

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Rillito River Historic Communities – Binghampton

A few months ago Pat and I walked one of the Rillito River Park pathways along the dry riverbed and learned that many years ago the River flowed freely and had quite an interesting (and probably little known) history. Let me tell you what we found out.

Around 1900 two communities developed along Tucson's Rillito River – communities that flourished because of plentiful and dependable river water. One of these was a pioneer Mormon settlement that included farms just north of the River bend and the more urban settlement of Binghampton (pronounced bing-hámp-ton), south of the Rillito River at today's North Dodge Boulevard and East Fort Lowell Road. The second community, east of the Mormons, at old Fort Lowell, was started by Mexican farmers and ranchers.

The underlying geological structure of these near-River areas holds ground water closer to the surface than in other parts of the Tucson basin. That, plus the convergence of the Tanque Verde and Pantano desert waterways to form the Rillito (where the present day Craycroft bridge crosses the River) provided a reliable water supply for centuries. (Extensive human use of surface water, and groundwater pumping that started in earnest in the 1940s, have lowered the water table and now keep the creeks, washes, and rivers dry most of the year.)

The first settlers along this section of the Rillito were Native American Hohokam. Archeological evidence suggests that between 250–1450 AD the Hohokam built houses, dug canals to water their fields, fashioned pottery, and raised their families.

Other than a few Mexican and Anglo settlers starting in the 1850s, the next residents along the eastern Rillito came in 1873, when the U.S Army built Fort Lowell to protect citizens against Apache attacks. The Army occupied Fort Lowell until 1891.

Mormon Settlers

In 1899 Nephi Bingham, a Mormon, started working a small farm just north of the River bend. In 1904 Nephi and his family moved south of the River to a place that quickly became known as Bingham's place. At the time, there was only one house between their home and Tucson, six miles away by wagon road.

A little farming community of Bingham relatives began to grow on both sides of the River. Seeking to escape political unrest and revolution, in 1909 Mormons started coming north to join Nephi from a colony in Colonia Dublan, Mexico. Additional Mormons from Safford, Thatcher, Duncan, Pima, St. David, Douglas, and Benson soon joined the community.

Plentiful Water

The settlement thrived – based on plentiful water. Nephi hired Yaqui Indians to dig a ditch to draw water from Tanque Verde Creek two miles to the east, near old Fort Lowell. A strong underground flow there provided unfailing water.

They stored the water in two large ponds near present day North Alvernon Way, just south of the River, and irrigated their farmland from the Rillito, the reservoirs, and shallow wells.

They planted vegetable gardens and orchards, and ran dairies.

Constructing a Church

In 1910 the Binghampton Branch of the Mormon Church was organized. Worshipers built a frame/adobe school south of the River - where children learned during the week, and everyone attended church on Sunday. In 1927 members began constructing the church building that was dedicated in 1935, remodeled extensively since, and is still operating today at 3750 East Fort Lowell Road.

The Church was the center of activity for the Binghampton settlement which would eventually grow to an area bounded by North Country Club Road and North Swan Road to the west and east, East Fort Lowell Road to the south, and the base of the foothills on the north.

Also existing today is the Binghampton Cemetery, north of the Rillito, at 4001 North Alvernon Way, almost hidden in the beautiful foothills desert. The 40-acre cemetery dates back to 1899, now accommodates over 1500 interments, and is still accepting burials. On a recent visit, Pat and I located Bingham-family patriarch Nephi Bingham's gravesite.

Gradual Decline

The population of Binghampton probably exceeded 300 people by the early 1920s. Farming continued to thrive until the 1930s when reduced Rillito River flow, declining water tables, and the Great Depression forced residents to find other jobs.

From the late 1920s through the 1930s, Binghampton experienced an influx of non-Mormon ranchers and farmers who established horse-riding schools, boarding stables, horse ranches, and pecan groves in place of the family farms. The community remained mostly agrarian until the early 1950s.

By the 1960s many Binghampton residents had moved farther out of town to the suburbs. The area was rezoned for multiple-use, drastically changing the character of the neighborhood.

Today, a drive through the old Binghampton community reveals mostly a collection of small businesses, only a few original (but heavily modified) homes, and no signposts relating the community's fascinating history.

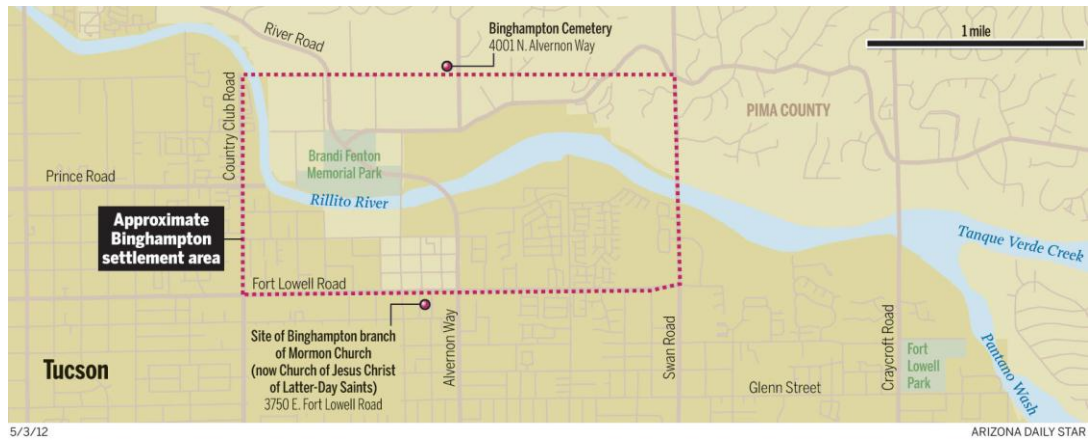
Remembering Binghampton

More positively, in 2003 the 427-acre Binghampton Rural Historic Landscape was designated to save what was left of the rural area, just north of the River, approximately at North Dodge Boulevard and East River Road.

In 2006 Brandi Fenton Memorial Park, 56 acres within the Binghampton Rural Historic Landscape, was dedicated as part of the Pima County parks system. Tucson's Fenton family initiated a unique public-private partnership to help fund and develop the park in memory of their daughter who was killed in an auto accident in 2003 when she was just 13. The park provides a number of very well done Binghampton-history exposition signs along its pleasant sidewalks. Access to the park is from the rerouted North Alvernon Way near its intersection with East River Road and also, as Pat and I recently discovered, via Tucson's popular river walk and bike paths.

Next Time: The story of the Old Fort Lowell Neighborhood.

Sources: Online: Mormon Colonies in Mexico; History of Binghampton Ward; Images of Binghampton: A History; Tucson's Pioneer Legacy: "They came and existed and they farmed;" Binghampton Rural Historic Landscape; Brandi Fenton Park. Newspaper Articles: Arizona Daily Star (September 15, 1991); Tucson Citizen (February 28, 2005); Desert Leaf (January 2008). Interview with Duane Bingham (2012).



*The Rillito River, formed from the confluence of Tanque Verde and Pantano Creeks, was a reliable source of water for early 1900s communities.
(Courtesy of Arizona Daily Star)*



*Water from Tanque Verde Creek was drawn via an irrigation ditch to Binghampton storage ponds, large enough for boats.
(Courtesy of Duane Bingham, circa 1920s)*



This original Binghampton school building at 3701 East River Road is now part of Khalsa Montessori School. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



The Binghampton Cemetery, started in 1899, still accepts Mormons and their extended families for burial. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



*This Mormon Church at 3750 East Fort Lowell Road
was dedicated in 1935 by Binghamton residents. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)*