

Artist-in-Residency
River of Time Museum
Fountain Hills, Arizona
Alan C. Pape
April, 2011

As part of my two month residency at the River of Time Museum in Fountain Hills, Arizona, I have tried to discover the “Real Arizona.” Here, in an environment that is completely different in every way from my home back east in Wisconsin, I have enjoyed experiencing the cultures, vegetation, and history of Arizona. The following story was recorded on April 4, 2011 as part of an interview with Sabina Chester, a 43 year old member of the Yavapai tribe living on the reservation lands of the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, adjacent to Fountain Hills. This is Sabina’s story:

“My River of Time Over Time”

Way back before the big Flood of 1979, the Verde River was entirely different than it is today.

When I was small my family lived in a little house about a mile west of the river. We were just north of the old Mormon Church where the big mesquite trees still grow. My parents, Oscar and Dianne Chester, and my older sister Miriam and I lived in that old place and enjoyed a rather simple life. It was a type of life full of meaning and principles which I also try to teach to my children today. As the old saying goes, “We were poor but we didn’t know it.” Looking back, there is a lot to be said about not having every new thing you can’t afford. For instance, city kids today are taken on trips to big artificial fancy water parks or they live in neighborhoods with expensive public swimming pools. However, nothing can match or be more fun, than the self-made adventures we had along the Verde River.



Back in my youth all the roads in our area were very sandy. We spent almost every day during the hot summers down at the river. I can’t remember ever wearing shoes all summer and because it was just a little bit cooler in the shade from the brush along the roads, we would always race over the hot sand to the next island of shade. After a day of swimming the older kids would stand in the shade dripping water onto the sand. I remember how good it felt to stand in the cooler, moister, foot outline of the older kids after they had left. By older, I mean eleven or twelve years old, where us younger kids were six or seven.

After the flood the river changed its course and all of our good swimming areas disappeared. Even the big Hwy. 87 bridge got swept away and we could no longer get to our school in East Mesa. That bridge-out meant a very long ride down to Tempe and back up to school. The river seemed so much clearer and cleaner before the flood. As many as five of my friends and I would sit on a large dead windfall tree along the west shore watching the fish and the ripples in the

sandy bottom. The light easily shined through that three or four feet of water. It kept us entertained for hours. We played a swimming game where someone would spot the brightest colored stone on the river bottom. Then we would all take turns jumping in and trying to retrieve it.

No one taught us to swim. In fact, except when I was real young, I can't remember ever having adults around at the river. We all watched out for each other, even when we saw an occasional snake along the path or out in the river. We would yell "Snake!" and then, the next one would see it and also yell "Snake" until it was gone. Some were Rattlers and others water snakes. No one ever got bit down at the river.



The river seemed much wider then, or was it because I was so small. The far bank seemed so far away then, all covered with thick vegetation, with its big old willow trees hanging out over the water. Before the flood, the river had a big "S" curve in it, which we used to great advantage. Instead of the straight way it now flows, it used to hit a series of rapids and made a big turn to the south in front of our beach below the tall bank. Our west bank is about 40 feet above the river and the cattle made a trail right down to the river at our old swimming area. Up at the top there is narrow road going along fenced off hay land. All the Yavapai farm land is irrigated from ditches from way up stream. The Verde is why this area of Arizona has been inhabited for nearly 10,000 years. Some of the head-waters of this river start at what is called Montezuma's Well some 100 miles from here. Many of the Original People believed that it is

from out of this large natural spring, north of the city of Fort Verde, that our first peoples came from.

On our side of the river there was always a trail. The trail conveniently connected our three main swimming areas. The gentle force of the river was our conveyer belt of fun and adventure. First came the "whirl pool", then the "rapids" and finally, the "sandy part" where the younger kids learned to swim. As you got older and braver, you would enter the river further and further up river from the quiet waters of the sandy part (a type of natural beach on the bend of the river). Our ultimate goal in life was to someday join the older kids up beyond the rapids at the giant cottonwood grove and the "whirl pool."

It was only the older kids that would climb that biggest of the huge cottonwoods that grew right out of the river bank. It must have been at least six feet in diameter and one hundred feet high. The rough and fissured bark of this enormous tree helped us to climb to the lower branches and a selection of "jumping places". They would position themselves at various branches, first at the lowest, then working their way up as they gained confidence. They could easily clear the river bank and land far out into the river hitting the deep waters of the whirl pool. They would spin around just in time to get picked up by the faster outer current which sent them off to the far-side, and under the branches of a big over-hanging willow tree. Then they zoomed out over the rapids and back to the sandy part where they would climb back out for a quick rerun. Our riverside path must have seen hundreds of thousands of wet bare feet pounding it into shape for

millennia.

It was only the older kids that dare swim under the big over-hanging willow. We would just watch in awe and trembling, slowly wading into the river below the whirl pool. We would wait for the perfect time to catch the side current taking us just over the side of the rapids and back to our beach.

Did we have swim suits you ask? Some kids did but most of the boys just took off their shirts and swam in their cut-offs. Some of the girls like me, had a full length play dress with a tank top. My Grandmother, Ethel Hayes Doka, made that dress for me in the style of the old “camp dresses”. The dress was hard to swim in at first but I got used to the extra weight of it. Probably, it made me a stronger swimmer.

Everything has changed now. No one swims in the river anymore because it flows too fast and has a bad smell to it. We fish it but never keep and eat the fish. The once sandy bottom with its bright colored river rocks is hard to see and the occasional flooding keeps the big trees from growing back.

I wish you could have seen the river as I did back so many years ago. It was the best part of growing up.

Sabina Chester was born in 1967 to Oscar and Dianne Ahawheta (sweeping water) Chester. She is $\frac{1}{4}$ Navaho and $\frac{3}{4}$ Yavapai representing three clans: The Tolkepaya, Kwovokopaya, and Wipukyipaya. She has six children and three grandchildren Nicole 23, James 19, Stardawn 16, Ricky 14, Aria 12, and Fabian 9. One of her grand daughters is named Sewa, which means “White Flower.” In the accompanying painting, Sabina and her youngest child Fabian, have posed for a recreation of those magic years she remembers on the Verde River. Fabian has found a special gift for his mother, a white feather. Could it be from below that Bald Eagle’s nest in the giant cottonwood? Interestingly, Sabina never mentions the temperature of the swift moving Verde. Even in the warmest part of summer, the locals say, it is still very cold.

