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The Taming of the Salt



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Salt River Project

Chapter 10



William M. Breckinridge

He Located the Site of Theodore Roosevelt Dam

William M. Breckinridge and his two companions stood on a high spur that upthrust from the north end of a canyon above the confluence of Tonto Creek and the Salt River. It was an almost unbearably hot August afternoon in 1889, but the men seemed unaware of the heat as they peered, in turn, along the straight edge of a carpenter's level.

The three men spoke quietly to one another, but a tone of excitement

tinged their voices. This excitement was evidenced in the way they gestured to the east and north and back again, while Breckinridge made notations in a notebook.

They eyed the canyon slightly to the west. Two long, wide valleys spread beyond it like forks of a stout stick, one reaching almost due north, the other to the east. Willow and mesquite trees marked the course of the streams that followed the valleys. Where the streams joined in the canyon, most of the vegetation ended. Rushing water had scoured the sheer canyon clean, exposing its almost perpendicular walls and ponderous strength.

Breckinridge, leader of the party, was a professional surveyor, although he is best remembered as a noted lawman of the Wild West. He had chased outlaws and fought Indians. He knew more than his share of badmen and had put them behind bars, or in their graves, in helping tame the frontier. He had helped build railroads in Colorado and wagon roads in Arizona, had prospected for mines, guarded treasures—and led a charmed life.

Yet none of his outdoor adventures had been as important or as gratifying as the discovery made that hot August day in 1889.

Accompanied by James H. McClintock, then a young newspaperman and later to become Arizona's outstanding historian, and John R. Norton, superintendent of the new Arizona Canal in the Salt River Valley, Breckinridge had found the "Tonto Creek" damsite. For a few years it would be called Hudson damsite. For several years more the federal government would spend great effort collecting data on the river's flow at that point and in making engineering studies. It wasn't until 1903 that actual preliminary construction began there on the historic Theodore Roosevelt Dam, keystone of the Salt River Valley Water Users' Association's multiple water storage, distribution, and hydroelectric complex.

Breckinridge came to Arizona in 1877 as a freighter with the Boston Colony, which is credited with stripping a tall pine tree for a Fourth of July observance, thus giving Flagstaff its name. He had been almost everywhere in southern Arizona before official duties led him out of Maricopa County into neighboring Gila County in search of a water reservoir.

He had been the Maricopa County surveyor for several months. During this time he extended roads, checked faulty spots in the original surveys of the Valley, made as early as 1868, and increasingly was called upon to check the locations of canals and potential sites for dams.

No doubt about it, the Salt River Valley was facing a crisis. It was laced with canals, but the checkerboard of fields reaching from Mesa to Buckeye was marked with spreading fringes of dun and brown. Crops were dying. Not enough water flowed down the Verde and Salt rivers in midsummer to mature all the crops sown in the optimistic springtime,

when melting mountain snow produced a short-lived abundance of water.

Realization had come to citizens of Phoenix and surrounding towns that the state of agriculture in the area would remain perilous unless water-storage facilities could be developed to hold back the spring freshets and heavy rains of late summer and winter. While crops withered, these waters were being wasted into the Gulf of California.

The Board of Supervisors of Maricopa County had combined with the nascent Phoenix Chamber of Commerce in urging a United States Senate committee to visit Arizona on an inspection tour of possible reservoir sites in the Far West. The concept of federal irrigation support was emerging, although 13 years would pass before it would become national policy.

Breckinridge, Norton and McClintock had been sent to find locations to suitably impress the visitors. Norton had provided pack horses, McClintock rode a blue mare.

They started out early in August, skirting the north base of the Superstition Mountains to strike the Salt River above its junction with the Verde. Along the tortuous canyon they found several places suitable for dams. Each was a sheer, narrow canyon, narrow enough for economy in dam construction, and downstream from a basin large enough to store a considerable body of water. One by one they noted the future locations of Stewart Mountain, Mormon Flat and Horse Mesa dams. Each location was properly identified in their notebooks, but each basin, alone, they later reported to the Board of Supervisors, appeared too small for the Valley's great needs.

Just below the junction of Tonto Creek and the Salt River they became jubilant. "We saw that we had found an ideal spot for a dam and reservoir," Breckinridge wrote in his reminiscences, *Helldorado*, published in 1928.

For measuring distances, the three men either stepped them off or, as Breckinridge recalled, "by counting the steps of McClintock's blue mare."

They dug down, deep into the sand of the riverbed to satisfy themselves about the depth of bedrock. They tested the hardness of the rock in the canyon, realizing that the quarry for their dam was on the site.

Having checked out the apparent high-water mark along the Salt, they turned up Tonto Creek to check the elevations hidden behind hills to the north of their original survey point. Here they satisfied themselves that the reservoir would hold far more than a year's runoff from rain and melted snow.

Crossing from the upper end of Tonto Creek to the East Verde, they followed that small stream down to the main Verde and located the site for Horseshoe Dam. Then they packed southward to Fort McDowell,

identifying smaller damsites and canal headings. Finally they went back up the Salt for a second look at the Tonto Creek canyon.

After rechecking their calculations and measurements, they hurried back to Phoenix. Breckinridge reported to the Board of Supervisors that a dam 200 feet high could be built easily and cheaply in the canyon. He figured that it would impound a V-shaped lake 26 miles in length, averaging two miles in width, with an average depth of 80 feet.

The discovery of the Tonto-Roosevelt damsite was the crowning achievement of Breckinridge's career, even though it was less spectacular than his many other adventures, such as chasing after train robbers and freight thieves, and acting as tax collector in rustler-ridden Galeyville.

By the time of his death, in 1931 at the age of 84, the Theodore Roosevelt Dam for 20 years had been providing the raw materials of progress—water and hydroelectric power—and by then the outlaws of Breckinridge's younger days were simply memories of a receding past.