

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

Louis Nelson and Harry Sundust Speak Up

Part 38

In the spring of 1920, nine members of the House subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs held public hearings across the western United States to hear testimony directly from both Indian Service personnel and American Indians regarding conditions in Indian Country. On Saturday, May 20, 1920, the subcommittee visited the Pima Agency in Sacaton. Louis Nelson, an educated Pima schoolteacher, eloquently expressed the desire of the Pimas to be free from the restrictive hand of federal supervision. While not a chief or a headman, the Pimas elected Nelson “to speak for them.” He clearly articulated the Pimas’ opposition to federal paternalism and the leasing—including the proposed 50,000-acre Elliot lease—of Pima-Maricopa land, while at the same time making his case for the restoration of Pima water delivered free of charge to the reservation.

“We feel that it is not right to have our land leased at all for the simple reason ... that we see from other tribes of other Indians where land has been leased and what kind of people have been brought in, what the consequences are. From the experience of other tribes, we like to have ours a little different if we can help it.

“The Government has been doing things over their head, handling their financial affairs for them and doing everything for them and letting the Indian sit back and fold his arms and not learn anything at all by experience. We would like to do it ourselves if we can; and if we can not do it, the Government official will be right there, and if we do not do it right, help us there; and if we can not do it the next time, then we will learn by experience to prepare ourselves for citizenship.* We know then what to do if we are to be given citizenship. But if everything has to be done for us, we do not feel that it is right at all.

“[We are cultivating] all that we can with the little water we have been getting. We have been irrigators a long time before the white people came around. Give us water that is ours. We have been deprived of water for a long time, and if that water had been kept for us our condition would have been different. We would be ready then to cultivate the land ourselves, but we have been held back by the carelessness of the Government in not looking into [our water rights].

“There is a project right on hand now where a company is willing to advance these Indians, to put in their wells, where they could be training themselves how to handle their own allotments and wholly finance themselves, instead of somebody else going in there and doing it for them; and if that could be done, of course, I can not tell just how long it would take [to put the land back into production], but it will be done by the Indians. It is in them. The Indians are workers and the stuff is in them and they can do it.

“[The white people] have got their own land and could cultivate it. There is a whole lot of land lying idle all over [off the reservation]. Why do they not go ahead and follow that up [with a lease]?

“Ten years [for the proposed Elliot lease] is a lifetime in our machinery, and if the leases were for 10 years, and then, besides, if [Elliot] has a right of taking another 10 years, that means 20 years; he is making all the money at the expense of the Indians.

“Another thing, the Government has been encouraging these Indians to raise cattle and stock. Where will these cattle be if Elliot takes all that surplus land? A whole lot of Indians have their homes and cattle on the place; that is where they graze their horses and cattle. The Indians do not consent to [the lease] at all.

* The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 conferred US citizenship on all American Indians. Arizona state citizenship was not conferred until 1948.

“Reasons for objecting to land leases on the Pima Indian Agency:

- 1) It would demoralize our sense of appreciation of land value.
- 2) It would destroy our responsibility as agriculturists and irrigators.
- 3) It would bring in an undesirable class of people amongst us.
- 4) It would destroy our higher standards of moral and social virtues, which have been in the past years held up so high with pride.
- 5) It means a good Indian is a dead Indian.
- 6) The high ideals for our welfare, advancement, and uplift would be destroyed.
- 7) Consequences from experience of other tribes in United States where land has been leased have taught us better.

“If land is to be leased let us do it ourselves. Let us handle our contracts, agreements, and our financial affairs with the aid of a Government official so an Indian will do it himself next time.

“The main point is that [the Pimas] object because they do not want undesirable people to mix up with them... But the main thing, as I stated before, if anything is to be done, let the Indians do it as far as they can do it themselves. And not the Government. What I mean is the Indian will be learning by experience to handle all his own affairs as far as possible.

“[As to how long it would be before the Pimas irrigated all their land and put it under cultivation] would depend on the Government giving us back our water that has been given over to the white people above [the reservation]. What I aim at is our river water has been given over from carelessness of the Government a long time to these white settlers above here who have now our canal flow of water, while the Indians here are left dry and they are the first ones that have been here.

“[We] have seen now that [groundwater from wells] has proven a success while, at that time, there was not anywhere around [the reservation] any success at all. A few [Indians] might still object [to groundwater but most do not anymore].

“I think it will be alright [to pay the Government back for building the new irrigation system], but at the same time there is a feeling in the Indians that if their water, which is just as valuable as anything else, has been taken away from them and there is never reimbursement from it, and now when the Government is trying to give the water from other sources and get their water right, then charging them reimbursement, they do not feel it is justice at all because their water, their first water, has not been repaid for the loss of it.

“[The Pimas] will do anything to make their own living. They want to go forward and do not want to stay back. I think they will pay for it [if given an extension of time beyond the normal government reimbursement plan]. They can make it all right if they have the water. There is no question about it; they can make enough to pay if there is any water. They are workers; they can pay it.”

Harry Sundust, a Maricopa from District 7, addressed Arizona Congressman Carl Hayden and the subcommittee via a letter. Besides desiring an allotment of 80 acres, he also opposed the leasing of land. While two or three lease applications had been made in the district, Sundust outlined his reasons for opposing the leases, which he saw as discriminatory.

“Some leasing of land is going on here; they lease it to the whites. The farmer says the leasing of land will be not over \$20 acre, and so the leasing is not over \$20, while the white farmers are leasing their land from \$50 to \$100 acre. Now again you see this is not right. It does not benefit the Indians, but it will benefit the whites who are farming the leased land. They don't pay for the water, while we Indians have been working hard putting in our dam and ditches without any Government support, and the whites come in and get their water without any payment.

“Hoping very much that you will take up the matter for us Indians. I am,

Yours respectfully,

Harry Sundust”

Louis Nelson and Harry Sundust Speak Up

Using the words listed below, find the words in the grid. Words may go horizontally, vertically and diagonally in all eight directions.

Harry Sundust

justice

lease

Maricopa

Pima

Louis Nelson

virtue

responsibility

moral

water

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

Teacher Plan for “Louis Nelson and Harry Sundust Speak Up”

Objectives

Terms to know and understand

- Federal supervision
- Paternalism
- Consent
- Demoralize
- Virtues

Students will be able to:

1. Clearly state in their own words the reasons the Pima and Maricopa objected to land leasing.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions to the apparent challenge regarding repayment of water.

Critical Thinking:

- Louis Nelson stated to the subcommittee that many of the Pimas felt they shouldn't have to pay for the water. Nelson's argument was that since upstream settlers, through the careless actions of the federal government, had taken the Pimas' water, and since the federal government had never paid the Pimas for this lost water, that it was now an injustice for the Pimas to have to pay for the water. While Nelson was confident the Pimas could pay—since they were excellent farmers—he wasn't sure they were morally obligated to because of government neglect. In your opinion, was this moral argument valid? Is it still valid today? Explain.
- Leasing of Pima-Maricopa land was a whole new proposition in 1919 (see Part 26 “Outsiders Leasing the Land?”). Even Superintendent W.F. Haygood admitted as much in the hearing in Sacaton. Review Louis Nelson's list of 7 reasons why the Pima were opposed to leasing. Which one argument makes the most sense to you? Discuss the terms Nelson used (demoralize, responsibility, undesirable, moral and social values, high ideals). How important an issue do you think this was to the Pimas and Maricopa at the time? Are these issues valid today?

Activities:

- If the Elliot lease (50,000 acres) and other leases (one in the north-central part of the reservation for 31,400 acres and several small leases in District 7) had been approved, how might this have affected the Community's water supply? Why do you think the federal government was so interested in leasing reservation land (recall Part 24 where the US Army Corps of Engineers recommended in 1912 that if the Pimas did not farm the land that it should be leased to farmers willing to farm it)?
- Carl Hayden stressed to W. F. Haygood that it was his responsibility as superintendent of the Pima Agency to “make clear to these Indians that hereafter, when appropriations are made for their benefit in the way of irrigation works, that they must expect to repay the cost to the United States.” The Arizona congressman recognized the Pimas might not be able to repay the money right away but that they had to bear in mind that one day they would have to pay. Keeping in mind the words of Louis Nelson opposing repayment, one can see there is a strong difference of opinion on the matter. If you had to reach a compromise on this issue, how would you handle it?

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.