

Arizona Falls - Transcript

Narrator:

Water is the life-blood of the Valley of the Sun. It flows from rivers such as the Salt and Verde into a labyrinth of 131 miles of canals that feed the valley's homes, businesses, farms, and orchards. The canals we depend on today were first designed to irrigate existing farms and encourage future agricultural development. William J. Murphy was a pioneer in this regard. In 1883, the railroad excavator and entrepreneur and his men braved raw desert, flash floods, and funding mishaps to construct the canals.

Shelley Dudley:

He was doing excavation along land that hadn't been developed at all, hadn't been any type of farm, and they just had to go through whatever they came across.

Narrator:

One thing they came across was a solid shelf of rock at what is now 56th street and Indian School.

Shelley Dudley:

There was a big fall in the land, but even as early as 1883, 1884 when the Arizona Canal was being built, people saw the potential for hydro power. So they left the fall in there.

Narrator:

Where some saw a future source of electricity, others saw beauty. Murphy, who acquired land around the area, planted trees and grasses around the falls.

Shelly Dudley:

There was nothing out there before. It would have been cactus and dried brush, and here we have a great canal going across the northern part of the Salt River Valley and a spectacular fall, and people ended up going out and having picnics.

Narrator:

But the falls had potential for more than a picnic spot. Around 1900, 1901 they petitioned the Federal Government to build power plants on the Arizona Canal. They built one at Arizona Falls. In 1902, the first hydro-power-plant electricity was delivered to the city of Phoenix.

Narrator:

Just three years later, floodwaters rushed through the canal, destroying the power plant. The federal government empowered what is now Salt River Project to rebuild.

Shelley Dudley:

In 1910, the Salt River Valley Water Users Association, which is now part of Salt River Project, saw the potential in the valley and signed a contract with the federal government to construct three hydro power plants in the valley along three different canals, and one of them was the Arizona Falls.

Narrator:

The new power plant was finished by 1913, providing electricity to farmers around the area, but the falls were now covered up.

Shelley Dudley:

It became a great, massive, concrete structure.

Narrator:

And it stayed that way until about 1950, when it was no longer a cost-effective power source. The plant was shut down, but the structure remained for the next 50 years. Most valley residents had no idea what was under it.

Norma Steckenrider:

We moved here in about 1986, and I used to walk the dogs up and down the road. And it just was ugly. It wasn't pretty. I didn't ever know there were falls here.

Narrator:

At the turn of this century, new renewable energy technology and some forward thinking allowed the S.R.P., the city of Phoenix, the U.S. bureau of reclamation, and the Phoenix Arts Commission to bring Arizona Falls back to life.

Shelley Dudley:

We've re-created the feeling of the falls and yet have retained and are producing green and renewable energy. So it's a marvelous blending of technology and a learning environment.

Narrator:

Once again, Arizona Falls is a place of beauty, power...and picnics.