

# Smithville Extension Mystery Solved

By Hal Herbert, contributing writer Aug 3, 2005

Not long ago, Ray Ferguson stopped me at the Pima Post Office and asked if I knew anything about the Smithville Extension.

"What's that?" I asked.

Ferguson told me about the extension to the Smithville Canal that was added in 1896. Obviously, I knew nothing about it, so Ray went on to explain that it really shouldn't be called the Smithville Extension because it could not have been connected to the Smithville Canal but to the Union Canal.

Well, I love an historical controversy, so I promised to look into it. I contacted Verna Rae Colvin, the Valley's expert on the history of the canal system. She self-published a very informative tract on the subject after editing the centennial history of Eden called "The Garden Where We Lived."

Colvin got out her history and maps and showed me the extension and the dates associated with its construction and use. She said she had received much of her information from Dudley Welker, my next source of information.

Now, let me say a few words about the characters in this drama. Ferguson is the son of an early store owner and cotton farmer from Glenbar. His father owned and operated the Glenbar Store, the Eden Store and even the Central Market over the years.

After Highway 70 was widened in 1953, Ferguson's father traded the store for a cotton farm and changed professions. Ferguson operated the cotton farm for a number of years and now leases his land to Marco Palmer.

Colvin, the daughter of Vernie Cluff of Central, is a descendant of David Cluff, one of the pioneers of the Gila Valley. She is married to Bob Colvin of Eden, whose family traces back as far as the Cluffs.

Dudley Welker is a well-known judge and attorney in the Valley and a descendant of Valley pioneer James R. Welker, bishop and postmaster. Joseph, Dale and Sid Bigler are the sons of George A. Bigler, a pioneer in farming and ranching, best known for his pecan orchards in Central.

Colvin's maps show that the Smithville Extension started where the Union and Smithville canals came close together, southwest of Pima, about halfway to Glenbar. The Graham County Bulletin published a supplement called the "Holiday Trade Edition," dated Nov. 19, 1897. That supplement included the following statement:

"What is known as the Smithville Canal was extended several miles west and north of Cottonwood Wash last winter, and under the extension was raised good crops this year by Hyrum Weech, J.A. Burns, F. Kerby, H.J. Anderson and others on about 150 acres, cultivated for the first time. Probably 100 acres more new land will be put in cultivation under this canal next year."

Pay close attention to this early description. The canal we were to trace, as we will discover, went west, then south and west again, making a huge "U" south of the railroad. It did not go anywhere close to Cottonwood Wash.

The original Smithville Canal followed Cottonwood Wash, north of Pima and travels in a southward direction to a spot near the north end of 200 South where it turns abruptly to the west. The 1897 extension must have been an addition that we now refer to as the Smithville Canal (not an extension). According to Colvin, the extension we are interested in was built in the early 1900s.

For years, Judge Welker, the executor of his grandfather's estate, has been receiving tax and irrigation bills for a sliver of landlocked land (2.2 acres, 66 feet in width) that his family has kept for sentimental reasons. The land, between Marco Palmer's farm and Red Knolls, has not received water for years, if ever.

The Gila Valley Irrigation District bills him for a water allotment on the "Smithville Canal." The Smithville Canal does not go anywhere near Red Knolls, and the intervening land owned by Marco Palmer is irrigated by the Dodge-Nevada Canal.

How could it be possible that a canal, known for years as the Smithville Extension, be connected to the Union Canal, not the Smithville Canal?

Two tasks were at hand. The first was to enlist the aid of Ferguson to trace the remnants of the extension (it has not been used since World War I when it was abandoned), and the second task would be to investigate the historical record and irrigation district maps. Ferguson's farm consists of the southern-most fields in the vicinity of the so-called extension. Discovering the course of the old extension has been one of Ferguson's life-long goals.

Tracing the old canal turned out to be quite an adventure. Ferguson and I were joined by Bob Colvin, who, like his wife, has a life-long interest in the history of the Valley and of its canal system.

We started out in my four-wheel drive pickup with plenty of bottled water. We went through the Glenbar Cotton Gin yard and crossed over the Smithville Canal, heading directly south toward the end of the Union Canal. Not far beyond the Union Canal Ferguson pointed out the remnants of the old canal that traveled from east to west.

We followed a dirt road to Patterson Wash. There, Ferguson had spent many hours pondering the course of the canal. He remembers that in 1936 he walked under the remnants of an old flume that crossed the wash. He pointed to the far side of the wash where footings of piling that supported huge timbers still exist. Built like a crude railroad bridge, the flume could have carried thousands of acre-feet of water across an expanse almost 100 yards long.

Pioneer canal diggers traced the contours of the country, maintaining a slight drop in elevation that mimicked that of the river which ran farther and farther to the north. From Patterson Wash, the canal meandered along foothills where you can see the faint remnants of pilings along the face of a hill. The canal then entered a uniquely beautiful spot. Sitting like beehives, numerous reddish clay mounds appeared to offer an insurmountable obstacle for the canal.

At that location, Ferguson directed us off the dirt road onto a plain that fell from the mound-like clay hills. With no visible sign of the canal, he walked us into a section between two of those clay hills and pointed out the foundations of pilings where a short flume or pipe (siphon) connected two twenty-foot embankments. We walked up the embankment and, sure enough, the remnants of a cement-lined canal were clearly visible. The crumbling cement trough hugged the side of the hill as it progressed southward over seemingly impassible barriers.

From there, Ferguson guided us to Bigler Wash where the canal made an abrupt turn to the west, crossing Sunny Flat north of Bigler Reservoir. After crossing Bigler Wash, the canal turned northward between Bigler and Matthews Wash. It then crossed over Matthews Wash where the cement casement for a 4 foot siphon (pipe) is still visible on both sides of the wash. The same is true of Tripp-Underwood Wash and Hunsacker Wash. On the casement at Tripp-Underwood Wash the initials "HLS" are still clearly visible. (Ferguson believes that the initials were put there by Hyrum L. Smith, who farmed near Glenbar and taught at several local schools.)

The Hunsacker Siphon was huge - the size of small barn. Thousands of pounds of cement had to be hauled to the site and mixed with local sand and water to pour into forms that stood at least 10-feet tall. Both Bob Colvin and I were amazed at the distance we had traveled and the rough terrain we traversed in tracing the old canal. We stood in amazement and awe at the audacity and dedication necessary to complete the task.

According to the 1920 map, the extension continued, completing the "U" before turning westward toward the backside of Red Knolls. Ferguson pointed out large tracks of land that had obviously been cultivated many years before. The only land in that vicinity currently under cultivation are Marco Palmer's cotton fields, which are now watered by the Dodge-Nevada Canal.

Now that we had examined the physical remnants of the extension, we had to determine its origins. Why was Ferguson

insisting that it must have been built off the Union Canal rather than the Smithville Canal?

According to the Pima Topographic Map the Smithville Canal is built along an elevation of 2,840 feet elevation. The Union Canal is built along an elevation of 2,900 feet elevation. A re-examination with GPS at the ends of the Union and Smithville Canals and of the site where two canals come closest together confirms that the elevation difference is 60 feet. The Union Canal is 60 feet higher than the Smithville and the first old head gate to be discovered on the old canal is at an elevation of 2,880 feet, too high to be connected to the Smithville Canal. Therefore, it is physically impossible for that extension to have been connected to the Smithville Canal. There was no way and no reason to raise the water 60 above the Smithville Canal to irrigate the area south of Glenbar.

Maybe the problem is not the physical origin of the extension but the name, Smithville Extension. To discover the original name given to the canal, I contacted Joseph, Dale and Sid Bigler, whose father, George Bigler, ranched and farmed in that area. Articles in their family history, "George A. Bigler, Family History," published in 1999, solved at least half of the mystery.

George Bigler owned a ranch on Sunny Flat, and he got permission from the Union Canal board to take all the water from the canal during the winter months when there was little demand for irrigation water. In 1921, Bigler hired a surveyor to establish the grade needed to reach the ranch and hired some men to start construction on what became known as the "Seven Mile Ditch."

The first obstacle was a wash, west of Cottonwood Wash, which was spanned by a flume of 4x4 trestles strengthened with 2x4s. Corrugated tin was used for the trough, which was patched with tar. No remnants of that trestle or flume exist today. The ditch then proceeded in the same direction we traced it.

The kicker is that George Bigler built the canal to feed water into the Bigler Reservoir and no farther. It lasted for three seasons and never really fulfilled its purpose. The reservoir dam failed, and the canal continually needed repairs. Sid Bigler insists that the Seven Mile Ditch never went beyond the Bigler ranch.

The second half of the canal as shown on the 1920 map from the Bigler Ranch to Welker's land and Red Knoll provided what appeared to be a complicated mystery. If it was not connected to the Seven Mile Ditch, to what was it connected? The answer was in the Bigler family history.

George Bigler wrote, "I bought Sunny Flat in 1915. David Rogers took up 160 acres in Sec. 21, Twp 6, range 24 east as a homestead, and I took up 160 acres adjoining it as a desert section." The key was his mention of Section 21. The Smithville Extension is shown contained completely within Section 16, immediately to the north of Section 21.

What appeared to be a continuation of the Seven Mile Ditch turns out to be the Smithville Extension. The Seven Mile Ditch was a completely separate ditch. They shared a similar path but further examination of the elevations of the footings across Matthewsville, Tripp-Underwood, and Hunsacker Washes showed the elevation to be 2822 feet, well below that of the Smithville Canal. The Seven Mile Ditch was built at an elevation of 2900 feet, the same as the Union Canal.

So the answer turned out to be that the Smithville Extension did exist and was connected the Smithville Canal and the Seven Mile Ditch was connected to the Union Canal. Neither canal lasted very long. Both succumbed to multiple washouts and distances to great to be easily maintain.

The remnants we traced belonged to both the Seven Mile Ditch and the Smithville Extension. The closest they lay to each other was less than one mile near Sunny Flat. That made it easy to fail to distinguish the siphons on Matthewsville, Tripp-Underwood, and Hunsacker Washes from the end of the Seven Mile Ditch. The Biglers insist that the Seven Mile Ditch only lasted three seasons, which would mean that it was abandoned sometime in the mid-1920s. The exact demise of the Smithville Extension is not known, but Judge Welker would argue that it must still exist because he received a bill for its non-existent water last month.

