

Back To the Past

Before Your Visit - Activity 1

Picture the Past

Background Information

The Hohokam inhabited the Tucson Basin from about A.D. 300 to 1500. These people lived successfully in the desert, even without the technology of today's society. Using only the natural materials from their immediate surroundings, the Hohokam were able to meet all of their survival needs. For shelter, they built "pit houses" by digging a pit one to two feet deep into the ground. Although digging was difficult in the hard caliche soil of the Tucson Basin, the Hohokam used various tools including rocks, sticks, and clay scoops. Trunks of cottonwood, mesquite, or willow were used for the frame which was then covered with brush and then plastered over with mud and dirt. This design allowed the house to stay relatively cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

The Hohokam grew crops of corn, beans, and squash along the Santa Cruz and Rillito Rivers taking advantage of the rich soils occurring there. Small irrigation canals were built to channel the river water to their crops. However, the Hohokam were not completely dependent on crops for food; they also continued the hunting and gathering practices of their ancestors. An important source of food for the Hohokam were the beans of the mesquite tree. Mesquite beans were collected and ground with a stone mortar and pestle, called a metate. The mesquite flour was used for broths, breads, and stews. Another important source of food for the Hohokam was the ripe fruit of the saguaro. Because saguaros reach up to 50 feet in height, the Hohokam would use a long stick — usually a "rib" from a dead saguaro — to reach up to the top and knock the fruit down to the ground. The fruit was boiled down into syrup and cakes were made from the dried seed. The Hohokam supplemented their diet with rabbit and deer meat. Occasionally bighorn sheep, antelope, rodents, and birds were also eaten. The Hohokam used the natural objects in their surrounding environment for desert survival with respect and creativity.

Activity Preparation

Make photocopies of "Present Words From the Past" - enough for each student or pairing of students.

Objectives

Students will

- describe who the Hohokam were and where they lived.
- define key words describing Hohokam culture.
- list and describe some natural items the Hohokam used to help them survive.

Lesson Information

Materials

Story "Hohokam Summer," puzzle
"Present Words From the Past," one copy for each student, pens or pencils

Time

One class period

Subject Areas

Social Sciences, Science, Language Arts

Key Words

Hohokam, pit house, irrigation canal, metate, archaeologist, harvest, mesquite beans

Activity Procedure

1. Introduce this unit by reminding students of their upcoming trip to Sabino Canyon. Explain that during their trip, the class will be learning about some people who lived in Sabino Canyon (and Southern Arizona in general) a long time ago. Do any of the students know the name of these people who lived so long ago in this area? Introduce the students to the name Hohokam given to the Native Americans who lived in the Tucson area from about 300 to 1500 A.D..
2. Ask students to imagine what it might have been like in the Tucson area about 700 years ago — no cars, streets, no shopping malls, no schools. Yet it is estimated that there were thousands of people living in the area. How did they survive? Ask students what they think people need to survive. Explain that the basic needs for survival of humans are similar to those of all animals; we all need food, water, and shelter. Where do we get these things today? Where do students think people got what they needed to survive long ago? Conduct a discussion on how people would have relied directly on the surrounding environment for survival.
3. Remind students of the oasis-like quality of Sabino Canyon. Do students think that ancient people would have liked to live in such a place? Absolutely! Inform the students that we know for a fact that the Hohokam once lived in Sabino Canyon. How might we know that people were there over 500 years ago? What kinds of clues might exist to tell us about their culture? What would people leave behind that would last over 500 years? Explain that the people who study ancient cultures (called **archaeologists**) have found various objects left by the Hohokam in Sabino Canyon as well as throughout the Tucson area. In Sabino Canyon, pieces of pottery as well as remnants of pit houses (Hohokam shelters) have been found. Also, rows of rocks, laid to divert water to agricultural fields, exist just west of the Canyon. These and other clues tell us that there were people living in Sabino Canyon long ago — even before the discovery of America by Europeans.
4. What would life have been like way back then? While there are no written records about the Hohokam, there are clues which tell us a lot about how they lived. As well, other desert dwellers' life styles also give us ideas as to how the Hohokam probably handled various survival situations in the desert environment. Explain to the class that you are going to read a story about a day in the life of a Hohokam child. Explain that the object is for them to try as best they can to imagine what it might have been like as you read the story. Can they imagine smells, sights, feelings? Tell them that the story takes place on a summer afternoon about a thousand years ago — what might that feel like? Have the students lay their heads on their desks, close their eyes, relax, and listen.
5. Read the guided imagery story, "Hohokam Summer." After reading the story through once, ask if there were any words that they heard that were unfamiliar. List the vocabulary words on the board and ask the students if they remember how the words were used. Ask some of the following questions for discussion:
 - How is the saguaro fruit harvested?
 - How did the Hohokam get water to their crops?
 - What other foods did they eat?
6. Tell the class that you are going to read the story again, and this time, they should listen carefully for the vocabulary words. When they hear a word, they should raise their hands and think to themselves how the word was used. Read the story again pausing when you reach the highlighted vocabulary words. Conduct a discussion with the students about the meaning and use of the various vocabulary words. To reinforce some of the vocabulary words, hand out copies of the master "Present Words from the Past" and have each student or pair of students complete the puzzle.