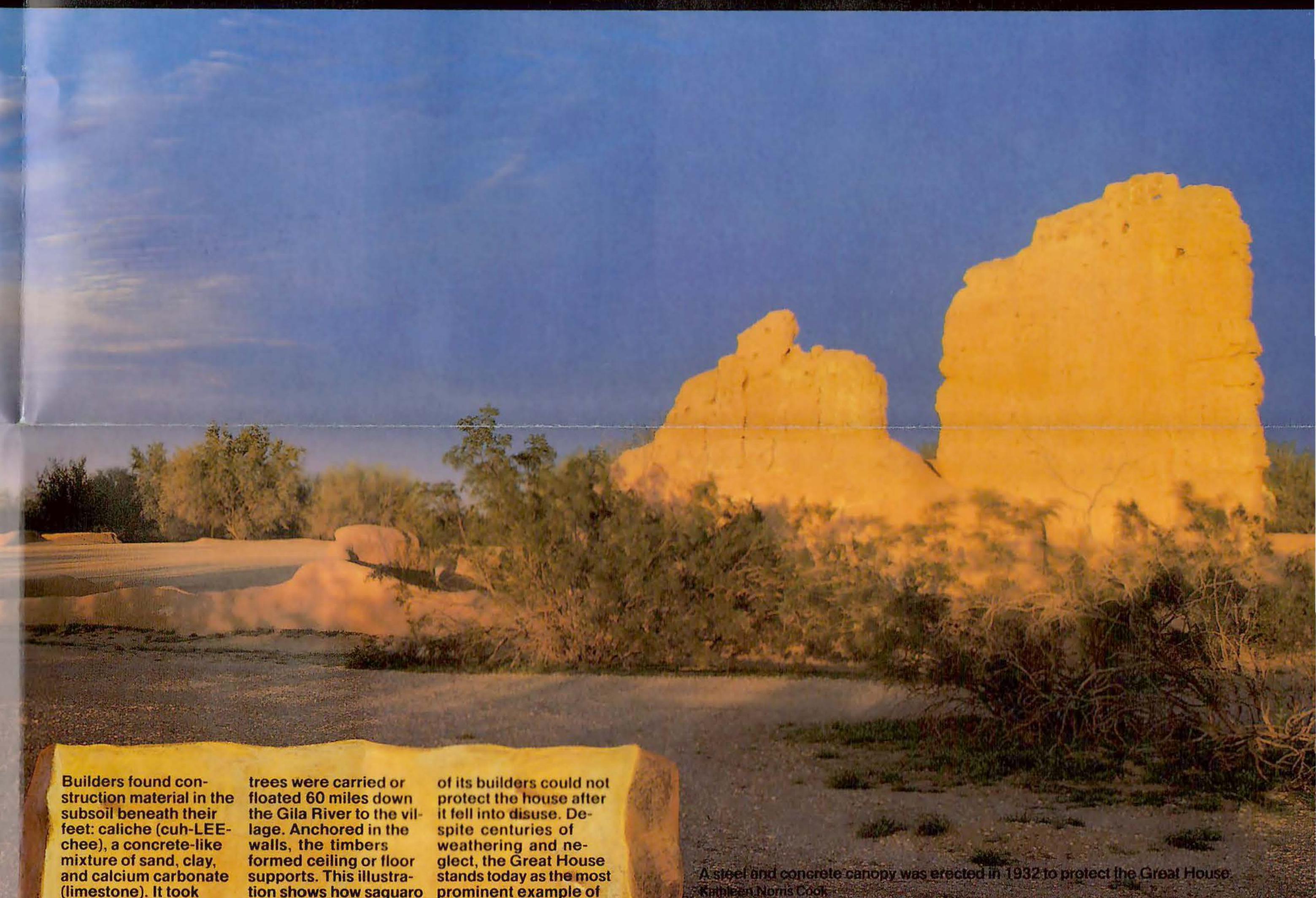
Casa Grande Ruins

Casa Grande Ruins
National Monument
Coolidge, Arizona

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



A steel and concrete canopy was erected in 1932 to protect the Great House.
Kathleen Norris Cook

After a long battle with the desert, the ancient building still commands respect. Four stories high and 60 feet long, it is the largest structure known to exist in Hohokam times. Early Spanish explorers called it Casa Grande ("Great House"), and to them it was a mystery. Its walls face the four cardinal points of the compass. A circular hole in the upper west wall aligns with the setting sun during the summer solstice. Other openings also align with the sun and moon at specific times. Apparently, the builders of the Great House, people who knew well the ways of the land, gathered inside to ponder the heavens. Knowing the changing positions of celestial objects meant knowing times for planting, harvest, and celebration.

Who were these people who watched the sky so purposefully? Archeologist Emil Haury, who studied the Hohokam, called them the "First Masters of the American Desert." Their origins lay with the Archaic hunter-gatherers who lived in Arizona for several thousand years, but the Hohokam drew also from Mesoamerican civilization. By AD 300 a distinct Hohokam culture was in place along the Gila and Salt Rivers and their tributaries. Like other southwestern farming peoples, they lived in permanent settlements, made pottery, and traded. The Hohokam, however, tamed the rivers with irrigation canals. Villages on the main canals formed irrigation communities that regulated the system. In areas without perennial streams, they tapped groundwater or diverted storm runoff into dryland fields.

The people cooperated in trade as well. Villages stood along natural routes between present-day California, the Great Plains, the Colorado Plateau, and northern Mexico. The Hohokam traded mostly pottery and jewelry, for which they received a variety of items. Shells from the Gulf of California were so common that they were probably a medium of exchange, like coins. Macaws, mirrors, and copper bells reveal a link to tropical Mexico, as do the shallow, oval pits found in major villages. These may have been arenas for ball games like the Aztecs played, or they may have been gathering places unrelated to sports. Similar ballcourts as far north as Wupatki (a prehistoric site near Flagstaff) show the extent of Hohokam influence.

Declining popularity of ballcourts, in the 12th century AD, marks a gradual change in the Hohokam world. With the onset of the Classic period, around 1150, people left the outlying settlements and concentrated in large riverine villages such as Casa Grande. Open arrangements of pithouses surrounding central plazas gave way to walled compounds. Besides houses the compounds sometimes contained solid, flat-topped structures called platform mounds. The mysterious Great House, completed prior to 1350, also dates from the late Classic period. Its presence tells us that this village was more important than most. This and other Great Houses, situated in villages at the ends of major canals, likely played a part in the organization of irrigation communities.

Classic-period Casa Grande lasted until the 1400s, when Hohokam culture ebbed throughout the Phoenix Basin. In 1694 Father Eusebio Kino and his party of missionaries found an empty shell of the once-flourishing village. The Pima Indians, who lived in brush huts nearby, said that their ancestors were "ho-ho-KAHM," meaning "all gone" or "all used up." Few European-Americans visited the area until the late 19th century, when souvenir hunting threatened to destroy the site. The scientific community pressed for legal protection and in 1892 the Casa Grande became the Nation's first archeological preserve. Fortress-like, the Great House guards within its confines the secrets of an ancient people.

Builders found construction material in the subsoil beneath their feet: caliche (cuh-LEE-chee), a concrete-like mixture of sand, clay, and calcium carbonate (limestone). It took 3,000 tons to construct the Great House. Caliche mud was piled in successive courses to form walls 4 feet thick at the base, tapering toward the top. Hundreds of juniper, pine, and fir trees were carried or floated 60 miles down the Gila River to the village. Anchored in the walls, the timbers formed ceiling or floor supports. This illustration shows how saguaro ribs were laid perpendicular across the beams, covered with reeds, and topped with a final layer of caliche mud. The best efforts of its builders could not protect the house after it fell into disuse. Despite centuries of weathering and neglect, the Great House stands today as the most prominent example of Hohokam technology and social organization.

Illustration by Rebecca Leer

About Your Visit

Casa Grande Ruins National Monument preserves the remains of an ancient Hohokam farming village as well as the enigmatic Great House.

Location The park is in Coolidge, Arizona, about an hour southeast of Phoenix. From I-10 take Coolidge exits and follow signs to the park entrance off Ariz. Rte. 87/287.

George H. H. Huey

Desert tortoise inspects prickly pear fruits. Round-tailed ground squirrel (right) keeps watch.

James H. Robinson

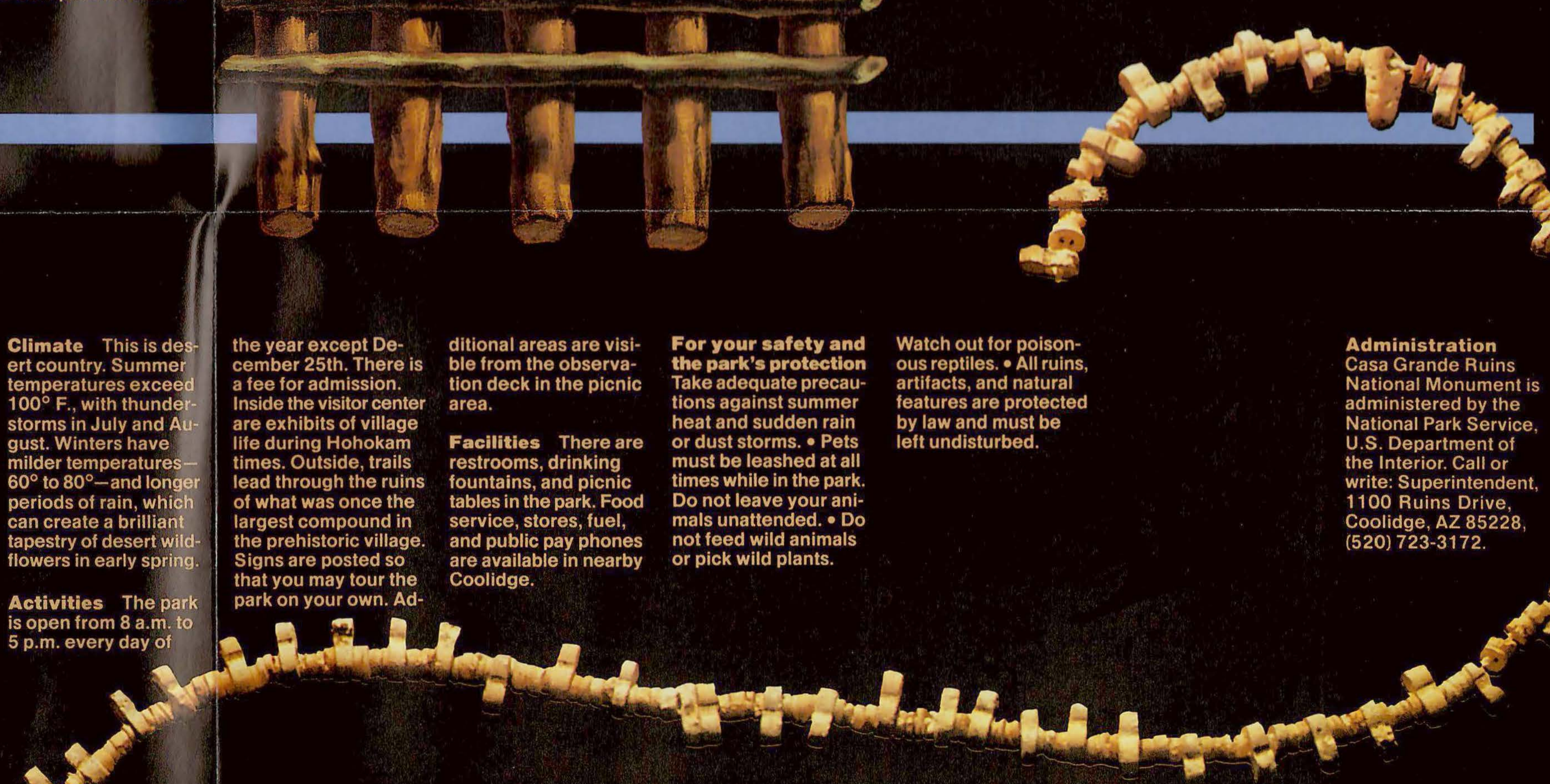
Gilded flicker atop saguaro cactus. Hohokam necklace at right was made from shell beads.

Climate This is desert country. Summer temperatures exceed 100° F., with thunderstorms in July and August. Winters have milder temperatures—60° to 80°—and longer periods of rain, which can create a brilliant tapestry of desert wildflowers in early spring.

Activities The park is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day of the year except December 25th. There is a fee for admission. Inside the visitor center are exhibits of village life during Hohokam times. Outside, trails lead through the ruins of what was once the largest compound in the prehistoric village. Signs are posted so that you may tour the park on your own. Additional areas are visible from the observation deck in the picnic area.

Facilities There are restrooms, drinking fountains, and picnic tables in the park. Food service, stores, fuel, and public pay phones are available in nearby Coolidge.

For your safety and the park's protection Take adequate precautions against summer heat and sudden rain or dust storms. • Pets must be leashed at all times while in the park. Do not leave your animals unattended. • Do not feed wild animals or pick wild plants. Watch out for poisonous reptiles. • All ruins, artifacts, and natural features are protected by law and must be left undisturbed.



Administration
Casa Grande Ruins National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Call or write: Superintendent, 1100 Ruins Drive, Coolidge, AZ 85228, (520) 723-3172.

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Illustration by Rebecca Leer

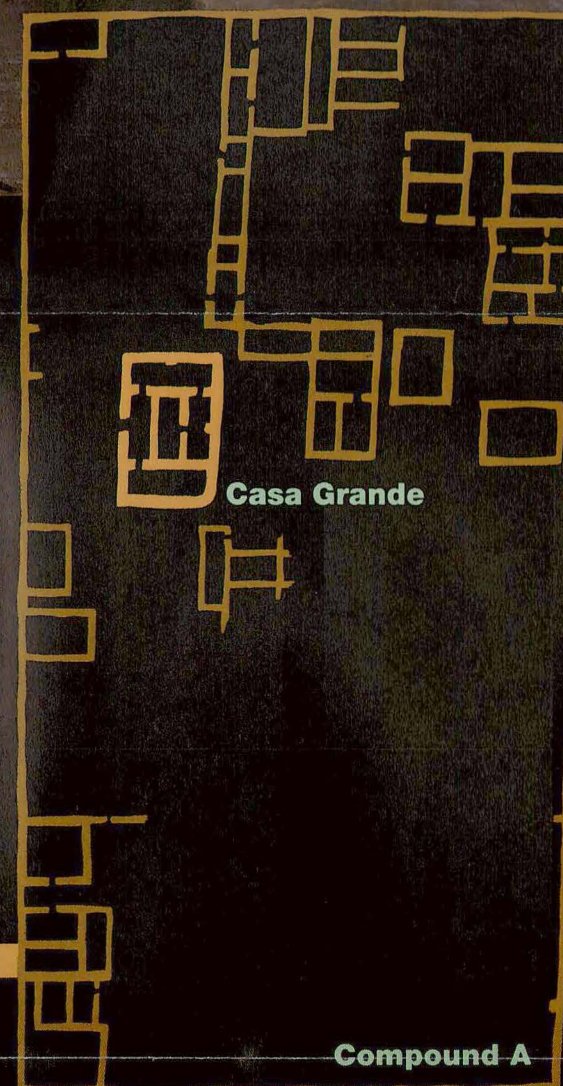
The village comes to life before sunup. It is the first day of summer, a time of constant activity despite the intense heat. Men depart the compound carrying traps, bows, and arrows. This is the best hunting time, before the animals seek shelter from the sun. Large game is elusive; hunting mule deer, pronghorn antelope, or bighorn sheep requires a long hike into the hills. Today promises to be too hot for such a trek. Besides, rabbits and pack rats are plentiful in the area and provide tasty meat.

The saguaro fruits are ready for harvest. From a distance, the tall cacti appear to be in bloom. This is actually the ripe fruit splitting open to reveal bright red pulp. The people work quickly to collect the fruit before it is eaten by desert creatures, who prize it equally. Gatherers maneuver long poles to knock the fruit from the tips of the cactus arms. It is hard to resist eating some of the fruit right away, but the people remember that other villagers have waited all year for the harvest. Pulp is eaten fresh or sundried. Juice is cooked down to syrup or set aside to ferment. Besides ceremonial wine, the fermented juice is used to make jewelry. Artisans paint designs on shells with resin. The shells are submerged in the saguaro juice, whose acid eats away the unprotected parts of the shell. When the resin is removed, the design remains raised above the surface.

The villagers take pride in their shell jewelry, ornaments, mosaics, woven cotton textiles, and pottery, which are popular not only with their neighbors but also with people known only through trade. As they work shaded beneath ramadas, open-sided shelters, the artisans exchange stories of these faraway peoples and pass around the tangible evidence of their existence. A black-and-white ceramic bowl from the north is serviceable, they note, but not as pleasing to the eye as their own designs. Far more enticing are the items from down south: copper bells and vivid red, blue, and green feathers from exotic birds.

A messenger arrives with news of an emergency at the canal. The men drop their work and head for the fields. They wind through waist-high cornstalks to where the main canal branches off into fields. One of the gates that regulates flow has been damaged and must be repaired before the crops are inundated. A party returns with reeds from the along the canal, which are quickly woven into a strong mat. The mat is reattached to the gate, and the gate is replaced. There is a collective sense of relief. This time they were able to make the repair themselves. At other times, particularly after heavy flooding, they must summon neighbors to work with them for days to clear gates, dredge channels, and re-line canal beds with clay to prevent seepage.

Water from the Gila River. Food from the desert floor and hillsides. Building material from the earth itself. The natural world is the source of things that sustain life and deserves respect and gratitude. The people of the village observe the earth and heavens carefully to determine when to take the gifts nature has to offer and when to give thanks. That is the purpose of this evening's gathering in the Great House. Through a small, round hole facing west, the people inside can briefly see the setting sun directly ahead on the horizon. The sighting means that today is the longest day of the year, a comforting sign that the cycle of seasons continues.

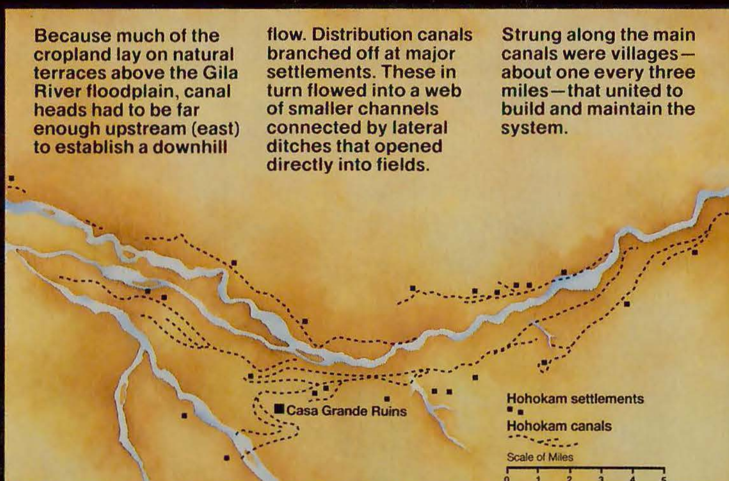


The diagram at left shows the known portions of the walled compound, with the Great House highlighted in bright yellow. (The south-eastern section of the compound is unexcavated.) The illustration above shows a conjectural village scene in the 14th century A.D.

A Bountiful Harvest from the Desert

It is hot and dry, with few perennial water sources and little rainfall. The Sonoran Desert does not seem a likely place to find the essentials for human survival. Yet for more than a thousand years the Hohokam managed to support a sizeable population on things grown, hunted, or gathered.

The lifelines are the rivers, the Salt and Gila, which originate in the east and meet west of present-day Phoenix. The Hohokam tapped the rivers with irrigation canals, diverted high water to the rich soil of floodplains, or captured rainwater. Their crops withstood desert conditions. Corn, the major crop, matured quickly enough to decrease exposure to the elements and produce two crops a year. Other crops were beans, squash, tobacco, cotton, and agave. Wild plants such as amaranth were also encouraged in fields.

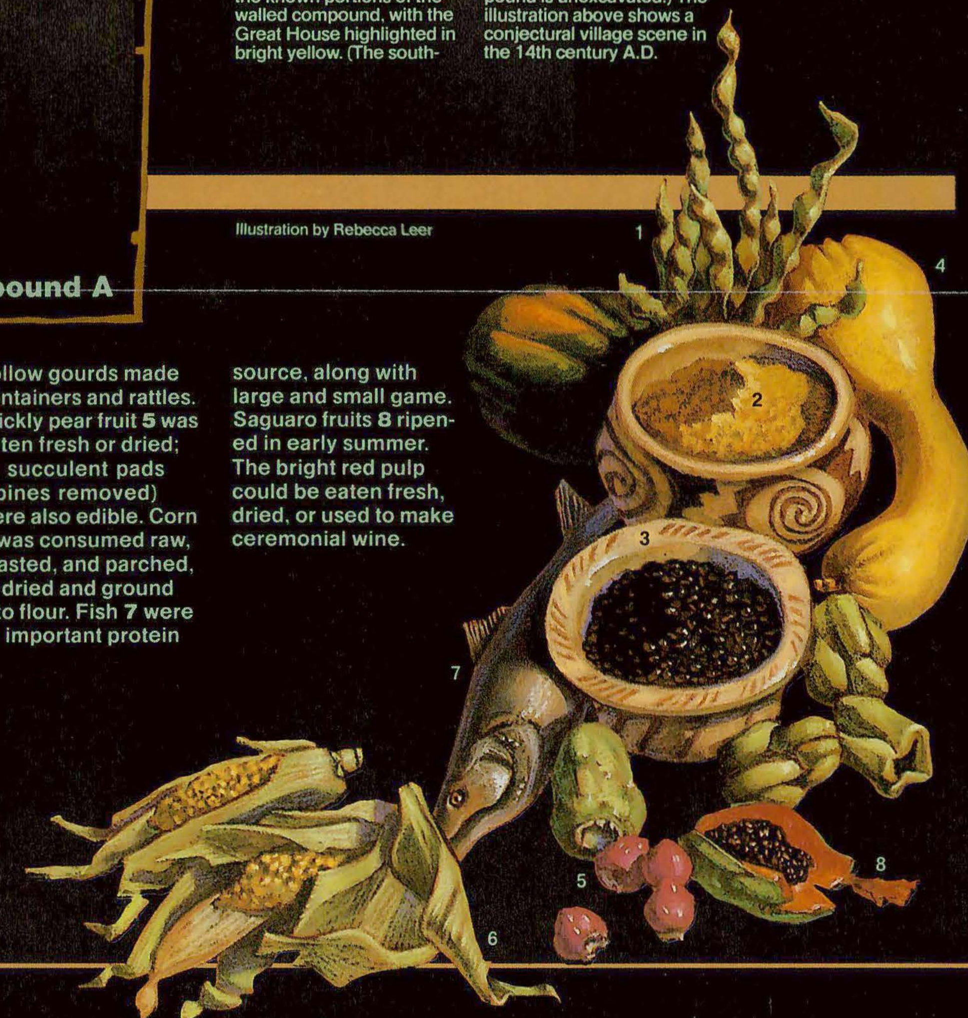


Because much of the cropland lay on natural terraces above the Gila River floodplain, canal heads had to be far enough upstream (east) to establish a downhill flow. Distribution canals branched off at major settlements. These in turn flowed into a web of smaller channels connected by lateral ditches that opened directly into fields. Strung along the main canals were villages—about one every three miles—that united to build and maintain the system.

These people known for farming actually drew a major share of their sustenance from the wild. They did not have to search far; the desert was alive with useful plants and animals. Paloverde, mesquite, and ironwood trees provided wood, fruit, buds, and seeds. The open desert and foothills had ocotillo, creosote, bursage, and saltbush as well as edible cacti such as saguaro, cholla, hedgehog, and prickly pear. Here, hunters snared rabbits and other small game. Mule deer and bighorn sheep foraged on the hillsides. Rivers supplied fish, waterfowl, and turtles, and nourished lush vegetation along their courses: mesquite, cottonwood, willow, reeds, and grasses.

At right are several important domesticated and wild foods: Mesquite pods **1**, a staple food, could be eaten whole or dried and pounded into meal **2**. Beans of many varieties **3** were consumed fresh or dried for storage. These red-on-buff bowls represent the most distinctive Hohokam pottery style. Squash **4** was eaten fresh or boiled; hollow gourds made containers and rattles. Prickly pear fruit **5** was eaten fresh or dried; its succulent pads (spines removed) were also edible. Corn **6** was consumed raw, roasted, and parched, or dried and ground into flour. Fish **7** were an important protein source, along with large and small game. Saguaro fruits **8** ripened in early summer. The bright red pulp could be eaten fresh, dried, or used to make ceremonial wine.

Illustration by Rebecca Leer



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