

A Brief History of the Bigler Canal to Sunny Flat

Work on the Bigler Canal¹ west of Pima, Arizona probably started about 1922. George Albert Bigler (1878-1965) of Central, Arizona, intended to divert excess water from the Union Canal to a large tract of land he owned few miles further west, in the extreme northeast part of the area known as Bear Springs Flat. George and his family referred to this area as Sunny Flat. Even though the canal was completed after great and sustained effort, no share of Union Canal irrigation water was ever decreed for this parcel. Despite this major setback, George managed to get enough surplus water from the canal and from a system of catchments that he built south and west of the property to successfully raise crops of vegetables, melons, grain, and hay for several years in the 1930s and possibly as late as the 1950s³. Eventually the canal and Sunny Flat were abandoned, evidence (some would say) that hard work does not always result in success.



George Albert Bigler

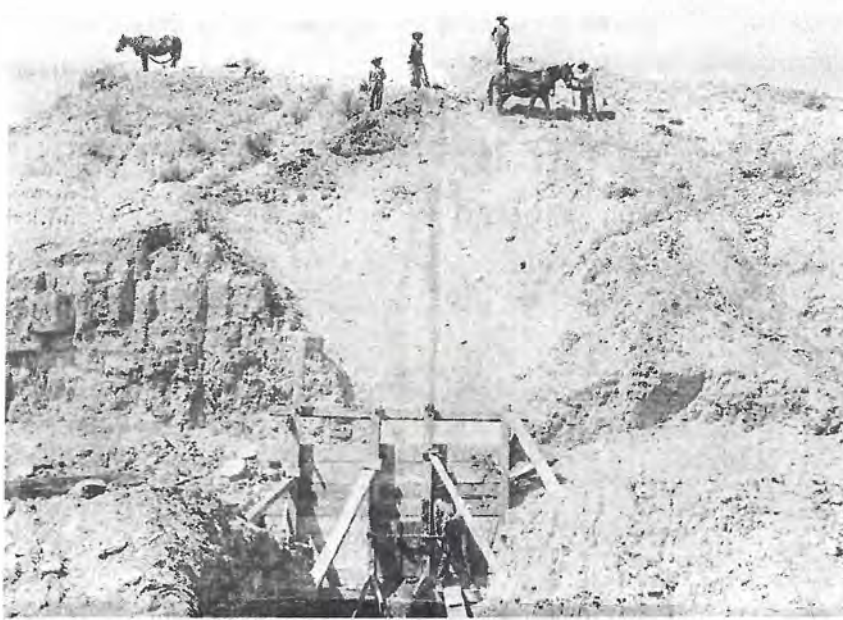
Today, much of the canal can be followed through its course westward. To cross the deep canyon of Patterson Wash, George and his men built a flume supported by posts, the stubs of which are still evident. From the east side of Patterson Wash, the ditch can be seen side-hilling north and west. The actual path from there to where the canal enters Sunny Flat is undefined, but an ambitious walker or drone-pilot could probably find it in short order.

¹ Not to be confused with other "Bigler Canal" a few miles southwest near Bear Springs. Also sometimes called the "Seven-mile Ditch."

² George Bigler's son Jacob Dale Bigler (1927-2007) recalled riding horseback as a very young boy to take his father lunch and dinner as he worked on the ditch. Dale said that after dinner his father would put him on the horse and slap its rump. He would eventually fall asleep from the rocking of the horse and wake up in Central, with the horse standing in the dark at the corral gate.

³ Unpublished Bigler Family History.

To get to Sunny Flat proper, one follows the El Paso Natural Gas line northwest from Patterson Wash⁴. After descending into the Flat on a side road off the gas line, the ditch is on both sides of the old access road. In several places, the hillside was too steep for the ditch to “hang” without wooden supports built to keep the ditch from eroding and failing. At one point, a tunnel appears to have been built to avoid having to circumnavigate a ridge that extends out into the Flat. After perhaps $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile the ditch follows a berm westward to where the farm was.



Men working on a headgate of the Bigler Canal

The remains of farm include a stone-and-mortar structure that is often mistaken for a well, but was a silo for storing grain and chopped silage. There is also sign that a corral and small barn were once there. The only evidences of a dwelling are parts of a cast-iron stove and a porcelain chamber pot found about 50 yards northwest of the silo. The large earthen dam west of the silo stored runoff from the washes beyond to use in irrigation.

Leaving the silo and heading north, one can see where runoff has taken the original road. Visitors have established new track a few yards east of the original. Now the only residents of Sunny Flat are jackrabbits, a herd of javelina, and a passing mule deer or two.

On a personal note, in 1985 I wrote a short story based on the Ditch to Sunny Flat. The author Edward Abbey liked it so well that he encouraged the editor of *American West* to buy it. With the \$600 I received, I bought an engagement ring for the young woman who became my wife—another story.

--Michael K. Crockett, October 26, 2018

⁴ In recent years, residents of this area have been threatened by a pack of wild dogs. My younger son and I witnessed this pack attempting to take the young from a herd of javelina. The large boar in the herd successfully repelled them.