



## A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

### *Unique geography created the Yuma Crossing – and shaped the history of our community and nation*

Standing on the banks of the Colorado River in Yuma today, it is hard to imagine the river in its original, untamed state. Yet, in the days before dams were constructed up and down its length, the waters of the Colorado shaped the geography – and history – of the entire Southwest.

In those days, the full volume of water that now sustains life in seven western states and two countries ran by Yuma's doorstep – and often ran wild. The course of the river was unpredictable from year to year and from season to season, and in the table-flat floodplains where it met the Gila, the riverbed often stretched across 15 miles of silty bottoms laced with unexpected back channels and even pockets of quicksand. Getting across was no easy matter, even when the river was not in flood.

But at the place that would become Yuma, two outcroppings of granite held their place against the river's might and squeezed it into a narrower channel. Here the waters ran swift, but the banks held firm and the passage was, if still hazardous, at least predictable. From the time the earliest people came to the area, this was known as the easiest and safest place to ford or swim the river, the Yuma Crossing.

#### **Early explorers**

The first Europeans arrived in the Yuma area in **1540** – some 80 years before the Pilgrims set foot on Plymouth Rock – when Spanish expeditions led by the Hernando de Alarcon and Melchior Diaz sailed up the Colorado from the Sea of Cortez. They noted the natural crossing of the Colorado as a potential site for settlement because of its strategic location.

But these Spanish explorers also found thriving communities already in existence along the banks of the river – ancestors of the present-day Quechan and Cocopah tribes – hunting, fishing and growing crops. The explorers called the Indians the Yumas, from the Spanish word for smoke (*humo*), because smoke from their cooking fires filled the valley as the Spaniards surveyed the Crossing from “Indian Hill.”

Early expeditions aside, the Indians of the Yuma area were left largely undisturbed until the **1680s**, when Father Eusebio Kino arrived in Sonora to establish missions and convert the native people to Christianity. Father Kino's expeditions throughout what is now Arizona, New Mexico and California mapped an area 200 miles wide and 250 miles long, including what is now Yuma County. He led the first land expedition to Baja California, confirming that it is a peninsula, not an island.

It was not until **1774** that Yuma became firmly fixed on maps of New Spain. That is when the viceroy of New Spain charged the captain of the presidio at Tubac (near present-day Tucson) with finding a practical overland route from Sonora to northern California. **Juan Bautista de Anza** arrived in Yuma in January and established relations with the Quechans, who controlled the river crossing.

That friendly contact proved critical to the survival of Anza's men when the expedition became lost in the wilderness of sand dunes to the west and was forced to retrace its steps to the banks of the Colorado. It was not until the end of March that Anza and some of his men finally arrived at Mission San Gabriel (near present-day Los Angeles). But it was the **Anza Trail** – through the Yuma Crossing – that opened the way for Spanish settlement of Alta (upper) California. In terms of the larger world, Yuma was “on the map.”

However, this increased the pressure for the Spanish to control the strategic Yuma Crossing and to convert the Quechan. **In 1781**, the **Quechans rebelled** against Spanish oppression, injustice and a significant loss of their crops and food stores. The Spanish settlement at the Crossing was destroyed with many Spaniards killed and taken captive. The Spanish largely retreated and never again tried to dominate the Quechan or control the Yuma Crossing.

By the time Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, a decade of war had destroyed the silver-mining industry and left the country bankrupt. The northern presidios and missions began to wither as mountain men and other explorers from the United States moved into the area.

### **The American era**

The growing influx of Americans into Mexico's northern reaches eventually led to the outbreak of war in 1846. During this turbulent period, the U.S. Army recruited Mormon volunteers to blaze a southern wagon route to California that crossed the Colorado River at Yuma. Its grueling march of nearly 2,000 miles from Iowa to San Diego helped to secure vast areas of the Southwest for the U.S. After the U.S. Army occupied Mexico City, Mexico was forced to cede its northern territories – all of California, Nevada and Utah, most of Arizona and parts of New Mexico and Colorado.

What put Yuma on the map for Americans was the **gold rush of 1849**, when thousands of fortune hunters headed west, seeking the quickest way to reach California. In one year, more than 60,000 travelers passed through what was then known as Colorado City, following the Gila Trail – present-day Main Street – to the rope ferry that would carry them across the Colorado River.

Reflecting the town's new importance, the U.S. Army in 1852 established Fort Yuma on Indian Hill, overlooking the strategic crossing from across the river. In 1854, the Gadsden Purchase was ratified, finally making the portion of Arizona south of the Gila River – and the Colorado City town site – part of the United States.

At the same time, the U.S. Army determined that the easiest way to supply new forts in the lands taken from Mexico was to bring supplies by sea, then up the river to Yuma. From Yuma, thousands of tons of supplies were transported by 20-mule teams to outposts throughout the Southwest. The U.S. Army Quartermaster Depot – now a state historic park – was in operation from the 1860s to the 1880s. Some of the original buildings from the Quartermaster Depot era still stand in the park, making them among Arizona's oldest buildings.

By 1857, the first stage road was built from San Diego to San Antonio, with stages carried across the Colorado River here aboard the rope ferry. The first post office also was established that year in Colorado City – only to be washed away by flooding in 1862. When the town was rebuilt, it was renamed Arizona City.

In 1858, Lt. Joseph C. Ives led a steamship expedition upriver to the approximate site of today's Hoover Dam, near Las Vegas. By the 1870s, six steamships and five barges were traveling the lower part of the river (and decimating the native forests of willow and cottonwood to fuel their boilers).

On the eve of the Civil War, Arizona City's position on the Colorado and its status as a port made it one of the busiest – and wildest towns – in the old West. Just imagine the human confluence on these river banks of seafaring sailors, river pilots, soldiers, muleskinners, miners, trappers, outlaws, cowboys, Indians and bandits – and of course, all those others who made their living by meeting their needs, whether for supplies and provisions, strong drink, lively entertainment or warm female companionship.

Amid the Civil War in 1863, President Lincoln signed the bill creating the territorial government, and in 1864, Pony Express service was established through Arizona City. With big plans following the end of the war, the Arizona City town site was laid out in 1866 with a 100-foot right of way for Main Street in order to accommodate heavy wagon traffic and promote commercial development. Formally incorporated under territorial law as Arizona City in 1871, the town was renamed once more in 1873 – to be known from that point forward as “Yuma.”

The newly renamed city gained one of its lasting claims to fame in 1876, when the Yuma Territorial Prison opened on the twin hill across from the fort. A fairly enlightened institution despite its fearsome reputation, the prison remained in operation until 1909; its buildings were used by Yuma High School from 1910 to 1914 and now are the main attraction at Arizona's most-visited state historic park.

Shortly after the prison opened, the railroad arrived – eventually making possible the 1957 and 2007 versions of the movie *3:10 to Yuma* (the plot of the movie being whether notorious outlaw Ben Wade can be held to be transported to Yuma's prison on the train departing at that hour).

The first train crossed into Arizona from California in 1877 on a track alignment that corresponds to present-day Madison Avenue. The pivot that supported the swing-span rail bridge – which opened like a door for steamship traffic to pass – still exists and is the centerpiece of Pivot Point Interpretative Plaza, where Madison Avenue meets the river.

Typical of Arizona's atypical development, the railroad line was built from west to east beginning in Yuma, reaching Tucson in 1880. This eventually became the main line of the Southern Pacific, one of the great coast-to-coast railroads of the era.

### **The taming of the West**

As the Wild West era ended, Yuma also changed, though it continued to take a pioneering role in regional development. An ambitious irrigation scheme called the “Yuma Project” was the first major undertaking authorized for the new U.S. Reclamation Service (now known as the Bureau of Reclamation) in 1904; actual construction of the Laguna Dam began in 1905.

Completed in 1909, the Laguna Dam was the first dam on the Colorado River, marking the end of the steamboat era – and the beginning of irrigated agriculture.

As part of the Yuma project, a massive tunnel called the Yuma Siphon was dug *underneath* the Colorado River. Completed in 1912 – the same year Arizona became a state – this engineering marvel still delivers irrigation water for the Yuma Valley through a 14-foot-diameter concrete tube that reaches 965 feet from the California side of the river to just below old City Hall. You can learn more about the project – and see water bubbling up through the Siphon – at the Yuma Quartermaster Depot State Historic Park.

Through the early years of the century, Yuma was still a place for firsts: the first plane to land in Arizona touched down here in 1911; the first highway crossing of the Colorado River was the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge in 1915; Fly Field (now Marine Corps Air Station Yuma) was one of the first airports in Arizona and in 1928 hosted 25 planes in a cross-country air race. In 1929, the famed aviatrix Amelia Earhart ran off the end of the runway in Yuma while competing in the first Women's Air Derby from Santa Monica, Calif., to Cleveland (Earhart had a new propeller flown in, continued the race and finished third).

As the Depression gripped the nation, Yuma's economy was sustained by the construction of the Imperial Dam and All-American Canal; in fact, the Coronado Motel was the first modern-style motel to be built in Arizona (in 1938, with side-by-side rooms in a single building versus separate cabins).

Less happily, because of the huge migration through Yuma toward the “promised land” of California, state police were posted on the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge. If travelers could not show that they had money in their pockets or a firm job in California, they were not permitted to cross the river. Many people turned around and settled in Yuma – the origin of the neighborhood still known as “Okietown”.

### **War and peace**

After Pearl Harbor, Yuma went on a war footing along with the rest of the country. The Civil Aeronautics Administration had authorized permanent runways at Fly Field in 1941; now activity ramped up and Yuma Army Air Base was established at the site. With its first classes graduating in 1943, the base became one of the busiest flight schools in the nation, training pilots to fly AT-6 single-engine trainers, T-17 multi-engine trainers and B-17 Flying Fortresses.

In 1942, Major Gen. George S. Patton established the Desert Training Center (later known as California-Arizona Maneuver Area) across a huge swath of desert straddling the state line from Nevada to the Mexican border. More than 1 million men trained for combat under harsh desert conditions at four camps in Arizona and seven in California – with Hyder, Horn, Laguna and Pilot Knob in the Yuma area.

By 1943, the Army also had opened the Yuma Test Branch at the present-day site of Yuma Proving Ground near the Imperial Dam on the Colorado River. Because the flow of the river there could be controlled, it was a perfect place to try out portable bridging equipment that would be used in Europe. Italian prisoners of war used to help build the facilities were allowed to visit town once a week.

But when the war ended in 1945, military activity came to an end. Flights ceased at Yuma Army Air Base and the area was partly reclaimed by desert.

By 1949, with Yuma's postwar economy looking a bit grim, the Yuma Jaycees decided to stage an elaborate publicity stunt to spotlight the area's year-round perfect flying weather: an attempt to set a record for nonstop flying.

The plane was an Aeronca Sedan named the "City of Yuma" and emblazoned with the hopeful slogan "The City With A Future." The small plane took off on August 24 and did not touch the ground again for nearly 47 days – until October 10, 1949.

The record-setting 1,124 hours aloft was made possible by a team of volunteers who passed food and fuel to pilots Woody Jongeward and Bob Woodhouse from the back of a Buick convertible as it sped along the runway at 80 miles an hour, with the plane flying just above it and matching speeds.

In 1997, the record-setting plane was located and returned to Yuma by present-day Jaycees, who had it restored and flown again to mark the 50th anniversary of the endurance flight. The historic plane now hangs in the atrium lobby of Yuma's City Hall. Free interpretative exhibits include a short video and excerpts from NBC News radio broadcasts from 1949.

Whether due to the stunt or other reasons, the Yuma air field was reactivated in 1951 as a U.S. Air Force facility. Renamed Vincent Air Force Base in 1956, it was signed over to the Navy in 1959 and has been a Marine Corps facility ever since.

Also in 1951, the Yuma Test Branch reopened – with a greatly expanded mission – as Yuma Proving Ground. For the next half-century, agriculture and the military were the mainstays of the local economy – along with a growing tourism industry.

### **A new look at – and for – Yuma's riverfront**

As in many cities, Yuma's growth in recent decades shifted away from the historic downtown. The creation of a "pedestrian mall" on Main Street in the 1960s failed to staunch the exodus of retail establishments, and the city largely turned its back on the historic riverfront. Stripped of their native forests and starved of seasonal flooding, the banks of the Colorado were overgrown with non-native vegetation and often occupied by transients.

In the 1990s, community leaders came together to develop a plan to reclaim the riverfront and revitalize the historic downtown. The effort received a major boost with the designation by the U.S. Congress of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, which refocused attention on the city's history and leveraged public investment to encourage private development in the historic North End.

In 2009, the Heritage Area's master plan projects earned the Governor's Arizona Preservation Award as the "most significant contribution toward the preservation of some aspect of the natural, cultural or aesthetic legacy of Arizona." These projects included:

- Renovation and reopening of the historic Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge (2002)
- Development of West Wetlands Park (first phase opened 2002)
- Development of the East Wetlands environmental restoration area (begun 2004)
- Development of more than 10 miles of paved and lighted trails on the river and East Main Canal
- Design and development of Gateway Park (opened 2007)

- Public/private development of Pivot Point Conference Center (opened Nov. 2008) and Hilton Garden Inn at Pivot Point (opened May 2009)
- Development of Pivot Point Interpretative Plaza, a free public exhibit area on the site where the first railroad train entered Arizona in 1877 (opened June 2010).

Arizona's budget crisis in recent years posed a new challenge for Yuma as the two state historic parks bookending its riverfront redevelopment area were threatened with closure. But the community rallied to "save" the parks, and the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area assumed management of the Quartermaster Depot in late 2009 and of the Yuma Territorial Prison in early 2010.

With the help of grants, community fundraising, and capital funding from Arizona State Parks, major improvements to the grounds, buildings and museum exhibits have been completed and historic adobe structures have been reroofed and restored at both parks. To ensure a bright future for these parks, new master plans are being developed in cooperation with Arizona State Parks and National Park Service.

As the City of Yuma celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its charter under the laws of the new state of Arizona on April 7, 1914, it also demonstrated that this community is committed to preserving and celebrating its rich heritage and unique position at the crossroads of the Southwest. Permanent improvements sparked by the Centennial celebration include new signs in historic downtown welcoming residents and visitors to the Gateway of the Great Southwest and a new beach on the Colorado River in West Wetlands Park.

More recently, the Arizona Historical Society partnered with the Yuma County Historical Society and other organizations to complete two major projects: an \$80,000 effort to catalog and preserve Yuma's historic archives in a state-of-the-art facility in Yuma's Heritage Library, and a major renovation of the Sanguinetti House Museum and gardens.

These efforts earned the Governor's Tourism Award for Arizona Preservation in 2016, and are part of a master plan for AHS's entire North End campus, which envisions development of an agriculture museum and restoration of the historic adobe Molina Block, Yuma's first commercial building.