

ROOSEVELT DAM: A PART OF OUR CHANGING TIMES

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 1999

The energy and force of the mighty Rio Salinas (Salt River) has been known since recorded history. This great exotic river has flowed between Four Peaks and the Superstition Mountains for millions of years. The native Americans contended with the raging Salt River each spring during flood season.

When the first white settlers began to till the soil of the Salt River Valley they soon found the river did not cooperate with their agrarian plans. During the spring runoff all of their irrigation weirs were often washed out and their canals damaged. Agriculture continued to survive in the valley from 1867-1894 despite the annual flooding of the Salt River. The pioneers of the Salt River Valley lived and survived through flood and drought, believing someday there was a better way.

Around 1880 a group of local citizens believed the Salt River could be controlled with a large dam. Ten years later several dam sites were being considered and one of those sites was in a narrow canyon just below the confluence of the Salt River and Tonto Creek. Early land speculators saw no real potential in the Salt River Valley until the construction of a large dam was suggested in Box Canyon sixty miles east of Phoenix on the Salt River.

Prior to the construction of a dam at the confluence of the Salt River and Tonto Creek the farmers of the Salt River Valley depended on weirs and a canal system to irrigate their crops. The weirs and canals did not provide a dependable source of irrigation water. The Hudson Company acquired the site in Box Canyon to build a dam in 1897.

The combination of a serious drought, federal inaction at the time, and the failure of the Hudson Company to construct Tonto Dam, led to the formation of a citizen's committee which eventually became the Salt River Water User's Association. Eventually, through lobbying by the committee, Congress passed the Newland Arid Lands Act. This act led to approval of the National Reclamation Act of 1902 and eventually the funding for the construction of Tonto Dam.

The Salt River Water Users Association had 198,587 acres of land on the books for water when they were closed on July 17, 1903. Benjamin A. Fowler was the founding force behind the Salt River Water User's Association and the dam would be built with a federally subsidized low interest loan. The building of the Mesa-Roosevelt Road required bonding for some 551,000 dollars from the communities of Phoenix, Tempe, and Mesa. The construction of this road allowed the businesses of these communities to participate in the economic boom at the Tonto Dam site.

Construction bids were opened on February 23, 1905. John M. Rourke of Denver, Colorado, submitted the winning bid of \$1,147,600 and would complete the project in two years. The newly formed Bureau of Reclamation started on the infrastructure of the Roosevelt Project in 1903.

Louis C. Hill was appointed as an engineer for the U.S. Reclamation Service on June 8, 1903. Hill was former railroad engineer and professor of hydraulics and electricity at the Colorado School of Mines when appointed to the job. He was involved with the construction of Roosevelt Dam from 1903-1911.



This 1898 photo shows the area where Theodore Roosevelt Dam was built. The location was originally called "The Crossing" by early Arizona pioneers and was the place in the Salt River where Indians, farmers, and ranchers would ford the river. The site is situated in a narrow gorge a short distance below the confluence of the Salt River and Tonto Creek. Photo courtesy of the Salt River Project.



The first stone is laid in the Salt River at Roosevelt Dam September 20, 1906. From left to right: Dan Carr, Chester Smith, Reclamation Service construction engineer; J.M. O'Rourke, contractor; Mr. Steinmetz, contractor; L.C. Hill, U.S. Reclamation Service engineer in charge; John Urquhart, construction inspector; and an unknown dignitary. Photo courtesy of Salt River Project.

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The first stone for Theodore Roosevelt Dam was laid on September 20, 1906, and the last stone laid on February 6, 1911. Severe flooding caused many delays on the project and created an enormous over-run in construction bids and time.

The dam was raised 284 feet above bedrock and, at the time, was the largest masonry dam in the nation and formed one of the largest man-made lakes in the world. The Roosevelt Dam project became a national model in sound water development and management. The building of Roosevelt Dam was the most important economic boom in Arizona's history as the dam's construction impacted both the mining industry and agriculture.

The construction of the dam demanded the protection of the project's watershed and this led to the formation of the Tonto Forest Preserve in 1909, which is known today as the Tonto National Forest. The Bureau of Reclamation, Tonto National Forest and the Salt River Project are all constant partners today insuring a good water and electrical supply for the Salt River Valley.

The need for greater water storage capacity and better flood control resulted in the modification of Louis C. Hill's work. Roosevelt Dam was raised an additional 77 feet in 1996 (the year the work was completed) giving this Arizona icon a new modern look going into the twenty-first century. The dam now appears as a monolithic structure of modern design rather than a leaky masonry structure. It is part of the changing times and the original monument to Louis C. Hill and his men has faded into oblivion.

Today we look to Roosevelt Dam to stave off one of Arizona's worst droughts. Roosevelt Lake is lower then it has ever been in the sixty years I can remember. If this drought continues at it present rate, Arizona will be suffering one of its greatest crisis of the twenty-first century.

A drought will insure some higher water cost in the future and a drought in the upper Colorado River basin states will also limit the amount of water flowing through the Central Arizona Project. Ironically, a vast majority of our new residents believe there is a unlimited supply of water called the "100-year water supply" which developers boost when developing desert lands. But this so-called "warranty" is not worth the paper it is written on and there is a 100-year water supply only if it rains.

Roosevelt Dam is holding up its' end in this period of crisis. Lets hope it rains all this winter and the drought is broken.



Old powerhouse at Roosevelt Dam

