

Hassayampa Dam Disaster--1890

A 100-foot wall of water came roaring down the narrow canyon in the early hours of February 22, 1890. The dam had burst! Before the Hassayampa was back in its channel, 83 persons were known to have been killed and scores of others were missing. It stands as Arizona's worst disaster.

By I. H. PARKMAN
Photographs from the
Sharlot Hall Museum, Prescott

IN 1888 A DAM was completed across the Hassayampa River 60 miles upstream from Wickenburg at a place called Walnut Grove. Two years later this dam, constructed and owned by the Walnut Grove Water Storage Company, H. S. VanBuren of New York, president, was to play the leading role in the greatest disaster in Arizona's history.

The need for water to mine hydraulically the placer mines in the Walnut Grove area prompted the construction of the dam. Dam water was also used to irrigate approximately 500 acres of land below the dam. Wooden flumes were built to carry the water stored by the dam downstream to the placers. Because the country had considerable fall, water pressure developed quickly in the flumes.

The Walnut Grove Water Storage Company's dam was built between two sloping granite cliffs. It was 110 feet high, 400 feet across on top and 130 feet across at its solid rock bed base. It was constructed of loose rock and dirt encased with rock laid in mortar. At high water it backed up the Hassayampa to form a two-mile lake. To

handle overflow conditions a spillway 15 feet wide and eight feet deep was constructed near the top of the dam. Normally the Hassayampa in that vicinity is just a small babbling brook, but at other times, as is the case with all Arizona dry streams, it becomes an angry, roaring, rushing torrent, and a small 15 by eight foot spillway could not even handle a fourth of the water that comes down it.

Twenty miles below the big dam a smaller one was built to capture the runoff that was diverted and used from the Walnut Grove dam.

In the winter of 1889-90 an unusually heavy amount of snow fell in the Bradshaw mountains on the headwaters of the Hassayampa. This was followed by a warm rain in the latter part of February, 1890. Almost immediately the winter's accumulation of snow was turning into living water and every arroyo, swale and canyon became a mad, rushing stream. With these streams dumping their accumulation of water into the Hassayampa, it was only a short time before the big lake back of the dam was at capacity.

It soon became apparent that the spillway was far too small to handle the runoff. To make matters worse, it became clogged with trees and other debris despite tremendous efforts to keep it clear. In a matter of hours water began running over the top of the dam.

At 2 a.m. Saturday morning, February 22, 1890, the dam gave way with a mighty roar and a 100-foot-high wall of water went roaring down the canyon.

It took only half an hour for the water to reach the smaller dam 20 miles downstream.

This dam did not last any longer than it took the flood to hit it and the mad water went rushing on down the canyon, leaving destruction and death in its wake. The channel was swept clean to the mouth of the Hassayampa where it empties into the Gila. At 9:30 that morning the water reached the Buckeye Canal and spread out over the valley, flooding the old Evans home a half mile east of the channel with four feet of water. The new 30-acre alfalfa field on their farm was covered with sand and drift.

The river in the vicinity where Highway 80 now crosses it was more than a mile wide. It continued to spread out and when it emptied into the Gila it was two miles wide.

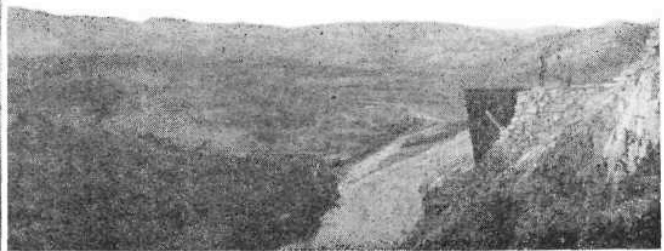
At that time the G. A. Roberts family lived in a house on their homestead just east of the Hassayampa-Gila junction. Hearing the distant roar, the Roberts boys, John and Oscar, started to the field to catch the horses, but the thunder of the flood frightened the beasts away. The family reached high ground north of their home just minutes before the flood crest hit. The peak of the flood passed in a few minutes, pouring its rushing waters into the already swollen Gila which was itself in flood at the time. A few hours later the Hassayampa was back in its channel.

Members of the Dr. J. P. Evans family were at home on their farm on the north side of what is now Highway 80, about a half mile east of the Hassayampa channel. They were not as fortunate as the Roberts family and the flood caught them before they could reach high ground. The men had to carry the women to high ground through waist deep water for almost

Rare 65-year-old photograph shows the Hassayampa Dam as it appeared during its brief life. View is downstream.



This companion photograph was taken shortly after the dam was washed out by the swollen stream. View is upstream.





Survivors of the Walnut Grove disaster. Photo taken a few days after the dam broke.

a quarter of a mile. Many other Buckeye residents were caught without warning for there were no telephone lines or radios to warn them of the approaching water. The consequences were tragic, for 83 bodies were recovered along the river's path. Many others were lost. The exact number killed in the flood has never been ascertained.

The one man who could have warned the residents downstream got only as far as Boulder Pat's Saloon, halfway between the two dams. When it became apparent that the dam might give way, this man whose name is not of record was dispatched on horseback to warn the people. He started three days before the dam broke. At Boulder Pat's he stopped for a drink and told the patrons there his news. They laughed at his information so, according to reports, he stayed on and got drunk.

The next morning he was seen riding into the swollen river and disappeared. According to reports he was never heard from again.

The greatest known loss to one family was suffered by the L. D. Haines family. The parents and four of their six children were killed. The two other members of the family were working in Phoenix at the time and it was from one of these survivors that I have supplemented my information on this disaster.

For two weeks after the dam broke the Arizona papers were full of the accounts of suffering and death.

The old *Phoenix Daily Herald* told the following stories:

"E. G. Wheeler, who at one time was connected with the Post Office Book store in this city was at lower dam on the Hassayampa and has not even been heard of. The merchant at

the Camp, Bob Brawl, lost \$4000 worth of stock.

"Deputy city treasurer Fleshman returned from the Hassayampa River disaster about ten o'clock last night (Feb. 27). Everyone in the party was haggard, stiff and exhausted from the journey. They witnessed many pitiful sights. Tuesday morning the party had reached Smith Mills where they found Ed. Scarborough and team safe and sound. Proceeding to Seymore, old mother Conger was found, naked and starving. Her store and every earthly possession has been swept away, including \$1500 in gold coin that was hid between the cloth ceiling and the shingles. They say the Hassayampa is swept clean from the upper dam to its mouth. Its canyon walls are ground smooth. Debris of all kinds, animals, provisions, buildings and trees are scattered everywhere. For the first two miles the water wall must have been 100 feet high. Thirty bodies were seen by the party including seven Chinamen and "Chinese Mary," a well known denizen of the Capital. Our Phoenix delegation met parties from Prescott, Congress and other localities, all united in the sad work of identifying the dead. In one grave six miles from Wickenburg, 18 victims sleep peacefully awaiting God's Judgment Day."

For many years after the flood bones of lost victims were found in the sand along the Hassayampa. As late as 25 years after the disaster a skeleton was found that was believed to have been that of John Silsbee, pioneer musician.

The property destruction was not great outside of the dam itself and the construction camps, for the river traverses desert country all the way down to its mouth. A heavy looser was Bob Brawl, a merchant in the canyon a short distance from the dam.

A safe belonging to him and containing \$5000 was swept down the river and buried under the sand. As far as it is known the safe is still out there somewhere.

Someday the dam will probably be rebuilt in order to conserve the water for irrigation—but it will be built of solid concrete with gates and spillways large enough to take care of any possible overflow. History has given a lesson too costly to ignore.

• • •

SOUTHWEST CONCERNED OVER NAVAJO DRINKING PROBLEM

The Navajo Indian drinking problem has been receiving increased public attention since the Indians were given free access to liquor. Many people support the Gallup, New Mexico, Police Department's contention that the end of Indian prohibition is turning out ignobly. Others feel that there is less drinking now than during prohibition, but that the drinking is now out in the open.

Most all observers agree, however, that the situation will straighten itself out in a few years—that the present rash of public drunkenness is merely the logical outcome of the sudden lifting of the drinking ban.

Hundreds of Navajos crowded Gallup bars during the recent Indian Tribal Ceremonials. Two police wagons were kept on the run all during the festival, carrying away inebriated Indians. One police officer declared that more drunks were arrested in one night in Gallup than in the city of Chicago.

No one, it appears, has a complete picture of what is taking place as a nation of some 75,000 people finds itself suddenly able to buy beer, wine and whisky like anyone else. The Navajos themselves still prohibit the bringing of alcohol onto their reservation, however.

U. S. Commissioner Glenn L. Emmons declared that "the Indians are still learning how to handle alcohol. Sometimes, in cases such as this, the situation gets worse before it gets better."

The Navajo language newspaper *Adahooniligii* reports that the Navajo Agency and the Navajo Tribal Council have protested a proposed move of a Gallup bar closer to the reservation. The bar has obtained permission for the move from the McKinley County board of commissioners pending its legality. Navajo leaders fear that there are not enough law enforcement officers on the reservation to handle disturbances that might occur at the bar.