

## 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*

## *Asking High Prices in Money: Trade in the Villages*

*Part 57*

According to the emigrant perspective, the Pima refused money because “it was of no use to them.” Failing to comprehend the value and utility of gold coins and a cash economy, the Pima and Maricopa preferred trade items in lieu of money. An emigrant traveling through the villages in the spring of 1849 would have found colored shirts “the only current coin” used. Brass buttons were traded for food, with one brass button having “more purchasing power than a five dollar gold piece.” But while shirts, pants, vests, cloth and other items remained in demand throughout the emigrant years, the Pima and Maricopa soon learned the utility of coinage and began accepting Mexican silver coins and American gold coins. Once they recognized the value of coin, the Pima and Maricopa began to use them to purchase the limited—but growing—supply of manufactured goods in Tucson.

As the Indian economy metamorphosed into more of a market economy, barter and trade lost its appeal and the Pima and Maricopa began demanding Mexican silver and American gold coins. Mexican silver had more of an immediate use since Tucson was a Mexican military town that used silver coins as its medium of exchange. Since any number of manufactured items could be purchased in Tucson, it would be natural for silver to be accepted in exchange for Pima food supplies. While a limited number of gold coins were accepted, the Pima tried to exchange them with other American emigrants as quickly as possible. Hayes, for instance, explained Azul “was anxious to get silver for a ten dollar gold piece we gave him.” He also added he met eight Pima men enroute to Tucson “to buy cattle.” Harvey Wood noted the Pima wished to exchange a \$10 gold piece for “a new silver half dollar.”

To insure a favorable rate of exchange and perhaps to increase prices, the Pima brought only “small quantities” of food to exchange with emigrants. The Indians recognized and seemed to understand a basic principle of economics: limited supplies artificially inflate prices on the open market. Such economic savvy added to the level of prosperity enjoyed by the Pima. Emigrants, equally aware of such tactics, remarked the Pima were shrewd traders and always looked to the end as justifying the means. Another ploy in gaining the price they sought was to make emigrants linger before the trading began. Hayes, for instance, noted the Pima kept his party “waiting half an hour” before opening the market.

With perhaps 20,000 emigrants passing through their villages in 1849, the Pima and Maricopa were aware of the economic opportunity facing them. Emigrant journals suggest the Pima and Maricopa increased their agricultural output to accommodate the demands placed on them, perhaps cultivating as many as 12,500 acres of land. Understanding this opportunity, Azul invited emigrants to forgo the California adventure and prospect for gold locally. Such an invitation was not lightly given but was offered with a specific end in mind. “The Pima chief ineffectually solicited us to stop and mine a day or two’s journey up the Gila,” Harris wrote in the summer of 1849, “promising to furnish us a guard of fifty of his warriors with provisions, representing that gold could be dug there in paying qualities and adding that his object was to have introduced among his people trade and agricultural implements and methods from the

United States.” Azul recognized emigrants had the technology and agricultural skills his people needed to engage more efficiently in agricultural production.

Eight months earlier, Lt. Cave Coups explained Azul was “exceedingly anxious to see the white man come and live amongst them, to teach them how to make corn, big horses, and everything they did.” The Pima had asked Major Graham in 1848, “if he could not let them have a thousand or two spades, so they might have a great deal of corn for the next white men that came along.” While none of the emigrants permanently remained in the villages at this time, Azul’s invitation is important as it provides insight into the mind of the chief as he considered the future economy of his people.

As their perceived level of importance increased and as their recognition of the value of money was heightened, so, too, did the Indian’s demand for coin as the medium of exchange. An emigrant visiting the villages in the latter part of 1849 noted the Pima knew “the value of money” while another remarked they “asked high prices in *money*.” When Eccleston stopped at the Pima villages in November 1849, he noted the Pima were well supplied with clothing and wore only “the most flashy colors,” suggesting the Indians’ demand for such trade goods may have already been met. When he attempted to buy some ponies, Eccleston was told the Pima would accept cash only, no trade. When he bought corn from the Maricopa a few days later he paid “a big price” in money.

While there was never a set rate for the buying and selling of commodities, American extravagance inflated costs. Audubon complained American wastefulness “made it difficult for anyone to make reasonable bargains with either the Pimos or Maricopas.” Extravagance may have been a relative concept that may not have matched the true nature of the emigrants, who dumped goods along the trail to lighten the burden on their worn and weary animals. To the Indian mind the emigrants had a dazzling array of technology, such as metal tools, better quality and more colorful cloth, etc. These goods far surpassed the available supply of goods from poverty-stricken soldiers and settlers in Sonora, including Tucson. Because the emigrants carried with them the products of industrial America, the Pima and Maricopa—lacking such goods—would have concluded that the Americans were a wealthy people.

As a literate people—with many keeping or reading journals and making drawings—the emigrants impressed the Pima and Maricopa, who were intrigued with the written word and hand drawn pictures. When the perceived waste of the emigrants is factored in—the emigrants (especially Graham’s column in 1848) discarded wagons, left behind scores of dead or stray animals, littered the trail with a variety of manufactured items such as wheels, crowbars, blacksmith bellows, carpenter’s tools, stoves, chairs, tents, washing machines, guns, powder, chains, saddles, harnesses, trunks of clothing, cooking utensils and a vast assortment of tools—the Indians must have concluded the Americans were wealthy and wasteful. “You can name nothing that was not lost on this road,” one emigrant wrote. Another commented that his mother would scold him if she could see “us give our shirts away, cut up our drawers, & destroy all we have left... but so it is everything must be left & we will do well if we get there [California] with a whole skin.”

Another part of the perceived emigrant extravagance can be attributed to “a want of small change” that compelled emigrants to “frequently pay more for an article than we would if we could make the change.” Part can also be attributed to the conscious decision of the emigrants to give more in trade than the purchased foods were worth. While some emigrants burned or dumped into the river everything they left behind, others traded it away, giving far more in trade value knowing it would otherwise be lost and of no value or profit. Doc Candee, for instance,

noted he traded extravagantly with the Pima and Maricopa because “we must dispose of it at any rate.” As a result, emigrants traded “a good garment for a water melon” that under different circumstances they would not have exchanged. Whatever the reason, by 1852, most goods were sold for coin.



Pima baskets, like these drawn by John Russell Bartlett of the US-Mexico Boundary Survey in 1852-1854, were on occasion purchased by emigrants enroute to California.

## *Teacher Plan for “Asking High Prices: Trade in the Villages”*

### Terms to know and understand

- In-lieu
- Metamorphosed
- Savvy
- Ploy
- Medium of Exchange
- Extravagance

Students will be able to:

1. Discuss the changing economic system among the Pima and Maricopa villages and how it benefited the people.
2. Explain the laws of supply and demand and how the Pima and Maricopa utilized them.

**Objectives**

### Critical Thinking:

- Why do you suppose the Pima and Maricopa were initially uninterested in selling their goods for Mexican silver or American gold coins? Why would Mexican silver be accepted more readily in 1849? Why do you suppose the people eventually asked for American gold coins almost exclusively? If you were selling something today, would you rather sell it for silver or gold?

### Activities

- Engage students in a discussion of the laws of supply and demand. Explain to them that the Pima seemed to understand the essence of these laws. Explain to students supply is the quantity of a product that sellers are willing to provide to the market at a given price. When prices are high, sellers are willing to provide larger amounts of their products to the market. When prices are low, sellers are willing to provide smaller amounts to the market. This relationship between product supply and its price is called the law of supply. Demand is defined as the quantity of a product that buyers are willing to purchase from the market at a given price. When prices are high, buyers are willing to buy less of the product. When prices are low, buyers are willing to buy greater quantities of the product. This relationship between product demand and its price is called the law of demand. The price of a product or a commodity depends on the relationship between supply and demand. If the supply and demand curves are placed on the same graph, the point where they intersect is the product's market price. Based on all the supply and demand factors, this is the price (money or trade value) that the Pima and Maricopa were willing to sell their goods to the emigrants. What advantages are there to having a cash economy rather than barter economy?

### 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.