

South Phoenix, the Roosevelt School District and SIRC



Roosevelt School District History

What began as a 15-pupil district in the late 1800's has grown into a school district serving more than 9,500 students and 1,400 employees in 18 schools, an early childhood education center and a community school. The Roosevelt School District remains as the largest employer in South Phoenix. One of the community's first schools was the Broadway School, a small, one-room brick building; the typical "little red school house." The other was the Heard Ranch School. Roosevelt School District No. 66 was established in Phoenix in 1912.

Together as the Consolidated School, it was located south of the Phoenix City Center on the corner of what is now 7th Street and Southern. The Consolidated School was soon expanded beyond its three classrooms, which already were taxed to their limits by the school's 150 students. Homesteaders of Anglo and Hispanic descent were the District's original population. Mexican laborers came later to work the farms.

The population increased rapidly and a twelve-room addition was built in 1921, making it necessary to provide more classrooms. This was done when schools were built on the east and west end of the District, but this accommodation was minimal and short-lived. When the East End School burned down, the West End School was abandoned and buses were bought to transport all students to Roosevelt School. The original Roosevelt School was destroyed by fire on April 5, 1985 and the new administration center opened in December 1987 on the old Roosevelt School site.

Adapted from the original article: Roosevelt School District No. 66, General Information / About Roosevelt School District, www.rsd66.org/domain/56.

South Phoenix History

Anglo settlers who homesteaded in the Salt River Valley during the early 1870s were Confederate soldiers and veterans from the deep South, among them was Jack Swilling who had deserted the Confederate Army. Through his Mexican born wife, Trinidad Escalante Swilling, he forged friendships with Mexicanos, who as irrigation workers, helped Swilling develop the Old Town Ditch ("Swilling Ditch") along Van Buren Street in the south Phoenix townsite by following the network of canals built by the Hohokam Indians from 300 to 1400.

By 1877, the Phoenix population reached 500 people, one-half of whom were Mexicans. Phoenix had the appearance of a Mexican settlement in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Mexicans graded the roadbed and laid the tracks for the Maricopa and Phoenix Railroad, and made the sun-dried adobe bricks used in business and residential structures in south and central Phoenix.

Heavy flooding, especially in 1891, and proximity to railroad tracks south of the Salt River, made the area undesirable for living as did economic development by more arrivals of Anglo speculators, carpetbaggers, and entrepreneurs. South Phoenix's pastoral and agricultural atmosphere attracted Mexican families who homesteaded and made their living in farming and ranching, but these dreams of land ownership were undermined by enterprising and unscrupulous real-estate practices. As South Phoenix came into its own in 1911, irrigation from the newly built Roosevelt Dam provided for cotton farms and cattle feed lots, oranges and dates to pick and Ostrich farming.

Adapted from the original article written by Dr. Christine Marin, 08/07/2006, A Short History of South Phoenix from 1865 to the early 1930s. <https://barriozona.com/a-short-history-of-south-phoenix-from-1865-to-the-early-1930s/>

The Geography of Despair: Environmental Racism and the Making of South Phoenix

"Initial African American settlement in the Phoenix area began in the latter part of the 19th century as migrants escaping racism in southern states came west. Phoenix, however, offered little refuge from segregation and discrimination,... Both African Americans and Latinos were segregated and racially controlled by a wide variety of formal and informal practices that remain..." (p. 160).

"The material effects of racial discrimination, spatial control, and unregulated land uses in South Phoenix were pronounced by the 1920s. By then, living conditions for the poorest Latinos and African Americans in South Phoenix were, by all accounts, dire;" (p. 161). The effect "has been to produce unequal and unsafe environmental burdens on low-income, minority communities, a condition that has been produced and reproduced [by] socio-environmental conditions in South Phoenix for more than a century of urban development" (p. 166).

"While African Americans and Latinos historically lacked the political and economic power to effectively contest the degradation of their neighborhoods," (p. 166) they have endured the racism and environmental inequality brought by industrialization and transportation development without receiving many of the economic benefits of having industrial and commercial enterprises in the community.

Bolin, B., Grineski, S. & Collins, T. (2005). The Geography of Despair: Environmental Racism and the Making of South Phoenix, Arizona. *Human Ecology Review*, 12(2), 156-168.

Pictured on the opposite page are several of the 2018-2019 school year RSD Social Workers. Left to right: Martha Thomas, Michelle Cabanillas (current SIRC Community Advisory Board member), Omar Fabian, Barbara Wolfe-Colbert, Shayla Felix, Vanessa Armendariz, and Rachael Goodworth.

This brief is supported by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities of the National Institutes of Health under award number U54MD002316. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

