

Oasis at a Cultural Crossroads

By Jim Turner, Arizona Historical Society, retired

Trudging miles across the desert, thousands of thirsty Forty-Niners, half-crazed from heat stroke, stumbled into the Pima and Maricopa Indian villages. On the banks of the Gila River near present-day Phoenix, the villages formed an oasis between Tucson and present-day Yuma. Weary travelers marveled at luxuriant fields of wheat, melons and corn. To their astonishment, the natives welcomed them cheerfully. When Kit Carson asked them how much their wheat cost, the Pimas replied, "bread is to eat, not to sell; take what you want."

For almost two centuries, Spanish missionaries, Mountain Men, Forty-Niners, Civil War soldiers and eventually American settlers benefited from plentiful crops and hospitality. These Gileños (people of the Gila River) preferred farming to fighting, but their successes against Apaches guaranteed safe haven anywhere within two days ride of the villages.

For the first 170 years, only handfuls of Europeans reached the villages. However, on November 11, 1846, General Stephen Kearny's 120-man "Army of the West" reached the Gila River villages en route to California during the Mexican-American War. Hearing that Kearny wanted to trade for provisions, the Pimas rushed to meet them, briskly walking the nine miles from the villages to the approaching troops in three hours, arriving out of breath, loaded down with corn, beans, honey and watermelons. Although they traded some, this orderly expedition required little assistance.

Not so when Colonel Philip St. George Cooke's 340-man Mormon Battalion arrived at the villages a month later in desperate need. Blazing the first wagon trail through Arizona, they suffered the grueling ninety-mile stretch of desert between Tucson and the villages. Sergeant Henry Bigler reported empty canteens and weather as hot as June. Soldiers dropped by the wayside, begging for water. The battalion marched with very little rest, traveling at night to avoid the heat. Bedraggled, the next scene the Mormon Battalion suddenly encountered must have seemed like a mirage. Miles before they reached the villages, Pima and Maricopa women and children came out to meet them. A soldier wrote in his diary, "These Indians appear glad to see us, many of them running and taking us by the hand."

In the summer of 1849, the Pimas encountered the largest number of immigrants yet, the fortune hunters of the California Gold Rush. In the next few years, more than 9,000 argonauts reached the gold fields by way of Arizona. Most came ill prepared for the long, hazardous trip.

Hundreds of travelers faced starvation by the time they arrived at the Pima and Maricopa villages. Again these American Indians supplied what they could, often without compensation.

California grew in the late 1850s, and there were stagecoach lines and then Civil War troops to supply. The Pimas and Maricopa's saw a decade of prosperity where they learned the value of currency. They benefited from the construction of a local blacksmith shop and flourmill. In 1866, serving as the First Arizona Volunteers, they donned U.S. Army uniforms. As scouts and warriors, they helped settle the Apaches on reservations.

However, the Gileños' hour in the sun was short lived. By the 1870's, settlers in nearby towns diverted the waters of the Gila River upstream from the villages. The Pimas reported that they could no longer grow beans, pumpkins, melons or corn, and that families were suffering. Newspapers and military reports noted cases of trespassing, water rights problems, and even murder.

Because of their location and natural resources, the Pima Villages were an oasis for travelers of many cultures for almost two centuries. In that small window of time, several cultures lived together and met each other's needs. All too soon, settler traffic jammed the crossroads and dried up the oasis.

Note:

Jim Turner is available to speak to your group on numerous topics related to Arizona history. Please visit his website at www.jimturnerhistorian.org or call him at 520 576-8678 for more information. Jim Turner also teaches some interesting non-credit Arizona history classes at Pima Community College. You can find links to the class schedules from Jim's website.