

Rim Country legends

WATER STORIES 1:

WATER, WATER — EVERYWHERE?

The subject of water in Arizona continues to provoke discussion and speculation. This is not surprising since our state is considered part of the Upper Sonoran Desert and deserts are not known to be flush with water. However, visitors do not panic over talk of a shortage because in the Rim Country water seems to be everywhere.

In her publication *Water Supply Handbook* (July 1995) Carroll Cox writes, "The Mogollon Rim country receives the state's most bountiful amount of precipitation, 21.9 inches annually, and is also home to hundreds of springs that feed a substantial amount of water into tributaries of the Salt, Verde and Gila Rivers."

Many of my most delightful and cherished days were spent tramping along forested streams fed by two aquifers that lie deep under the Coconino Plateau.

The Coconino and Redwall-Mury strata spill their "white gold" into these streams where the Rim has been lifted 1,000 to 2,000 feet. I have explored these creeks since 1963 and have never found them dry. In fact, the Fish and Game folk stock them with trout on a regular basis. Consider the streams west to east under the Rim beginning with Strawberry Creek, Pine Creek, Webber Creek, Bray Creek, North Sycamore Creek, Chase Creek, Mail Creek, East Verde River, Dude Creek, Ellison Creek, Tonto Creek and on it goes.

Then there are the lakes just over the top of the Rim, from little Potato Lake to the large Chevelon Canyon Lake. In his book "On The Border With Crook," John G. Bourke describes the area like this, "The most singular thing to note about the Mogollon was the fact that the streams which flowed upon its surface in almost every case made their way to the north (into the Little Colorado River) and east into Shevlon's Fork, even where they had their origin in springs almost upon the crest itself. One exception is the spring named after General Crook, which he discovered and near which he had such a narrow escape from being killed by Apaches. That (General's Springs) makes it into the East Fork of the Verde. It is an awe-inspiring sensation to be able to sit or stand upon the edge of such a precipice and look

down upon a broad expanse mantled with juicy grasses, the paradise of livestock. There is no finer grazing section anywhere than the Tonto Basin." (page 145)

As Bourke stood there he did not understand about the deep layers of sandstone that formed the aquifers to make all that luscious growth possible. But that first glance in 1871 gave the Crook party an idea of the value so much water would provide for the future ranching industry.

How could anyone think water was a problem in the Rim Country?

For thousands of years these central mountains were used by several waves of prehistoric peoples. They used the watercourses for their agriculture and drinking. Anasazi groups were all over the Rim Country. However, the immediate Payson area was peopled by a different genetic group called "bun heads" because (like Neanderthals) they had an occipital "bun" or enlargement at the back of the skull. All these groups disappeared from the area about 1350, probably due to overpopulation and the exhaustion of the natural resources. An extended drought was probably in the mix of causes.

About 1500 the Athapascan invasion from the north took place, and the Apache tribes began to form. By that time the drought had ended and the soil had rejuvenated. The Apaches held the Rim in firm control for more than 200 years, being replaced in the 1870s by the Euro-American settlers.

The white settlements grew rapidly, and their major industries were ranching and mining. By the 1890s multiple thousands of cattle were overgrazing and the ecology of the area was being destroyed. In his famous 1926 paper *History of Grazing on Tonto*, Ranger Fred Croxen interviewed many Tonto Basin ranchers. He wrote, "Florence Packard and Chub Watkins say that along Tonto Creek where now 150 head of cattle is considered a good round-up for one day, they used to round up at least 2,000 head and it took two days to work this bunch."

By the end of the 20th century ranching had been almost completely replaced by the retirement and recreation industries.

It is in this modern era that water has become a subject of intense discussion.

Next: Water for Payson



Stan Brown

BACK WHEN