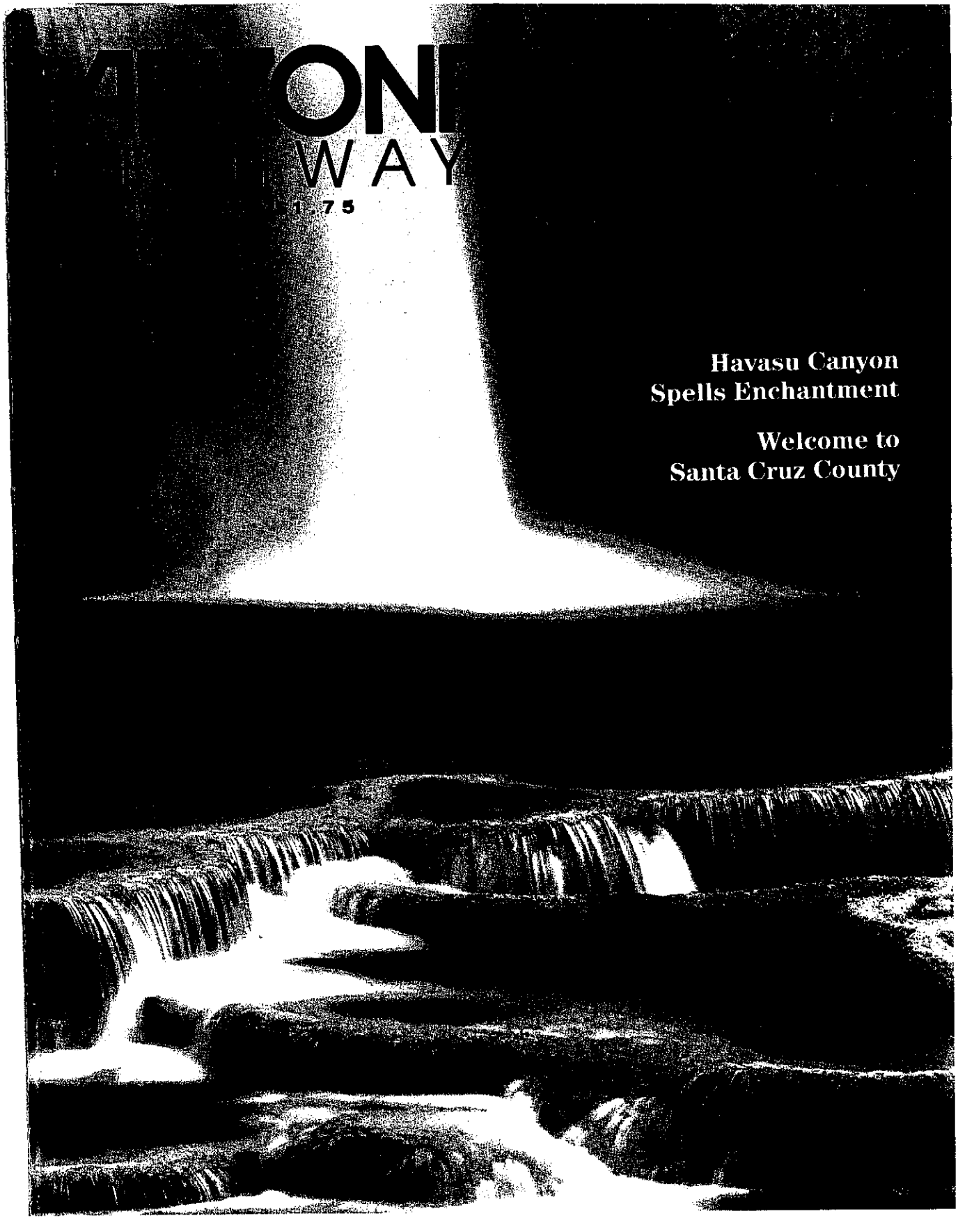
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ARIZONA
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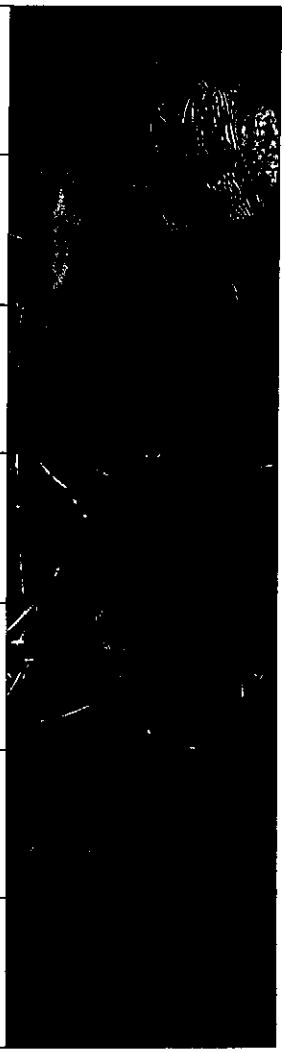


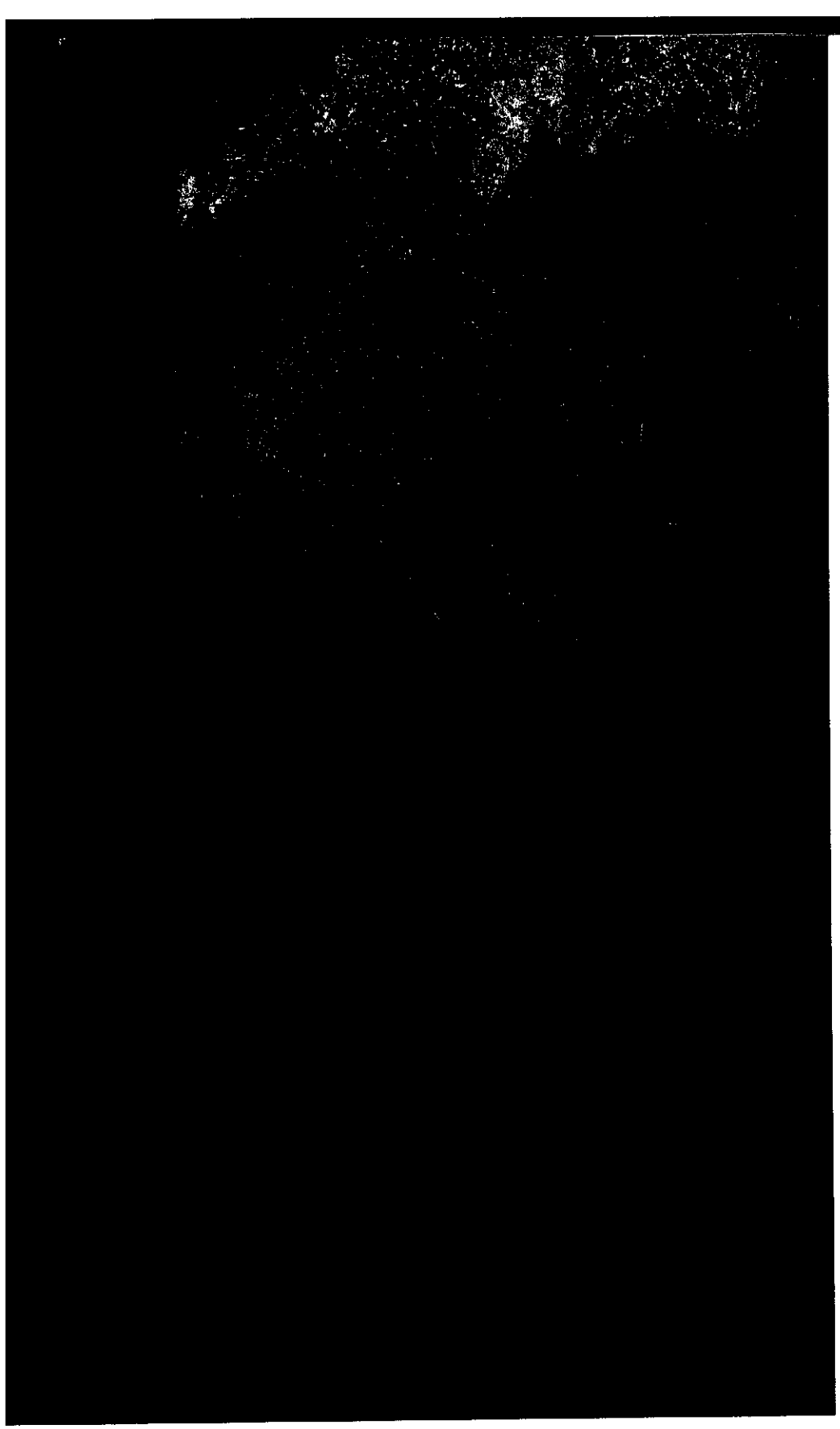
DEPARTMENTS

(FRONT COVER) *First visited by European travelers in 1776, Havasu Canyon is home to the Havasupai Indians. With its five magnificent waterfalls, it remains to this day a niche of pure enchantment for visitors. For more on this fabled land of red cliffs and turquoise streams, see page 4.* LARRY ULRICH
(OPPOSITE PAGE) *Topped by a silver dome, Santa Cruz County Courthouse in Nogales reigns over a 1,246-square-mile area which for countless ages has served as a major trade funnel between peoples of the north and south. A special feature on Arizona's smallest county begins on page 22.* JACK W. DYKINGA

El Rio de la Santa Cruz

The River of the Holy Cross

TEXT BY NADINE EPSTEIN PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANDY PRENTICE



To those who only know the Santa Cruz River as she appears in Tucson, it is difficult to think of her in romantic terms. There she is shriveled and worn; her tired, dust-baked path is parched and cracked, yawning for the violent drenching of a monsoon.

Should we even call her a river? I often wondered when crossing her empty streambed. Is she not simply a ghost from the past, an underground water reserve, a flood-drainage ditch cutting a wide swath through a burgeoning city? Is she a river simply because she occasionally floods and destroys a trailer park unwisely perched on her banks?

Puzzled, intrigued, I went in search of the soul of *el Rio de la Santa Cruz*, the River of the Holy Cross. After months of hiking and driving back roads, talking to those who know her, reading dog-eared 19th century travelogs, I had my answer.

For those who venture back along her 220-mile course, the Santa Cruz becomes again the blithe spirit she was a century ago. In treasured spots, she remains a fresh mountain stream roaring through luxuriant jade banks of cottonwoods, towering Druid oaks, and muddy cow paths.

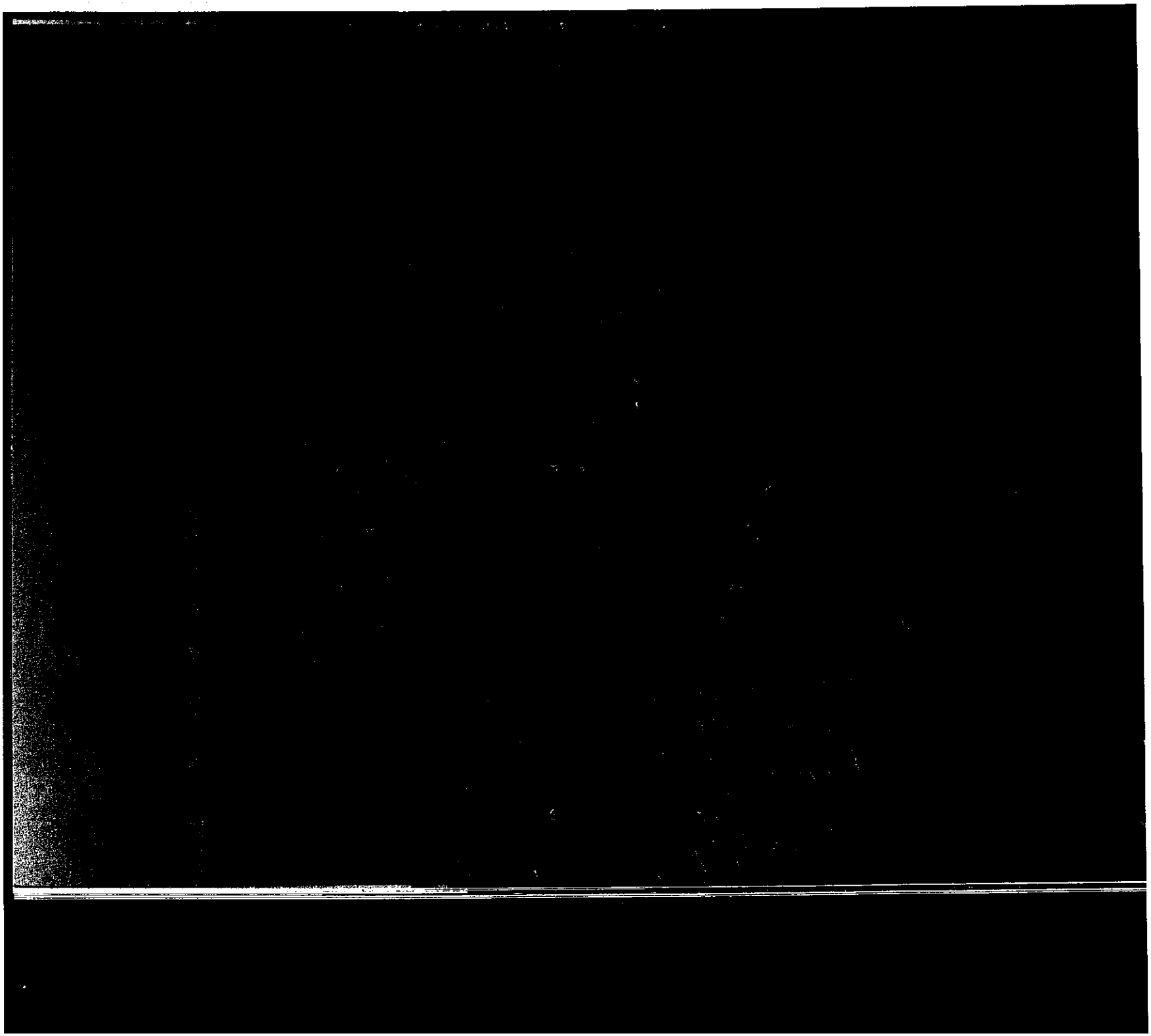
Although much of her surface flow and her irreplaceable, gloriously lush marshes and forests have vanished, she is yet a mighty water system. Her odd circular path with its reserves of groundwater below is a lifeline for an area of 8,600 square miles, stretching from the Huachuca Mountains in the south to the suburbs of Phoenix in the north.

Rising in the sensuous dusk-rose Canelo Hills near the Cochise-Santa Cruz county line, the stream meanders southward through the San Rafael Valley and into Mexico. There she loops through her namesake village, cuts around the southern edge of the Patagonia Mountains, and heads back into the United States a few miles east of Nogales.

Once across the border, she skirts the Santa Rita Mountains to Tucson and gently bends northwest to Marana. Although maps show that she flows into the Gila River near Phoenix, theirs is a foul-weather marriage, consummated only in times of flood when her dry wash metamorphoses into a muddy torrent that can cause damage reckoned in millions of dollars.

Her furious "100-year" floods (typically coming more often than that) and a

Autumn morning on the Santa Cruz River near Tumacacori National Monument. Although nature and humankind have at times dealt harshly with her, the river remains today a remarkable water system.



"500-year" flood like that of 1983 have devoured, at one time or another, almost every bridge in her way. Her roaring walls of water, ruthless inland tidal bores that churn the sand, are sometimes lethal to those too slow in stirring from her path.

"The story of the Santa Cruz is really the story of the exploration of the Southwest," said Jim Maish, whose great-uncle, a 19th-century mayor of Tucson, was one of the first of a long list of settlers to dam and pump her waters for profit.

In her lifetime, she has shared her valley with a diverse stream of humanity, beginning with prehistoric Indians, the Hohokam, then the Pimas and Papagos. Spanish missionary Marcos de Niza trod her banks in 1539, followed by Francisco Vasquez de Coronado the next year. In 1687 the Jesuit missionary Eusebio Francisco Kino followed her north, changing her name from Rio de Santa Maria and founding a string of missions, *visitas*, and farms along her path.

Back then, she was a coy Spanish river. Until 1821, when Mexico gained its independence, a series of Spanish officers including explorer Juan Bautista de Anza occupied a riverside fort at Tubac. Mexican rule lasted until the Gadsden Purchase was concluded in 1854, when residents along most of the river's length suddenly found themselves living in the United States.

When Americans began streaming into the green valley, battles with nearby Apaches ensued. The river's banks turned red, drenched with blood and marked with graves and ruined homesteads. Parts of the Santa Cruz Valley would remain virtually uninhabitable, even for Pima Indians, until nearly the end of the century.

Innocuous arroyos in the Canelo Hills, dry except when it rains, feed into the Santa Cruz about 12 miles north of the Mexican border. The river then winds through the huge San Rafael Ranch and the fertile San Rafael Valley, which resembles dewy Welsh countryside. Cows graze on mesas along the banks, and Gila minnows, the only fish still living in the Santa Cruz, dart to and fro.

A mile east of the tiny settlement of Lochiel, once a crossing point into Mexico but now closed, the river courses beneath a barbwire fence that marks the border. Shady and secluded, it is a spot ready-made for picnics and even a swim, since the water is almost four feet deep here even in the dry season.

To follow the river from this point, you must drive west to State Route 82, then southwest to Nogales where you can legally cross the border. From Nogales, Sonora, drive east to the pristine farm village of Santa Cruz. Its whitewashed houses shelter about 600 people, mostly wind-burned, cowboy-hatted Sonoran ranch folk. Here well-irrigated orchards and loamy fields flank the river, a steep-banked, frolicking white-water stream. Mexican vaqueros drive through her frothy bed to their overgrazed meadows in old mud-spattered pickups. In spring, the air is full of the aroma of apple blossoms.

"The Santa Cruz is both a blessing and a curse," said Alvero Domingus, a ruggedly handsome farmer who owns a modest Eden-like farm producing apples, cabbage, lettuce, and zucchini.

The curse, he explained, is that there are no bridges over the river (except for railway spans) in Mexico. During periods of flood, the village is cut off from the outside

(OPPOSITE PAGE) *On a late afternoon in early August, a mud-crack mosaic in the Santa Cruz, south of Tucson, takes on the appearance of delicate flakes of paper-thin wood shavings.*
(BELOW) *The tree-bordered Santa Cruz rises in the Canelo Hills near the Cochise-Santa Cruz county line, then flows southward through the magnificent grasslands of the San Rafael Valley. The Huachuca Mountains are in the background.*

world. The old road to Nogales crosses the riverbed numerous times, and a new road, which parallels the border, dips into the channel at least once.

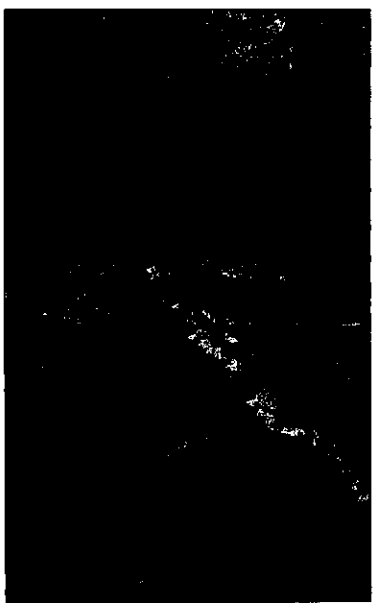
At sunset I left the village of Santa Cruz and drove south on the old road, following the river along her 30-mile loop around the southern end of the Patagonia Mountains. After about seven miles, I discovered that even in the dry season the river blocked my low-slung automobile. So I drove back to Santa Cruz as the sky darkened, accompanied by the voices of song sparrows—rarely heard along other parts of the river today—and a silvery full moon that rose grandly above the mountains.

I spent the night in a boarding house in the village. In the morning, my hostess, hoping to surprise me, brought out packaged white bread and peanut butter when I asked for tortillas. "We are almost in America here," she explained in Spanish.

While I had lost some time, my extended stay wasn't wasted. The delay afforded me a glimpse of the Domingus family's museum-worthy treasures picked up along the riverbanks: an Indian skull, arrowheads, flints, old coins, and bullet casings dating back to the campaigns of Pancho Villa.

My departure this time was via the new dirt road through the Patagonia Mountains. I didn't see the river again until six miles east of Nogales, Sonora, where it was shallow enough to cross. Just to the north, the river ran in a wide channel back into the United States, peacefully passing beneath a barbwire fence onto the Buena Vista Ranch.

On the American side of the border, the first thing I noticed were shiny red fire hydrants that lined empty dirt roads with



names like "Avenida del Sol" and "El Camino Real"—the signs of real estate dreams.

But a dream is all it is right now, says Carl Reinhard, a good-natured part-owner and would-be developer. Plans to sell thousands of lots are entangled in a massive legal dispute over river water rights. The development's future also has been complicated by a charismatic one-time owner of the ranch who (explains Reinhard, looking out over a lovely stretch of river remindful of Iowa) "...sold the same land to 300 people."

Reinhard recalls floods here in which the water ran 11 feet deep and a thousand feet wide, whizzing by at 22 miles an hour. But on most days, the Santa Cruz just creeps north to the former Yerba Buena Ranch, today a lake-dotted golf and country club and an affluent Nogales, Arizona, subdivision known as Kino Springs.

Motion picture actor Stewart Granger and his actress wife, Jean Simmons, once owned this ranch, remembers Alma Ready, author of *Open Range and Hidden Silver: Arizona's Santa Cruz County.* A pagoda they built to watch river sunsets still stands high on a hill across from an old Hohokam archeological site. After the couple parted, Ready writes, the ranch was sold to developers.

The Grangers weren't the only Hollywood actors to pause in the Santa Cruz Valley, she notes. Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, and Dolores Del Rio all stayed at the once-splendid Rancho Grande Hotel near the Yerba Buena. And just a mile or so upstream from the ranch, John Wayne is said to have been a regular visitor at the Guevavi Ranch, where the crumbling adobe remains of the Jesuit missionaries' Guevavi visita still stand beside the river.

The land on which the Rio Rico Resort Community rises today has had a colorful, sometimes violent history. On a hill overlooking the river are the adobe ruins of Old Calabasas (Spanish for squash), a visita attended by Indians who once farmed the river valley below. On another hill was Fort Mason, established in 1865. It was abandoned October 1, 1866, victim of a lethal malaria outbreak caused by mosquitos from swamps and duck-shooting ponds.

(OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP) *High, dry, and lonesome in the Santa Cruz riverbed near Tucson. The "river" is usually little more than a channel at this point; but in flood* (OPPOSITE PAGE, CENTER), *she can be an awesome sight.*
(ABOVE, AND LEFT) *Providing a summer water festival for kids, the Santa Cruz flows past Santa Gertrudis Lane near Tumacacori.*

(ABOVE) *Panoramic view of San Xavier del Bac (the translation of the Piman word Bac is "place of the water"). The original mission was founded in 1700 by Jesuit missionary Eusebio Francisco Kino. Runoff waters from the Santa Rita Mountains and numerous arroyos flow northward under the sands of the Santa Cruz River, and used to surface at this historic site.* JACK W. DYKINGA
(RIGHT) *Scene near Rio Rico Resort Community in southern Arizona. Here the Santa Cruz joins with the perennially flowing waters of Sonoita Creek.*

In the latter half of the 19th century, the valley was home to New Calabasas, a railroad town with an elegant riverfront hotel.

Today this scenic area is a labyrinth of curving roads, lots for sale, and modern homes beneath skies filled with windblown clouds of rose hue and a hazy white sun streaming against slate-blue mountain silhouettes. Rio Rico's golf course stands where the Santa Cruz River joins with densely wooded Sonoita Creek, one of the river's few tributaries with a perennial flow of water.

To the north, clad in green grasses and shimmering cottonwood leaves, the Santa Cruz flows past historic Tumacacori Mission, a national monument. The river parallels the old Tucson-Nogales highway. Until the 1970s, when Interstate Route 19 was completed well above the river plain, floods repeatedly washed away the road, cutting off traffic north and south.

The river passes through Tubac, where the ruins of an 18th century Spanish military post are preserved in what was Arizona's first state park. For an extended period in the 19th century, Apache depredations depopulated Tubac and the entire Santa Cruz Valley. But in the last generation, it has bloomed as an artist's colony of galleries, restaurants, and shops as well as a belt of groves and orchards.

Although some 19th century travelers reported lush natural vegetation here, the river now rambles past Amado through the old scrubby-brown Canoa land grant with less and less surface water evident. Years of agricultural pumping and overgrazing are partly responsible for the arid appearance. Nature, too, is working against the river here: Canoa is a sandy alluvial valley that absorbs water.

The Santa Cruz passes the retirement community of Green Valley as an underground stream. By the time the sandy course reaches the San Xavier Indian Reservation, where the graceful, white-towered Mission San Xavier del Bac rises near the banks, the valley has become desert studded with saguaro and cholla.

Just north of the reservation is Tucson. Here in pioneer times the Santa Cruz played an important role in day-to-day life. But now the river normally means little more than a dry channel requiring a highway overpass and some bridges, and leaving an empty space paralleling Interstate 10.

But when she floods, the Santa Cruz is an awesome sight, one that has been known to cause temporary irrationality in desert dwellers and to flush out that rarest of southern Arizona species, the Santa Cruz sailor. There have been a few over the years, all along the river's course. But my favorite river-faring example is that of quiet, mild-mannered Glenton Sykes, a former Tucson city engineer. In the summer of 1951, he piloted a homemade boat down the swollen river from San Xavier Mission to Tucson's Congress Street, delighting reporters and photographers.

Today, except at times of heavy rains or upstream flooding, the riverbed is entirely dry in the Tucson Basin. It wasn't always so. Until the turn of the century, 20 percent of the Santa Cruz between Canoa and Marana had surface flow, says Julio Betancourt, a paleoecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. And until the 1940s, the river's now almost barren banks were lined with mesquite and cottonwood bosques and grassy marshes. What little there was of the river's silvery surface flow has vanished, he says, because of legions of thirsty settlers and their lawn sprinklers, swimming pools, and cooling systems.

This declining level also has affected the Santa Cruz's midstream tributary, Rillito Creek, and the Rillito's tributary, Pantano Wash. (Cienega Creek, however, a tributary of Pantano, is one of the healthiest wetlands left in southern Arizona.)

Twenty miles northwest of Tucson, the Santa Cruz flattens into a wide sandy plain, inactive and undistinguished except during major floods when its waters sweep over the town of Marana. Betancourt calls this the Santa Cruz "delta," since it is here that Canelo Hills sediment washes up at the end of its voyage.

It may take thousands of years for nature to replenish the river's surface flow in Tucson, says Betancourt. Meanwhile, those who live along the Santa Cruz's banks are doing their best to prevent her groundwater reserves from dropping farther, a trend that could kill off what vegetation remains and doom the river to live out her life as a soulless, unpredictable flood channel.

Fortunately, that's not likely to happen. Tucson's water conservation program has been touted as one of the most successful in the Southwest. New laws limiting the pumping of groundwater and an infusion of water for Tucson from the Colorado River via the Central Arizona Project aqueduct are expected to relieve pressure on underground reserves.

But if you're impatient to see this desert river in a tangle of verdant bloom, head south. Just don't tell anyone I sent you. One Sunday at a barbecue in the San Rafael Valley, a rancher turned to me and said: "I hear you're writin' a story on the Santa Cruz. Beautiful, isn't she?" Then he added, "But she's our secret. Do you really have to go tell everyone about her?"

Nadine Epstein is a Chicago-based free-lance writer who contributes regularly to The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, *and Reuters news service.*

Randy Prentice is a free-lance photographer and professional musician living in Tucson.