Take Up
Your Mission

Mormon Colonizing Along
the Little Colorado River
1870-1900

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About the Author . . .

CHARLES S. PETERSON, a native of the Little Colorado country, whose forbears participated in the Mormon migration to Arizona, has been privileged as few others in the field to carry out his research directly from tremendously rich primary sources. Among his published works, his biographical sketch "A Mighty Man Was Brother Lot" won the Oscar O. Winther Award for the best article appearing in the *Western Historical Quarterly* for 1970. Associate Professor of History at Utah State University, and Associate Editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly*, he previously served as Dean of Instruction at the College of Eastern Utah, as Professor of History at the University of Utah, and as Assistant Secretary-Treasurer of the Organization of American Historians. Additionally, he served as Director of the Utah Historical Society and as Editor of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* for three years.
into which headgates were built were located at strategic spots, usually at a bend or "at the top of the water" where the flow could easily be drawn off into some earlier course which was near stream level. More often it was a matter of lifting the water and "taking it out" by means of diversion dams. Like the rock walls, these were located according to footing conditions and convenience of diversion. The first dams were not large works, rising no more than twelve feet. As a lift of more than a few feet was usually avoided, it was hoped that such modest barriers would be adequate. Hard experience soon proved that the happy combination of conditions under which the small dam sufficed was limited indeed. Larger works or continuing reconstruction were consequently required.

All of the earliest dams were constructed of dirt-fill, bound and stabilized by rock, cedar brush, and logs. In time settlers learned to lay them with the side fronting the water rising at a gentle pitch so that floods swept up and over, leaving the dam intact. Before the turn of the century, more impressive works had been made on the Little Colorado, but Silver Creek was still controlled by a series of these earthen and rubble diversion dams. For decades it proved necessary to replace them with
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heartbreaking regularity. Later a degree of permanence was achieved by pouring concrete shells over the dams and laying aprons downstream onto which flooding waters fell as they came over the dam.

After the earliest years, efforts were made to impound unused water in reservoirs to supplement the natural flow of the streams during periods of heavy irrigation. Between Snowflake and Taylor, for example, three such reservoirs had been constructed by the early 1890s. Dams or levees ten or twelve feet in height and perhaps two hundred yards in length were built, generally at sites removed from the direct path of the river. One of these was said to have "about 4,550 yards of earth work in the bank besides rock and brush." Its capacity was estimated at "enough water to irrigate 1,000 acres over once."

Perhaps the largest and most effective reservoirs were built at St. Johns. Beginning with two in the immediate vicinity of town in the early 1880s, development progressed until before 1915 the Lyman Dam backed up a substantial amount of water. While the utility of St. Johns' dams was great, they frequently broke, precipitating a chain reaction that swept dams away at Woodruff and St. Joseph that might otherwise have held.

2 See "Minutes of the Woodruff Irrigation Company, 1895-1906," pp. 154, 161, 166. The original minutes are in possession of Earl Crofford at Woodruff, Arizona. He has been kind enough to furnish the writer with a copy.

The shadow of the church loomed large in both the associations of the early years and the chartered companies of the later era. Stake presidencies and bishops played vital roles. They became involved in water development when they entered the country and remained at its forefront until they were removed from office or died. In many cases their successors inherited this obligation, carrying the tradition into the twentieth century.

L. H. Hatch, who served in the stake presidency from its inception in 1878 until 1901, spent the entire period in a struggle to solve Woodruff's water problems. Tending to pessimism and self-recrimination, he was nevertheless the figure around which Woodruff's shifting population formed as he helped build twelve dams and weathered the destruction of eleven of them. His voice on the stake presidency and access to the General Authorities, most of whom he knew well, won concessions far beyond what the size and prospects of the community might otherwise have merited. Driven by despair as dams continued to fail, he carried his requests for aid beyond the confines of the Mormon community, securing funds from public sources as early as 1890. He sulked, preached, threatened, and prophesied to focus the elements of continued effort on the "famous Woodruff dam." 9

According to a son living in 1966, the old gentleman's determination was in part the result of a personal pact with Brigham Young to locate the "worst place on the Little Colorado" and develop its water as evidence of success to other less determined missionaries. 10 Whatever the facts, L. H. Hatch's leadership was an important, if not the paramount, factor in the course taken by Woodruff's long fight to tame the Little Colorado River.

Less a joust with fate and more a matter of positive leadership was the role of D. K. Udall, who first as bishop of St. Johns and later as president of a stake by the same name also spent the better part of a lifetime in water development. Between 1880 and 1915 he was intimately associated with the promotion and construction of seven reservoirs some of which were immense projects requiring effective cooperation between Mormons and outside financiers and engineers. At Round Valley where he lived for a time, he put "a portion of each year" into "building and rebuilding" a "cluster of small lakes." At Hunt, about halfway between St. Johns and Holbrook, he also participated in successive construction of the "Udall Reservoir" or, as it was called locally, "Zion's Lake." 11

In company with visiting General Authorities, Jesse N. Smith, president of the Eastern Arizona and Snowflake stakes, provided much of the

10 From a personal interview with Wilford L. Hatch of Franklin, Idaho, August 20, 1966.
11 Udall and Nelson, David King Udall, pp. 184-85.