

## **The Ancient Hohokam Community of Phoenix**

***A story by Jerry Howard, Ph.D. presented at the Phabulous Phoenix Storytelling Showcase on December 11, 2013***

As an archaeologist, I have spent much of my life searching under the ground, applying the scientific method to the remains of the past, in order to tell the story of the people that came before, stories of their struggles and their accomplishments.

So, journey back with me in time, here on the great Salt River, the year is AD. 1347. The people, who we now call Hohokam and their predecessors, have survived the arid desert of the Salt River Valley for over three millennia. They have established a sustainable lifestyle based on the largest irrigation system ever created in the New World.

An old man, wrapped in a cotton blanket decorated with intricately woven designs sits on the roof top of an adobe building and looks knowingly across the valley. The building upon which he sits is his home, a simple dwelling that he constructed as a much younger man. Its door faces out onto a plaza surrounded by other rooms. They are the homes of his children and their families who all work together and carry out daily activities in the plaza. Theirs is an extended household, the center of work and family.

Their household and its rooms are enclosed by a high wall, one that also surrounds several adjoining households of their clan. The wall is a deterrent to outside raiders – an effective one which has kept outsiders at bay, at least so far.

The old man's life has revolved around the growing of the corn and it is hard work. As an elder, his fingers are bent from what we know as arthritis, but to him it is simply the pain of old age. His back is bent, his knees do not work as they should but yet, he remains proud and useful to the household.

Looking out from his roof top perch he can see the spring crop of corn, green and glistening in fields that stretch as far as the eye can see. In the distance he can see one of the great canals, 30 feet wide and 15 feet deep, a massive construction project, one of their greatest accomplishments. The digging of the canal was hard on him, even as a much younger man, and the work was slow as they loosened

soil with their digging sticks, scooped it into baskets and haul it up and pile it on the edges of the canal. But he worked long, hard hours knowing that the reward would be his own field to support a family and to be passed down to his children. And of course a share of the communal water, which meant life itself.

Once completed, the farmers took turns being in charge, organizing people and figuring out who gets water, how much and when. When you have this undesirable job you are always fair minded, knowing that your neighbor will soon be in charge and hopefully he will be fair to you in return. If not, there are the councils who can resolve disputes, but you DON'T want to go there, it can be trouble. The old man is wise now; he knows it is best to get along with your neighbors, particularly when you must work with them to bring the needed water to the corn, squash and beans.

The old man turned his gaze away from the fields and focused on the city of which his home was a part. He lived in one of the two greatest of their cities, cities with the great temple mounds and large ball courts. His people were proud to be connected with the, even then, ancient traditions of the people to the south. People who would be later be known by names in a foreign tongue, Maya, Aztec, Toltec, Zapotec.

The great temple showed the power of his village, their ability to construct a sacred mountain, a mound, with gleaming white walls and rooms on top, rooms dedicated to the gods. Their mound was just larger than the football fields which would appear much later in time. Here, the sacred rituals were played out, rituals vital to keeping the world in balance and maintaining the annual rhythms of the river. The river god could be tricky, supplying too little water to feed the crops, or too much, creating massive floods and inflicting great damage.

The ball courts were periodically the center of activity. The ball players, wrapped in their protective pads struck the rubber ball, imported from Mesoamerican peoples to the south, and tried to hit the large upright post at the ends of the courts. The game came from Mesoamerica, people far to the south. It replayed the great game when the hero twins defeated the 12 lords of death at the court in Sibilba, the land of the dead far below the surface of the earth but tied to our

world by the ceiba tree, the tree of life, the tree connecting all of the worlds. Like all of the people, the old man loved to watch the games, to cheer for their players and to hope that the outcome of the game would prophesize good luck in the year to come. It was as much about the sacred as the profane, as much about the religion as the sport.

As he looked beyond the village, passed the great temple, could his eyes dimly see the future? The conflict across the southwest was increasing ever since he was a child. People moving south, many joining his already overpopulated village and stressing an already inadequate food supply. Warriors stand guard, watching from the stone forts on high peaks that stand along the northern and southern boundaries of their territory. Could he see that soon this great human endeavor, the building of massive canal networks would come to an end?

The end did come, the people moved to the east, to the Hopi Mesas, to Zuni Pueblo, they went to the south to Northern Mexico, perhaps some to the west to the Colorado River. And some stayed or returned, their descendents the great O'odham nation, the descendants carrying on the traditions. It is a living culture and they are our neighbors today, on the Salt and Gila River communities.

And a great legacy was left to us. The irrigating waters of the Hohokam transformed the environment of the valley. In the place of the natural Sonoran Desert they created an agricultural landscape capable of feeding more people than any other area of the American Southwest. The irrigating waters added nutrients and fine particles to the soil. The fertile soils they created allowed for the rise of a new agricultural society, the Phoenix rising again from the seeds planted by an ancient people.