

The Colorado River Indian Reservation

A Brief Historical Summary

The Colorado River Indian Reservation stretches over 400 square miles of fertile river bottom, low desert mountain ranges and mesas. The land covers the Arizona border extending to eastern California along the Colorado River. It is here that the Mohave Indians have dwelt for centuries, planting crops in the flood plain of the Colorado and gathering mesquite beans.



According to Alfred Kroeber and other anthropologists, the Mohave are classified among the Yuman-speaking peoples including the Quechan, Cocopas and Maricopas. The Mohave traditionally lived in line villages stretching along the river. They considered themselves a nation, were excellent warriors, and traveled extensively—as far as the Hopi Reservation to the east and west to the Pacific Ocean. Garces, a Spanish explorer found them living in the area when he came through in 1776. He took Mohave guides and followed well-established trails into California. Tall and large-boned people, the Mohave used these same routes to run sometimes a hundred miles a day without stopping—visiting other tribes to trade. Because they had a reputation as fierce in battle, the travelers were treated with respect, lest their brethren hear of mistreatment and come for revenge. Children were included in most aspects of daily life through observation and formal teaching. They casually acquired most tribal lore and custom while still young.

The Chemehuevi, a branch of the Southern Paiute and semi-nomadic were said to have moved in to their inhabited area in the 1800's. Both of these original tribes were faced with threats from the influx of White Americans seeking gold in California. In 1864, the chiefs of the Mohaves and Chemehuevis, along with those of the Quechans, Yavapais and Hulapais,

met with Colonel Charles Poston, the Superintendent of Arizona's Indian Agency, to negotiate for a reservation. The town of Poston, established in 1942, bears his name. The chiefs agreed to the present said site after receiving the promise from the government to build an irrigation system sufficient to irrigate the acreage in exchange for the aboriginal lands being relinquished. In 1865, the Colorado River Indian reservation was established by an Act of Congress and approved by President Abraham Lincoln as a homeland for Indians of the Colorado River and its tributaries.

Congress delayed appropriations until 1867. Whooping cough took the lives of over 200 Mohaves in 1869 while miners were depleting gold mines in the area. By 1870, only 300 acres of land had been cultivated and, according to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Arizona, the Indians were "fast disappearing" due to disease and famine. A post office was established near the present town of Parker, named after a Seneca Indian, Eli Parker, who had been Commissioner for Indian Affairs during President Grant's administration. In 1881, the local school opened with 36 pupils and two teachers. The first 25 years of the reservation were characterized by economic failures, epidemics, famine and exodus, with only surviving Mohaves and a few Chemehuevis left.

During the first years of the 20th century, the policies of cultural extinction were exercised in the Indian schools. A Senate report describes the curriculum as "designed to separate a child from his reservation and family, strip him of his tribal lore and force the complete abandonment of his native language." The strong pull of the tribes to their homeland and traditions helped their struggle for cultural survival. It was not helped by another government policy of prohibiting traditional Indian ceremonies. This ban was justified as an economic necessity.

Construction of an efficient 40-horse steam-powered pumping station at the turn of the century, which irrigated several thousand acres, brought the Colorado River Indian Reservation agricultural recognition.

The fluctuations of the Colorado's alluvial flood cycle were controlled by the construction of Parker dam, completed in 1935. Among the serious consequences was the demise of the Chemehuevi Reservation at Chemehuevi valley as the waters of Lake Havasu swallowed the Reservation. The completion of Headgate Rock dam in 1941 insured a steady supply of water sufficient to irrigate the 104,000 undeveloped acres of reservation land available for agriculture.

In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act established a credit fund to allow tribes to develop their natural resources. On July 17, 1937, the Colorado River Indian Tribes ratified a Constitution and By-Laws for a new tribal government. In 1940, the Tribal Council enacted a code of law and order ordinances and established a judicial system for the reservation. Tribal sovereignty was not yet a reality however.

During World War II (WW II), The Office of Indian Affairs (OIA, today the Bureau of Indian Affairs) and the War Relocation Authority (WRA) expanded the reservation irrigation system when a WWII Internment Camp was established in the newly named area called Poston. The OIA justified the appropriation of congressional funds by promising that the project would benefit other tribes besides the Mohaves and the Chemehuevis. In addition, President Franklin Roosevelt's war emergency fund paid for the operation of the Poston Internment Camps while the OIA hired the Poston Japanese American detainees to work on the irrigation system. The Indian Service began pressuring the Tribes to open their reservation to others. The Tribal Council resisted until 1945 when they were threatened with the potential loss of a substantial portion of their reservation to non-Indians. Tribal Council Ordinance No. Five reserved a portion of the reservation for colonization by other Indians. The Ordinance divided the reservation into two portions: the Northern and Southern Reserves. The Hopi and Navajo tribes as well as other tribes living along the Colorado River tributaries were recruited to develop the southern reserve. The first 17 Hopi family "colonists" moved into the Poston Camp II compound on September 1, 1945. The Navajo "colonists" began to arrive in 1947 as

well as other tribes. Many families lived in the Poston barracks for several years until the subjugation of the Southern reserve was completed. The BIA, who had exclusive authority over reservation development, continued to pressure the tribes for more colonization until the Mohaves and Chemehuevis filed a suit with the Indian Claims Commission questioning the legitimacy of the colonization. They were ultimately successful in stopping the colonizing process.

One of the stipulations of Ordinance No. 5 was the ability of the recruited colonists to apply for membership into the Colorado River Indian Tribes. As a result, the official seal of the Colorado River Indian Tribes consists today of four tribes – the Mohave, Chemehuevi, Hopi and Navajo tribes.



Today, the reservation economy is based primarily on agriculture, tourism and light industry. The Tribes have developed an extensive land-leasing program and have several marinas, lodging facilities and mobile home parks that cater to the recreation markets. Recently opened is the BlueWater Resort and Casino, featuring rooms, marina, gambling facilities and a 4-plex theater.

The Tribes, recognizing the importance of education for the future economic and cultural success of the reservation have a number of programs to address that need. Included are the Education Department for K-12 students, Career Development for post-secondary, Headstart, GED programs and Johnson O'Malley, which address cultural issues.

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