

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

The Long Sought After Gila River

Part 52

An ambitious emigrant party traveling under the right circumstances could complete the trip from Tucson to the Pima villages in 36 hours, although most took between two and six days. While scores of travelers suffered terribly from thirst and dust, there was reason for optimism if emigrants could get within fifty miles of the Pima villages. As the stream of travelers grew to a torrent, and as more suffered from thirst and heat, young Pima men patrolling the desert south and east of their villages began searching for travelers in distress.

Seizing an opportunity to improve their economy by providing water to thirsty travelers earned the Pima the reputation “Good Samaritans of the desert.” Carrying “gourds of water, roasted pumpkins, and green corn,” Pima men and women encouraged emigrants and advertised their products to travelers in distress. A contingent of hospitable Pima with food and water, for instance, met a group of Texas Argonauts some fifteen miles south of the Gila River. After supplying the advance train, the Indians “hurried forward for relieving the others” and escorted weary stock back to their villages for recruitment.

The Long-sought after Gila River

“Its banks are covered with Cotton wood and Willows, and the country for about 2 miles back [is covered] with Mezquite.”

William Hunter, Missouri emigrant

Whether escorted by the Pima or arriving on their own, many a tongue-swollen man and beast sensed the cool, crisp waters of the Gila several miles distant and found the resolve to persevere. “After a wearisome ride,” an emigrant wrote in June 1849, “I saw the wagons and the tall cottonwoods of the Gila, and when within a half a mile of it, my tired mule smelt the running water. She pricked up her ears, gave one long bray, and struck a bee line for the Gila directly through the thick chaparral.” Arriving at the river, the mule “plunged her head and never raised it till her sides were distended like a hogshead.” Some scenes were more humorous. “There was no checking their [mules] impetuosity,” Durivage added. “[S]ome of their riders were left hanging in the branches of the trees, some were thrown and some were pitched headlong into the water.”

The Gila River represented more than just water for parched and famished emigrants. The Pima and Maricopa welcomed the travelers to their riverine villages, “shaking hands as old friends when meeting [as if] being separated for years.” Thus, the river signified not only survival over one of the more difficult portions of the journey west but friendship as well. The agrarian villages of the Indians meant needed food and forage could be acquired and, in that sense, symbolized a sustaining force for man and beast. Plenty of clear and good tasting water was available and could be packed for the journey across the “Forty-mile desert,” as the cutoff

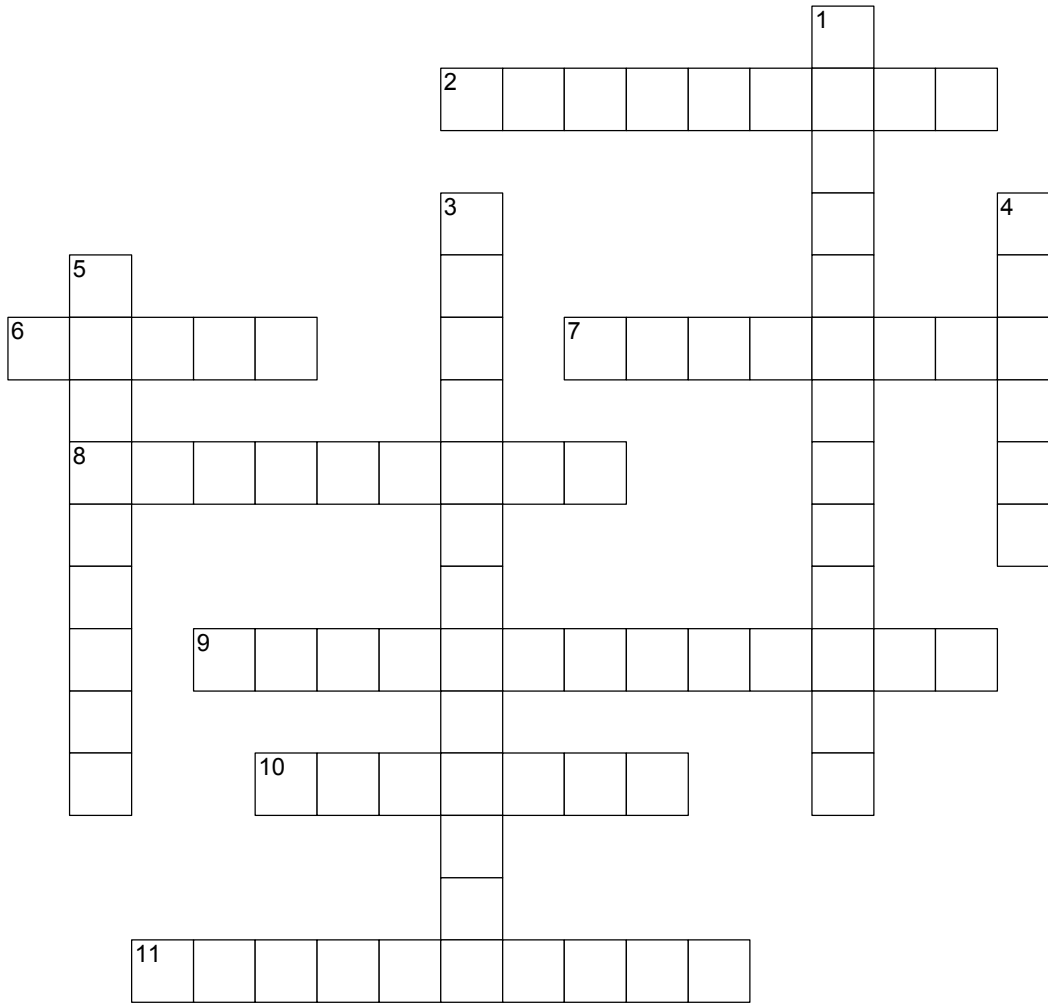
between Maricopa Wells and the Gila bend was referred. Scores of emigrants noted the cold, good tasting waters of the Gila—some likening it to a “sweet beer.”

Some emigrants compared the Gila to the Missouri River, “although much less in volume [and] spread out over much [more] land, with numerous Channels and sandy Islands.” While “a dense forest of mesquite” in the bottomlands limited access to it, the river was a full, clear desert stream with a vibrant riparian canopy growing on either bank. There was little or no forage in the desert between Tucson and the Pima villages and meager forage along the Gila Trail, with some emigrants surviving the latter route only because of the abundance of mesquite beans found near the river. Audubon, traveling from Tucson, noted an “injurious” weed enroute to the villages that caused the death of his mare. The middle Gila through the Pima and Maricopa villages, however, offered grass for forage—both within the sandbars of the river and in low-lying areas away from it.

The Gila—and the Pima villages twelve miles downstream from where the main emigrant road obliquely struck the river—was easily identified from a distance due to the gallery of cottonwood, willow and mesquite that graced its path through the desert. It was “really a beautiful stream, flowing clear & rapidly,” Robert Green wrote, allowing us to “quench our raging thirst.” Eccleston, traveling to the villages via Tucson in November, observed, “It was not long before the road came close to the long-looked-for Gila. I rode in to see it, as the cottonwood, willow, &., obstruct[ed] the view, and found a swift stream about 40 ft. wide, not as clear as I expected to see it, but perhaps this may have been caused by the late rain.” Other emigrants described the river by its “dense growth of wild willow and weeds, tall cottonwoods, and the low willow tree.” One emigrant even noted his party paid a Pima guide \$10 “to conduct us to the river Gila.”

The middle Gila through the heart of the Pima and Maricopa villages was an oasis in the desert, with a series of springs and marshes, one of which was nearly a mile long. Audubon noted “a great many lagoons” along the river bottomlands. An abundance of water and trees along the river and in cienegas encouraged colonies of birds, ducks, geese, swans, cranes and “hundreds of the plumed partridge [quail].” Some cienegas and lagoons were fed by springs and were used by the Pima and Maricopa to irrigate farmland. At least three natural springs, including Blackwater slough east of the villages, were fed by underground water sources. Springs near Maricopa Wells supplied water for Maricopa crops in addition to providing wildlife habitat.

The Long Sought After Gila River



Constructed using Crossword Weaver

Across:

2. The Forty-niners described the Gila River as about this wide (in feet):
6. Some Forty-niners paid Pima guides this to direct them to the Gila River:
7. The Gila River signified this for many travelers to the Pima and Maricopa villages:
8. The quickest time one could travel from Tucson to the Pima villages (in hours):
9. These two items could be acquired at the Pima and Maricopa villages:
10. Many of these natural sources of water existed along the river:
11. These tall trees grew along the river and when they dropped their seeds made it look like falling snow.

Down:

1. Both the Pima and Maricopa and many Forty-niners ate these when they were hungry:
3. The name given to the Pima because of their good reputation and friendship:
4. Another tree growing along the river and used in basket making:
5. The name given to the desert cutoff between Maricopa Wells and the Gila bend:

Teacher Plan for “The Long Sought After Gila River”

Terms to know and understand

- Habitat
- Lagoon
- Cienega
- Oasis
- Obliquely
- Good Samaritan
- Impetuous

Students will be able to:

1. Explain why the Pima and Maricopa were called Good Samaritans.
2. Identify and describe the four qualities the Gila River symbolized for emigrants.

Objectives

Critical Thinking:

- If the distance between Tucson and the Pima villages (which were closer to Tucson than the Maricopa villages downstream) was approximately 90 miles and you traveled at a rate of 3 miles an hour, how many hours would it take you to arrive in the villages? Now imagine it is 110 degrees outside. How is this going to affect your travel? How will it affect your animals? What could you do to minimize the heat? How much water might you and your animals need? How might you plan differently if you traveled in December versus May or June?

Activities

- The emigrant trail can still be seen east of Sacaton. The road from Tucson followed the Santa Cruz River to Picacho Peak but then turned north and generally followed McClellan Wash. It came around the east side of the Sacaton Mountains, with the trail passing between Sacaton Peak and Thin Mountain. This trail later became part of the Butterfield Overland Mail route. If you visit the site you will need permission from the Gila River Tribal Rangers. They can be reached by dialing (520) 562-7139.
- Have students describe the Gila River as it looks today. Then have them describe it as recorded by the Forty-niners. How has the river environment changed? How has this affected the people of the Community? How has it affected flora and fauna (plants and animals)?

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.