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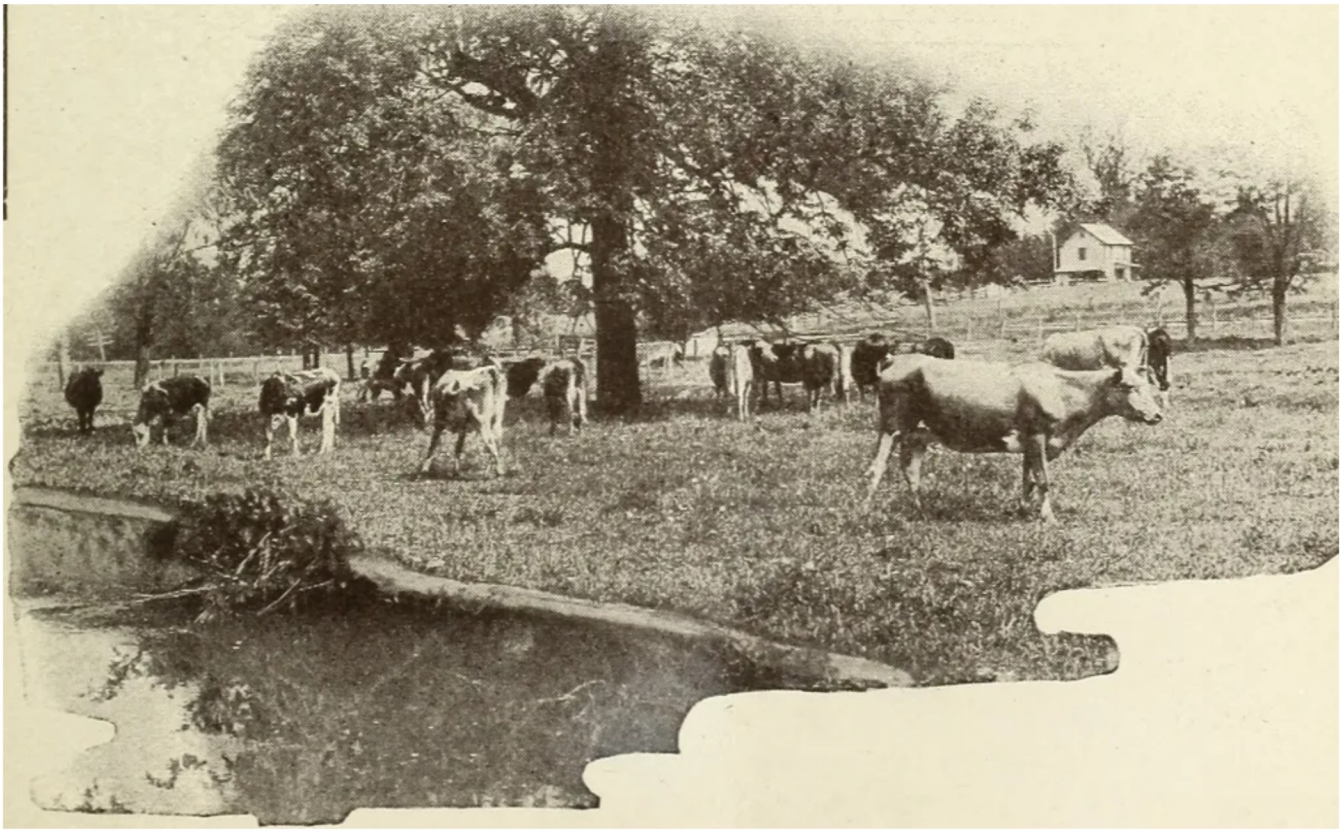
COWS ON THE COLORADO: THE HISTORY OF DAIRY COLONIALISM AND MOHAVE HEALTH



In 1912, Office of Indian Affairs Superintendent August Duclos reported that the Mohaves had "the most pernicious habit of feeding infants tea and coffee." **[1]** Among the Colorado

1910 that Mohave families were "willfully ignorant and hopelessly lazy" in their wariness of cow's milk. **[2]** Then, in 1913, a visiting Indian Affairs inspector repeated this observation. Parents, he wrote, refused to give their children cow's milk (or condensed milk) "claiming it is poisonous." In his estimation, such beliefs "practically doomed" all infants who had trouble nursing from their mothers. **[3]**

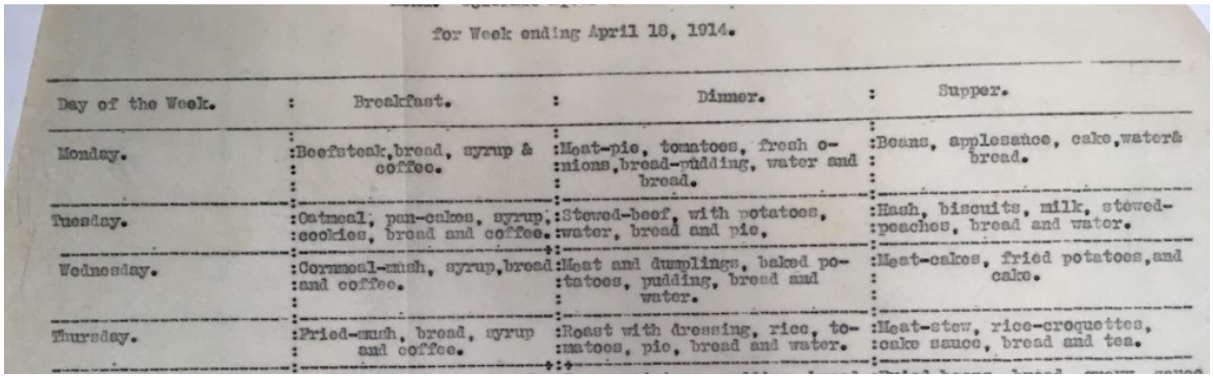
These statements transferred the blame for high infant mortality rates from the Office of Indian Affairs to Mohave families. By emphasizing "willful[ly] ignoran[t]" mothers and "doom[ed]" children, officials disregarded Mohave parents' empirical knowledge of cow's milk. While all humans are lactose intolerant to some extent, the effects were greater for Indigenous communities who had less exposure to, and traditions of drinking, domesticated animal milk, like the Mohaves. Mohaves' ancestral diets were primarily plant-based. They grew desert beans, corn, wheat, melons, pumpkins, and sugar cane. They gathered mesquite and screwbean pods, and wild grasses and seeds. Fish, and to a lesser extent deer and small game, supplemented their farmed and gathered foods. So, it makes perfect sense that mothers were wary of feeding their children a food product like cow's milk that likely made them sick.

Yet Indian Affairs officials from Washington D.C. to the Lower Colorado River believed that milk, dairy, and beef (in other words, *cows*) would save the Indians in more than one way. First, nutritious cow products would fortify Native bodies against disease. Therefore, milk was critical to surviving infectious diseases like tuberculosis. Second, dairy products were thought to civilize Indigenous minds and behaviors by inculcating them in U.S. consumption habits.

Like many other early twentieth-century policies aimed at assimilating American Indians to Euro-American values, language, economics, and politics, drastic alterations to diets and foodways could be violent. Not least because, what I term *dairy colonialism*, often restricted American Indians' access to traditional foods while subjecting their bodies to a substance they could not digest and which was potentially full of bacteria, including those that caused tuberculosis. Dairy products, most notably milk, provide a microcosm for the paradoxes of colonial thinking about health, medicine, and assimilation at the turn of the twentieth century: milk, like some aspects of western medicine, had the potential

While perhaps Indian Affairs officials could not convince mothers to feed their children milk in the home, when those children were removed to boarding schools, they hoped any impediments to milk drinking would disappear. Removing cultural barriers to drinking milk (i.e. parents) was important for officials because they believed milk and dairy could heal sickly, especially tubercular, children. Tuberculosis on reservations and in boarding schools had plagued Indigenous communities for some time. The combination of poverty, violence, and starvation on reservations as well as exposure to TB bacteria had already created a catastrophic epidemic across most of Indian Country before the Office of Indian Affairs began to pay attention to the problem in the late aughts. And when they did, dairy was a large part of the solution.

As early as 1898, the Office's *Rules for the Indian School Service* mandated that "coffee and tea must be furnished sparingly; milk is preferable to either, and the children should be taught to use it." **[4]** In his 1910 *Manual on Tuberculosis*, the first medical supervisor for the Office, Joseph Murphy, encouraged superintendents and physicians to supply tubercular Indians with "nourishing foods," especially milk and eggs. **[5]** But, this did not always translate. At Colorado River Indian School, Dr. Mary Israel reported to the commissioner in 1914 that the school had no special diets for sick students. Instead, "all weakly children are encouraged to take a piece of bread and butter, or cookie, and a cup of milk between meals." **[6]** Menus from that same year, reveal that healthy students were not furnished with much milk.



for Week ending April 18, 1914.

Day of the Week.	Breakfast.	Dinner.	Supper.
Monday.	Beefsteak, bread, syrup & coffee.	Meat-pie, tomatoes, fresh onions, bread-pudding, water and bread.	Beans, applesauce, cake, water& bread.
Tuesday.	Oatmeal, pan-cakes, syrup, cookies, bread and coffee.	Stewed-beef, with potatoes, water, bread and pie,	Hash, biscuits, milk, stewed-peaches, bread and water.
Wednesday.	Cornmeal-mush, syrup, bread and coffee.	Meat and dumplings, baked potatoes, pudding, bread and water.	Meat-cakes, fried potatoes, and cake.
Thursday.	Fried-mush, bread, syrup and coffee.	Roast with dressing, rice, tomatoes, pie, bread and water.	Meat-stew, rice-croquettes, cake sauce, bread and tea.

Colorado River Indian School menu for week ending April 18, 1914;
from School Work, Reports on, Methods, Suggestions, etc. [1/4], Box 211,
Subject Files, CRR, RG 75, NARA-Pacific.

Regardless of the OIA's ongoing milk requirements, coffee was still served daily to the children while milk only half of the week. **[7]** So while officials in Washington pushed milk drinking in their schools, schools like this one didn't, or couldn't, always follow suit.

In the case of Colorado River School, the reason was likely a matter of supply via the school dairy. In 1916, Superintendent August Duclos tried to increase milk and dairy consumption on the reservation by purchasing cows and encouraging Mohaves to raise them. Through his preliminary research, Duclos discovered that the TB rate among California cows was as high as 50% and California was the main supplier of cows, especially dairy cows, for the Southwest. **[8]** When Duclos did eventually receive the funds to purchase 100 yearlings for a tribal herd, he could not promise they were TB-free.

Duclos's research shows that federal employees, like many public health officials, were aware of the dangers posed. Yet milk continued to symbolize American cultural and dietary superiority. And healthy cows were required to uphold this reputation. But they were not always available and the state's regulatory power to ensure clean milk had its limits. For Mohaves, milk was a symbol of settler colonization's effects on their bodies, it made many literally sick to their stomachs and they were often unwilling to subject their children to it. *Dairy colonialism* was a powerful transformative force on the Lower Colorado River. But its history reveals the often-violent interconnectedness of settler ideologies, Native bodies, and the environment well into the twentieth century.

[2] M.A. Israel to O. Babcock, 27 July 1911, Vol. 15, Box 188, Letters to COIA, Colorado River Reservation, RG 75, NARA-Pacific.

[3] Folder: 700, 11681-14, Box 80, RG 75, DC, Entry 121, CCF, CRR, RG 75, NARA-Pacific.

[4] 1898 Rules #222, 28.

[5] Joseph A. Murphy, *Manual on Tuberculosis: Its Cause, Prevention, and Treatment* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 8-9.

[6] "Special Report on Health, 1913-1914, Colorado River Reservation" by Anna Israel-Nettle, In Goodall 1914 Report, Folder: 700, 105855-14, Box 80. Entry 121, CCF, CRR, RG 75, NARA-DC.

[7] Rules 1898 #222, 28. In 1912, the school and agency owned 11 cows/heifers and 2 steers. 15 cows/heifers and 50 steers were owned by individual Indians. 1912 Stats Folder: G6- Annual Report, Colorado River Indian School (Reservation), 1912 & 1913 [1/2] Box 195, Subject Files, p. 37, RG 75, NARA-Pacific.

[8] Dec 13, 1916, Folder: Health, Education, Law and Order, Supplies, 1916-17 [MOLD DAMAGE], Box 201; 19 February 1917, Subject Files, Box 196, Folder: Cattle, 1916-18, CRR, RG 75, NARA-Pacific; 3.8 million cows tested and killed from 1917 to 1941, see: Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode's "Not on My Farm! Resistance to Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication in the United States," *The Journal of Economic History* 67 (September 2007): 769.

*Cover Image Credit: J.C. McDowell, *Delicious Products of the Dairy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1919).

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