

# COTTON IN ARIZONA



Textiles (fabrics) are made from long fibers, which may be natural or man-made. Natural fibers can come from plants, animals, or even minerals.

Can you think of any types of fiber? Look at your clothing labels, if you can, and write down what materials your clothes are made of.

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Chances are good that your clothes are, at least in part, made out of cotton! Why is that? Why do you think cotton makes a good fiber for clothing, especially in the desert?

## Growing and Processing Cotton

Draw cotton at each stage and make observations in the boxes below

	➔		➔		➔	
<b>Seed</b>		<b>Flower</b>		<b>Boll</b>		<b>Fiber</b>
•		•		•		•
•		•		•		•
•		•		•		•

Besides making clothing, what else can cotton, parts of cotton, or cotton byproducts be used for? Circle the ones you think are correct!

fertilizer

Q-tips

as a snack

animal feed

book binding

money

tires

airplanes

potato chips

bandages

## What is Pima cotton?



Native American man plowing his land near Sacaton on the Gila River Indian Reservation, circa 1909–1932

You may have seen “Pima cotton” printed on the label of thick, fluffy towels or soft, high thread count sheets. The name refers to a type of extra-long staple cotton that was developed in Arizona. Extra-long staple means that the fibers are longer and therefore can be twisted more tightly and woven into a denser fabric.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was working to develop new forms of extra-long staple cotton. Extra-long staple cotton from the Sea Islands of South Carolina was interbred with Egyptian cotton at the US Field Station in Sacaton, Arizona, on the Gila River Indian Reservation.

The Akimel O’otham (or Pima, as the Spanish had called them) had been growing short staple cotton in the desert for centuries, but they were struggling to continue their farming traditions. As settlers

moved into central Arizona, they diverted water from the Gila River for their own fields, leaving little available for the O’otham.\* Now O’otham farmers cultivated these experimental crops for the USDA, and the resulting blend was named Pima cotton in their honor. The first type of Pima cotton was introduced in 1908.

During World War I (1914–1918), when it was difficult to get Egyptian cotton overseas to the US, cotton farming boomed in Arizona. Towns like Goodyear and Litchfield Park sprang up around wartime cotton production—cotton was needed to strengthen Goodyear tires—and thousands of farm workers were hired from nearby Native American communities, from the US South, and from Mexico. But when the war ended, the demand for cotton disappeared, and the cotton boom went bust.

**Arizona Cotton.**  
The cotton crop at the Sacaton experimental farm is a decided success this year, and demonstrates conclusively that Arizona can be made a great cotton growing state. Cotton raising, however, is not likely to become very popular here as long as fruits, alfalfa, and other crops now in favor with the Arizona farmer, continue to pay a large profit.

Newspaper article from the *Daily Arizona Silver Belt*, November 15, 1908, page 6

1. Underline any words that you don’t know, look them up, and define them in your own words on a separate piece of paper.
2. Arizonans can’t do everything alone! Our state is connected to other states and nations by the movement of people, goods, and ideas. Find at least two examples in the text of people, goods, or ideas that came to Arizona from somewhere else and circle them.
3. What do you think happened to cotton farmers and farm workers after the cotton industry collapsed?

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4. If you met the man in the photograph above, what is one question you would ask him?

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\*More than a century later, adequate and fair access to water is still a major issue for the Gila River Indian Community! Can you find a recent news story about indigenous people and water rights?