

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project

Education Initiative
2003-2004



Restoring water to ensure the continuity of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh tradition of agriculture

“Water! Water!!! Water!!” The Great Consideration

Part 41

When Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny led the American Army of the West down the Gila River Valley into the Pima-Maricopa villages, in November of 1846, he “had heard a great deal of the Pimos and knew them to be a good people.” The Pima and their Maricopa neighbors were not hostile as some tribes in the area were but were peaceful, industrious tillers of the soil. While they were good warriors and knew how to fight, they preferred to engage in agriculture and trade. They also had “a high regard for morality” and an “unassum[ing] ease and confidence” as traders. Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, leading the Mormon Battalion down the Gila River six weeks behind Kearny, expressed great pleasure upon meeting the Indians about whom he had heard so much. Greeting Maricopa chief Antonio, Cooke remarked he was pleased to meet such a “great friend of the Americans.”

The stream of Americans heading west to California after 1848 would repeat the words of both Kearny and Cooke. These American emigrants were well aware of the peaceful and hospitable nature of the Pima and Maricopa. Both tribes were well known for their industrious habits, hard work and willingness to trade. Reports of their agricultural skill, village nature and moral uprightness abounded, extending back to 1694 when the Jesuit missionary priest Francisco Eusebio Kino made the first recorded observations of the Pimas.

Many of these accounts, like that of 18th century Franciscan missionary priest Pedro Font, indicated that the industry and work ethic of the Pimas was responsible for their friendship and hospitality. Such hard work enabled the Pimas and, later, the Maricopas to provide for all their own needs and to trade surplus crops with their neighbors for items not readily available within their villages. Cultivating an abundance of food and fiber crops, the Pimas developed and sustained a stable economy based on agriculture and trade. They also had a strong sense of morals (with a keen sense of right and wrong) that would endear them to Spaniards, Mexicans and Americans alike.

The Pimas had a rich, complex culture with many ceremonies and beliefs. Three cultural traits that became synonymous with the Pimas were to a large degree influenced by the free-flowing and perennial Gila River. These traits included an agricultural way of life, living in permanent villages, and a strong set of moral principles. The visitors that came through the Pima villages noted each of these character traits in one way or another.

The Gila River had a variety of names and spellings prior to 1848. Spaniards often referred to the river as the Rio Grande, Rio de hila, Rio Grande de hila, Rio Azul, Rio de los Santos Apostoles and Rio del Nombre de Jesus. Early Americans passing down the river called it the River of Hila, the Jila, hee-la, Helay, Xila or the Jee-la. The Pima simply called it *Akimel* or “River.” Another important river—once known as the Little Gila River—was called *Keli Akimel* or “Old Man River.”

The Little Gila River began just east of the modern day reservation north of Coolidge where it branches off of the Gila. It flowed south of and parallel to the Gila River for about 15 miles before it returned to the Gila west of Sacaton. The Little Gila provided irrigation to much of the land between Blackwater and Sweetwater. Together, the Gila and the Little Gila were the social and

economic lifeline of the people with their waters representing the very life and essence of the Pima, as the Spanish called the *Akimel O'otham* or "River People." With the waters of these rivers, the Pimas cultivated a variety of crops that sustained a healthy diet for the people. These foods, in turn, were traded with others to maintain a stable economy in the midst of what could be an inhospitable desert. The waters of the Gila River helped ensure a flourishing, stable village-based culture. Without this water, the social, cultural and economic welfare of the people was endangered.

To a large degree, the river defined the very existence of the Pimas and how they viewed those around them. The river allowed the people to annually grow two crops, a factor that was particularly important with the introduction of Spanish wheat. Their relatives to the south, called Papago by the Spanish, were the *Tohono O'odham* or "Desert People." Not having a perennial source of irrigation water, the Papago responded differently to their environment than did the Pimas. Rather than living in permanent villages, the Papago lived in summer dry-farming villages, where they captured rain runoff to irrigate crops in the rich alluvial floodplains. These floodplains were in areas where rainwater came down out of the mountains to saturate the ground long enough to grow a crop. In the winter the people moved to mountain hunting settlements.

After the 18th century, the Pimas, while acknowledging their kinship with the Papago, recognized the river gave them a level of affluence not enjoyed by their relatives or any other tribe in the region. They seemed to understand that *Akimel O'otham* not only meant "River People" but also implied they were "the resource-rich elite." The Gila River allowed the people to gain a level of wealth not known before or since. Lacking the resources (i.e., a flowing river and a large expanse of fertile land) of their kin, the Papago annually walked to the Pima villages to help with the harvest. By so doing, they were able to acquire the food they needed by trading items grown or found in the desert near their homes. They also traded Spanish goods and items lacking among the Pimas—such as flannel clothe—for agricultural goods. Many Pima and Papago families became related through this system of trade. In time, the Pimas exercised a level of economic authority over their southern relatives through trade.

Beginning in the 16th century and continuing well into the 19th century, the Pimas and their later arriving Maricopa neighbors exhibited a pattern of continued ecologic and economic adaptations to their environment. They began to grow new crops (introduced from the Spanish) and found new ways of cultivating their lands. Combined with their desire to improve their standard of living, the Pimas exhibited extraordinary agricultural production. A stable, agriculture-based economy ensured a dependable food supply, which in turn resulted in a confident, friendly people who desired to trade with others. In time, the Pimas would develop an extensive trade system with Spanish, Mexican, Indian and, later, American communities.

Known as good traders and possessing an extensive, fertile tract of land along the Gila River, the Pimas became "a wealthy class of Indians" by the 19th century. While this wealth was not always measured in dollars, it was based on the Pima's ability to acquire trade goods from tribes and communities hundreds of miles from their villages and enabled them to live a comfortable life. Their honesty and friendship made them the most welcomed Indian tribe in the Southwest. By the 1860s, Arizona Superintendent of Indian Affairs Charles Poston, recognizing the history and importance of the river, foresaw both the growth and extraordinary agricultural capacity of the Gila River Valley. Writing to Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Dole, Poston emphatically warned that the most important consideration of the Pimas and Maricopas was "Water! Water!!! Water!!!"

Character Qualities of the Pima and Maricopa People

Read the paragraph below, which summarizes ten character qualities that describe the Pima and Maricopa people during the period 1690-1865. Find the character qualities that are shown in **bold** in the grid below. Words can go horizontally, vertically and diagonally in all eight directions.

G	L	Q	I	N	D	U	S	T	R	I	O	U	S
D	E	P	E	N	D	A	B	L	E	H	K	M	T
L	C	Q	N	N	B	L	U	N	O	B	F	M	G
T	A	R	R	P	J	F	G	S	X	H	R	K	M
J	H	R	T	V	E	R	P	B	W	L	I	R	N
E	R	L	U	C	C	I	H	M	L	N	E	R	P
L	B	L	A	T	T	O	L	N	N	J	N	G	T
B	A	E	V	A	L	Y	N	P	C	X	D	M	M
A	P	R	B	Z	D	U	G	F	Y	L	L	Z	K
T	K	L	O	G	O	P	C	R	I	B	Y	B	P
S	E	J	R	M	O	C	F	I	Q	D	G	G	X
M	Y	Y	K	C	G	K	X	T	R	X	E	M	N
X	J	K	D	T	H	W	L	L	M	G	R	N	M
G	N	I	K	R	O	W	D	R	A	H	A	M	T

The Pima and Maricopa have always been known as **HARDWORKING** and **INDUSTRIOUS** people. As tillers of the soil, they were an **AGRICULTURAL** people known to be **FRIENDLY** and **DEPENDABLE**. By welcoming many visitors to their villages, they showed others they were a **HOSPITABLE** people. When guests arrived, they bartered and sold food and fiber crops, being recognized as **CONFIDENT** traders. Theft was unknown, showing the strong **MORAL** character of the people. The Pima and Maricopa—while able to fight when necessary—were **PEACEFUL**. The Spanish, Mexicans, Americans and other Indians saw them as a **GOOD** people who could be trusted.

Teacher Plan for “Water! Water!!! Water!!!”

Terms to know and understand

- Industrious
- Hospitable
- Dependable
- Moral
- Good
- Friendly
- Confident

Critical Thinking:

- Discuss with students what character qualities are. Then discuss factors that can influence the character of an individual or a people group. Why do people develop and cherish certain character qualities and not others? Inform the students that the character qualities describing the Pimas and Maricopas are those specifically noted and described by either Spanish or early American explorers and is not a complete list of all the character qualities valued by the people. Nonetheless, the qualities described give a good indication of what other qualities the people may have valued. What other qualities do you think describe the Pima and Maricopa? Are these values still true today?

Activities

- Discuss with students that this is the introductory lesson in a series dealing with the time (1690-1865) when the river ran unimpeded. Each of the character qualities described in this reading will be apparent in one way or another throughout all twenty lessons. Challenge students to consider cultural/social/environmental/political issues that might influence the values one holds. Discuss their findings.
- When the Gila River ran unimpeded the Pima and Maricopa lived well. While they were not free from difficulties and sickness, they for the most part lived a good life. For many years—especially after the early 1700s—the Pimas grew an abundance of food crops that they sold and traded with others around them. By the 1850s, they were considered “a wealthy class of Indians.” What does wealth mean? Does it have to mean having an abundance of money?
- Have students write an essay on the character qualities that are important to them. Be sure to have them explain why they are important

About P-MIP

The Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project is authorized by the Gila River Indian Community to construct all irrigation systems for the Community. When fully completed, P-MIP will provide irrigation for up to 146,330 acres of farmland. P-MIP is dedicated to three long-range goals:

- Restoring water to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh.
- Putting Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh rights to the use of water to beneficial use.
- Demonstrating and exercising sound management to ensure continuity of the Community’s traditional economy of agriculture.

Students will be able to:

1. Identify ten character qualities descriptive of the Pima and Maricopa historically.
2. Write a report on the personal meaning of these ten character qualities and why such qualities are important.

Objectives