

Chapter 4: The Years of Famine

While the idea of removing our people was put to rest, our real challenge, the loss of water, remained. Our life source—the Gila River—was in its last stages of a slow and seemingly certain death, with the Gila watershed having been irreparably harmed by the loss of beaver, increased mining activities, deforestation of the upland regions, overgrazing of the desert range, drought and periodic flooding, which became more destructive as the river ecosystem changed. By the late nineteenth century, the Gila watershed was so overtaxed that it could no longer support the life it had just a few decades earlier. The river channel was increasingly “covered with large stones (and) the once grassy swales are now for the most part saltbush steppe or desert.” Cienegas or ponds that were once common along the river flats were beginning to disappear. All the while upstream settlement and water diversion continued. The arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad to Casa Grande in 1879, brought more settlers, further stressing available water. These changes reached their peak during the “forty years of famine.”

We were prepared to go to great lengths to protect our way of life. In 1882, government agent Roswell Wheeler, fearing an outbreak of hostility, requested another detachment of soldiers be sent to Sacaton. Thomas Cruse, one of those soldiers, was surprised at this call as we had never fought against the settlers. However, “deprived of irrigation until [we] looked out on barren fields and faced starvation,” we were growing desperate. More of our people moved to the Salt River Valley so “they might not hear their women and children cry for bread.” The government for the first time purchased wheat for “destitute Indians.” One of our elders feared “our pride as independent and self-supporting people was forever (being) destroyed.”

The Florence Canal meant more hardship. In 1886, the Florence settlers received government approval to begin construction of a canal that took much of the remaining flow of

the river. The Justice Department was asked to stop this project, but it did not. When completed in 1889, this canal left our farms with inadequate water. New canals in the Upper Gila Valley only added to our struggle to survive. We faced hard times and life was difficult.

The 1890s and early 1900s were especially difficult for our people as drought was the norm, rather than the exception. Summer crops failed eleven times between 1892 and 1904 and winter crops failed five times between 1899 and 1904, marking the years between 1892 and 1904 as the years of starvation. Whereas we grew 6,000,000 pounds of winter grains in 1889-90, we grew just half that amount in 1890-91. By fall hundreds of thousands of cattle and horses were shipped out of the territory and by the following year drought in “the southern portion of the Territory” was severe. Nonetheless, more than 20,000 head of steers were driven into the Salt River Valley to forage on irrigated alfalfa, showing there was still water in that valley.

Every year after 1892, the drought and upstream diversions prevented us from growing sufficient crops. Government agent Cornelius Crouse estimated that 1,000 of our people would raise no grain in 1893. Deprived of our water, many of our men cut mesquite to sell to non-Indians. We did this to provide food for our families. The calendar stick of Juan Thomas of Blackwater recorded this hardship. His entry for 1896-1897 simply states: “The river practically dry. The Blackwater Indians were forced to leave homes to sell wood.” By 1905, “nearly 12,000 cords a year were being cut and sold in Phoenix.” A local newspaper reported in 1901 that more than 30,000 cords of mesquite were stacked at Sacaton Station (at Maricopa Road and the Gila River along the Maricopa and Phoenix Railway) ready to be transported to Phoenix. Over a span of a dozen years we cut nearly 100,000 acres of mesquite trees so we could feed our families; many of these trees never came back due to the lack of water

Our hardship is best expressed in an incident that occurred in 1895, when four of our men were arrested for stealing some horses so they could sell them to provide food for their families. The men were sentenced to one year in the territorial penitentiary and when one of our men, Wee Paps, was asked if he was sorry for stealing the animals, he answered: “Until the past few years we have always had plenty of water to irrigate our farms, and never knew what want was. We always had grain stored up for a full year’s supply. We were happy and contented. Since the white men came and built the big canals and acequias we have no water for our crops. The Government refuses to give us food and we do not ask for it; we only ask for water, for which we prefer to earn our living if we can. I am no thief, and I will not beg, but my wife and children were hungry, and I must either steal or they must starve. So I took the horses and traded them for grain, and the hunger of my family was satisfied. You can do with me what you will.”

In the summer of 1900 the national media focused on our water crisis. The *Chicago Tribune* reported “Indians Starving to Death: Six Thousands Perishing on the Gila Reservation in Arizona Because of Failure of Crops.” The paper added, “That 6,000 Pima Indians, always the consistent and active friends of the white man, should be reduced from a condition of wealth and great prosperity to actual starvation through neglect of the federal government ... seems a ... killing of friends.” Newspapers from Washington DC to Los Angeles and from New York to Tucson carried similar articles. This gave us hope that maybe our water would be restored.

Our leaders also appealed to government officials. In March 1901, Antonio Azul and twelve village chiefs wrote: “We have had very poor or no crops for the past three years. About two thousand of us are not likely to raise any wheat this year, because we have no water.... Our Horses and cattle are dying for want of food and [having] nothing to feed them we cannot work them.... Many of our people have not enough to eat and to wear and don’t know what to do for a

living.” Those without food had to cross the river to get “moldy flour and rancid bacon” from the government agent in Sacaton. Those who could not make the journey went hungry.

The following year, Azul appealed directly to President Theodore Roosevelt. Noting our assistance to the emigrants and our people’s long history of irrigation farming in the desert, Azul informed the President of our suffering—and of our desire to remain self-sufficient. We have been reduced to poverty, Azul told Roosevelt. The President then assembled a committee to examine our complaints and admitted that our conditions were “one of grinding poverty and that there has been extreme and wide-spread suffering among [us].” While we managed to retain our “self-respect and endeavored to eke out a living,” the President acknowledged that our “deprivation of ... water” was the cause of our stress.

At the same time, Congress began discussing a national reclamation act. By 1901 most government leaders in Arizona and Washington DC believed that if there were a national law authorizing construction of storage dams and irrigation projects, the first such project would be on the Gila River for our benefit. Among sites considered were the Tonto site on the Salt River; the Buttes just east of Florence; the San Carlos site near the western edge of the San Carlos Apache Reservation; and the Riverside site at the confluence of the San Pedro and Gila Rivers. The Salt River site was to include a canal that would deliver water to our community.

Most people were convinced we would get the first reclamation project because of our well publicized “water abuses.” Territorial Governor Louis C. Hughes encouraged the government to build a storage dam on the Gila River. Playing on our water needs, Hughes envisioned a project that might irrigate 500,000 acres of land in the Gila River-Casa Grande Valley. This would, the Governor stated, “supply all the land required by these Indians for all time to come” and allow “a bonus” of off-reservation land to be served with water as well.

Despite overwhelming support for a site on the Gila River, land speculators, farmers and business interests in the Salt River Valley invested heavily in the lobbying of government officials. Speculators like Dr. A.J. Chandler, Dwight B. Heard and William J. Murphy were well connected to those in government authority. William Code, who served as Chandler's irrigation engineer for ten years, mysteriously showed up as our a government irrigation engineer in 1902, a critical time when support for the Gila River site was transferred to the Salt River site. Territorial Governor Alexander Brodie personally requested his good friend President Roosevelt to support the Salt River site, which was indeed selected in 1903 as the first reclamation project in Arizona. This is where Roosevelt Dam is today.

At the center of this scheme was a plan to pump the "inexhaustible" supply of groundwater beneath our reservation. Code—working hand-in-hand with speculators in the Salt River Valley convinced officials in Washington that we did not need a dam on the Gila River. Working with the Reclamation Service, Code proposed groundwater wells in place of the water that might have been stored behind San Carlos dam. The cost of these wells was around \$80,000 with another \$460,000 needed to construct a power plant to operate the wells, making the total cost \$540,000. Unknown to us, this proposal required our relocation to Santan and the sale of all our land west of modern day Price Road. This amounted to 180,000 acres, which, at \$3 per acre, was \$540,000, just what the government needed to implement the scheme. A contract between the government and the Salt River Valley Water Users Association provided the Association with \$100,000 of our money. But this contract spelled doom for us. We never received any water from the Salt River reservoir. Former Territorial Governor Joseph Kibbey admitted a non-Indian would never have agreed to such a contract. Nonetheless, the government approved of it on our behalf. We were completely unaware of these activities.

When we discovered what was occurring, we sent Hugh Patten and Lewis Nelson to Washington DC in 1908, even though they had been forbidden by the Indian agent to leave the reservation. Our leaders understood we sat on a precipice, fearing not only the loss of our land but also our rights to the waters of the Gila River. Fearing these losses, we asked the Indian Rights Association for its “assistance on behalf of our people.” Within the petition, our leaders declared their steadfast opposition to being moved off any of their land, demanding instead that our rights to the “natural low-water mark flow” of the Gila River—or as much “as we were accustomed before it was all stolen from us”—be protected.

As important, our leaders requested that a representative of the United States “confer with us ... to examine the conditions pertaining to land and water on this reservation.” Our leaders understood that as a sovereign people, we had a government-to-government relationship with the United States. Yet, we had “no voice in the matter at all,” having been “continually overreached by Engineer W.H. Code, who has attempted to force a system of irrigation upon us.” Believing in justice and seeing no other option, we appealed directly to the United States Congress and the American people for the protection of our rights.

In December 1911, Antonito Azul penned our *Appeal for Justice*. “We have not the papers to show just what the speculators and politicians of the Salt River Valley had to do with the appointments of Agent (John) Alexander and Engineer (William) Code, but the events which followed speak loudly. Before these men came on the scene, Government engineers ... had recommended the San Carlos Reservoir site as the best in this part of the country. But some time between August 15, 1902 and July 25, 1903, it seems a reservoir was decided upon for the Salt River Valley instead of the Gila River Valley.... [We] were not allowed to meet with and talk to

Government officials who came to our reservation [and were] never told of our right to good river water without expense.”

Our appeal for justice had an important impact on Congress. Together with the personal appeals made by Patten and Nelson, Congress agreed to suspend all irrigation work in Santan and in the Salt River Valley pending an investigation. Code then resigned and our lands were protected. But we still did not have sufficient water to restore the prosperity we once enjoyed. We had weathered the famine but the real question was whether our water would be restored.