Tom Childs of the Papago country. Photo by Norton Allen.

Tom Childs of Ten-Mile Wash

By RICHARD VAN VALKENBURGH

It isn’t necessary to live in the city, or even to go to school, to acquire true wisdom. Tom Childs doesn’t wear tailored clothes, and most of his life has been spent on that great waterless desert that covers southwestern Arizona—but he has learned the art of living at peace with the world and his neighbors, both white men and Indians. Also, his friends testify that he is “a man of no habits.” Which in the language of pioneer Arizona means that while he may drink and swear, he always keeps his word.
This photo was taken on the overland mail route between Tucson and Yuma, Arizona, in the 1870's by a traveling photographer named Gentile. His helper was an Apache Indian, later to become Dr. Carlos Montezuma. Photo courtesy Arizona Pioneer and Historical society.

A traveler's stock would be taken inside. The Apaches were bad at that time. Nothing was left outside without guards.

"The station was between the main trails traveled by the Apache when on their raids southward into the Papago and Mexican country. I well remember the moonlight night when they wiped out Salles Purusa's outfit. They killed his herders and ran off his stock. Then I remember the time when we killed an Apache. Father stuck his head on a pole as a warning to the others.

"In 1875 Mother thought it was about time for us children to start school. So we moved to Phoenix. At that time there were about 500 people. Half were Mexicans. There was a courthouse, jail, schoolhouse, restaurant, several general stores, and of course, lots of saloons.'"

"With that small population you should remember Jack Swilling?" I probed.


"Just before his death in 1878 he worked with my father as a law officer. Father always said, 'Jack was not a bad fellow. He drank too much. Then he bragged about a robbery up near Wickenburg which he did not commit. He was too good a man to let die in Yuma Prison——'.

"This same Jack Swilling started Phoenix in about 1868. At first they called it Swillings. Then the settlers got to arguing about a new name for the townsite. So they called in Darryl Duppa, who suggested, 'Let's call it Phoenix after that Egyptian bird that rose from the ashes of the dead. For are we not building a new civilization on the ashes of the old Indian ruins that line our canal banks?'"

Tom and I walked out to go into the twilight. The last crimson of sunset was trickling through the gaps in the purple peaks of Crater ridge to the northwest. To the west there was the green border of Ten-Mile Wash and the shadowy grey of the desert as it swept up to fade in the indigo ridges of Childs' mountain. Turning to Tom I said, "Now, I know why you chose this place for a home."

"Yes," he answered slowly, "I feel it—the ever-changing color of this mountain I know so well. Under its shadows I've had my good and bad. For this has been my home for 61 years.

"It was after Mother died that Father and I moved down here. He had wandered by here in 1850 while looking for the copper deposits that the Mexicans in Sonora had told him about. We came down here to get a start in the cattle business. But neither of us ever got very far away from mining. We were always looking for a good prospect."

"Knowing little of the early history of the Ajo country I asked, "I guess every part of Arizona has a lost mine—some tradition handed down by the old Indians and Mexicans. I've heard a lot of legends about these Ajo mines. How much is actually the truth?"

"Yes, that was one of these stories that brought my father up here in 1850. Down in Sonora he heard the Mexicans telling about bolos de cobre which had been taken from three little peaks to the northward of
a place they called Ajo, or wild garlic. He further learned that from the earliest Spanish days the ore had been mined by the fathers of the Mission San Marcelo de Sonoyta. You can still see the remains of the padre's old arrastre and smelter at the Alamode in the Ajo mountains.

"Father did not find any 'balls of pure copper.' But he did find the three cerritos. They were rich. Peter Brady who died in Tucson in 1902 came to Ajo soon after Father. Those three cerritos are gone now—for they stood right over the place where Phelps-Dodge now have their great open pit mine."

History tells us that Peter Brady located the copper at the time he was surveying a route between Indianola, Texas, and San Diego, California, for the Parallel Railroad company. With Major R. A. Allen he organized the Ajo Mining company in 1853. When they returned to start work on the mines the Gadsden treaty had not been ratified. Mexican soldiers tried to drive the Americans away. But the Americans held on to their property.

Tom went on, "Brady's outfit didn't do very well, and they finally quit. During the war between the states, Frank Clymer worked the mines. He shipped his ore across the desert to the Colorado river. From there boats carried it to Swansea, England. But the mines were hard to operate. Distance from civilization was great and the Apaches were always rampaging, burning up things and killing people.

"We located our first mines at Ajo in 1887. At first we were in partnership with the Shotwell-Calado company, but their money soon gave out. After another try with the St. Louis Copper company we decided to handle it ourselves. We made some money that way. In 1912 we sold out our holdings to the Calumet and Arizona company. Later this firm became a part of the Phelps-Dodge corporation, the present operators of the mines.

"It was about this time that I began to take an interest in our Papago neighbors. Then I married one of their girls. Not counting the adopted children, I now have 13 living children and 35 grandchildren. While at times I have lived at Quitovaquita and Bates Well down near the border, I have always called this place on Ten-Mile Wash, home."

Sensing that Tom was agreeable to talking further about his personal life I asked, "Tom, I know something of the Navajo—even speak a little of their language. But tell me something of these Papago with whom you have lived and known for all these years?"

There was a hint of a smile in his eyes as he answered, "Now I may be hard-headed. But my life with the Papago has taught me many things that I have never seen in a book. And I have read a lot. Furthermore, I speak their language. I stand on this fact—no white man can get anywhere as to what they're thinking unless he speaks their language.

"Now take for instance this simple thing. Most book writers interpret the word Papago as Bean Eating Indians. There were no such Papago. Among themselves each regional group had their own name. There were the Huhula, the Dirty Talkers from around Gila Bend, the Ki-kima from Poso Redondo, etc.

"They say that Papago is from pawi (tepary bean), o'otam (people). That is not right. The term they are talking about is pa'pat (bad or ugly), o'otam (people). This must be a name that the Pima gave them. The Papago would not call themselves Bad or Ugly People."

Tom may be right. The present common usage may be the result of an early Spanish mispronunciation. It may be, as Tom suggests, the Pima name for their western neighbors. Few Indian tribes today are known by the names they call themselves. Father Pfefferkorn states in 1774 that the Pima regarded the Papago as "being of mean origin."

"For over 50 years I tracked the desert with only the Sand Papago as my companeros," Tom continued. "My best friend was old Caravajles, the hermit of Tinajas de las Papago on the Sonora side. It was from him that I learned of the few watering places in this uninhabited land of which the white men know so little."

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"Caravajles first guided me through the Pinacate. This is the immense malpais punctured by craters that lies in a 40 mile belt between Sonoyta and Punta Penasco on the Gulf of California. In our ascent of Pinacate. This is the immense malpais belt between Sonoyta and Punta Penasco before trod by white men.

Our horses struggled through the powdery volcanic ash and the obsidian crackled deep in the monstrous lava-flow on the south side of this terra incognita we came to the cave of Hito. But what we found in the sacred cave of the Papago I cannot tell.

Westward we went over the Salt Trail towards the silt beds at Salina Grande on the Gulf. In this barren wilderness of sand we came upon the deserted jacals of the Sand Papago. And nearby were the mass cemeteries of these Aremeno of which Caravajles said, ‘huahua do’tan, All Gone People.’

Beside the trail lay great dumps of broken sea shell. Caravajles told me that they were the workshops of the ancient people. That their shell ornaments were carried as far north as the land of the Na- vajo. I know this is true for I have seen specimens of this shell from the Gulf all over the Southwest.

While Tom was rummaging for samples of the fine obsidian from the Pinacate I took the opportunity to ask, "I imagine that the Papago have changed a lot since you first met them?"

"Yes, they have!" Tom was quick to answer. "I dug their first real well at Covered Wells in 1886. Then I saw how they buried their dead up in the rocks. So I made their first coffin at Quitovacita in 1904. But they didn’t get the idea. Sometime after the first customer used the box another Indian died. They just dumped out the bones and put in the new corpse.

You ask me regarding the disposition of the Papago. Well, they don’t care much about the white men. They don’t really want to be bothered with them. The old timers had a motto, ‘Get along with the melicans, but don’t tell them anything.’

In the early days they had a pretty tough time with some of the early prospectors and hard characters who traveled through their country.

There is another thing to remember. You got to do business their way. Never question a Papago twice, he’ll sulk. And never give him anything expecting white man’s value in return. If you buy anything from him, pay him, and promptly! He’s been hooked too many times by promises.

So here is Tom Childs’ sage advice on dealing with the Papago. His interpretations must not be construed as harsh. He is a realist who recognizes that the Indians’ mental gears mesh differently than those of white men. It is natural that deep down in their hearts many feel as did Old José of San Xavier when he told me, "some of these snobby melicans smoother me!"

On the other hand true men of the desert like Tom Childs treat their own race with the same dispassionate evaluation. "Lopez the bandit was a dirty killer and deserved to die of thirst in the sand west of San Luis; Charles T. Hayden, the father of Senator Carl Hayden of Arizona, for whom my father was once wagon master, was a good and honest man . . ." What other men think of Tom Childs he could not tell himself. When I stopped at Gila Bend to inquire as to the location of his ranch I met A. H. Staut, the local hotel owner. Mr. Staut, a pioneer, whose father was once a partner of Tom’s father, in the conversation said, "Tom Childs is a man of no habits."

In pioneer-Arizona talk this means that one may have drunk or gambled (which Tom did not) but was a man of his word. It is testimony from Tom’s own kind of people that after three score years of fellowship Tom Childs of Ten-Mile Wash is a respected member of that select fraternity that has no cash initiation fee—the Men of the Desert.

DESSERT QUIZ This monthly quiz really is a sort of School of the Desert. It covers a wide range of subjects—history, geography, mineralogy, literature, botany, and the general lore of the desert country. Most of those who take the quiz test every month find their scores gradually improving. The average person will not get 10 correct answers. Fifteen is a good score for those who travel and read extensively. Once in a great while one of Desert’s readers attains 18—and that is a super-score. Answers are on page 38.

1—Desert woodpecker, when he drills his hole for a home, prefers—Mesquite trees—Ironwood—Saguaro Cactus—Palo Verde—

2—Dates in the Coachella valley of California generally are picked by—Shaking the fruit off the tree—Knocking it down with a long pole—Climbing the tree and picking the fruit from the stems—Cutting off the stems and dropping them to the ground for picking—

3—The color of juniper berries when mature is—Blue—Red—Green—Yellow—

4—“Stop” is a term used in—Mining—Wrangling dudes—Irrigating desert lands—Making cactus furniture—

5—Most poisonous among the members of the desert insect world is the—Vinegaroon—Black Widow spider—Tarantula—Centipede—

6—An Indian trader on the reservation is licensed by—The tribal council—The superintendent—The local hotel owner—

7—Chief industry of the Hualpai Indians is—Gathering pifion nuts—Weaving—Farming—Cattle raising—

8—The wealth in the fabulous Seven Cities of Cibola was recovered by—Coronado—Escalante—Pegleg Smith—Never found—

9—The Kaibab forest is located in—Utah—Colorado—New Mexico—Arizona—

10—Largest city visible from Nevada’s Charleston peak is—Reno—Carson City—Las Vegas—Tonopah—

11—Hohokam is the name given a prehistoric people who once dwelt in—Imperial valley of California—Salt river valley of Arizona—Death Valley—

12—Tribesmen living in Moenkopi are—Apaches—Navajo—Hopi—Osage—

13—Tribesmen living in Moenkopi are—Apaches—Navajo—Hopi—Osage—

14—The blossom of the Nolina is—Pink—Red—Yellow—Purple—

15—One of the following four minerals belongs to the Aluminum group—Galena—Manganese—Bauxite—Hematite—Manganite—

16—Dr. Welwood Murray’s name is connected with the early history of—Palm Springs—Tucson—Phoenix—Yuma—

17—The Winning of Barbara Worth was written by—Zane Grey—Harold Bell Wright—George Wharton James—Stanley Vestal—

18—Driving your car through heavy sand you probably will get best results by—Letting some air out of the tires—Turning the car around and backing through—

19—The Gadsden territory was purchased from—The Indians—France—Mexico—Spain—

20—The historic feud between the Clanton Gang and the Earps ended in a showdown fight at—Ehrenberg—Prescott—Tombstone—Bisbee—

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