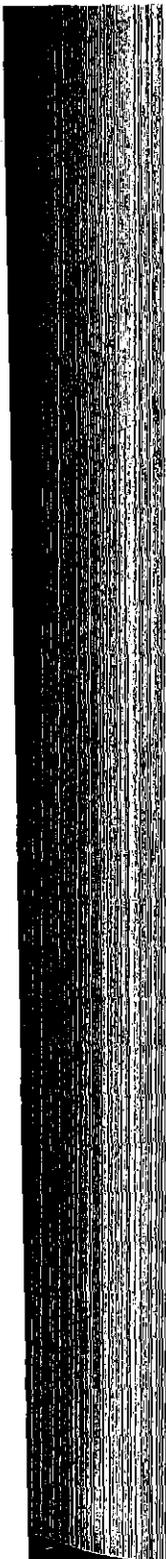
In 1870 the federal government established a post on the White River about twenty miles

upstream from its confluence with the Black River. Although it carried several names in its early years, after 1879 it was known as Camp Apache. It was a focal point of the last Arizona Indian wars. On December 28, 1872, a fierce battle in the Salt River Canyon claimed the lives of seventy-five Indians. In September, 1881, the White Mountain Apaches attacked Fort Apache, one of the few times Arizona Indians staged a direct attack on an army post.

Other violence characterized the Salt River watershed in these early years. In Pleasant Valley on Cherry Creek cattlemen in the 1880s resisted the intrusion of sheepmen. A great six-year battle, the Graham-Tewksbury feud, erupted and cost the lives of twenty-nine men. Also known as the Pleasant Valley War, this feud rid the area of sheep, cost the life of every male member of the Graham family, and left only one Tewksbury survivor. Today the Pleasant Valley and its only town, Young, is distantly isolated and rustically bucolic and bears no trace of its bitter heritage.

Due to its remoteness and to federal management, the Salt River watershed still has an abundance of wildlife. The Salt's waters, particularly in the high mountain tributaries and in the man-made lakes, are fished for rainbow trout, large mouth, small mouth, and yellow bass, and other game fish. But the region is growing in human population and the present density outside of Globe-Miami of 1 to 2.5 persons per square mile is certain to rise rapidly. With the rise will end the primitive nature of the Salt River basin. The Forest Service has long-range plans for the region as a "retreat and recreation haven" for Phoenix and Tucson residents, while the Apaches want to develop their own lumbering, livestock, agricultural, and recreation economy.

At its lower levels the Salt River has seen the touch of human "management" for some time. A Confederate army deserter, Jack Swilling, was the first person to start a renewal of the ancient Hohokam irrigated agrarian economy. Excavating the ancient Indian canals, Swilling established a community which was producing crops by 1868. A small town, Pumpkinville, developed, but settlers changed the name to the more dignified Phoenix in 1870. Southeast of there, in 1877, a Mormon band formed the farming community of Mesa. By 1900 more than 180,000 acres were



along the Verde. Birds from all over the Southwest came there, using its lush flora as a suitable haven from the desert in which to breed. The river remains to this day one of the most important breeding bird habitats in North America. Doves, quail, meadowlarks, hawks, owls, road-runners, woodpeckers, swifts, swallows, wrens, ducks, herons, and geese abound. When the Spanish explorer Antonio de Espejo scouted the Verde Valley in 1583 he recorded seeing parrots there also. So, too, did mammals abound: deer, antelope, squirrel, beaver, muskrats, otter, porcupines, jack rabbits, skunks, raccoons, bats, chipmunks, mountain lions, bobcats, foxes, and badgers. Before overgrazing by ranchers and draining of marshy land, there were places along the Verde where a horse stood belly deep in grass.

The first Americans to visit the Verde appear to have been a segment of a trapper brigade which included the mountain men James Ohio Pattie and Ewing Young. While one contingent worked up the Salt, the other worked up the Verde to its headwaters, returning to its mouth at the Salt. Thereafter the Verde was frequented by mountain men seeking beaver and other wild life and a pleasant refuge from the desert. Kit Carson trapped the Verde in 1829.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the Mexican War, made Arizona an American territory. Yet not until 1863 was a territorial government established for the region. The site chosen was at Del Rio Springs, headwaters of the Verde. (Four months later the capital was moved to Granite Creek, a tributary a few miles to the southwest.)

While trapping declined, mining increased. The greatest find along the Verde was copper, discovered along a 30-degree slope some 2,000 feet above the valley floor. At first the inaccessibility of the ore, and the long distance to market, discouraged development. Then the Montana copper king, William Andrews Clark, decided to develop the site which had been named "Jerome." He built a narrow-gauge railroad connecting the mine to the Santa Fe standard gauge line 26 miles to the west. Clark's railway, the United Verde and Pacific railroad, had 126 curves. People called it "the crookedest line in the world." It first ran in 1895 and was aban-

the Verde River to the mine head ed.

While no great silver or gold had been made in recent times, behind a legend of a rich gold vein Verde. Today lost-mine seekers about ten miles east of Perkinsville mining community. Apaches are said to have discovered the vein in an arroyo which runs up the Verde. The Spanish drove out the miners and operated the mine themselves. The mine was so rich that it was smelted easily. According to legend, they stacked the bullion in the open. When the Apaches attacked, only a few miners escaped, carrying with them or leaving behind from memory a map of the location of the mine. The mine has not been located.

About thirty-five miles downstream from the Verde is Ivan Lake (filled with the Verde water) and Sycamore Canyon—a wild, unspoiled area of 47,762 acres—designated by the National Park Service as a wilderness area. The Verde flows from the north. At about 10 miles from the mouth the Verde turns south and enters the Lower Verde. Twenty-five miles across and for the valley is a veritable oasis, a "sagebrush" normal surface of the land, the Verde is free of geologic faults. Unfortunately the temperature inversion which traps the cold air in the Valley.

The most northerly town on the Verde is Jerome. It was established in 1912. William A. Clark's smelter for Jerome was built here. It finally closed in 1953 with the discovery of uranium (although it brought ten years of prosperity to the Verde), for its noxious fumes were a serious thing—paint on houses, people's lungs, and gardens, while the forested slopes were used as fuel for the smelter. To this was added the grazing by cattle. The destruction of the desert was under way. However, the miners successfully established farms and orchards along with primitive irrigation systems.

After meandering along the Verde the river leaves the Verde Valley at the Verde Chasm, down which the water flows to the Lower Verde. The chasm remains a haven for deer, mountain lions, beaver, ducks, and geese in abundance. By this time several