

# Shaped by Water

## Life along the Paria

**H**ere in Tropic, you're at the headwaters of the Paria River, the waterway that has played a major part in shaping the dramatic landscape of this valley. How can this be? Most days, the Paria seems far more like a trickle than a river. In warm weather, it often runs dry. But like many southwestern waterways, the Paria River's small size is deceptive, and can change at a moment's notice. Springtime runoff and late summer rainstorms can quickly turn the trickle into a torrent, packed with sand, pebbles, and other debris that scour the land like a bulldozer.

As the ghost towns scattered along the Paria drainage attest, the river's unpredictable water supply, especially in this arid climate, could not sustain a community. Settlers had to find other sources of water to make permanent homes here.

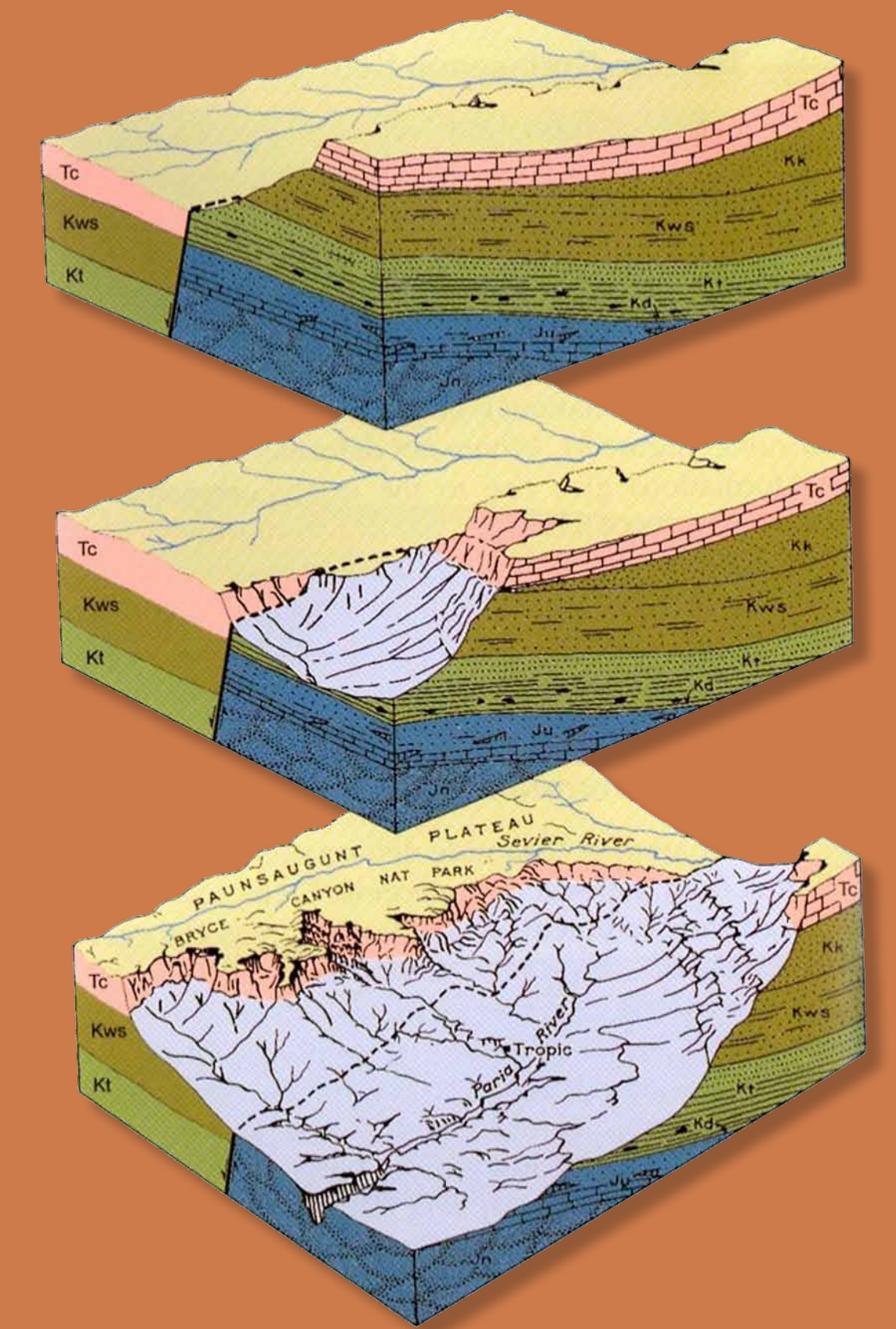


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*By the time it reaches the Colorado River, about 95 miles downstream, the Paria River has gathered water from springs and seeps and has carved deep, beautiful red rock walls for which the Paria drainage is famous.*



*The Paria River (shown here just north of Tropic along Highway 12) begins about five miles northeast of Tropic on the flanks of the Paunsaugunt Plateau.*



*Gradually, over millions of years, runoff into the Paria River drainage has helped form the landscape that surrounds the town of Tropic. (Block diagrams from H.E. Gregory's geological survey of the Paunsaugunt plateau, 1951.)*

## Coping with Extremes

At times bone-dry, at times ripped by flash floods that carry away its sandy banks, the Paria River fluctuates between challenging extremes. Before establishing the town of Tropic, settlers took matters into their own hands to create a steady supply of irrigation water for the community. From 1890-1892, they hand-dug the 9¾-mile Tropic Ditch, diverting water from the East Fork of the Sevier River on the Paunsaugunt Plateau to the Paria River. The diversion still irrigates Tropic today.