

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project

Education Initiative



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

Is Justice Sleeping? Akimel O’otham Water and the National Media, 1900

Part 15

Local and national newspapers were very involved in reporting the challenges facing the Gila River Indian Community in 1900. To receive a national reclamation project, both the Gila River and Salt River valleys had to persuade Congress to adopt the National Reclamation Act. Powerful national forces—from railroad interests to land speculators and businessmen—were also at work seeking to persuade Congress. Akimel O’otham water needs provided local and national interests with the moral argument they needed to carry them to success. A strong moral reason to support a reclamation project could be the deciding factor between whether or not an irrigation project was approved.

Setting a national precedent before a well thought-out irrigation plan was adopted was one of the biggest political hurdles facing Congress. Senator Orville Platt, of the Indian Affairs Committee, refused to support the San Carlos bill for just that reason. “[I]t involves a new policy in the history of the United States, and commits the Government to immense expenditures in the future for carrying out that policy,” Platt stated in the opening debate of the San Carlos bill in January 1901. “The Government ought at any practicable cost to supply water to this [Pima] reservation for the benefit of the Indians,” Platt continued. “That is conceded.” Nonetheless, Platt was worried the bill would commit “the Government to the policy of national irrigation.” Wisconsin Senator Quarles feared the “only thing that would be necessary to launch that scheme [national reclamation] under this established policy would be to indicate an Indian reservation as a terminus for canals and ditches.”

The national media continued to report the situation on the Pima Reservation, where conditions were bleak. Starting with the summer of 1899, summer *and* winter crops failed five consecutive years within the Community. Just seven of 586 families (2,853 people) were able to grow a “full crop” in 1900. The *Tucson Citizen* reported in the spring of 1900, that “Justice has been sleeping long enough in this case, so long in fact that a tribe which for a hundred years had never cost this government a dollar is today reduced to penury, want and idleness.” The article, entitled “Pima Indians: Recommendation of Aid for this Worthy Tribe,” again illustrates the rapid changes that had occurred within the Community and the challenges that lie ahead.

The history of the Pima Indians is most interesting. Their industry and thrift, their charity and their kindness to the white man and red man alike for a period as far back as we have any record in Arizona stands out in strong contrast when compared with the history of the treacherous hellhounds who comprise the major portion of this Nation’s wards.

It is a crying shame that the opportunity to continue as a self-respecting, self-supporting race should be denied them.

It means the reforming of a tribe of 8,000 Indians, from nomads, tramps, thieves and vagabonds to prosperous, settled and industrious citizens. It means the reclamation of a desert into as fertile a valley as any the famous river Nile can boast of. It means homes for thousands of thrifty agriculturalists in a land of sunshine and bountiful harvests. It means making the present valueless government land marketable. Best of all, it means the initiation of the United States in the business of utilizing by practical methods its vast water supply in the arid region. One government reservoir in actual use will establish a precedent and in a measure commit Congress to building others. The representatives from the arid states should work together for this end and the San Carlos reservoir will serve as an excellent starter.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported in May that the Akimel O’otham were “in a deplorably destitute condition, and without prospects for immediate improvement.” Many of the O’otham had

“nothing to eat except mescal and old mesquite beans, and this not through shiftlessness, but because last year’s crop of wheat is exhausted and the new crop is not yet ripe. The crop will be a very scanty one this year. The Pimas are active and industrious and the scarcity of water is due partly to the drought and partly to the fact that white settlers have preempted what water there is flowing above ground above the reservation.”

The *Phoenix Republican* noted in July “the Pimas have never been in such dire trouble. As stated heretofore the whites have diverted the waters of the Gila River above the reservation and as a result the Indians have no water for their crops. They will have less than one-fifth of a crop of grain and their cattle are dying in large numbers.”

That same summer, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a story reporting more than 6,000 Pimas starving on the reservation due to drought and upstream diversions. The story, entitled “Indians Starving: Six Thousands Perishing on the Gila Reservation Because of Lack of Water,” was reprinted in the *Florence Tribune* on July 14, 1900.

Six thousand Indians are starving to death on the Gila Reservation, according to S.M. McGowan, superintendent of the Indian Industrial School of Phoenix. His statement paints a most deplorable picture of conditions existing among tribes that have never been contaminated by white blood.

Superintendent McGowan said he found twenty helpless adults in one miserable shack, that would, under ordinary circumstances, scarcely accommodate three persons. Congress has appropriated \$30,000, but no method of distributing the money was stipulated, hence it is tied up, while the wards of the government are starving to death.

This statement of the pitiable condition of the friendly and industrious Pimas is old news to western readers, and the case is one of the most shameful and outrageous instances of neglect and betrayal on the part of the United States of an ally, worthy and true. That 6,000 Pima Indians, always the consistent and active friends of the white man, should be reduced from a condition of wealth and great prosperity to actual starvation through neglect of the federal government, while the adjacent Apaches, always the white man’s foes and causing more trouble, pillage and loss of life than any western tribe, should be today sleek and well-fed at the hands of the same government, seems a rewarding of enemies and killing of friends.

For hundreds of years the Pimas lived in plenty, irrigating their fields from the waters of the Gila until the white man came and diverted its waters onto other areas. At the time of the Gadsden Purchase, Lieutenant Michler of the Boundary Commission said of these Indians in his official report, dated way back in 1856: ‘Besides being great warriors, they are good husbandmen and farmers and work laboriously in the field. They are owners of fine horses and mules, fat oxen and milk cows, pigs and poultry and are a wealthy class of Indians. The Pimas consider themselves regular descendants of the Aztecs. As we journeyed along the valley we found lands fenced and irrigated and rich lands of wheat ripening for the harvest, a view differing from anything we had seen since leaving the Atlantic States. They grow cotton, sugar, peas, wheat and corn. As I sat upon a rock,’ continues Lieutenant Michler, ‘admiring the scene, an old gray-headed Pima took pleasure in pointing out the extent of their domain. They are anxious to know if their rights and titles to their lands would be respected by our government, upon hearing that their country had become part of the United States.’

The old man’s anxiety was but too well-founded, and could he contrast now the wealth and prosperity of his tribe before the Westward sweep of civilization with its present destitution and decay, he would have cause to rise in vengeance and demand that this great government adopt a course of common decency.

There are many people in the eastern States who have cried out against the injustice meted out against the poor Indian. Their sympathy has usually been misplaced and wasted away upon a savage, treacherous and relentless foe of the white man. But here now is a worthy cause—none worthier ever lived—to right a wrong, to give a good people that of which they have been wrongfully despoiled through the criminal carelessness of the government. And the solution of the problem is so easy, so simple. The waters of the Gila are ample to supply the needs of the starving Pimas and many others, only they largely run to waste during flood times. The government reports and surveys show that the building of a great dam on the Gila would store up enough water to irrigate thousands of acres of as fertile land as the sun shines upon.

Cannot some of our friends, who have anon[ymously] professed such interest in the poor red man come to his assistance now and see that he may be accorded simple justice? The cause is worthy, the means are at hand; the interest alone is lacking.

On July 10, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that more than 5,000 “Pima and Maricopa Indians” were facing harsh times due to loss of water.

The Pimas and Maricopas have been, until recently, a self-sustaining nation. They raise their crops of grain and corn with a skill equal to that of the whites. The settlers, seeing the results which the Indians have produced, through the operation of the desert land act, brought under cultivation much land in the valley of the Gila, adjacent to this reservation, and have built extensive canals between Florence and the railroad station of Casa Grande. Under the provision of the United States law, all land bought under the desert land act, must be made productive by the application of water. In order to comply with the provisions of this law, the settlers were compelled to make diversions from the Gila River at points above the Indian reservation. Other lands were taken up under similar conditions on the upper portion of the Gila River. These diversions by the whites quickly deprived the Indians of their water supply, and for the past five years they have been left on the desert without water for their crops and scarcely enough for their horses. They are put in the position of either having to steal, starve or be fed as public wards, and the government has been forced to issue rations to them and feed them as it does the soldiers. Numerous court decisions have been rendered establishing beyond controversy the fact that the Indian has the prior and the better right to the water.

That the news media supported the cause of the Pima is beyond doubt. That they supported it to further national reclamation also appears beyond doubt. As Reverend Sheldon Jackson and Reverend George L. Spining noted in their national Circular Letter of 1900, *Our Red Reconcentrados—Some Facts Concerning the Pima and Papago Indians of Arizona*, there were a variety of reasons to support the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh in the quest for the San Carlos project.

Justice demands it. Water is their life, and we have permitted it to be diverted from their use. Gratitude demands it. We owe them more than we have ever returned for friendly services in the Apache wars, etc., Humanity demands it. They are stranded in a barren waste, and with their means of subsistence cut off, they must not be allowed to starve. Political economy demands it. It is not wise statesmanship to allow any community to descend from a law-abiding, self-supporting condition to a condition of beggary, vagabondage, and crime for the want of a little timely aid.

Teacher Plan for “Is Justice Sleeping?”

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Synthesize information from newspaper articles and write a persuasive essay describing why the waters of the Gila River should be restored to the Community.
2. Compare and contrast the challenges facing the Pima and Maricopa in the middle of the 19th century with those of the latter nineteenth century.

Terms to know and understand

- Moral
- Precedent
- Media
- Husbandman
- Prosperity

Critical Thinking:

- At the turn of the twentieth century, major newspapers in America were known for “yellow journalism.” Remember the events behind the sinking of the “USS Maine,” which led to the Spanish-American War, in 1898. While the media often times engages in hyperbole, the starvation at Gila River was real and widespread. So, too, was the loss of water within the Community. Most information about the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh was written by people who never visited the Community. If you were alive in 1900 and knew what you now know, what message would you write for the world to read?

Activities

- Discuss with students what the term “moral” means. What moral reason was there for restoring the waters of the Gila River to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh? Be sure students recognize and understand that there were also legal reasons for restoring the water. This water had been taken from the Community without their consent. At no time did the Community give up any of its rights to the waters of the Gila River. In fact, Antonio Azul, on behalf of the Community, had specifically been assured that the waters of the river would be protected for his people when he met with the US-Mexico boundary surveyors in 1855. Have students write a persuasive essay focusing on both the legal and moral rights the Community has to the waters of the Gila River (and other surrounding tributaries of the Gila River).
- The idea of removing the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh to the Indian Territory ended in 1878. The idea of removing the Confederated tribes elsewhere in Arizona Territory—or consolidating other Indian tribes on the Gila River Reservation—however, did not cease until the early 1900s. Have students write an essay why they would oppose (or support) consolidation with other tribes either within the Community or on another reservation within the Territory. Describe the changing conditions within the reservation (between 1860 and 1900) and how this might impact your decision.

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.