

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project

Education Initiative



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

A Case of Justice and Humanity

Part 14

In the quest for restoring water to the Gila River Indian Community, both the Salt River Valley and the Gila River Valley played up the needs of the Pima and Maricopa. It was not that the Akimel O'otham and Pee Posh water need was unreal that Congress was hesitant to fund a reclamation project for the benefit of the Community. It was more that Congress was skeptical of the intentions of the both the Salt and Gila River Valley settlers. Both valleys used “Pima water abuses” to direct federal attention to Arizona—especially after 1900 when Congress began debating the National Reclamation Act.

The Salt River Valley was largely dominated in its political scheme by land speculators who stood to make a huge profit if the federal government could be convinced to build a water storage dam at the Tonto site (present day Roosevelt Dam). At the same time, non-Indian farmers in the Gila River Valley sought federal assistance for a reclamation project that would open up tens of thousands of acres of public lands. The Salt River Valley pledged to construct a highline canal to deliver water to the reservation. The Gila River Valley pledged that the San Carlos dam would be first and foremost for the benefit of the Gila River Indian Community.

Congress was fearful of several diverse arguments used to secure water purportedly for the benefit of the Akimel O'otham. George Maxwell, President of the National Irrigation Association, wrote a letter to Florence newspaper editor and former territorial legislator Charles Reppy on July 7, 1900, outlining the concerns of Congress. “We must ... be careful that we are not side-tracked by some new scheme for providing for the Indians by moving them to some other reservation.” Maxwell was aware there was talk of restoring water to irrigate nearly 200,000 acres of the Pima Reservation and then removing other Indian tribes to the reservation. These tribes include the present day Gila Bend Reservation (“Papago”), Ak Chin Indian Community (“landless Pima-Papago”) and Tohono O’odham Nation (“wandering Papago”). Territorial Governor Alexander Brodie encouraged Interior Secretary Ethan Allen Hitchcock to consider a storage system on the Gila River large enough so the Pima Reservation “could be made to support all the civilized Indians in the territory, and still afford a large surplus of land for white settlers.”

Maxwell also informed Reppy that Congress was fearful of constructing a reclamation project that would be authorized to benefit the Akimel O'otham but would in reality benefit non-Indians. “We must look ahead,” Maxwell encouraged Reppy, “and foresee every possible point that might be urged as an argument that the building of the reservoir was, as one Senator expressed it the last session, ‘more for the benefit of whites than the Indians.’”

A final concern was that “some eastern syndicate” would acquire all of the land below the proposed San Carlos reservoir and “realize an immense profit” at the expense of the government and the O’otham and Pee Posh. “Does it not seem to you,” Maxwell inquired of Reppy, “in order to make it absolutely sure that we should not be again beaten back by some such idea in the minds of Senators or Congressmen, that we ought to urge that there should be united with the appropriation for construction, a reservation of government lands under the reservoir?”

In 1900, the Akimel O'otham found themselves in the midst of a media barrage that extended from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *New York Tribune* and from the *Chicago Tribune* to the nation’s capitol in Washington DC. The *Florence Tribune* and several other Arizona newspapers printed (and reprinted) scores of stories related to the O’otham quest for water. The *Florence Tribune* spent most of 1900 and 1901 covering the San Carlos bill and O’otham water abuses on its front page. The *New York*

Tribune published “The First Irrigators” article, reproduced below, in February 1900; the *Florence Tribune* reprinted it on March 17, 1900.

Four hundred years ago, according to the narrative of that intrepid Spanish explorer, Cabeza de Vaca, the portion of Southern Arizona now occupied by the Gila Indian Reservation, grew luxuriant crops of fruit and maize for the friendly Pima Indians.... They occupied the same lands as at present and were industrious farmers and irrigators, as they continued to be for many years after the acquisition of Arizona by the United States. They have raised corn, wheat, pumpkins, beans, sorghum and vegetables in profusion; they have lived in small villages and held their lands in severalty and they are expert weavers of fine blankets and cotton fabrics. All this has been accomplished through irrigation, practiced by them since before the discovery of the new world.

What is the situation in this reservation today? Those philanthropists who bewail the passing of the American Indians may well turn their attention to the destitute condition of the Pima Indians, brought about by the push of the white settler and the criminal neglect of the Government, whose wards the Indians are.

The Pimas have always been friends of the whites and enemies of the Apaches. They gave aid and succor to the early white pioneers, and their tepees were always open to peaceable whites or Indians when hard pressed by the savage foe. It is today their boast that their hands have never been stained by the white man's blood. It was under these conditions that they were joined about a century ago by the Maricopas, who came as fugitives from the more powerful Yuma tribe. When the belligerent Apaches broke out upon the warpath, the troops of the United States often obtained substantial aid and substance from the gentle Pimas. Their agriculture has been carried on entirely by irrigation with water diverted from the Gila River. The tribes have always supported not only themselves, but have shared their world's goods with the poorer Indians [Tohono O'odham] to the south of them not favored by irrigation. They have learned readily at the Government Indian School, and their continued progress towards modern civilization has been regarded as one of the encouraging features of the Indian problem. During the last ten years their irrigating water—their lifeblood—has been taken away from them and they are, perchance, lapsing into indolence, misery and vice.

The waters of the Gila, above them, have been diverted by white settlers, and instead of waving fields of green, they now, during the summer, look out upon the dry parched earth. Year after year they plowed, and sowed and irrigated their crops, only to see them wither and die before maturity, owing to lack of sufficient irrigation water in the dryer months. A few who are favorably located at points where water appears in the dry bed of the Gila [Blackwater, Sweetwater and Gila Crossing] can still mature their crops; others can eke out a bare existence by hauling wood or other precarious employments, while the larger number have become more or less dependent upon charity or have degenerated into thieves and vagabonds.

About 6,000 of these Indians are dependent for their subsistence upon the lands of the reservation which contains 350,000 acres, while the water supply in the Gila last year [1899], owing to use for lands above, has not been sufficient to irrigate 1,000 acres belonging to the Indians. Fully half the crops planted have not produced enough for seed, notwithstanding the great fertility of the soil. Two acres per Indian of irrigated land has been shown by competent authority as ample land for their [domestic] use and comfort.

Government engineers have pointed out the solution of the problem through the building of a storage reservoir on the Gila which will supply water not only for the Pimas, but for thousands of other Indians whom the government could then move to this reservation and commence the process of education and agricultural civilization. Statesmen have urged upon the government the necessity for such action, from the standpoint of justice, humanity and even economy, but thus far Congress has turned a careless ear to such entreaties. Had the Indians been private American citizens, they could have claimed their rights and enforced them, but being wards of the nation, others have come in and taken their water to which they have had undisputed title for four hundred years, and the government turns indifferently away, even directing its attention to new wards thousands of miles distant, while its original friends and allies are left to steal and beg an existence or starve.

The United States has expended large sums of money for the introduction of irrigation on Indian reservations where it is desired to educate the Indians into agricultural habits as a means to his civilization. Here is a tribe of Indians who have for centuries been engaged in agriculture by irrigation, and who were, until recently, the only successful irrigators in Arizona. They are now deprived of their water through the agency of the white man, directly encouraged by the United States government. Is it not an imperative obligation of honor upon the American people that their supply should be restored to them? The only means lies through the construction by the government of a storage reservoir on the Gila. And instead of the uncertain possibility of elevating a savage or hostile tribe, the necessity presents itself of preventing the destruction of a civilization already attained among a friendly and in times of past hospitable people.”

Justice and Humanity

Using the clues below the puzzle, determine the answers and then find the words in the grid. Words can go horizontally, vertically and diagonally in all eight directions.

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

1. Needing the aid of another: _____ Skeptic
2. To be impoverished or poor: _____ Ward
3. To earn a living with great effort: _____ Philanthropist
4. Hardworking and diligent: _____ Dependent
5. One who improves life via charity: _____ Syndicate
6. An underhanded or secret activity: _____ Destitute
7. To doubt or question: _____ Industrious
8. To make a large profit: _____ Eke
9. A group formed for business purposes: _____ Scheme
10. Legally under the care of another: _____ Speculate

Teacher Plan for “A Case of Justice and Humanity”

Terms to know and understand

- Skeptical
- Syndicate
- Luxuriant
- Industrious
- Philanthropist

Critical Thinking:

- A number of prominent national newspapers ran stories on the water needs of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh. What evidence do you see in the news article of federal paternalism? What evidence do you see of stereotypic language? While stressing the need for water at Gila River, the media accepted the general attitude of the day that two acres was more than enough land for desert agrarian tribes. Two acres per person on Gila River would amount to fewer than 16,000 acres. This number represents a subsistence lifestyle, not an economy based on producing and marketing agricultural goods. How is (has) this view impacted the Community even today?

Activities

- Discuss with students what the term hyperbole means. Point out that Akimel O’otham water needs were very real. There were people starving, although probably not 6,000 as the newspapers were fond of reporting. Have the students read the *New York Tribune* piece and analyze it for hyperbole. Have them identify specific words or phases. Where do they see stereotypic language? Discuss with students how the media appeals to the emotions of people and seeks to encourage people to believe and act a certain way. What is the message the *New York Times* wished to portray? How would this help the Salt River or Gila River Valleys? Why couldn’t Congress simply construct a storage reservoir for the exclusive benefit of the Gila River Indian Community? Keep in mind what you have already learned from prior readings.
- Have students identify and list the three major concerns listed in George Maxwell’s letter to Charles Reppy. Think about each of these three issues. Who would potentially benefit from each of them? What difference would it make as long as water was restored to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh? Was there an obligation of those interested in federal reclamation to be truthful in their approach? Explain.

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 three main concerns that encouraged Congress to proceed slowly in the debate over reclamation for the benefit of the Gila River Indian Community.
2. Analyze and critic a newspaper article and examples of how the media played up legitimate needs for the benefit of others.

Objectives