

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project

Education Initiative

2002-2003



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

Recollections of a Pima Farmer: 1910s

Part 39

More than three decades ago, former Gila River Indian Community Governor Lloyd A. Allison recorded his recollections of life and farming in the 1910s, during the era when the US Reclamation Service (present day Bureau of Reclamation) built the Sacaton Project in the Santan District. To help better understand the Pima-Maricopa *himdag* (or way of life) in the early part of the 20th century, read Allison's words. They help place the events described in lessons 21-34 in their proper cultural context.

"The Pima irrigation system has been well organized since ancient times. Committees were set up in three zones so that the people wouldn't have to work through the entire system. The Santan Canal from Olberg almost to Gila Butte is the area in which the [Reclamation Service] wells were drilled [between 1908-1912]. Casa Blanca had its zone [and] there was one at the Flats. There were certain people in each village who decided how each ditch was to be handled. They governed that ditch system and determined how it was to be operated, how the ditches were to be maintained, who was to get water, etc. We are still using that Santan Ditch.

"When they were ready to clean the ditch, the three committees had one big meeting. They determined that the people might have one month to water any crops and then the water would be cut off and returned to the river so the ditch would drain and they could clean it out. This process might take a week. The 20 to 30 people living in each zone would then clean their ditches at the same time. When they were through, the committee called another meeting and passed the word that they would put the ditch back in the river and return the water to the ditches.

"Each person would have a different chore; one would bring wood or straw, another something else, and they would dike the entire river, but let some water go by so others could use it at the same time downstream. The ditch riders then came from the beginning of their zone to the end. There were probably three ditch riders in each zone and they worked around the clock. They probably didn't have any land of their own, so they earned their bread by delivering water to the farms. For instance, I would set aside a certain portion of my crop for the man who delivered water to me, and so would each family. When the riders got through they had more food than we did because they split the total take three ways. They lived well!

"There were strong rules. If you couldn't take the water the rider would pass you and you couldn't get more until the next time around, unless you had a very good reason for not taking it; they would then deliver water to you after they completed serving everyone else in the zone. The farmer had to share his crop with the ditch rider whether or not he got water. If no one used the water in the three zones, it was allowed to roll back into the river. I know this irrigation and diking was handled this way at each settlement because as a little boy I worked there so I could go in the river and get wet!

"I also remember when I was about 6 my mother and I used to walk to church every Sunday in Sacaton and we crossed the Gila about a mile from where we lived. When we got to the river, which was about 50 or more feet wide, at times about a foot deep, at others ankle deep, we used to cross on big flat rocks. The following Sunday, there may have been more water and we couldn't cross, but had to stand and wait for someone with a wagon to get us across. Maybe some Sunday there would be so much water that a wagon couldn't cross, so we couldn't go to church until the river went down. After 1910 or 1912, the San Pedro River people started moving in and cut down the flow so that the year-around flow was no more. This went on for some time, the river up, the river down, dry and deep, up and down, until the water started really going down and the river was going dry from upstream uses and there was no more water.

"There were, however, lakes up by the river. The people would get together and set a day to tap those lakes and make a new ditch to the Olberg heading. I think it was about that time they were talking about the Roosevelt dam and took it away from us. This is what happened to the river there [in the Salt River Valley]. It was about this time, too, the lakes went dry and the government put in the wells [at Santan]. These wells were only about 40-60 feet deep and the Indians dug them by hand. My uncle was one of those who dug the wells. A big bucket would be put down to where the Pima were

working in the well and they filled it with dirt to be hauled to the top. The Pima also dug the ditch system to hold the water from these wells; many Pima worked on the ditches. I believe they did all of the work. The people who sold the wells to the government put a big round concrete tank at one of the camps and furnished the mules the Indians used. They watered the mules at that tank.

“The wells were intended to relieve the shortage of water in this area and were completed by 1912. The government tried to move a lot of Pima into this area [Santan], but nobody would move. They just stayed wherever they were, at Casa Blanca, Bapchule and those villages.

“We used that water—the crops were so dry. There was no more water, even on the south side [of the river]. Casa Blanca, Bapchule, Wet Camp, Sacate and Snaketown were all dried up. We were the only people who had water—on account of these wells. My dad was raising hay, barley and alfalfa. The people from as far as Snaketown would come down to buy our hay. We used that water—I am not sure how many years. There was plenty of salt in it; you could see it on the ditch banks and everywhere. Crops needing continued irrigation did not do so well as they did when we were using river water. Finally, the water level kept going down. The wells were surging and not throwing much water. They played out and you couldn’t get enough water to irrigate.

“I remember that we had fun farming. Even when I was 6 years old, my father would say, ‘Let’s race to get the corn,’ or onions or whatever. And we would. One day I outran him and he quit racing me. The Papago came to help with the harvest. They came from different villages, such as San Luis and Santa Rosa, and worked at different Pima farms cutting and stacking wheat. Each farm stacked its own alfalfa, barley or other feed for their horses.

“The Papago men then did the threshing with the horses. They placed a pole in the center of the stack where they threw the wheat, tied the horses together with a rope and chased them around and around until the wheat was threshed. They then threw the wheat up in the air with pitchforks to rough clean it and the women would then come in with their baskets to reclean. When there was a lot of wind, they could just shake the basket and the wind would blow the chaff away and the pile would be clean. But if there was no wind, they tossed the wheat in their baskets over and over until it was clean.

“They still took their pay in grain. They would leave some of their wheat which we would keep for them until they returned to pick it up in November. There was only one wheat threshing each year. My father then hauled the wheat to the mill in Mesa and sold it. If he had any debt to the store he paid it at that time. He also sold cattle and paid that way. Until modern times we raised enough food for our needs. We also had irrigated pasture and raised and stacked alfalfa or barley for our horses. We only bought food to supplement in modern times when the water was going and then only things like coffee, sugar, lard and meat. We were better off in the old days and we had storehouses full of food and were never in need. Many families who did not have wells near their land did not have enough food.

“Until the allotments came in about 1914, we had plenty. We were forced at that time to make land exchanges to the new allotments. We had to move 6 or 7 miles west of where we had been living. No consideration was given by the allotting agent to the location the Indians had lived and farmed in. The allotments were laid out on paper. There was never any fuss over moving, but the allotment was the thing they objected to. We had to go to Olberg to learn where our new allotments were going to be. They were to start right west of Olberg’s store. There were two roads leading to that and each day the Indians came, some on horseback, some on foot and some in wagons.

“The allotting agent didn’t tell us about fractionized allotments and until 1924, when they finally learned the hard way, the Indians did not know what they were taking and what they were giving up when they took their allotments. As time went on and the fractionized inheritance grew, there would be so many people owning one ten acre allotment that it was impossible to farm, because if one, two or three of them were away or didn’t know how to farm, the allotment couldn’t be farmed and had to lay idle.”

After you have carefully read the selection above, read the questions and answer them. Some of the questions are designed to make you think about if you had lived a hundred years ago.

1. What was a “ditch rider?” Would you liked to have been a ditch rider? What benefits would you have enjoyed if you had been a ditch rider? Were there any disadvantages?
2. What would happen when a farmer was not prepared to take his water? What do you think a “very good reason” for not taking the water may have been?
3. Why did the river stop flowing around 1912? How would this have affected you had you lived at that time?
4. How were the wells in the Santan District dug? What impact did the pumping of groundwater have on the lakes that once were within the Community?
5. Which village had water in 1912? Which villages were without water? How might this have affected you if you were a farmer in Snaketown or Sacate?
6. Why did the wells stop producing water? Was this groundwater good for crops?
7. Threshing wheat means to remove the wheat seeds from the hulls. How did the people thresh their wheat in the 1910s? Would you like to thresh wheat like this today?
8. Many of the Tohono O’odham (Papago) came to Gila River to help with the harvest. How were they paid for their work? Why do you suppose they weren’t paid in money?
9. How did the people provide for their food needs? What foods did they buy? Do you think it is easier to buy food in the store or raise it on your own? Which might be better for your health?
10. Between 1913-1921 the reservation was allotted, meaning the land was assigned to individual tribal members in 10-acre parcels. How did allotment of the reservation affect the people and farming?

Teacher Plan for “The Recollections of a Pima Farmer, 1910s”

Terms to know and understand

- “Around-the-clock”
- Threshing
- Chaff
- Allotment
- Fractionized

Critical Thinking:

- How would life be different for you if you were the same age but only living in 1903 rather than 2003? If you were alive in 1903, what things would you do each day that you don’t do (or can’t do) today? What do you do today that you could not do if you lived a century ago? Which time would you rather live in? Explain.

Activities:

- If you can, invite a Community elder (or elders) into your classroom and have them share with you their experiences and the changes they have witnessed over the course of the 20th century. If you are unsure of whom to call, contact the elderly center in your district and see if you can arrange a visit (or several visits). This will not only help students make important cultural connections with their elders, but it will also give them an opportunity to learn first hand of the Community’s history and give them a better appreciation for what they have today.
- After the students have read the selection, remind them of the events of the day (from parts 21-34). Then, after they have answered the questions (or you have discussed them as a class), have each student write an essay of what life would have been like if they had lived in the first decades of the 20th century. Ask them to think about what changes the Community was experiencing and how this affected the Community as a whole. Have students write in the first person.

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. Place themselves in the shoes of their ancestors who lived 100 years ago and describe how life would have been.
2. Write a first person essay of what their life would be like if they had lived a century ago.

Objectives