



PEOPLE
The last hold-out in 'no-man's land'

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A 91-year-old California man has seen his neighbors evicted one-by-one from their desert homes over the past 30 years. William Tuttle is the last hold-out in a long land dispute with a powerful Native American tribe.

At first, the local sheriff's office was unsure what to do about the evictions. The officers would show up at a home, and, according to witnesses, often stand at the edge of the drive way and try to mediate heated disputes between the landlord and the tenant.

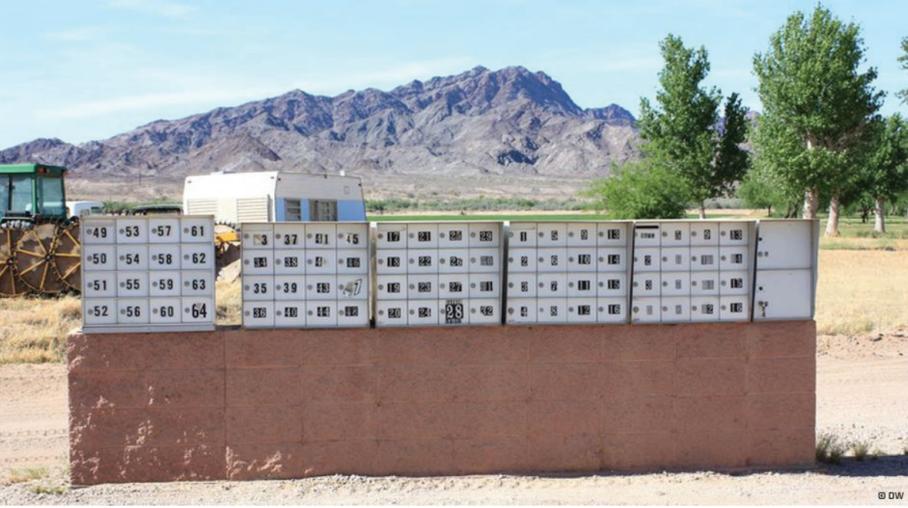
It's a difficult situation, as the tenant often claimed to be the rightful landlord, while the party doing the evicting would bring their own police force along.

That 'extra' police force is part of the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) government. CRIT claims the 2,200 acre (900 hectare) strip of land in California along the Colorado River, some 40 miles north of the town of Blythe. The state of California disputes that claim, although officials can't say who actually owns the land.

The US federal government offers no clarity, as the executive branch recognizes CRIT as the land owner, while the judicial branch let California's claim stand in a 2000 US Supreme Court decision.

Bureaucratic nightmare

It is such a confusing, complicated mess that even Riverside County sheriff's officers seem unsure who owns the land. Residents in the disputed area complain that decisions are often made arbitrarily by officers.



About 35 families live near the Tutttles in the high desert

"The county of Riverside has just thrown their hands up," says Cheryl Schmit, the director of Stand Up For California. Schmit lobbies against Indian gaming in California, and she says the land dispute could have far-reaching consequences for state and federal law.

"This is no-man's land," Schmit adds.

And if no-man's land has a mayor, it's 91-year-old Bill Tuttle. For the past 40 years, Tuttle has seen bureaucracy and fighting between various governmental drive other land owners and neighbors from the area.

Tuttle says CRIT has "twisted the law and haven't used the law the way it was written."

That, he explains, drives him to keep fighting the reservation. "If they're allowed to make their own law, what value do any of us got?"

Tuttle is suing to stay on the land he purchased in the 1940s, after he was discharged from the US Navy. Tuttle purchased the land because it's beautiful and serene. It borders the river, and his backyard is full of river reeds and song birds. The sky is often clear, and the early April sun is bright and warm. Tuttle loves the desert, and he's the last of the original landowners to remain.

Burnt-out trailers

As with most disputes over land, the CRIT dispute is long and nuanced. It started in the late 1960s, when the US Department of Interior (DOI) ruled that CRIT was entitled to new lands in California. The DOI made the decision because the Colorado River had changed from when the original treaty was drawn up. Yet, CRIT wasn't established as a reservation in California at the time, and according to legal experts, federal law stipulates that only the US Congress can designate a new Indian reservation in California.



The Colorado River as seen from the Tutttles' backyard

The land given to CRIT belonged to many landowners, including Tuttle. One-by-one, the others were evicted or relocated. For a host of complicated reasons, Tuttle was allowed to live on the land for 50 years, but he had to surrender ownership rights to the federal government. The government then gave the land to CRIT, which abided by the terms of the lease until late last year. Unexpectedly, Tuttle was served with an eviction notice.

Neighbors have rallied to Tuttle's cause. Many complain that they too were evicted with no hearing or notice. They share similar stories of showing up at their homes only to find two-day notices to vacate attached to their doors. They complain that as soon as CRIT takes possession of the property, all the structures are torched.

"We watched and cried in the middle of the road, and they burned our trailers to the ground," says longtime resident Jodi Smith. She was evicted after a seven-year legal battle. Her mother claims the family owned the land outright.

"The sheriffs didn't do anything," Smith says. "They didn't know what to do. Imagine just coming home, then being told it's not your home, then watching people set fire to it." There are still burned out shells of trailers and other homes on the site the Smith's say they owned.

It's unclear why CRIT is evicting the residents, or setting the structures on fire. Several calls to the reservation's attorney were not returned. That's assuming that CRIT legally owns the land. Meanwhile, the land fight raises all kinds of questions about water supply. The Colorado River is the major source of water for Los Angeles, and it's unclear whether CRIT could gain water rights if they are found to own the land.

Battle to the end

The legal battle could have ramifications on a whole slate of policies. But to Bill Tuttle, and his wife Carol, it's a simple fight. It's their land, and they want to stay.



The area surrounding the Tutttles' home has been developed by alfalfa farmers

"It can't go on too much longer," says the 86-year-old Carol. "Our life span is almost up. It just feels like there should be a final to this, and it just doesn't seem to happen."

"I kind of feel that way," Bill Tuttle adds. "I'd like to see an end to this before I go."

He stops, looks at the slew of legal papers he's laid out on the table, then laughs.

"I think I've been hanging around for that reason!"