

Chapter 5: Early Irrigation Projects

After the passage of the Reclamation Act in 1902, we faced new threats to our water. The Government encouraged more settlers to settle in the valleys above us and then required them to apply water to their lands. This made it important for us to protect what little water remained in the river. The fact that the Indian Service believed we no longer had rights to Gila River water only added to our stress.

In 1908, the Reclamation Service was authorized by Congress to build Indian irrigation works. Under this authority, the Reclamation Service began construction of the Sacaton Project, the first modern irrigation project within our Community. This project was designed to irrigate 10,000 acres of soon-to-be allotted land on the north side of the river in the Santan and Stotonic districts. The Santan Floodwater Canal (modern Santan Canal) was constructed and nine irrigation wells were installed along a parallel well lateral to supplement the limited flow of floodwater that still made its way down the Gila.

When the Reclamation Service refused to build a permanent diversion dam at the head of the Santan Canal, our men constructed their own brush dam to capture the floodwaters. But this was only a temporary solution, as in 1911 the dam washed out three times. Consequently, we received little benefit from the floodwaters “on account of there having been no means of controlling them.” We irrigated over 4,000 acres under the Santan Floodwater Canal, in 1911, far short of the 10,000 acres we had been promised.

While the Indian Service believed our water rights were lost, some people, such as Irrigation Superintendent Charles Real Olberg, believed it was important for us to immediately put what little water remained in the river to use before upstream users appropriated it. Olberg convinced the government to build an irrigation system that would protect our remaining water.

To do this, the Indian Service replaced much of our then-existing irrigation system since upstream diversions and the deepening channel of the riverbed prohibited its use.

Our new irrigation system was to provide water to all our irrigable allotments, which were in the process of being made. By 1915, more than 30,000 acres had been allotted and nearly sixty miles of new canals and laterals had been built, although just 3,319 acres of land—fewer than what we farmed in 1911—were provided with water in Santan. With a limited water supply we could not maintain the water velocity necessary to keep pushing the silt through the canal. As a result, the Santan Canal was “completely choked” with silt by 1915 and declared inoperable.

New problems also arose, including well casings filling with silt. The floods of 1914 had damaged some of the laterals and the floodwater canal itself was in “very bad condition.” Olberg saw little use in cleaning the canal unless a diversion dam could be built above its mouth on the Gila River. Because of the damage and the absence of a diversion dam, Olberg recommended water be diverted through the old Santan Canal (modern Lateral 10), which we had dug in 1866, as it was the only way to deliver floodwaters to the land in the Santan District.

The Indian Service began a series of other projects between 1913 and 1916, all designed to serve lands that were being allotted to us. In February of 1913, the Little Gila Project was begun and was designed to restore irrigation to land south of the main channel of the Gila River, extending from Blackwater to Casa Blanca. The head of the Little Gila River was reopened and two wing dams diverted water from the Gila into the Little Gila to distribute it downstream. When completed, the Little Gila was to irrigate at least 1,000 acres of land.

The floods of 1914-15 again damaged the Little Gila River, with the winter flood destroying the head gate and filling the channel with silt and drift. When drift piled up against the Blackwater flume—built over the Little Gila to convey water through the Blackwater Island

Canal that served the land between the Gila and Little Gila rivers—the flume was destroyed, with three wagon bridges damaged and 2,500’ of the Little Gila near Sacaton Flats heavily damaged. More than 6,000’ of new channel was excavated to replace that damaged by the flood. When the work was completed, water was diverted into the Little Gila by using a brush dam.

In November of 1913, the Indian Service began surveying land north of Sacaton on what would become the Agency Project. This project was to irrigate 2,000 acres north of the Pima Agency and located between the Gila and Little Gila rivers. Water was provided to this land by means of a canal that headed on the Little Gila. By 1915, additional land had been cleared and put into cultivation, although insufficient water meant just 800 acres was irrigated.

The Blackwater Project was initiated in 1914 and was at times referred to as the “B” Line Ditch project. This ditch headed a mile east of our reservation and was to serve 2,500 acres in Blackwater. This included land in the Old Woman’s Mouth District, as well as land under the Upper Blackwater Ditch. Flooding limited full development of the Blackwater Project until after the construction of Ashurst-Hayden Diversion Dam.

In May of that same year, the Indian Service began the Casa Blanca Project, the largest irrigation project ever attempted in our Community until we established the Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project in 1995. The Casa Blanca Project was to irrigate 35,000 acres of land with water channeled through the Little Gila River to our farms west of Sacaton. This included farms in Sweetwater, Bapchule, Alkali Village and Casa Blanca, as well as some of our traditional farmlands that lost access to water with upstream diversions in the 1880s. A new canal headed near the mouth of the Little Gila River and was called the Casa Blanca Canal.

With the 1914 flood damaging the south bank of the Gila River (and a portion of the Sacaton Flats Canal), the Indian Service began yet another project called the Sacaton Flats

Project. This repaired the damaged canal (sometimes called the Upper Stotonic Canal) and restored the embankments along the Gila River. It was supposed to serve about 900 acres of land east of Sacaton, even though we had once farmed far more than that in the area.

Most of these projects were completed by 1916, when the agency superintendent boasted that our irrigation system was better than any other that we had in the past. Of course, we knew better. Despite these projects, our agricultural production remained unstable and chaotic without a permanent supply of water. While there were 18,500 acres of land under canal, in 1919, lack of water limited us to just 7,693 acres. All of these lands would soon be incorporated into the San Carlos Irrigation Project. The cost of these projects totaled nearly \$1,000,000. In 1922, the Indian Service added the Lower Gila Project, which cleared 1,500 acres of agricultural (and allotted) land in Santa Cruz. Since the Maricopa in District Seven had recognized rights to the waters of the Salt River, the Indian Service did little to assist them.

After the flood of January 1915, Representative Carl Hayden and Senator Henry Ashurst sought Congressional approval for money to build a diversion dam on the Gila River. Since a diversion dam would benefit our neighbors in Florence, Hayden thought it advantageous to have a portion of the dam charged to them. Hayden was seeking to use our suffering to bring a benefit to all of Pinal County, to which the government was trying to attach our economy.

Ashurst worked to secure an amendment to the bill adding a second diversion dam (and bridge) to be located within our Community. When another devastating flood struck the Gila Valley in February 1916, we sustained heavy damage. Many canals were destroyed, head gates and brush dams were washed out and our fields were damaged. When a Pinal County court issued a water rights ruling, in April 1916, Congress believed our water rights had been resolved,

this despite the fact that our interests were not even represented in the court. Congress then agreed to construct two diversion dams, one above Sacaton and one upstream from Florence.

When Congress authorized the construction of Ashurst-Hayden and Sacaton diversion dams, it created the Florence-Casa Grande Project. This project was to be primarily for our benefit by harnessing the floodwaters of the Gila River and making them available to us. But while Congressional debate on the project indicated a desire to provide us with “all the water [we] needed,” the law creating the Florence-Casa Grande Project gave the Secretary of the Interior the authority to negotiate a water agreement with water users in the Florence-Casa Grande Valley. Because of this agreement—using the 1916 Pinal County court ruling as its guide—we were to receive water for 35,000 acres of land with our neighbors given water rights to 27,000 acres. We were to get most of our water from Sacaton Dam, with the remainder diverted at the Florence dam and channeled down the Florence-Casa Grande Canal to a new canal—the Pima Lateral—that would deliver water to our farms.

Ashurst-Hayden Diversion Dam was completed in 1922 and began delivering water to our neighbor’s lands immediately. Sacaton dam, however, was not completed until 1925 and the bridge was not fully completed until 1928. But while Ashurst-Hayden Diversion Dam diverted an average of more than 84,000 acre-feet of water each year, Sacaton Dam diverted only 1,800 acre-feet per year. It last diverted any water on January 11, 1957. While we were willing to work, “lack of water in the Gila River” made it difficult for us to put our land to productive use.

After many years of lobbying by our leaders and friends such as Reverend Dirk Lay, Congress finally agreed to build Coolidge Dam in 1924. The dam was hailed as “the savior of the Pimas,” although in reality it was not. Coolidge Dam, and the San Carlos Irrigation Project that accompanied it, had only limited success. The dam was dedicated on March 4, 1930, by former

President Calvin Coolidge. At the dedication, Cherokee humorist Will Rogers remarked, “If this were my dam, I’d mow it,” a reference to the grass growing behind the dam and the lack of water in San Carlos Lake.

In the meantime, the Indian Service began subjugating, or clearing, 50,000 acres of our land in preparation for the water that would be stored behind Coolidge Dam. This meant thousands of acres of land were cleared of their desert plants and prepared for agriculture and the water we thought would arrive with the completion of Coolidge Dam. This subjugation took seven years to complete. In subjugating the land, the Indian Service removed nearly 2,000,000 mesquite, Palo Verde, ironwood and acacia trees. Since most of this land was on the eastern half of our reservation, there weren’t many trees left standing except along the canals and river channel. These, too, would soon die since water no longer flowed in the river.

In 1936, in an effort to provide more water to our people on the West end, the Indian Service did construct two diversion dams on the Lower Gila near Santa Cruz. The dams were to divert floodwater from the river and convey it by canal to lands in Santa Cruz, Komatke, Gila Crossing and Co-op. But other than the floodwaters of 1941, the dams diverted little water.

Consequently, while many irrigation projects were constructed to protect and put to use our rights to the waters of the Gila River, we still struggled to farm due to insufficient water. This was due to continued upstream water use—including the sinking of thousands of wells that pumped groundwater. Many of our people abandoned the farm life and took work in nearby towns. Our water—despite many promises—still had not been protected or restored.