

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

A Pima Remembers

Part 40

In 1959, George Webb penned his remembrances of farm life in the first decades of the 20th century. Born in the village of Gila Crossing in 1893, George, and his wife Hattie, raised cattle and farmed “when there was sufficient water” for nearly 30 years. The Webb’s gave up farming in 1938 “because of [a] shortage of water.” In his book *A Pima Remembers*, George Webb explained that his purpose in writing the book was to help Pima and Maricopa youth understand “the early life of their people.”

“In the old days, all the Pima Indians made a good living working their fields which produced a good yield. There was plenty of feed and water along the Gila River for their stock. Many lived in nice adobe homes of which a few are still in use today.

“They maintained their own water system, distributing the water to anyone needing it the most. When a dam washed out by flood water, they all went out and put in another brush dam. When an irrigation ditch needed cleaning, they went out together with their shovels and cleaned it out.

“There were only a few farm machines, but they had the plow, drawn by horses. Even plowing was done from farm to farm by someone who had a plow and a team. At other times the people he plowed for did something for him. Every field was put into crop. And so successful was their planting that if you climbed to the top of one of the nearby hills, you would see green along the river. All this was the result of helping each other, and having plenty of water from the Gila River. That is how the Pimas farmed in the Gila Valley for hundreds of years.”

“In those days, the Pimas always had plenty. The Papagos who lived in the desert south of us did not have a river like the Gila to water their fields, and their food was never plentiful. During the summer months, some of them would come to our village with cactus syrup put up in little ollas, and salt, and we would give them beans and corn in exchange.

“The only salt we had came from the Papagos. At a certain time of the year they would go down to the ocean and get the salt from the shore where the tide left the water to dry. They always felt that we gave them more than they could give us, although to get the salt they had walked hundreds of miles to the ocean and back. And so they would stay with us for a few days and help us harvest our wheat.

“These Papagos cut wheat with a sickle, putting the grain into little piles as they went along. After they had finished a field of grain, a wagon went along with everybody using pieces of small sized rope about three feet long to tie the wheat into bundles, throwing them on the wagon. The man on the wagon untied the bundles, placing the cut grain so he could get as much on the wagon as he could. After the wagon was loaded, it was taken to a threshing place and the load dumped off. This threshing place was usually made in the field, close by, so the wagon did not have to go too far to unload.

“After the cut wheat was stacked, three or four horses were tied to a center pole and were driven around the stake until the grain was tramped out. When the grain was tramped out, the straw was thrown up into the air to separate the chaff from the grain. This was done with a little wind blowing. The women, putting a cloth over their heads and back, used arrow-weeds to sweep off anything that fell with the grain. These women were doing this while the grain and straw was being thrown into the air. Sometimes a wind blew at night so, if there was a bright moon, the people did all this at night.

“Early in the morning they would break up their camp in the field. Bundles and bags were scattered all over the camp grounds. The Papagos had nets that went over the horse’s back and hung down on either side in which they put their goods. Then they piled their bedding on and sat on top of that. After everything was packed on the animals, the Papagos would go around shaking hands with us, then help each other mount and say: ‘We go now! If everything is all right with us we’ll be back next year.’ Many Pima and Papago families are related because of those many times the Papagos came to help us harvest our wheat.”

“Then came a time when all this was changed. A dam was put across the Gila River, upstream from the Pimas. The purpose of this dam was to hold the waters of the rainy season and let it out for irrigation use in the dry times.

“It took a long time for that dam to fill up and when it did, the water no longer came down the Gila. The Pimas were left without any water at all to irrigate their farms or water their stock or even to drink. They dug wells. The wells dried up. The stock began to die. The sun burned up the farms. Where everything used to be green, there were acres of desert, miles of dust, and the Pima Indians were suddenly desperately poor.

“They had never worked for wages. They chose to stay on the reservation. It was their home. That was a time before electricity and gas were much in use, so demand for wood was large. There was plenty of wood on the reservation, so the Pimas became sellers of wood. The price for wood was small, but saved them from starving. Today, there are no mesquite trees left on the reservation that are not second growth. If you look at the base of any mesquite tree you will find a dry stump. That is where a much bigger tree once grew.

“For many years the Pimas lived somehow without farming. They still had their land, but no water. It was hard. But harder when white people used to accuse us of being lazy for not working our farms.”

“In the old days, on hot summer nights, a low mist would spread over the river and the sloughs. Then the sun would come up and the mist would disappear. On these hot nights the cattle often gathered along the river up to their knees in the cool mud.

“Soon some Pima boy would come along and dive into the big ditch and swim for a while. Then he would get out and open the headgate and the water would come splashing into the laterals and flow out along the ditches. By this time all the Pimas were out in the fields with their shovels. They would fan out and lead the water to the alfalfa, along the corn rows, and over to the melons. The red-wing blackbirds would sing in the trees and fly down to look for bugs along the ditches. Their song always meant that there was water close by, as they will not sing if there is not water splashing somewhere.

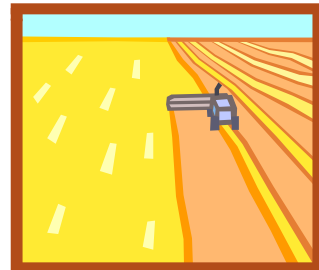
“The green of those Pima fields spread along the river for many miles in the old days when there was plenty of water. Now the river is an empty bed full of sand. Now you can stand in that same place and see the wind tearing pieces of bark off the cottonwood trees along the dry ditches.

“The dead trees stand there like white bones. The red-wing blackbirds have gone somewhere else. Mesquite and brush and tumbleweeds have begun to turn those Pima fields back into desert.

“Now you can look out across the valley and see the green alfalfa and cotton spreading for miles on the farms of the white people who irrigate their land with hundreds of pumps running day and night. Some of those farms take their water from big ditches dug hundreds of years ago by Pimas, or the ancestors of Pimas. Over there across the valley is where the red-wing blackbirds are singing today.”

The Tools of Yesterday and Today

Circle the pictures that show farming and irrigation tools used by Pima-Maricopa farmers in the past. Put a square around those tools used by Pima-Maricopa farmers today.



Teacher Plan for “A Pima Remembers”

Terms to know and understand

- Slough
- Threshing
- Chaff
- Ollas
- Sickle

Critical Thinking:

- How has your life been impacted by the loss of a flowing river (Santa Cruz, Gila or Salt)? Would you be willing to give up modern amenities such as air conditioning, television, radios and modern music, cars and computers to live as your ancestors once did? How much would you be willing to give up to live an agrarian way of life? How important is it to you that the Pima-Maricopa retain their agrarian heritage and cultural attributes? Discuss this with other students in your class.

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.
- Have students research their family history and family trees. If they have relatives within the Tohono O’odham Nation, have them research how they are related. Perhaps some of the students come from families where their relatives met and married a spouse from the Tohono O’odham Nation. Have students draw out their family tree. Have them research what their family members did for a living. Were they farmers? Did they operate the irrigation canals (as Lloyd Allison described in Part 39)? Were they from families that were involved in commerce and trade? How has this helped make you who you are today? Why is it important to know and understand your family heritage?

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. Explain the causes of the cultural and economic changes that occurred in the first decades of the 20th century and how it impacted the people.
2. Trace their family history and develop a family tree.

Objectives