

**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*

***A Desert Oasis: Gold Trails to the Pima and Maricopa Villages in 1849***

***Part 50***

The discovery of gold near Sutter’s Mill, California, in 1848, opened a stream of emigration across northern Sonora, Mexico (modern southern Arizona), with perhaps 40,000 emigrants traveling over one of the four southern trails that converged at the Pima and Maricopa villages above the confluence of the Gila and Salt Rivers. Some 8,000 mostly Mexican emigrants journeyed across the desert between April 1848 and January 1849, with 20,000 gold seekers taking one of the southern routes in 1849 alone. These travelers became known as “49ers” since they headed west to California in 1849.

All of these travelers looked forward to their stay among the Pima and Maricopa, aware these villages were places stock could be rested, relaxation assured, food and forage obtained and protection from marauding enemies secured. One emigrant penned words considered by many 49ers following the southern trails. Leaving the Rio Grande in New Mexico and turning west towards the headwaters of the Gila River, Robert Green wrote, “we are all talking strongly of being compelled to eat mule beef on the road as we wont be able to get any provision[s] until we get among the Peima Indians.” Louisiana Strentzel, one of the few women on the trail, credited the Pima with the success of her party. “Had it not been for this water, the muskite [mesquite] beans, and the corn at the Pimose village,” Strentzel wrote, “not one wagon could have come through.”

Personal memories of the 49ers visiting the Pima and Maricopa villages reveal much more than accounts of half-starved, thirst-craved emigrants in need of food, water and hospitality. While the journals describe the Pima and Maricopa villages as the last opportunity emigrants had to purchase fresh food and find good forage for their animals before arriving at Warner’s Ranch some 300 miles to the west in California, they also tell a story of the extraordinary economic output of the confederated tribes in the mid-nineteenth century. While the emigrants looked forward to their visit to the villages, the Pima and Maricopa—with little foreknowledge of the number of emigrants heading their way—supplied the necessary food for the travelers, a testimony of the agricultural ability of the Pima-Maricopa people.

The two confederated tribes—especially the Pima—had already demonstrated a desire to incorporate new technology and resources into their existing economy. Wheat, for instance, had been introduced by Spain in the closing years of the seventeenth century and revolutionized the Pima economy by expanding their agricultural endeavors, increasing production, providing new means by which trade items might be acquired and serving as one reason why villages became more concentrated and increased in military strength. Spaniards enroute to California missions, American mountain men trapping southwestern rivers and American military columns traveling between the United States and San Diego in 1846, all required food, water and hospitality as they crossed the Arizona desert. The Pima and Maricopa had provided such goods to the Spaniards and Mexicans for a century and a half and they now did so for the Americans. The exchange added to existing social and cultural values and positioned the Pima and Maricopa as a leading economic force in the region, allowing them to serve as the breadbasket of the Sonoran reach of the southern trails.

Strategically located along the middle Gila River above its confluence with the Salt, the Pima and their Maricopa allies developed a stable economy based on irrigated agriculture. This economy was poised for unprecedented growth after 1846. The arrival of tens of thousands of emigrants in the villages improved productivity and unleashed a greater desire for new

technological aids that would enable the Indians to further increase production and expand their economy. Having “enjoyed complete autonomy” throughout the century and a half of Spanish and Mexican administration, the Pima were a people “to be wooed, rather than coerced.” Their villages on the far northern *frontera* of New Spain and, later, Mexico gave them a “freedom of choice and action” in their relationship with the Americans that they used remarkably well to their own benefit.

Using as guidebooks the 1846 journals of topographical engineer Lieutenant William Emory, traveling with General Stephen Austin Kearny and the Army of the West, and Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, of the Mormon Battalion, thousands of gold-seeking 49ers eagerly anticipated their visit to the Pima and Maricopa villages. It was here they could acquire food and enjoy a friendly reception, something they would not have enjoyed since leaving Mexican towns and villages along the Rio Grande and in the upper Santa Cruz River Valley. For these travelers, the Indian villages represented a desert oasis where weary souls could be restored.

### **The Jornada to the Pima Villages**

*“We were now coming to the Land of Trouble, where the bristles  
of the Hog began to show on the spine of Man.”*

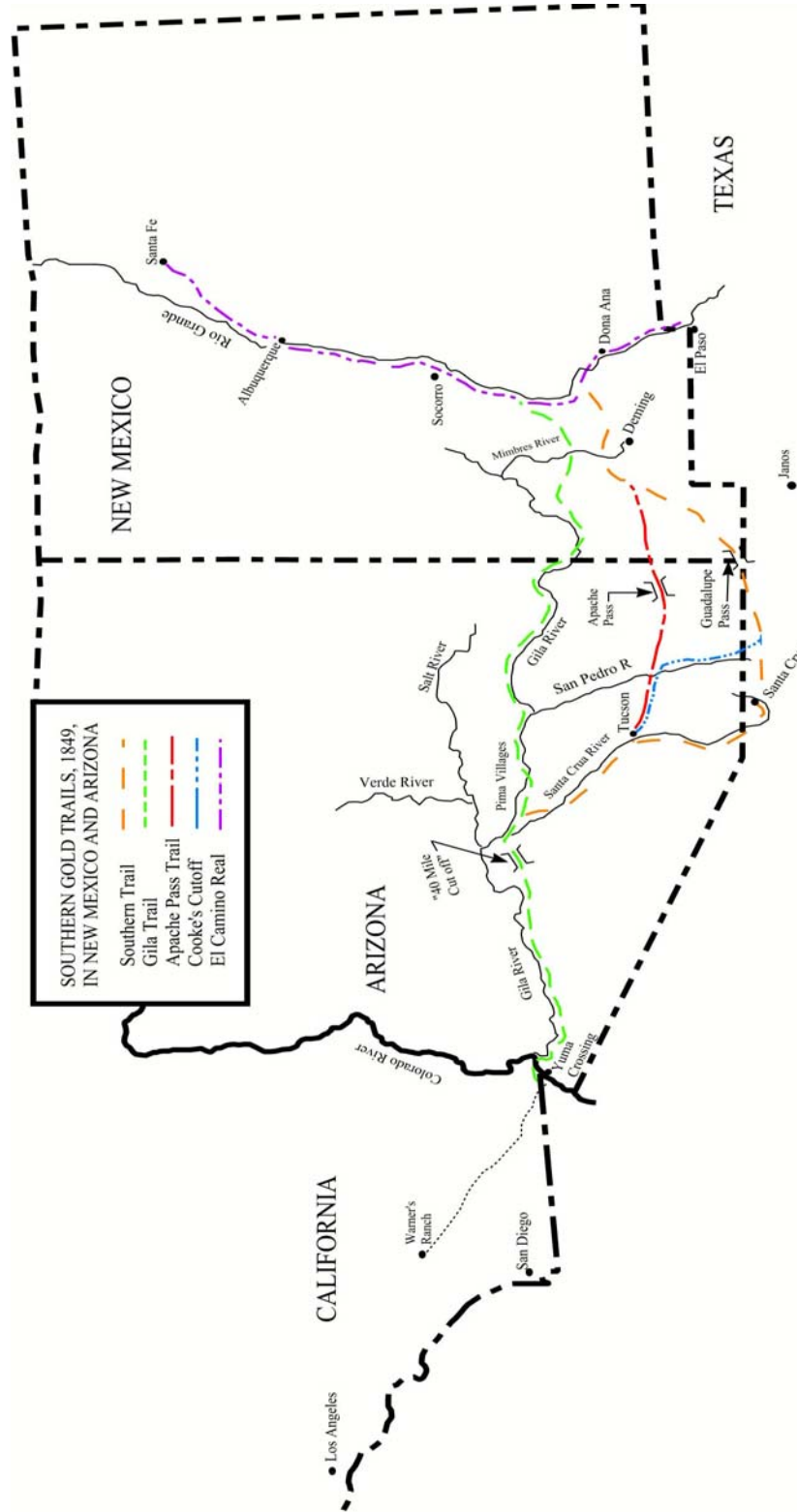
Charles E. Pancoast, Forty-Niner

Two main southern trails—with two cutoffs—met at the Pima-Maricopa villages. The most difficult—and less frequently traveled—was the Gila Trail (above the villages), which began on the Rio Grande south of Socorro, New Mexico, and followed the route opened by the Army of the West in 1846. It followed the Gila River from near its headwaters to the confluence of the Colorado River and was traveled mostly by pack mules. That portion of the trail above the Indian villages, one emigrant explained, was “utterly worthless.”

The more frequently traveled route was the Southern Trail, which left El Camino Real (Spain’s Royal Highway between Mexico City and Santa Fe) near Doña Ana, New Mexico, and traveled in a southwesterly direction through Guadalupe Pass and then west until it struck the Santa Cruz River Valley whence it turned north into Tucson. From Tucson, the trail crossed the Santa Cruz (alkali) Flats to the Pima villages over one of its most difficult stretches, one over which man and beast terribly suffered. From the villages, the Southern Trail joined the Gila Trail, which continued along the Gila River downstream over a barren desert wasteland to the confluence with the Colorado River near Yuma Crossing. At this point the trail continued west to Warner’s Ranch where it split into two trails, with one branch steering toward San Diego and the other toward Los Angeles.

There were two variations of the Southern Trail. One—called Cooke’s cutoff—was opened by the Mormon Battalion in 1846, with its jumping off point on the Rio Grande north of Doña Ana where it followed the Southern Trail, traversing southwest through Guadalupe Pass but then down the San Pedro River Valley before turning west into Tucson. From Tucson it joined the main Southern Trail and continued northwest to the Pima villages. The second—the Apache Pass cutoff—was infrequently traveled as it went through the dreaded pass in the heart of Chiricahua Apache country (modern Cochise County). This cutoff followed a route generally paralleling present Interstate Highway 10 between Deming, New Mexico, and Tucson. From Tucson it, too, joined the Southern Trail.

## *Southern Gold Trails through the Pima and Maricopa Villages*



## Teacher Plan for “A Desert Oasis: Gold Trails to the Pima and Maricopa Villages in 1849”

### Terms to know and understand

- Emigration
- Confluence
- Extraordinary
- Economy
- Frontera
- Jornada

### Critical Thinking:

- With the discovery of gold in California, tens of thousands of people from all around the world traveled to the gold fields looking for wealth. There is no record of any Pima or Maricopa traveling west in search of gold. Why do you suppose this was the case? What does it say about the Pima and Maricopa people?

### Activities

- One result of the gold rush was that it provided a name for the National Football League team from northern California (San Francisco 49er). Many athletic team namesakes are a reflection of that city’s or state’s history and culture or say something about that particular geographic area. Look at the follow list and explain to your students what the team mascot represents or means. Ask them to see if they can identify other teams and where their team name may have come from.
  - **National Football League**
    - \* New Orleans Saints
    - \* Tampa Bay Buccaneers
    - \* Minnesota Vikings
    - \* New England Patriots
  - **Major League Baseball**
    - \* San Diego Padres
    - \* Seattle Mariners
    - \* Texas Rangers
    - \* Colorado Rockies
  - **National Hockey League**
    - \* Toronto Maple Leafs
    - \* Chicago Black Hawks
    - \* Vancouver Canucks
    - \* Ottawa Senators
  - **National Basketball Association**
    - \* Boston Celtics
    - \* Los Angeles Lakers
    - \* Chicago Bulls
    - \* Houston Rockets

### 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 the two main southern trails that converged at the Pima and Maricopa villages.
2. Explain one result of the discovery of gold in California on the Pima and Maricopa.

**Objectives**