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Deadly water

Elders recall forced removal to contaminated land

First in a three-part series



Katharine Peshlakai gathers wood at her home in Black Falls, Ariz. Peshlakai was one of the last four families to be forced from Wupatki National Monument to the Black Falls area. — © 2009 Gallup Independent / Brian Leddy

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By Kathy Helms
Diné Bureau

BLACK FALLS, Ariz. — Katherine Peshlakai, Faye Willie and Elsie Tohannie have a lot in common, besides their years. □ Following the Long Walk in the 1860s and the imprisonment of Navajos at Bosque Redondo, their families settled in an area later known as Wupatki National Monument. Recognition of Navajo occupancy was not included in enabling legislation that created the park, and in the early 1960s, the families were kicked out.

Driven from their winter sheep camps at Wupatki and across the Little Colorado River to make way for the national monument near Flagstaff, they settled in Black Falls, an area contaminated in the 1950s by radioactive fallout from above-ground atomic testing at Nevada Test Site.

They located their homes near abandoned uranium mines where ore was dug and used to fuel the Cold War. They drank from springs and wells contaminated with uranium and arsenic and dug water holes in the river to water their livestock. Now, after more than 40 years, some of the

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"Forgotten People," as they are known, finally have safe drinking water.

Through grassroots efforts and a \$20,000 Environmental Justice grant, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Indian Health Service extended a waterline and constructed a safe water hauling point at Black Falls Church to serve area residents living near four unregulated wells contaminated with uranium and arsenic.

Indian Health Service distributed 14 water hauling tanks and Home Depot in Flagstaff provided kitchen sinks. Eleven have been installed. The tanks, wrapped in black plastic to prevent algae growth, sit atop cinder blocks. Ronald Tohannie, Elsie's son, ran piping from the tanks into the homes, where water is gravity-fed into the sinks.

On Feb. 24, Peshlakai, 87, turned on the faucet and drew her first cup of clean drinking water as her daughter Eleanor, 67, members of the Forgotten People organization and EPA officials gathered to watch the momentous occasion.

On May 22, Ronald and George Kee siphoned water from a tank in the bed of Kee's pickup into Willie's tank. Smiling, she watched as the slow trickle filled the Starbucks mug she held under the faucet, and then tasted her first safe drinking water. Bleeding the air out of the line to get better water pressure would come later.

On Mother's Day weekend, when her grandkids came to visit and asked where the water was, Elsie, 80, had the great pleasure of pointing to sink and telling them, "The water's right there."

"They couldn't believe it. They said, 'This thing actually works?' They had to run outside and look at it," her daughter Nina, said.

Willie, a downwind victim of atomic testing, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer about eight years ago. "She was in the hospital in Phoenix for at least three months. She actually went into a coma," Nina said. "They had her on a respirator.

They didn't think she was going to live. They were ready to unplug her. But they didn't and she came out of it."

Her cancer is now in remission and she has been told that she is eligible for compensation under the federal Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. She also has thyroid and breathing problems, Nina said.

Willie was in Oklahoma being treated for tuberculosis when her family was evicted from Wuptki in the 1960s. "When she came back they were already on this side (Black Falls) and they were told that they couldn't go back. As far as she knows, no one ever shared a story that anyone was

compensated” for the forced removal, said Don Yellowman, president of the Forgotten People, translating for Willie.

Willie lives near Dry Spring, an unregulated water source.

“For a lot of years she just used a bucket to get the water out of there.” Though Dry Spring does show evidence of uranium, at 20 parts per million, it is below the health-based standard of 30 parts per million, and is considered safe, according to Clancy Tenley of U.S. EPA. Arsenic has been detected at 4.7 parts per million. The safe standard is 10.

“She buys a lot of bottled water. For her livestock she is using McCabe’s windmill, a livestock watering point from up on the mesa. Usually my brothers haul it,” Nina said. Willie lives alone and her clean water tank had been setting empty until Kee hauled water from Tuba City to fill it.

Elsie was born at a place called Hanging Sheep Skin, in Navajo. “They were nomads, so they kind of moved from that area to way behind the San Francisco Peaks, then back to there and back to Wupatki,” Nina said. They were evicted from Wupatki in midwinter. “There is a news article on that, how they were chased across the river. Some of their sheep died because of exploding ice.”

Ronald, Elsie’s son, was 6 years old at the time. “We lived about a mile from the river and we had a sheep camp set up. One day we were herding sheep out there. I was on a horse; my mom was on foot. This ranger came by and he told us to take our sheep across the river. He followed us all the way to the river until we crossed, then he left.

“We had to kind of sneak back to our sheep camp. About a week later, we loaded all our mattresses and we drove our sheep across the river then. We had a wagon with two horses. That’s what we used to move. That was in the 1960s.”

The water situation in Black Falls is really bad, he said. “All our water is contaminated with uranium. The only place we could go was to Dry Spring. That’s about the closest one. It took us about half a day to haul water from there. We used to use buckets to load up our barrels.

“We were also drinking the Box Spring water. We thought it was the best-tasting water near us. We’ve been drinking it for about 30 years,” he said. “We didn’t know that it was contaminated.” Box Spring has been posted by EPA as contaminated with uranium and arsenic.

“We tried boiling it after that, thinking it would clear up the water. We make coffee with it right now,” he said. Ronald went for a health screening about two months ago. “They told me that the only thing that was kind of abnormal was the arthritis, and my blood count wasn’t right.”

Peshlakai and her nine children were the last to move from Wupatki. She said the park superintendent and his assistant came to their home and remained there until they were completely packed.

"A relative, Chee Paddock, had a flatbed truck. They tore down the house and loaded up the lumber. They were just cutting down the supports at the corners and putting that onto the flatbed truck. The authorities there were insisting that no trash was left behind," Yellowman translated.

"Who would do that to the kids?" Peshlakai asked.

"We were the last ones that were chased out. We had to cross the river when the river was getting high in May. Our in-law, Chee Paddock, he had a little truck. He was the one that helped us, him and his wife Margaret. They're all gone now.

"At that time we had a lot of sheep. They crossed by themselves. I had to drive across. I had a little truck." One of her uncles let the family stay in a hogan in Black Falls because it was an emergency situation, she said. "You can even see right now where that house was unloaded."

They dug out watering holes in the river for the sheep and cattle and hauled drinking water from either Box Spring or Badger Spring. Badger Spring also has been posted by EPA for uranium and arsenic contamination. They stopped hauling from Box Spring about 10 years ago, according to Eleanor.

"Even though we had been drinking it, it was the goodest coffee that we made!" Peshlakai said.

MONDAY: Rolanda and Larry Tohannie talk about drinking uranium-tainted water.

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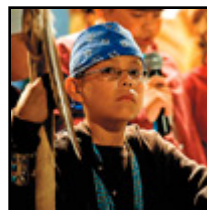
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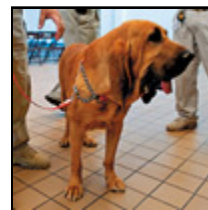
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