

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project
Education Initiative



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

*In the Midst of a Crisis:
the 1870s*

Part 6

In the spring of 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant sent Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard to Arizona Territory to initiate the “Peace Policy.” Presbyterian missionary Charles Cook welcomed Howard in Yuma. In late spring, the General traveled to the Pima Reservation to personally review the water crisis. He found the Akimel O’otham restless and complaining that settlers continued to divert the waters of the river. Howard noted that a large number of Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh had moved to the Salt River Valley, where further problems arose. “Pima horses get upon a farm,” the General wrote, and “are taken up or shot; retaliation comes, a house is burned, and the Pimas, as a whole, are blamed.”

Howard proposed three solutions to the water crisis. First, he noted the government could extend the reservation east to include the area of Adamsville, thus eliminating a large number of non-Indian farmers. This would be costly and would not solve the water problem. Second, Howard suggested that the reservation be extended east to include Adamsville and Florence. But this, too, would be costly as dozens of non-Indian land claims would have to be purchased by the United States. Finally, Howard proposed that the United States build two canals, one on each bank of the Gila River. A government agent would ensure a fair division of the water to all cultivators. But this would be “too difficult of execution even with an honest and skillful agent,” Howard concluded. The only other “solution,” therefore, was to remove the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh from their ancestral lands to a place “either inside or outside of Arizona.”

Removal (or consolidation of Indian nations onto smaller and fewer reservations) was a staple of federal policy in the 1870s. Removal to the Indian Territory (present Oklahoma) was thought to be especially advantageous. “The larger the number (of Indians) that can thus be concentrated,” Felix Brunot advised the President in 1869, “the better for the success of the plan (allotting all reservation lands and abolishing tribal status).” Consolidation was to be the government’s plan to end “future Indian troubles.” President Grant accepted this view and ordered Interior Secretary Jacob Cox to place all Indians “on fixed reservations,” hoping that “the less advanced” tribes would benefit from living alongside the “more civilized” tribes such as the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh.

Removal became an obsession with Columbus Delano, the new Secretary of the Interior. Delano sought to remove all Indians to the Indian Territory. According to his calculations, 172,000 American Indians were then living on 96,155,785 acres of land, or 559 acres per person. Another 60,000 Indians were living on 44,154,240 acres of land in the Indian Territory, or 736 acres per person. “Could the entire Indian population of the country ... be located in the Indian Territory,” Delano asserted, “there would 180 acres of land, per capita.” This was “an ample area of land to afford them all comfortable homes.” Howard’s proposal to remove the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh to a location “either inside or outside of Arizona” therefore was hardly unusual.

After Howard visited the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh villages, he encouraged Indian Agent John Stout to persuade the leading headmen to visit the Indian Territory and see for themselves the abundance of water. Tell them the government intends to take all the Indians to the territory, Howard explained to Stout, “as fast as they get ready to go.” On May 11, 1872, Stout met with fourteen Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh leaders to discuss sending a delegation to the Indian Territory. “If it is as you say,” Antonio Azul told Stout, “we think we would like to live there.” Nonetheless, the chief remained

skeptical. “[H]ow do you know it is a good place,” he inquired of Stout, when “you have not been there.”

Azul consented to making the trip, but only if Stout agreed to three conditions. First, the trip would have to be delayed until after the summer harvest, but before the beginning of cold weather. Second, Stout would have to accompany them to the Indian Territory and ensure their safe return. And, finally, long-time friend, interpreter and agency farmer John Walker would have to accompany the Indians to assess the quality of the land.

Before Stout could take the headmen to the Indian Territory, he first had to obtain permission from President Grant. When three months passed with no word from the President, the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh leaders again met in council and asked Stout to lead them to Indian Territory. “We have not raised enough grain to keep us through the year,” Azul lamented to Stout, “and we are afraid we will not raise as much next year.”

Stout urged the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to immediately begin removal. “As it is the intention of the Government to make all of its Indians independent, they should be afforded every reasonable facility to that end,” Stout reported. Commissioner Francis Walker, having been informed that settlers were conspiring to withhold the flow of the river from the Indians, agreed with Stout. Herman Bendell, territorial Superintendent of Indian Affairs, cautioned Walker, reminding him that Akimel O’otham water rights were “paramount to every other condition respecting the progress and well-being” of the Indians.

Besides offering a practical solution to the problems besetting the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh, the United States Government saw removal as a way to eliminate the vices of idleness, which resulted from the lack of water. Although many Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh left the reservation to farm or work, many refused. Lacking water to farm as they had done since time immemorial, some Indians fell prey to the whiskey peddler. Others engaged in vices that only compounded the crisis. These vices alone, Stout believed, required the immediate removal of the Indians “beyond the reach of ... contaminating influences.”

Many Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh found their own solutions to the water crisis. Beginning in 1870, a number of O’otham settled in the Blackwater district south and east of the then-existing reservation. In the Blackwater district an alluvial spring in the riverbed provided water when surface flows diminished or disappeared. Movement away from the river—and traditional villages—to areas where water seepage was available continued with the settlement of Gila Crossing in 1873 and Maricopa Colony in 1887 (both were later added to the reservation by Executive Order). During 1873, some 300 Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh moved to what would later become the Salt River Reservation. Stout estimated that more than 1,300 Indians lived off the reservation by the fall of 1873.

Non-Indian settlers—once grateful for O’otham and Pee Posh support and protection—greeted each successive move off the reservation with protest. Forty-six citizens of Florence—including Levi Ruggles—and fifty-nine settlers in Phoenix petitioned the Indian Office to remove the Indians from the reservation. They are “troublesome and dangerous neighbors,” the petition read and the reservation can no longer support them. Disavowing any “selfish motives” the settlers pointed out that the reservation lands were among the poorest in the territory and “would not be occupied for years to come if the Indians were removed.”

In 1873, the Board of Indian Commissioners recommended that President Grant remove the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh to the Indian Territory. That summer Stout was authorized to take a delegation of leaders to inspect the territory, after the Akimel O’otham had carefully considered the issue the preceding winter. “If we cannot go to the Salt River Valley then what?” Antonio Azul complained. “We have no food and you cannot feed us.” If satisfied with the land in the Indian Territory, and if favorable terms of removal could be agreed upon, Azul was prepared to emigrate the following spring. New Commissioner of Indian Affairs Edward P. Smith told Delano that if one-third

of the tribal members removed now, the remainder could be removed over the course of a few years. The reservation lands, when sold, would pay for removal expenses.

On September 23, 1873, Stout, accompanied by agency farmer John Walker, led Antonio Azul and four other leaders to the Indian Territory. There, the group “prospected” a new reservation west of the Sac and Fox Agency (west of present-day Oklahoma City). Stout reported the leaders were “much pleased” with the visit and “entirely satisfied” with the land. Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh leaders, facing destitution in Arizona, were prepared to emigrant the following year.

But the winter and spring of 1874 brought an abundance of rain. Canals that had been dry for years were racing with water. Tribal elders, fearing the Indian Territory might be unhealthy or that they might die enroute, were not interested in removing. Young O’otham men, influenced by trader stories of freezing to death or death by hostile tribes, lost interest as well. More alarming were the rumors that once the Indians gave up their lands in Arizona, the government would renege on its promise of land in the Indian Territory. As the winter rains fell, the government’s plan for removing the Indians washed away. Hundreds of Indians having left the reservation now returned. Fifty thousands bushels of wheat, 4,000 bushels of barley and 500 bushels of corn were grown that summer. With the return of prosperity, the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh lost any interest in abandoning their farms in Arizona and removing to the strange lands of Indian Territory.

Teacher Plan for “In the Midst of a Crisis: The 1870s”

Terms to know and understand

- Alluvial
- Obsession
- Time immemorial
- Conspiracy
- Vices

Critical Thinking:

- Faced with a water crisis, Akimel O’otham chief Antonio Azul had to make a difficult decision based on the advice of the village headmen. If you were the head chief, what decision might you have made? Why?
- If the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh had been removed to the Indian Territory, how might life be different for you today?
- The Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh have always been friends and allies of the United States. Why did the United States not protect their water rights?

Activities

- Use the following conceptual framework to introduce the lesson to students. In 1870, the United States Government began a carefully developed, multi-faceted plan to assimilate American Indians into the general society by diminishing the authority of tribal governments. In 1870, the United States assumed direct control over the education of Indian children (affecting cultural status). In the 1880s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs implemented the “Religious Crimes Code,” which prohibited many Indian religious ceremonies (affecting spiritual status). In 1885, the Major Crimes Act initiated federal criminal jurisdiction in Indian Country (affecting legal status). And, in 1887, the General Allotment Act broke up most reservations into individually owned pieces of land (affecting land status). The ultimate goal was American citizenship, which theoretically meant complete assimilation. This never happened, although American Indians were granted citizenship in 1924.
- Read the article and discuss with students how the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh experience may have been just one part of the larger picture of federal-Indian relations in the late 19th century. Discuss with them how this may explain the lack of federal protection for their water resources.
- List the “solutions” provided by both the United States and the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh to the water crisis of the 1870s. Discuss the pros and cons of each. Then discuss how the crisis might have affected the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh, both individually and as tribes.

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 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.

Student will be able to:

1. Synthesize the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh experience into the broader picture of federal-Indian policy in the latter 19th century.
2. Evaluate various “solutions” to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh water crisis as put forth by both the United States and the O’otham and Pee Posh.

Objectives

Gila River Indian Community Original Boundary and Additions of Land

