

CHI CH' IL (Acorns): Dissolution of Traditional Dilzhe'e Gathering Practice(s) Due to Federal Control of the Landscape

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"It is of considerable importance to prevent the encroachment of our citizens on lands belonging to the Indians of our South West frontier" (John C. Calhoun, Secretary of War 1830).

Abstract—*The radical transformation of the Southwestern landscape over the last century has had multiple repercussions. It is our belief that it was confiscation of the Dilzhe'e (Tonto Apache) home country, combined with evolving control of the land by Federal agencies after 1905, as much as the wars of conquest, which caused the dissolution of traditional Dilzhe'e, practice(s) and associated wisdom. In support of that claim this short paper focuses on the personal experience of Dilzhe'e Elders of the Yavapai-Apache Nation.*

Introduction

The Dilzhe'e are a Western Apache people commonly called Tonto Apache who have lived in central Arizona for centuries. Today they live as members of the Yavapai-Apache Nation (located in Camp Verde), the Payson Tonto Tribe, and in limited numbers at San Carlos as the descendants of families who remained in the South after the American wars of conquest. The modern Yavapai-Apache Nation is the amalgamation of two tribes, comprised of Dilzhe'e clans and families of Yavapai (often cited historically as Mohave Apache). The initial physical merger of these two distinct cultures was forced mutual confinement by the Army from 1873 through 1900, beginning on the Rio Verde Reserve and later at San Carlos, with their union subsequently formalized into Federal tribal status under the Indian Reorganization act of 1934.

There are many ways of tracking time, and each culture has its own style of accounting for the landscape that sanctifies the home country and what constitutes someone else's terrain. In 1954 the Indian Claims Commission held hearings to determine "boundaries" as perceived by Indian people in the old days. Senate subcommittee lawyers were pressing an elderly Chemehuevi man, Young Beecher, about where a certain boundary might have existed during his Grandfather's time. Exasperated after repeated questioning Mr. Beecher exclaimed, "I told you, I don't know nothing about no lines!" (Senate Docs. 1954). No amount of badgering would change his perception. For Indian people it was not a system of lines that determined what was considered *ours* and *theirs*, but a precise mental map of the landscape instilling in each person a geomorphic sense of place. This sense of place applies to the Apache mind in particular (Basso 1996).

After the Civil War ended in 1865 a series of American presidents established a system of Federal ownership upon the

lands of the West. The early decades of the twentieth century would see these lands, then under the marginal influence of the Department of the Interior, transferred to several other agencies: the National Park Service, Department of Defense, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, and to a larger extent the Forest Service. The goals of this transfer were to: (1) better control access, (2) expedite extraction of resources, (3) oversee allocation of the limited water, and (4) maintain influence over patterns of local economy. Today modern land managers administer this system within a framework of scientifically established lines and exact boundaries.

A Brief Description of Recent Dilzhe'e History

For the Dilzhe'e of the Verde Valley the "line culture people" (EuroAmericans) began showing up in numbers during the 1860s. By 1872, after several years of brutal warfare, nearly 1,700 Dilzhe'e were sequestered on the Rio Verde Reserve. The Reserve was established in October of 1871 by Presidential Executive Order and consisted of 800 square miles along the upper Verde River. In the spring of 1873 an additional 1,000 Yavapai People were brought over Mingus Mountain from Camp Date Creek near Prescott and placed onto the Reserve. (U.S. Government Docs. 1871, 1874).

Throughout 1874 government contractors in Tucson lobbied Washington DC to have the Dilzhe'e and Yavapai removed to a concentration camp at San Carlos, Arizona. So, in the bitter cold February and March of 1875, the Dilzhe'e and Yavapai alike were force-marched cross-country to San Carlos. The horrible trip took 18 days and was described by Army Surgeon W. H. Corbusier as "...a cruel, cruel undertaking..." (Corbusier 1968: 271).

At San Carlos true mobility ceased. Food rationing was instituted, tokens ruled the day, and regulations began to replace traditional wisdom. Without constant access to the landscape, much of the old wisdom served no practical purpose. Without a hunt, hunting songs could not be sung. Without access to special plants, at the proper times, baskets could not be made and the process languished. The old religion was suppressed. The language that transmits the wisdom lost its focus on traditional relationships and the culture began to drift. Vincent Randall recounts when his Grandmother was a little girl her family would slip off in August to gather chi ch'il by the light of the full moon. They still craved the old food after the nutritionally vacant and monotonous government rations of flour, sugar, coffee, and beef.

By 1895 the military reservation system was breaking down due to economic and political constraints. After 1899 many families of Dilzhe'e simply walked away from San Carlos and made their way back to their old haunts, from Payson through the upper Verde Valley and to the forested country south of the San Francisco Peaks.

During their absence the world had been changed. Even though most of the country was still unregulated, all of the good, well-watered parcels had been gobbled up. The government controlled the bulk of it, but as yet was unsure how to deal with it. Land along the Verde River filled with *Inaah* (white) settlers so fast it must have sounded like the coming of a flash flood. After the Dilzhe'e returned to the Verde country from San Carlos, their term for Camp Verde became *Kowa'gola'n* (many houses). Now outcasts in their own country, the Dilzhe'e were pushed into the less desirable corners of it. From now on the fence, the saw, the bull, the dam, and the mine would dominate. These forces gathered momentum as World War II approached.

By 1910 a school superintendent was placed in charge of overseeing the welfare of the Camp Verde Apaches (Dilzhe'e). A few years later in a report to Washington DC, Superintendent Taylor complained that there was little hope of educating or Christianizing these "wild Apaches" because they were "spread out for over 100 miles in camps from Ash Fork to Turkey Creek." He was in the predicament of being a bureaucrat without a budget. In 1914, after more letters and reports, he was given funds to purchase several acres in Middle Verde. A few families settled in at first with many more to come soon after (Tribal Records 1910-1923).

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, development in the old Dilzhe'e range was dramatic; a hydro-electric facility was established in Fossil Creek, Roosevelt Dam was constructed, and mines at Jerome were thriving. There were new roads all over the place. These projects relied upon and provided a steady source of income for hundreds of Western Apache. The men followed the work, their families lived in a camp near the project. The women gathered wild plant food with other Apaches close by and surrounded by the still open country. They sold frybread, coffee, and roasted meat to the laborers, generating a little extra cash (personal communication, EW, VR). These final days of roaming were to be short lived with the coming of regulations, the Great Depression and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

The Government Factor

In 1872 Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano set the political tone concerning Indians for decades to come when he stated, *We therefore claim the right to control the soil which they occupy, and we assume that it is our duty to coerce them, if necessary, into the adoption and practice of our habits and customs* (U.S. Government Docs. 1872, italics added). Wandering the landscape was unregulated behavior and the umbilical cord to a lifestyle that was to be left behind on the rocky road to citizenship.

The same year the Dilzhe'e were marched off to San Carlos (1875) the American Forestry Association was formed. Its mission was to "transform public concern for the forests into effective legislation." One year later the Federal Commissioner of Agriculture appointed an official "forest agent" with the specific mandate to gather information on the economic value of the American forests and "other assets" to be found therein. This assessment took a generation to complete (Bergoffen 1976).

In 1905 the Federal government transferred millions of acres previously termed "forest reserves" or "public domain" to the Department of Agriculture, and the modern Forest Service was created. With the transfer of power to the Department of Agriculture, the economic mission of the Forest Service was initiated with extensive surveys, fencing, logging, and related activities. This was overseen by a large bureaucracy with no tolerance for Indian people moving throughout the forest. The Forest Service refers to the period of 1917 to 1945 as their time of "growing up" (Bergoffen 1976: 11).

In the late 1920s the government was still consolidating jurisdictions and still in a quandary as to what to do with the Indians. In 1929 two million more acres of "public domain" were transferred into the cash register of the Forest Service. At this same time the Hoover administration was to set a course by which they could, "...ultimately discharge *this problem* from the Nation and blend them (the Indians) as a *self supporting people* into the Nation as a whole." (Wilbur and Hyde 1937: 88, italics added), discounting the fact they had been *self supporting people* for untold centuries. President Hoover's Indian Policy consists of a single page set between Slum Clearance and Prison Reform.

Chi ch'il (Acorn)

Western Apache People have a mature understanding of the landscape. This understanding comes from living for centuries in their home country and is expressed in Apache as *ch'igona' ai' nilis dahsol'ees helz'*, literally "don't let the sun step over you," which translates as "wisdom sits in places." Critical knowledge gleaned from the landscape combined with personal experience was forged into wisdom, which was passed on to each generation. Without this wisdom, survival and proper cultural balance on an uncompromising landscape was extremely difficult (Basso 1996; and personal communication).

Alienation from the landscape destroys this wisdom and puts the well being of all Apache people at risk. Elizabeth Smith-Rocha relates the following story; although it is not a chi ch'il story it illustrates the personal pain of being alienated

from ones own landscape. “I was about nine or ten years old (circa 1942). The Hamely’s were poor and never had a car so the boys used to take their horse up on the mountain (Mingus) to hunt for deer. They didn’t even have enough money for a hunting license, so they were poaching on their own land and might go to jail if they got caught!”

Commonly enough, after San Carlos, many older Dilzhe’e who witnessed what had happened to those who resisted simply clammed up. Talking about the old ways was at best melancholy and often counter-productive. Cultural information—which had been the domain of all Apaches—was now relegated to the internal archive of individuals and certain families who passed it on in degrees with variable success. Elders often advised children and grandchildren to “keep it in their hearts.” Others were told simply to “forget all about those days,” or words to that effect (VR, RH, VS, ER, RS, DS, personal communication).

The Dilzhe’e were poor even by frontier standards. Store-bought food was not always available or affordable. Traditional foods were (or could be) free and a healthier alternative to the *Inaah* food they were now subjected to. Some of the Dilzhe’e scouts had government pensions and could afford a car; some people had a horse. Those families could reach out even further into the “public lands.” For the most part the Dilzhe’e were still on foot and confined to a postage stamp reservation of less than 600 acres. They were, nonetheless, resourceful and foraged (and poached) in the surrounding Federal countryside. Almost everyone over 55 years old from the Yavapai-Apache Nation can tell a story of gathering wild foods as children. The Dilzhe’e wild versions of spinach, carrots, and onions, as well as acorn, pinyon, walnuts, red berry, mescal, packrats, rabbits, and deer were sought after.

Rosella Hines, a Dilzhe’e woman from Clarkdale remembers as a little girl in the early 1940s “walking seven miles up that Mountain (pointing at Mingus) ... just to get acorn.” In August the family would camp out for several days gathering acorn on the eastern slopes and later on, pinyon to the west. If they ran out of flour, Rosella and her sister Jennie were sent down the mountain to intercept the bread truck and buy fresh loaves for a dime apiece. Out on the landscape logging was in full swing, cattle were (over) grazing every acre, but as yet no official body was hassling the Apaches.

Vincent Randall and Elizabeth Smith-Rocha also have very fond memories of gathering and the camp scenes from their youth. Families had personal “little spots.” Clans and the greater tribe would utilize “big groves” such as the modern town-site of Payson (*T’e gotsuge*, “the yellow place,” referring to the changing leaves of the oak trees). In places like Oak Creek Canyon and around Sedona, the acorns fell in late July. Other places like Payson, Fossil Creek, Clear Creek, the East Verde, and the Mazatzals would produce throughout August. The “last place” was up on Mingus Mountain along Cherry Creek in early September. The Dilzhe’e call August *chi ch’il Naa na’ de*, when the acorns fall (VR, ER).

Families would go out from a day trip up to three weeks at a stretch. Certain locations were known to be “faithful” or “spotty.” Some places were avoided because of inconveniences such as red mites (*chi’e*), too many rocks, or concerns over

snakes. Flocks of wild pigeons were the most dreaded competition. “They would come in like a locust(s) and go from tree to tree right in front of our eyes, wipe it out, and move on.” This happened at Greenback Ranch east of Punkin Center (VR).

If the picking was good, “word would get out” and other family members would set forth as schedules and transport allowed. Like any treasured resource the exact location of the “little spots” was kept in the family and only “close relatives would be invited.” Provisions included blankets, coffee, flour, lard, an Apache *tus* (for water), a hand axe, a cast iron skillet, some potatoes, “maybe some bacon, maybe some sugar, maybe some peaches” (VR, ER, VS).

The quantity of *chi ch’il* to be collected was always “as much as they could get.” Vincent Randall relates that “some people could pick real fast, others would sit and scoot.” Flour sacks were the receptacle of choice, but cans, burlap bags, and pillow cases were also employed. “Aunt Daisy used a three pound coffee can.” Usually the *chi ch’il* was dried in camp on a blanket, “to get the worms out.” The bulk of the haul would be shelled and ground back at home. Ground acorns are a golden color favored by Apaches.

“In the old days it was just common food, it was always on the table like salt and pepper.” They ate them like peanuts, crushed and rolled up in a tortilla, “pâté’d with deer meat,” or “ground up and added to gravy.” The preferred method today is to boil a large pot of short ribs until the meat is “soft” then the ground *chi ch’il* is added as gruel to the personal taste of the cook (VR, RS, ER).

Extra *chi ch’il* was shared with Elders who could no longer get out. It was used to trade for other specialty items such as pinyon, deer jerky, or plant medicines. It could be sold for ready cash. Adam Newton was the last serious *chi ch’il* broker in the Upper Verde Valley. Until the time of his passing in February of this year (2004), Adam would purchase unshelled acorns in bulk from one of the few remaining gatherers at San Carlos or Payson. In August of 2002 I took Adam and his mother to Payson to purchase 100 pounds of *chi ch’il*. The meeting at their relative Rose’s house turned into a social affair as well as a cash transaction. Later on back at home in Camp Verde, with a profound patience derived from his blindness, Adam would process it all by hand, shelling, grinding, and filling coffee cans of various sizes to store in the cool pantry off the kitchen. For Tribal members who no longer gathered, but sought that nostalgic taste, Adam was about the only show in town. He was fond of saying, “I’m one of the last real Apaches, my prayers are Apache, I listen to Apache songs and I still do acorn” (AN). His passing may mark the official end, be it ever so small, to the traditional processing and distribution of *chi ch’il* in the Upper Verde. It is our hope his sister will pick up the gauntlet and continue the tradition, where he and Virginia left off.

The consensus amongst Dilzhe’e Elders interviewed on this subject is that World War II is the line in the sand regarding free and unregulated access to the landscape. After the War a feeling reflected by the following comments became standard: “They were fencing it all in, where the water is” (RH). “I think it was about 1948. We were up on Cherry (Mingus Mountain) where we would go to get acorn, you had to camp up there. The rangers (Forest Service) asked us ‘What are you doing?’ We

told them, ‘picking acorn.’ They said ‘you can’t do that anymore, you’ll have to move on.’ *So we didn’t go back up there*” (ER). “After the War a lot more of the country became inaccessible. Then you had to get a permit. Some of the Apaches made a big stink so the permit was free, but you still needed one. Needing permission to collect on our own land was an insult even if it cost nothing” (VR). And as the traditional resource areas dwindled “there was more competition from O’odham and San Carlos at the good places. Even the Mexicans were picking it” (RH).

The Cattle

And then there are the cattle. The Western Apache Coalition has mapped over 1,000 traditional place names on the Arizona landscape. Several of these locations are named for Emory oak groves such as, *chi ch’il sikad* (oak tree flats) near Payson. Yvonne Bonser has visited and evaluated several locations regarding the health of the oak trees and native plants. She has observed that wherever cattle are present, small diameter trees are rare or nonexistent. Her research indicates that cattle make it impossible for trees to get started, and in places where seedlings make it through the first year they are all trampled or grazed off by the second. In marginal areas where trees have survived into the 10-50 year range they are multi-stemmed bush-like plants, not mature single stemmed trees that produce a crop useable by Apache people. Where under story plants still exist in a grazed area they are dominated by non-native grasses (*Bromus* sp.) and invasive noxious weeds (e.g., *Tribulus terrestris*; Yvonne Bonser, unpublished data 2003). Numerous studies associate the success of these and other non-native species as indicative of improper grazing practices at the expense of oak woodlands and native grasses. This double-edged sword of drought and cattle goes hand in hand with an observation made by Elizabeth Smith-Rocha regarding gathering acorn after the War. “It was all drying up, no more water, no more little trees. They were pumping it to who knows where for the cows.”

The Bull

On the first day of August, 1930, Tom Smith loaded up the pick-up with his pregnant wife, Lilly; his sister, Virginia; and several younger children and set off. He drove east out of Camp Verde through Fossil Creek to a big cluster of oaks north of Payson. It was a hot day. Tom unloaded the provisions and headed back to work, planning to return for his family within the week.

For many years this expansive grove had been summer pasture for several bulls. One of these monsters was put out by the unexpected company and began to charge the large alligator juniper under which they had set up camp. Virginia got all of the children and herself up into the tree, but for Lilly climbing was not an option. The bull charged several times, coming close, but pulling up short on each occasion. After a while he stopped and went away. Within the hour Lilly gave birth to a little girl, Rebekah (RS, VS, ER, ES, VN). More than six decades later we drove by this place and Rebekah (who passed away in 1999) pointed out the spot under the big juniper where she was brought forth by the bull.

These bulls are ever-vigilant allies of the modern forests. Like the rangers on Mingus Mountain, they apparently have no tolerance for the acorn pickers and have no intention of letting any new trees get a start. Amongst the ancient oak of Rebekah’s grove there are no healthy trees less than 50 to 80 years old. So while the cattle flourish despite a significant drought, traditional Apaches have become an endangered cultural entity.

Conclusion

There is growing concern among land managers about the health of our Southwestern landscapes. Due to the thoughtful efforts of several employees of the Tonto National Forest that organization is by their action showing respect for Dilzhe’e history and traditions. We encourage this trend. Any steps taken to restore health to the landscape will require input from Western Apaches to be effective. We are concerned, however, that the national agenda of the Forest Service will trump regional vision and could ultimately stifle the creative policies instituted by local forest officials.

Epilogue

Vincent Randall took his mother picking for the last time in 1989. She was in her nineties and passed away the following spring. It was her mother who snuck off from San Carlos in the previous age to gather *chi ch’il* by moonlight. Virginia Newton, who placed the Smith children in the old juniper tree 74 years ago, is the mother of Adam Newton. She is almost 90 (she passed away the month after the conference).

In the old days, Apache ladies could discern which groves acorns came from by taste. They often named individual trees, Old Man or the Twisted One, expressing their own sense of stewardship. (KB, EW, VR, personal communication). They were sustained by their unsurpassable ability to make due. Modern resource management often means squeezing every molecule and droplet from the Earth, sooner rather than later as if a storm was fast approaching. This can only go on for so long. A lot of Apaches believe someday after the storm has passed they will need the old skills again.

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