

Chapter 3: Removal as a Solution to the Water Crisis?

In April 1863, Arizona Superintendent of Indian Affairs Charles Poston informed the commissioner of Indian affairs that his most important job was the protection of our water. “They have been uniformly friendly to our authorities and hospitable to our emigrants,” Poston wrote about our people. And it would be unfortunate if “in the eager rush for farms and city sites the land above them should be occupied ... and their supply of water reduced.” Beginning with the arrival of the first permanent settlers in the Florence-Casa Grande Valley in the 1860s and continuing with settlement of Upper Gila Valley towns in the 1870s, our water supply declined.

Many emigrants favorably commented on our friendliness and industriousness. We had “generously” furnished horses and food to any traveler passing through our villages. Alongside our villages could be found “a series of the finest fields” one could imagine. During the California Gold Rush (1849-1852), some 40,000 people passed through our villages, receiving both kind treatment and food. We “supplied many a starved emigrant, and restored his broken down animals.”

When the United States completed its stage line from El Paso to San Diego via Maricopa Wells, in 1858, it proved to be beneficial for our people. In 1859, we sold more than 250,000 pounds of wheat to the stage line and soon we increased our sales to over 1,000,000 pounds. By 1865, our food and fiber crops were having a significant impact on the development of Arizona Territory. It would have been “impossible” for soldiers stationed in the territory to survive without our crops. We fed settlers in the “mail districts, the mining districts north of the Gila, and the capital of the territory (Prescott).”

Following the 1854 Gadsden treaty with Mexico, by which southern Arizona became part of the United States, we found ourselves under American administration. In June 1855, Chief

Antonio Azul and eight other village leaders visited the American boundary commission in Nogales. Foremost among their concerns was the effect of the Gadsden treaty on our rights. We were promised that the United States would guarantee us all rights we had enjoyed under Mexican rule.

But these promises went unfulfilled and we soon became concerned. Just three years later, one of our village chiefs named Juan Jose became enraged when passing American soldiers refused his offer of five dollars in gold for shovels and axes. Even Azul grew distrustful, stating he was tired of unfulfilled promises made by the government. In response, the US Congress appropriated \$10,000 and authorized the purchase of presents for our people, acknowledging our loyalty and friendship to the American emigrants. On February 28, 1859, our reservation was recognized.

Although delighted with the gifts, we were unhappy with the size of the reservation. Azul protested because it did not include our grazing lands, protecting only our villages and farms along a 4-mile wide by 25-mile long stretch of the river (64,000 acres). We were promised that the reservation was to protect our fields and villages and that our other lands would be added later. Despite assurances, we had cause for concern. Government agents Ammi White and Levi Ruggles, ordered to protect our land and water resources, instead cornered the wheat market and speculated in land east of the reservation. Ruggles established the town of Florence while White founded nearby Adamsville. Ruggles soon became the largest private landholder in the Gila Valley, devoting more of his time to his business interests than to protecting ours.

Tensions escalated as more settlers built farms and homes on the river above us. Responding to our complaints about diminishing river flow, Major General E.O.C. Ord recommended that all the land above us—including the settlements in and around Florence—be

added to our reservation. Colonel Thomas Devin warned his superiors in Washington DC that if we did not receive enough water to irrigate our crops and if “crowded to the wall,” we were prepared to “fight for [our] rights” and drive the settlers from the valley.

The government did nothing to alleviate our land and water challenges, although in 1869 our reservation was temporarily expanded by 81,140 acres. Ruggles was removed as agent and replaced by Army Captain Frederick Grossman. The Army also sent inspector general Roger Jones to our villages to hear our complaints. Jones reported what we already knew: we had always cultivated “extensively” and sold large quantities of corn and wheat. He added that in a dry year our “crops would be ruined for want of water.”

The predicted crisis erupted that fall. After a flood damaged several of our villages and destroyed two trading posts and the Casa Blanca flour mill—and after a poor crop in 1869—400 of our people left the reservation to gather the corn and bean crops of settlers near Adamsville. Hundreds more began to farm near Blackwater, which was not yet part of the reservation. Inadequate rainfall and the purposeful wasting of water by upstream settlers left our crops in ruin. Antonio Azul publicly admitted that he could no longer preserve order among our people.

By 1871, our water situation was critical. Newly appointed government agent John Stout reported that “not a drop of water” had reached our fields that summer. “The time for preparing their lands is now at hand but having no water they can do nothing.” Village Chief Kihua Chinkum met with Stout and told the agent that, if necessary, he would drive the settlers out of the valley. Convinced violence was foolish, Kihua Chinkum promised that if water did not arrive within the month he and his village would join a growing number of our people moving to the Salt River Valley. Ku-vit-ke-chin, chief of Va Vak village, also announced that his people were moving to the Salt River, where water was in good supply. While upstream settlers planted a

second crop in 1869, lacking water we grew little. The crisis was so great that Azul and Maricopa Chief Juan Cheveria demanded the return of more than three million acres of farm, grazing and mesquite land along the Gila River, extending from the Pinal Mountains in the east to Gila Bend in the west.

As the crisis deepened, public opinion shifted against us. While we were once respected producers of food, we were no longer viewed as trusted allies. But we no longer viewed the settlers as we had either. While we once “took pleasure in feeding and assisting” the newcomers, we now viewed them with distrust, fearing further loss of our land and water. In this setting, President Grant sent Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard to visit us. Presbyterian missionary Charles Cook welcomed Howard in Yuma and, in late spring, the general visited with us to personally review the water crisis. Howard found we were restless but just in our complaint that the settlers diverted our water.

But rather than restore our water, Howard proposed sending our people to the Indian Territory (Oklahoma). The government viewed removal as the simplest solution. In 1873, other influential people encouraged the President to remove us to the Indian Territory. That same summer government agent Stout was authorized to take a delegation of our leading men to inspect the territory. “If we cannot go to the Salt River Valley then what?” Antonio Azul complained. “We have no food and you cannot feed us.” If satisfied with the land in the Indian Territory, and if favorable terms of removal could be agreed upon, Azul was prepared to emigrate the following spring. If one-third of our people would remove then the government was convinced the remainder would follow later. In the fall of 1873, our leading men visited the Indian Territory where they “prospected” for a new reservation near the Sac and Fox Agency (west of present-day Oklahoma City).

As resourceful people, we found our own solutions to the water crisis, although limited rainfall and continued upstream diversions between 1875 and 1883 added to our hardships. By 1876, more than 200 families moved near an alluvial spring close to Blackwater. We encouraged the government to add Blackwater to the reservation, as a partial solution to our water needs, something President Hayes did in 1876. Others moved west to areas where seepage water was available, settling in Gila Crossing and Maricopa Colony, both of which were later added to the reservation by executive order. More than 1,300 of our people now lived off the reservation.

Despite drought and increased upstream diversions, we managed to grow an “excellent article of wheat” on more than 7,000 acres. The summer of 1877, however, proved to be the warmest and driest in decades. Writing in August, Stout lamented that it was too late for rain to help our crops. “What has been planted has already dried up and the Indians will make no further attempt this season.” As the drought continued, Stout increased his efforts to persuade our leaders to accept removal to the Colorado River Reservation. In the meantime, 500 of our people were supporting themselves in the Salt River Valley, where settlers demanded their return to our reservation, something Stout refused knowing it would result in “great suffering” to us.

When the winter rains failed again, in 1878, more of our people crowded onto the eastern end of the reservation while others sought permission to move to the Salt River Valley. Stout told the commissioner of Indian affairs that unless the government was prepared to spend \$25,000 to feed us, it had better approve of the move. We did not “wish to become dependent” and only wanted to remain self-sufficient. In the spring, another Indian Inspector visited us and concluded that to confine us to the reservation would “be an act of inhumanity.” Removal was the only humane solution, with the inspector suggesting the government take the leading members of our people to the Indian Territory, leaving the rest to follow on their own. With half

of our people living off the reservation, Stout called a special council meeting with our leading men, trying to persuade to consent to removal. While listening to Stout, our leaders knew we did not wish to leave our land and only asked for the return of our water.

With so many of us living off the reservation cultivating small parcels of land, the US Army was called in to protect us against the “violent actions on the part of the settlers.” General Irvin McDowell recommended the establishment of another reservation in the Salt River Valley, something President Hayes did in 1879. Through an executive order, the President not only set aside the present day Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, but he also added 32,100 acres to our reservation in an attempt to protect our water and villages on the west end. “Even the increased [size of the] reservation will not prevent suffering,” yet another Indian inspector wrote in 1879, “because the laws of the Territory give the water to the oldest ditch (and) there is no water for the old Indian ditches.”

By 1880, the government acknowledged that removal was a failed policy and conceded that justice and humanity demanded that our attachment to our homelands be respected. Moreover, the government slowly realized that the growing tide of settlers would only add to our water needs. Abandoning the policy of removal, President Chester Arthur added additional land to our reservation in 1882 and then more than doubled the size of the reservation with an executive order in 1883. Despite adding much-needed land, it was water that we needed. We wished to remain self-reliant and self-sufficient, something we knew would be difficult—if not impossible—without water.