

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Backstory on Rillito River Columns

My last two columns (*Foothills Star*, May 3rd and 10th) told the story of two early 1900s Tucson communities that were successful because of reliable water in the Rillito River. I had so much fun researching and writing those columns – and spent so much time working on them – that I thought you might be interested in some of my experiences.

It started early this year when Pat and I - after living in Tucson for ages – “discovered” Rillito River Park and the nicely done walking paths and bicycle trails. How could it have taken so long (we asked ourselves) for us to stumble across such a wonderful Tucson resource?

I began thinking about writing a column on our belated discovery and started collecting data about the River Walk and its extension the Loop that will shortly encircle Tucson. I was well along with my planning when I woke up on February 5th to find a column on that exact subject in the *Arizona Daily Star* written by Josh Brodesky. I had been scooped!

Then a knitting friend of Pat's, Anne Fletcher, suggested that I write a column about the pioneer Mormon community of Binghampton that developed on both sides of the Rillito River bend. “Huh,” I said, “Never heard of it!”

With my ignorance doubly established, I went to the internet to see what I could find. That led to visits to Brandi Fenton Memorial Park (which historically commemorates Binghampton) and the Binghampton Cemetery (still active today after 113 years).

Meanwhile on January 29th Pat and I had attended a talk on the history of Fort Lowell by my buddy Jim Turner at the restored San Pedro Chapel, just west of Fort Lowell Park. I followed that up by visiting my packrat brother Al's historical files to read some of Jim's source material.

That led me to Fort Lowell Park and the Museum there, administered by the Arizona Historical Society. Bette Richards walked me through some fascinating historical materials.

To make a long(er) story short(er), I soon discovered the interesting connection between the Mormons in Binghampton and the settlers who followed the soldiers at Old Fort Lowell: a plentiful and reliable water supply and the use of ditches to carry water up to two miles to irrigate their farms. I immediately envisioned a two-part series.

I went back to the internet and found new leads on both communities – plus little tidbits of information. In studying Mormon history in Mexico, I discovered that presumptive

Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's father was born in 1907 in the same colony from which Mormons left to come north to settle in Binghamton.

I also learned a lot about the early 1900s hydrology of Tanque Verde Creek and how the settlers drew water from the near-surface underground flow, but my summary for the column didn't pass Pat's review due to an excess of "engineering complexity."

I visited the Arizona Historical Society at 949 East Second Street twice to search their books, newspapers, and historic photographs. I couldn't resist ordering (and paying for) a copy of an 1888 photo of the Fort that was published in the column.

As for my family-history-tracing adventures in the Gold Rush country of California and southern Mexico, I used maps – street maps and satellite maps - as important parts of my research.

My little red car became a familiar site in both the Binghamton and Old Fort Lowell neighborhoods as I drove up and down all the streets, looking for evidence of past history and interesting sites to stop and photograph.

I used satellite maps to study the Rillito, Tanque Verde, and Pantano waterways, trying to find remnants of the irrigation ditches. Over several weeks and a half-dozen visits Pat and I trudged for miles (down at the loose, sandy bottom) in the dry washes, finding no artifacts, trying to imagine how the irrigation ditches tied in to the then-running and underground water.

The final event in my research was locating and interviewing Duane Bingham, whose grandfather was the younger brother of Bingham family patriarch Nephi Bingham. Besides managing the Binghamton Cemetery, Duane has inherited many Binghamton historical materials, including priceless old photographs, one of which I was able to use in my column.

Among the many interesting things Duane Bingham told me was that the Rillito used to have very shallow banks, the current steep banks resulting from dredging by mining operations over the years. He also described a digging tool called a "Fresno Scraper," a sort of open-front-end, horse-drawn wheelbarrow that the Mormons used to help dig the irrigation ditches and the basement of the big Mormon church.

So I worked on the two columns for four months - on and off. Don't get me wrong; I'm not complaining. I enjoyed every minute!



Looking west from the middle of Tanque Verde Wash, you can see Craycroft bridge. Pantano Wash, coming from the south, joins Tanque Verde Wash under the bridge. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Looking southwest across the Rillito River, you can see Binghampton and the Tucson Mountains in the distance. Note the shallow banks of the Rillito. (Courtesy of Duane Bingham, circa 1920s)