

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

The Sacaton Project

Part 21

When Indian Irrigation Engineer William Code proposed to develop wells and relocate the Pima at Santan, he recommended that Maricopa Colony (1,500 acres) and Gila Crossing (5,000 acres) be exempt from sale, with land being allotted to the Pima and Maricopa in these villages. By the end of 1904, he was willing to allot 12,000 acres to the Pima living at Casa Blanca. Yet, by 1909, Code sought to relocate all but a handful of the Indians from these protected areas to Santan.

Congress approved of Code's general plan to develop well water in exchange for the sale of land—but only if the project proved a success. The first funds were appropriated on March 3, 1905. In January of 1906, John Granville arrived at Gila River to begin a preliminary survey in advance of allotment, which was closely aligned with the irrigation scheme. With the 1907 power contract with the Salt River Valley Water User's Association, work began on constructing an electrical line to the north boundary of the reservation. In April of 1908, Congress gave the Secretary of the Interior the authority to enter into agreements with the Reclamation Service to build Indian irrigation works. Using this authority, the Reclamation Service began what was known as the Sacaton Project.

The Sacaton Project included the 10 irrigation wells proposed by Code as well capturing the floodwaters of the Gila River. The project included the construction of three canals. The first was the Santan Canal, which would carry floodwaters from the Gila River beginning at a point 3 ½ miles east of Sacaton. The head of this floodwater canal was at the future site of the Sacaton Diversion Dam (and Olberg Bridge). This canal on the north bank of the river was designed to irrigate 10,000 acres of land with wells and floodwaters—which were unlikely to continue if San Carlos Dam were constructed. A second, smaller canal was to branch off the Santan and carry well water. A third canal was to be built on the south bank and supply a limited amount of water near Casa Blanca.

Before the Reclamation Service began construction of the floodwater canal, the Gila River shifted its channel, necessitating the construction of the canal head through a heavier cutting of rock than was originally planned in 1906. The canal—later called the Santan Canal—headed northwest for 8 miles, extending to within 2 ½ miles northeast of Gila Butte. Without a controlling dam at the head, the Pima constructed a brush dam to capture the floodwaters. In 1911, this head washed away three times. Consequently, the Pima received little benefit from the flood waters “on account of there having been no means of controlling them,” even though the past year had been “extremely favorable in respect of flood waters for irrigation.” The Reclamation Service informed the Indian Service that if it wanted a dam the Indian Service would have to supply it.

In 1911, the leading Pima chiefs petitioned the Indian Rights Association for their assistance in the fight against the developing irrigation and land cession scheme. Samuel M. Brosius, of the Indian Rights Association, pushed the House of Representatives to investigate the activities of Newell and Code, as well as the general expenditure of irrigation funds on behalf of the Pima. Brosius explained to the House that Code sought to allot the village of Gila Crossing in 1904 but had changed his mind because “since the completion of the Roosevelt Reservoir, it is known that all the cultivable land on the north side of the river at Gila Crossing can be supplied with Salt River impounded water.” As a result, the land had “much speculative value.”

Brosius distrusted Code and sought to involve the House in looking into the allegations of impropriety. Why else would Code “want the [Gila Crossing] Indians to abandon that much water [1,500 miner's inches or enough for 5,000 acres] in order to get a similar amount of pumped water

from the wells at Santan?" Brosius inquired. Furthermore, seepage water at Gila Crossing and Maricopa Colony was equivalent to the output of seven wells in Santan. With the cost of each well \$10,000, Brosius noted, why was this money not used to extend the electrical power line and "augment the natural supply of water at Gila Crossing with three or four wells?" As Brosius correctly reasoned, the wells were put in at Santan and not Gila Crossing so that non-Indians would "get the natural flow of good river water and the Indians [would] get the electricity" to pump inferior quality well water. Through the "aid of some unscrupulous [government] officials" the Pima and Maricopa stood to lose much more than their land. They stood to lose the life-giving surface flow of the Gila River itself. Lewis Nelson, a Pima from Casa Blanca, explained that Code tried to "advise" the Pima to accept the well project and that the Pima were afraid of losing their rights to the waters of the Gila River.

With regards to the "Casa Blanca Indians," there was a concern that they, too, might be relocated to Santan. While Code initially agreed that they should receive allotments at Casa Blanca, by 1909 he thought they should remove to Santan—with children eventually receiving allotments on the south side of the river near Casa Blanca. Nonetheless, 800 Pimas at Casa Blanca were scheduled to receive 5-acre allotments, far less than what they needed. Code even suggested "the Blackwater Indians would have to be moved." Even if all 4,000 Pima and Maricopa relocated to Santan—where some 10,000 acres were being developed—there was insufficient land and water for each member to receive an allotment of land; hence the 10 acre per family limitation. "Equitable distribution of the land already covered by an assured water supply" was a stated Indian Office objective.

The Pima were clearly unhappy with this scheme. Head Chief Antonio Azul, Chief Juan Jackson and Chief Vanico sent a letter to Interior Secretary James Garfield on July 1, 1909, objecting to allotment "because the water supply has been taken from us and is very uncertain now." Furthermore, the chiefs understood that the proposed allotments would "not be enough to enable us to earn a living by agriculture and stock raising, by the which we have earned our living heretofore." Nonetheless, the Indian Office proceeded with plans to allot the reservation. As late as April 29, 1911, Commissioner Robert Valentine ordered Allotting Agent Charles Roblin to allot each family 10 acres, five for the husband and five for the wife. Minor children would receive an allotment unless future developments should "cause such course to be impractical." This ambiguity caused the Pima even more concern, leading many to conclude that children would not be allotted at all.

Lewis Nelson also explained how Code tried to force well water on the Pima. Code (or J.B. Alexander, they each blamed the other) ordered the damming of the Little Gila River with the idea of denying water to Pima fields east of Sacaton. By so doing, Code hoped to persuade the Pima that they were really without water and that "pumps would have to be used." Code disguised his scheme by ordering the closure of the Little Gila River for fear it was unsafe and the entire channel of the Gila could "come down that channel." The Agency farmer and experimental farmer both characterized the closing of the Little Gila "as an outrage." Loss of this important conduit of water caused more privation among the Pima but did not persuade them to accept Code's scheme. The Little Gila was reopened in 1913 after Code had resigned and Alexander had been removed as superintendent.

In July 1911, the Indian Office withdrew its allotment plan in a telegram sent by Assistant Commissioner C.F. Hauke. "The Indians at Gila Crossing and Casa Blanca will be permitted to take allotments where they are now located," Hauke informed the Pima Agency via telegram. "But if they want allotments where water is now developed they can be allotted there [at Santan]. Please make it clear to everyone that the place of allotment for each Indian is within his or her selection." In a letter following the telegram, Hauke stressed that "wherever on the reservation there are settlements of Indians in large numbers enough and under favorable agricultural and irrigable conditions, every effort possible will be made to bring water to them where it can be done at a cost that would not be nugatory of all other efforts." Valentine visited the Pima Agency in October and in a meeting with the Pima held in Sacaton he promised to oppose any "plan to try to induce the Casa Blanca Indians to move over into

the Santan District.” He further pledged his support to allot every Indian 10 acres of irrigable land while dividing up all the grazing land on a per capita basis.”

The Pima also opposed wells on the ground that the water was too alkali and would prove harmful to their soil. Lewis Nelson, in a letter to Jonathan Stephens of the House Committee on Indian Affairs, complained once again about the ill planned well system. “Why ask us to experiment when the Gila River water, to which we are already entitled, would make experiment unnecessary.” River water, Nelson stressed, “is in no way an impossibility, and we know that it is the best and most practical system.” The Pima will “some day stand side by side with our white brother in thrift and culture,” Nelson continued. “To place us at a disadvantage now may mean the loss of hope, and when hope is dead the man is dead.” The Pimas opposed wells not only because of a fear that their rights to the low-water mark of the Gila River would be lost but also because the wells were “complicated and expensive” and the water was bad. The water, many believed, would ruin the land with alkali.

In 1913 the Reclamation Service turned over its activities in Indian Country to the Indian Irrigation Service and in March of that year the Indian Service assumed responsibility for the Sacaton Project. The plan to irrigate 10,000 acres of Pima land with well water continued but the scheme to sell off 180,000 acres of land did not. Relocation of the Pima and Maricopa to the Santan area also ended, although many allotments were eventually made in the Santan area. The Code-Newell-Hill scheme, which “originated with persons owning large tracts of land and water privileges adjacent to that portion of the Pima reserve proposed to be sold” ended. While crop production would continue to increase in the 1910s, the Pima still lacked a permanent supply of water. And their rights to the water had yet to be protected.

Match the names of the left with their roles/titles on the left.

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. _____ William H. Code | A. Commissioner of Indian Affairs |
| 2. _____ John Granville | B. Indian Rights Association |
| 3. _____ Samuel Brosius | C. Indian Irrigation Engineer |
| 4. _____ Lewis Nelson | D. Pima Chief |
| 5. _____ Antonio Azul | E. Allotting Agent |
| 6. _____ Robert Valentine | F. Pima leader |

Now match the Community names on left with the correct description on the right.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1. _____ Santan | A. 1,500 acres was to be allotted here |
| 2. _____ Casa Blanca | B. Area where Pimas were to be relocated |
| 3. _____ Gila Crossing | C. 12,000 acres to be allotted here |
| 4. _____ Maricopa Colony | D. 5,000 acres to be irrigated with seepage water |
| 5. _____ Sacaton Project | E. Name given to the project around which 10,000 acres were to be developed with well and flood water. |

Teacher Plan for “The Sacaton Project”

Terms to know and understand

- Allotment
- Alkali
- Speculative
- Seepage
- Unscrupulous
- Equitable

Critical Thinking:

- Casa Blanca was home to some of the best agricultural lands within the Pima Reservation. But in the early 1910s electric power, which could have operated wells to pump water to supplement the existing supply of water at Casa Blanca, stopped four miles short of the village. How might this lack of electricity have hurt Casa Blanca (remember the need for water)?

Activities

- If possible, take a trip out to the Sacaton Diversion Dam (Olberg Bridge). Ask students if they have ever seen water behind this diversion dam. Point out the intent behind the construction of the division dam was to divert floodwater into the head of the Santan Canal. The Pima were already concerned in 1911 that if a storage dam were ever built (i.e., Coolidge Dam), there would be no floodwaters to enter the Santan Canal, except on rare occasions when the river still floods. Yet, the Santan was a much larger canal than what was needed at the time, which of course, fueled speculation that the canal was really designed to deliver water to land west of the Chandler Ranch.
- Have students research the differences between groundwater and Gila River water. Which, if either, is better quality water? What nutrients are in groundwater that are not in river water? If possible, have children grow crops using water from both and see if there is a difference.
- If 4,000 Pima and Maricopa had been relocated to Santan to farm 10,000 acres, how many acres per person would have been allotted? If children had been allotted on the south bank of the river in the Casa Blanca area and their parents were allotted on the north bank, what hardship would this cause?

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. Hypothesize possible reasons why Code wanted to relocate all Pima and Maricopa to Santan.
2. Describe Pima concerns with the floodwater canal.

Objectives