The Akimel O’odham (Pima Indians) have resided along the Gila River for centuries. They were fishermen and farmers, using water from the river for irrigation. They also gathered wild plant foods as an additional or emergency food. The first Europeans to visit the Pimas were the Spanish. Father Eusebio Kino was the earliest European explorer to meet the Gila River Pimas. His first visit was in 1694. On his last trip to the Gila in March 1699 Kino wrote:

All its inhabitants are fishermen, and have many nets and other tackle with which they fish all the year, sustaining themselves with the abundant fish and with their maize, beans, and calabashes. (Kino's Historical Memoir of Pimeria Alta, edited and annotated by Herbert Eugene Bolton. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948:197)

The Anza Expedition to California passed through the land of the Pimas in 1775. Traveling with the expedition, Father Francisco Garces wrote the following description of the villages of the Pimas:

In all these pueblos they raise large crops of wheat, some of corn, cotton, calabashes, etc., to which end they have constructed good irrigating canals, surrounding the fields in one circuit common (to all) and divided (are) those of different owners by particular circuits. Go dressed do these Indians in blankets of cotton which they fabricate and others of wool, either of their own sheep or obtained from Moqui [Hopi]. (On the Trail of a Spanish Pioneer, by Elliott Coues. New York: Francis P. Harper, 1900:107-109)

The Mexican Era

The lands of the Pimas moved from Spanish to Mexican ownership in 1820 as a result of the Mexican Revolution. There was very little contact between the Gila Pimas and the Mexican government, but this period did mark the first visits by Americans. The first Americans to enter the Gila River Valley were fur trappers hunting beaver. James Ohio Pattie was the first of the trappers to travel through Arizona in 1825-1826. Of his visit to the Gila, he related:

On the 25th, we arrived at an Indian village situated on the south bank of the river. Almost all the inhabitants of this village speak Spanish, for it is
situated only three days journey from a Spanish fort in the province of Sonora, through which province this river runs. The Indians seemed disposed to be friendly to us. They are, to a considerable degree, cultivators, raising wheat, corn, and cotton, which they manufacture into cloths. (Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie by James Ohio Pattie, edited by Richard Batman. Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Co., 1988:55)

The American Period

The American Army's first contact with the Gila River Pimas occurred in 1846 during the Mexican-American War. Two army forces visited the Pima Villages on their way to California: General Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West, and Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke's Mormon Battalion. The Pima's land north of the Gila was ceded to the United States as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo at the war's end in 1848. The Pima Villages, starting with the Gold Rush in 1849, became an important rest and supply stop along the difficult road to California. Many individuals traveling the land of the Pimas left recollections of their visits. Benjamin Butler Harris traveled the Gila Trail in 1849 and said of the Pimas:

Pima Indians met the men ten or fifteen miles from the [Pima] village with gourds of water, roasted pumpkin, and green corn. Serving these, they hurried forward for relieving the others . . . Next morning, we descended the rich Gila bottom through a dense forest of mesquite to the Pima Village, meeting relief parties of Indians along the way. (The Gila Trail: The Texas Argonauts and the California Gold Rush by Benjamin Butler Harris, edited and annotated by Richard Dillon. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960: 80)

The land south of the Gila River became part of the United States through the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. Major William H. Emory first visited the Pimas with General Kearny in 1846, and a second time as U.S. Boundary Survey Commissioner in 1856. The following description was part of his official report:

After leaving these wells you again travel for twenty-nine miles along and occasionally touching the river; you also pass through several Indian villages of the Pimos (sic) and Maricopas. The former are further advanced in the art of agriculture, and are surrounded with more comforts, than any uncivilized Indian tribe I have ever seen. Besides being great warriors, they are good husbandmen and farmers, and work laboriously in the field . . . we found lands fenced in, and irrigated by many miles of acequias, and our eyes were gladdened with the sight of rich fields of wheat ripening for the harvest--a view differing from anything we had seen since leaving the

The Overland Trail through the Pima Villages continued to be an important route to California. In 1859, the Gila River Reservation was established, the first in Arizona. In 1864, J. Ross Browne, a famous world traveler and journalist, accompanied the Indian superintendent to Arizona. Mr. Browne wrote about the Pimas:

In 1858, the first year of the Overland Mail Line, the [Pima's] surplus crop of wheat was 100,000 pounds, which was purchased by the Company; also a large quantity of beans, called taperis, and a vast quantity of pumpkins, squashes, and melons.

That year [1859] they sold 250,000 pounds of wheat and a large supply of melons, pumpkins, and beans. In 1860 they sold 400,000 pounds of wheat—all the mail company would purchase. They had more, and furnished the Government and private teamsters . . . (Adventures in Apache Country by J. Ross Browne. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974: 110 )

The Late 1800s Government Reports and Pima Oral History

As word of the fertile lands of the Gila Valley grew, Anglo farmers began settling in areas upriver from the Pimas. Residents of Florence began diverting Gila River water in 1868 and Mormon settlers in the Safford Valley diverted water in 1874 (Dobyns: 50-52). As more settlers arrived, the need for more water increased. In 1887, the Florence Canal Company was formed to build a diversion dam. The U. S. Special Indian agent of Arizona Territory, J. M. Stout, reported the effect of this in 1871:

As a matter of course, our Indians are much dissatisfied and blame the settlers who are above us for taking away their water. On Sunday morning last, Chin-kum, a chief of one of the lower villages, and one of the best chiefs on the reserve, came to me and said that for many years he and his people had "lived from what they planted," but now they had no water; white men up the river had taken it from them. (in The Changing Ways of Southwestern Indians edited by Albert H. Schroeder. Glorieta, New Mexico: Rio Grande Press, Inc. 1973: 248-249)
An elder in each village recorded Pima history during this period. They carved notches and markings on a large wooden rod to help them recall important events. An anthropologist who visited the Pimas in 1901 made a record of such sticks. Calendar stick history tells of the events of the late 1800s:

**1872-73** - For several years the Pimas had had little water to irrigate their fields and were beginning to suffer from actual want when the settlers on Salt river [sic] invited them to come to that valley. During this year a large party of Rso'tuk Pimas accepted the invitation and cleared fields along the river bottom south of their present location. Water was plentiful in the Salt and the first year's crop was the best they had ever known.

**1898-99** - *Blackwater* - There was no crop this year.

**1899-1900** - A woman at Blackwater was fatally bitten by a rattlesnake. (This woman had gone far out on the desert to search for mesquite beans, as she was without food; indeed the whole community was starving because of the failure of the crops owing to the lack of water in the river for their ditches.) *(The Pima Indians* by Frank Russell. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1975: 54, 65)

The situation was so grave that the Pima Agency requested and was given an appropriation of $30,000 per year to purchase wheat. The amount of wheat purchased was the same as the surplus amount sold by Pima farmers in 1859 (Ortiz: 171).

**20th Century Accounts**

Conditions remained the same into the 20th century. Anthropologist Frank Russell lived with the Pimas in 1901-1902. In his report, Russell made the following observations:

*The once famous grassy plains that made the Pima villages a haven of rest for cavalry and wagon-train stock are now barren . . . Mats were formerly made by the Pimas of the cane, Phragmitis communis, that grew in abundance along the Gila until the water supply became too scant for the maintenance of this plant.* (Russell: 84-85, 147)
The construction of Coolidge Dam (San Carlos Project) in 1930 offered hope of a solution to the water problems of the Pimas. Piman George Webb, who farmed on the reservation during this time, recalled this period of history:

This dam was built up in a canyon of the Gila River, and its purpose was to conserve water especially for the use of the Pima Indians. . . . When the dam was completed there would be plenty of water. And there was. For about five years. Then the water began to run short again. After another five years it stopped altogether. (A Pima Remembers by George Webb. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1959:123)

In 1959, Mr. Webb remembered this about the Gila:

In the old days, on hot summer nights, a low mist would spread over the river and the sloughs. Then the sun would come up and the mist would disappear. . . . The red-wing blackbirds would sing in the trees and fly down to look for bugs along the ditches. Their song always means that there is water close by as they will not sing if there is not water splashing somewhere.

The green of those Pima fields spread along the river for many miles in the old days when there was plenty of water. Now the river is an empty bed full of sand. Now you can stand in that same place and see the wind tearing pieces of bark off the cottonwood trees along the dry ditches. The dead trees stand there like white bones. The red-wing blackbirds have gone somewhere else. (Webb: 124-125)

Today, the Gila River is still a dry bed through the Gila River Indian Community and lack of water continues to be a concern. A speech by then-Governor Alexander Lewis, Sr. in 1973 gives his perspective on the situation of the Pimas:

In the past our people worked the land. But then it happened that the water was gone and no longer could anything grow again on their land because gone was the water, and we [must] see things differently now.

In the past the O'odham were able to live satisfactorily on the crops they harvested from their land. Today this is not possible, for no longer can we work the land as in the past. For this reason the O'odham recognized the need for education: the need to learn new skills . . .

All this will change our way of life, how we live, and how we will live in the future. (Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 10. Edited by Alfonso Ortiz. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1983: 213-214)
Name __________________________

Student Outline for A River Through Time

As you read the primary source material, write down the important fact or facts you learned about the Pimas and the Gila River.

I. The Spanish Entrada
   A. Date _______________ Person __________________________

   B. Date _______________ Person __________________________

II. The Mexican Era
    A. Date _______________ Person __________________________

III. The American Period
     A. Date _______________ Person __________________________

     B. Date _______________ Person __________________________
IV. The Late 1800s
A. Date ________________ Person ________________________


B. Date ________________ Person ________________________


V. 20th Century Accounts
A. Date ________________ Person ________________________


B. Date ________________ Person ________________________


C. Date ________________ Person ________________________

