

History of the Goldfield Region

The following brief history of the region is drawn largely from several books by local Historian, Robert Mason^{1,2,3}, a brochure on the history of the Tonto National Forest published, by the National Forest Service ⁴, and applicable websites ^{5,6} providing historical background on Indian tribes in the region.

Due to its location near the Salt and Verde Rivers, one of the most lush river valleys in Arizona, the Goldfield area was a natural contact zone between various prehistoric peoples, and evidence suggests that it has supported a variety of settlements almost continuously for over 11,000 years. Although the Hohokam, who lived in the area from approximately 400 to 1450 AD are the most well known of the earliest inhabitants in the region due to their extensive irrigation canal system, there were other native groups including the Salado, Anchan, and Mogollon (Wood, p. 9). Findings of a large variety of encampments that existed along the Verde River, including a significant village of perhaps several thousand people, have been uncovered (Mason 1, pg. 6-7). There is also evidence that these groups conducted trade and had other political and cultural contact with many other prehistoric populations from northern Arizona to present day Mexico (Wood, p. 9). However, very little evidence exists for the period of time between the disappearance of the Hohokam and the arrival of the Apache and Yavapai in the 17th and 18th centuries (Wood, p. 15). Although the Apache and Yavapai are two distinctly different cultures with different languages, they lived in similar ways. They subsisted primarily by hunting and gathering, and also by planting small crops along the river where productive soil could be found, while also maintaining a somewhat nomadic lifestyle (Wood, p. 29).

The region that is now Arizona was considered Spanish territory from the time of the Coronado Expedition in 1540 until the formation of the Republic of Mexico in 1821, when it became part of Mexico. After the Mexican War of 1846, the area became part of the United States. However, there appears to be little permanent settlement activity that occurred in this period, perhaps in response to the fierce protection of land by the Yavapai and the Apache (Wood, p. 31). But the area does include historic sites related to mining, military, agricultural and ranching operations in territorial Arizona (Wood, p. 9). The discovery of gold, silver, and copper in the area in the mid 1800's was a turning point. Perhaps the best known legend is that of the Lost Dutchman Mine in the nearby Superstition Mountains. As the story goes, after Don Miguel Peralta discovered gold in 1845, he and a group of Mexicans transporting some of his takings were killed by Apaches in 1848 near Goldfield. Supposedly all signs of the mine were destroyed, until a German prospector, Jacob Walz, allegedly found it, but died without revealing its location. Many have since tried unsuccessfully to find it again (Mason 1, pg. 19). Also of note is the abundance of amethyst in the Four Peaks area, which was shipped to Europe by the Spanish in the 18th Century where some of the best specimens were added to the crown jewels of five countries (Mason 2, pg. 140).

Such stories led not only to the rapid arrival of prospectors seeking fortune, but also brought the American military into the area, including Camp (later Fort) McDowell, which was established in 1865 on what is now the Fort McDowell reservation. Resulting conflicts were considered part of the so-called Indian wars, when many Native Americans were rounded up and confined to reservations (Wood, p. 31). The most notorious event was the forced removal of thousands of Yavapai-Apache indigenous people, who were marched by the United States Army over 180 miles from the Verde Valley to San Carlos, resulting in numerous deaths. When they were released in 1900, only a fraction made it back to their homeland in the Verde Valley approximately 90 miles north of Phoenix (Yavapai-Apache website). After Fort McDowell was abandoned by the military, it was designated as an Indian Reservation in 1903 (Mason 2, pg. 49).

In the 1870's cattle ranchers and sheepherders arrived and competition for grazing rights sometimes turned deadly. In the early 1880s and again in the mid-1890s, a severe drought occurred in the region which was already being over-grazed. During this period, wells went dry, springs slowed to a trickle, creeks dried up, and cattle died. Cattle owners leased thousands of acres from the government for grazing purposes, as there was no privately owned land in this area through the early 1900s. When the Tonto National Forest was established, new government rules regarding grazing allotments were enacted, and for the first time cattlemen began to fence their ranges. Ranchers without well-watered ranges for their cattle began to leave in the early 1900s. When the rains finally came in torrents near the turn of the century, severe erosion resulted. But agriculture never materialized due to the harsh climate and unreliable water sources, despite attempts to reuse the existing Hohokam canals (Wood, p. 35). In 1905, pressure from the Salt River Valley Water Users' Association resulted in the establishment of the Tonto National Forest, primarily in order to protect the water flow for the Salt River Project, the first major reclamation project in the United States prior to construction of the Roosevelt Dam (Wood, p. 3). This was only the first of many dam projects built in the period ending in the mid-1940's that were crucial in the development of the Phoenix region (Wood, p. 37). The lakes created by these projects also provided new recreational amenities, even though they also caused the loss of unique environmental areas that existed along the previously free flowing rivers (Wood, p. 37). Today, the Tonto National Forest helps protect the stunning views and open spaces that provide recreational activities and contribute to the area's quality of life (Mason 3, pg. 136). Of its three million acres, which makes it the second largest national forest in the continental United States, only about 3% consists of private land. Although exchange programs have traded land on the perimeter of the forest for private land within the forest boundaries, this practice is rare (Mason 3, pg. 135). With respect to water reclamation, one dam that was never built also significantly affected the history of the area. In the early 1970's, construction of the Orme Dam was proposed at the confluence of the Verde and Salt Rivers, just outside the study area south of the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation's southern boundary. The project would have flooded most of the reservation and forced the community from their homeland. However, the project was abandoned by the federal government after an opposition

movement led by tribal members that included other Indian tribes and non-Indian groups forced reconsideration of the issue (Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation website). This group included a University of Arizona archaeologist who noted that there were hundreds of archaeological sites in the general area (Mason 1, pg. 9), and the president of the local Audubon Society, who noted the high concentration of nesting birds, including bald eagles (Mason 2, pg. 111). Another important influence in the area is the presence of gaming casinos on the Fort McDowell reservation since the early 1990's. Despite the seizure of gaming machines by FBI agents in 1992 that resulted in a blockade and three-week standoff, a gaming compact was signed with the state allowing for the casino's continued operation. This has also resulted in related economic development,

The Goldfield planning area remains primarily a rural residential and equestrian community. The opportunity to buy large parcels of undeveloped land and build a home in a quiet, rural area remains a major attraction for some people. As a result, the resident population in the Goldfield planning area has grown by approximately a factor of five since 1995 and more growth in the future is likely. However, growth and development creates potential issues such as the preservation of unique Sonoran desert areas, the provision of adequate infrastructure, ensuring compatibility between diverse recreational activities, and increasing air pollution from the use of unpaved roads.

¹ Mason, Robert, *Our Desert Oasis*, Schuster Co., Inc., Scottsdale, AZ, 1999 (4th ed.)

² Mason, Robert, *Verde Valley Lore*, published by author, Rio Verde, AZ, 1997

³ Mason, Robert, *More Verde Valley Lore*, Phoenix Publishing Group, Phoenix, AZ, 2004

⁴ Wood, J. Scott, Martin E. McAllister, and Michael A. Sullivan, *11,000 Years on the Tonto National Forest, Southwest*

Natural and Cultural Heritage Assoc., Albuquerque, NM, and Tonto National Forest, Phoenix, AZ, 1989

⁵ www.ftmcdowell.org/history.htm accessed 3/22/06

⁶ www.yavapai-apache.org/history.htm accessed 3/23/2006