

## 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*

## *Astute Traders in the Desert*

**Part 56**

“They were decidedly the most well-to-do aborigines we had yet seen.”

James Rusling, writing from the Pima villages

The Pima and Maricopa villages represented one of the main sources of food and forage between the Rio Grande in New Mexico and Warner’s Ranch in California. To those in need the Indians did not disappoint. While trade with the Pima began only with the permission of Chief Azul, many hundreds—and at times thousands—of people joined the fray. Robert Eccleston wrote in November 1849 his party found itself in the midst of a village where Pima wishing to trade bundles of cornstalks for animal forage soon surrounded them. None would sell, however, “till permission was obtained from the chief. When this was got there was great buying and trading.” Another emigrant spent four days in the Pima villages where his train was “bountifully” equipped with enough food to “supply the commissariat of an army.”

Already accomplished traders—having bantered and bartered with other Indian tribes, the Spaniards and Mexicans for centuries—the Pima welcomed the opportunity to trade with the Americans and Azul clearly saw it as a way to increase the overall well being of his people. The chief, for instance, greeted General Kearny while still several miles from the main Pima village. He then invited the General “to pass a day in his village to give ourselves an opportunity of trading with his people.” A doctor traveling with Kearny, observed the Pima “were most eager to trade” and did so with “the greatest confidence, showing not the slightest fear as the mountain Indians did.” John Audubon wrote many “who came to trade had already made up their minds only to do so for some particular article, and in those cases it was not of the least avail to offer anything else.”

A desire and willingness to trade emerged from the surplus of food grown by the Pima and Maricopa. To store surplus food for any length of time required efficient and effective storage capabilities. To trade and sell such quantities of food as demanded by the emigrant market further required the ability to store large quantities of food for extended periods. The fine Pima subterranean and woven granaries kept “full of pumpkins, melons, corn &c” demonstrated such care. Emory, for instance, noted corn, beans and wheat being stored in “large baskets” with corn in some places stored “in baskets covered with earth, and placed on the tops of the domes (of their homes).” By mid century, an emigrant noted every family had “a granary, or store house, which is much larger and better constructed than their huts.”

While desirous of trade, the Pima gave food to anyone in need. When Army scout “Kit” Carson inquired if he could purchase food from the Pima to feed the 120 dragoons of the Army of the West, in November 1846, he was told to “take what you want,” as bread was to eat, not sell. When Colonel Cooke’s troops entered the villages hungry and tired a month later the Pima rushed forward to feed the men at no cost. As emigrant traffic increased, and as the Indians’ desire for new agricultural technology increased, Azul and the Pima shifted almost exclusively to the trading and selling of their products, although it appears that no emigrant was ever turned away in time of need. Trade and sale naturally increased the material prosperity of the Pima and Maricopa, although the most desired trade items—metal tools, oxen and mules—were also the least acquired.

Considered “a shrewd” and “keen” people who were “willing to trade for anything that will better their present appearance,” the Pima initially traded to acquire white domestics, colorful cloth,

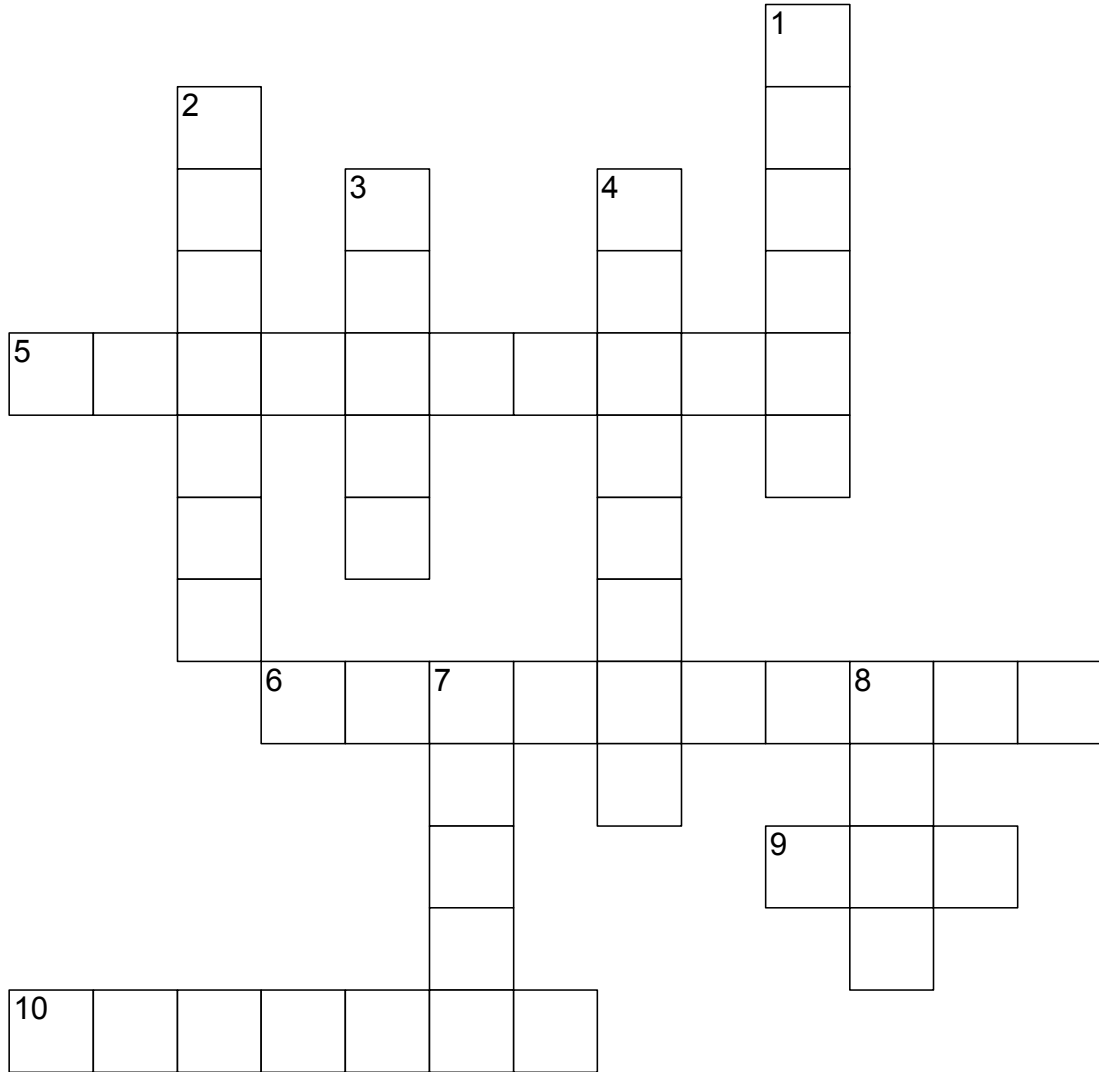
pants, vests, shoes, stone beads and red flannel. What emigrants needed most from the Pima and Maricopa was food and forage, both for their own need and for that of their animals. Pima corn and wheat along with beans, pumpkins and melons were most in demand. While there were periodic attempts by emigrants to purchase or effect an exchange for the limited number of Pima mules and oxen, the Pima declined as they needed such beasts of burden to expand their agrarian economy. Corn sold for fifty cents a basket that contained six to eight pints and a small bundle of corn stalks to feed livestock sold for a quarter. And while many emigrants purchased as much food and forage as prudent, the largest single recorded purchase by an individual—outside of the military—was Louisiana Strentzel’s twelve bushels of corn and wheat for the journey down the Gila River.

While corn and wheat were the main trade items, they were not the only items acquired by emigrants. Kearny purchased a cow at a cost of \$10 and other emigrants did likewise, although at a greater cost—Hayes reported one purchased for \$32. Smaller quantities of food such as dried corn, green corn, beans, peas, pinole, melons, pumpkins, potatoes, yams, tomatoes, corn meal, wheat flour, tortillas, molasses and salt all sold well. Pima blankets manufactured from a short staple cotton also sold, as were gourds fill with water for use on the Forty-Mile Desert. When practical, emigrants purchased sufficient food and forage for the journey down the Gila. One traveler noted the Pima had plenty of food and carried “large quantities of corn and corn meal, wheat and flour, also beans [and] squashes to trade for old shirts, old shoes, pants, vests, beads and buttons.”

As more emigrants arrived in the villages, and as the Pima demand for shirts, cloth and other trade items lessened, the Indians began shifting to more of a cash economy. An emigrant passing through the villages in the spring of 1849, for instance, observed the Pima “did not appear to know the value of money” with another stating, “money is well nigh useless to them.” This was consistent with Cooke’s comment of 1846 that the Pima “know nothing of the value of money or weights and measures.” Even when they began accepting coin the Pima “would not take money for anything near its value ... prefer[ing] beads, shirts, especially red flannel, pieces of old clothe, etc.” Other emigrants wrote that brass buttons, paints, looking glasses and similar novelties remained in demand among the Indians. One emigrant found the demand for cloth so high he tore red flannel into long strips to extend his trade value.

Jewelry and fancy beads were of little value although the Indians eagerly sought stone beads when they were available. Pima women especially sought red flannel shirts, with one emigrant noting they “would give anything to get” them. By the end of 1849 emigrants rarely saw “one of these Indians who had not on a Shirt, Coat or pair of pants.” As late as October 1850 the Pima—while more often than not demanding coin—relied on trade. William Miles, in the villages that fall, wrote his party asked for water and upon receiving it were told to “pay for it in the way of clothes, red flannel, of which they were excessively fond, and muslin shirts.” American gold coins were “indignantly refused.” When the emigrants tried to purchase melons using money the Pima laughed at them, “treating us as though they were independently wealthy, or that our cash was of no value.”

Cognizant they had a monopoly of the market along the middle Gila River, the Pima—and to a lesser extent the Maricopa—could demand increasingly higher prices for their commodities, especially when the multitude of emigrants increased. Hunter noted 800 Americans at the villages when he camped outside of Vah Ki in October 1849. Eccleston passed through the villages in November and noted the Pima “asked a large price” for everything. The Maricopa also “asked extremely high” prices for their goods. Durivage noted, “prices were enormously high, [with] a shirt being demanded for a very small quantity of any of the articles mentioned.” While the Pima did not have a set rate for their goods—allowing the market to fluctuate with demand—they were generally “reasonable in their charges.” Although white domestics were the medium of exchange in 1846, red flannel and other bright colored cloth brought the most trade value by 1849—and in some instances was the only cloth accepted.



Constructed using Crossword Weaver

ACROSS

- 5. The Pima and Maricopa traded with emigrants with a great deal of \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. One of the most desired trade items sought by the Pima and Maricopa (outside of animals) were \_\_\_\_ .
- 9. The color cloth was most in demand by 1849: \_\_\_\_
- 10. Pima women especially loved this type of cloth: \_\_\_\_\_

DOWN

- 1. Corn was usually sold to emigrants in one of these: \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Pima and Maricopa farmers stored surplus crops in baskets or in a \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. This color cloth was most in demand in 1846: \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. The Pima and Maricopa seemed to recognize they had a \_\_\_\_\_ of the market along the Gila River.
- 7. At the beginning, the Pima and Maricopa were more interested in \_\_\_\_\_ than in the sale of their goods.
- 8. One ox or two: \_\_\_\_\_

## Teacher Plan for “Astute Traders in the Desert”

### Terms to know and understand

- Monopoly
- Barter
- Banter
- Subterranean
- Granary
- Commissariat

### Critical Thinking:

Students will be able to:

1. Discuss the pros and cons of a barter system versus a cash system.
2. Express an opinion as to what made the Pima and Maricopa astute traders in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Objectives**

- The Pima and Maricopa grew an abundance of food crops. This in and of itself does not mean they would naturally be good traders. Yet, the Pima and Maricopa grew good crops and were viewed as shrewd, keen and astute traders. How might this knack for trade and sale be explained? What does it mean today? What do you think it means to be a shrewd, keen and astute trader? What evidence is provided in the text to support this assertion? How does James Rusling’s comment relate to this?

### Activities

- Engage students in a discussion about the pros and cons of a barter system and a cash system. In a barter system, individuals—like students often do on the schoolyard—trade objects for items they desire or would like to acquire. Explain this works well when there are only a few items available and you have a commodity that the other individuals desires. What do you do when your trade items is not in demand or is of no value to the other trading partner? In a cash system, an individual simple sells his or her goods for cash and then uses the cash to purchase whatever items he or she may need or desires. What might be the advantage of a system such as this? Are there any disadvantages?

### 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.