Under this mesquite tree Ramona Button and her father took meal breaks while raising traditional crops.

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Successful Farm Family

rowing native foods Arizona's desert

marriage of a New Englander and Pima Indian s to well-run farm that's bringing back native crops

an Looker
ess Editor

amona Button vividly remembers how she met her husband in 1972. The descendant of the hief of Arizona's Pima Indian as working as a nurse at a hospital on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. One day she was invited by a young Sioux woman to meet a man who spoke her language.

"I said, 'A Sioux speaks Pima?' She said, 'No, he's a White man,' " Ramona recalls. The young man was Terry Button, a student of anthropology and linguistics from Wesleyan University, who learned some Pima from an Indian student in his native Connecticut. Like Ramona, Terry could claim a proud heritage of his own–ancestors who arrived at Plymouth Rock on the Mayflower.

Romance leads to Arizona

Romance led to marriage that year and life on the Gila River Indian Reservation in the desert Valley of the Sun south of Phoenix. "The kids always tease us and say it's like Pocahontas and John Smith," Ramona says, referring to the chief's daughter who, legend says, saved the life of a leader in Virginia's Jamestown colony.

The Pima tribe may not have produced legends quite so dramatic, but it has left an important mark on America, including fine Pima cotton, a USDA cross of Egyptian and ancient Indian varieties. Pimas developed irrigated

Escaping the desert sun the Buttons take a rare break. The family includes (from left) Terry; Ramona; Velvet,17; Brandy, 21; and Edward, 16.

Native tepary beans (right) thrive on scant water and hoeing by Velvet and others.

ılture and fine weaving long Europeans arrived. They were skilled warriors who protected century miners and settlers from pache. A more modern Pima war- ra Hayes, was one of the U.S. es who raised the flag on Iwo n World War II.

y's life was far more peaceful. arted farming. "Ramona's dad traditional farmer. I worked with na's father," Terry says.

all start leads to success

e started with 10 acres of ground, ow we're farming 5,000," Terry roudly. Now the irrigated farm alfalfa, corn, durum wheat, bar- ilo, millet, certified cotton seed, cotton and a native crop for a al market–tepary beans.

ch of their success comes from hard work, and an early start on ıg for both Terry and Ramona.

hen I came down here, I knew o work," Terry says. At seven, Terry was helping in his father's grass seeding business, lugging heavy fire hose for hydro-seeding. His father, Edward, was staff agronomist for the Connecticut highway department and a nationally-known private turfgrass consultant. Terry spent summers picking melons and hoeing beans on uncles' farms by Salisbury, Maryland.

Ramona started even earlier, following her father, Francisco Smith, to her mother's 10-acre plot when she was four. Smith plowed with horses to plant melons, squash, gourds, tepary beans, okra, sugar cane, tomatoes and wheat. For lunch, he sometimes shot a rabbit and cooked it under a mesquite tree that stands near the field outside the town of Sacaton.

"Both of my parents were very strict and traditional," Ramona recalls.

It was on that traditional level that Terry started farming with his father-in-law. Smith was already in his 80s, but still strong. One day the two men had a wood-chopping contest. "I beat him by one fence post–and he was 84," Terry recalls.

During his first six years in Arizona, Terry also worked at a service station, studying mechanics in night school and working his way up to manager. In 1976, two years after Ramona's father died, the couple bought used tractors and began farming on a slightly bigger scale, renting Ramona's mother's land and land from her uncles. The Pima tribe owns some land in common and members also own small plots.

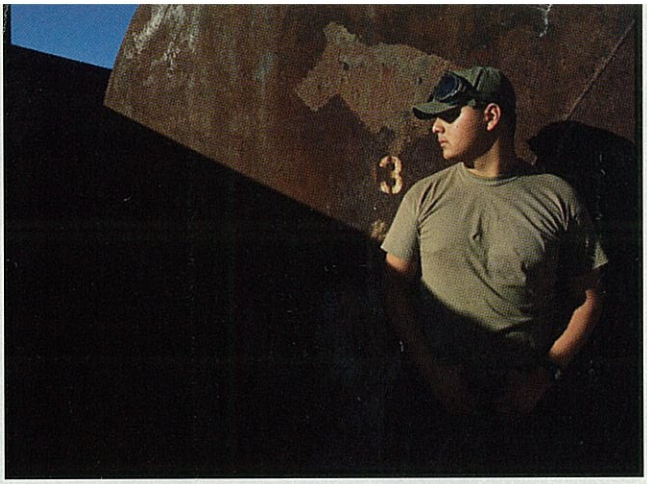
Laser-leveled and computerized

"We gradually started leasing more land and managed to get some Farmers Home Administration financing and started leveling and installing concrete-lined ditches," Terry says. Today, many fields have been leveled using laser-guided leveling equipment.

The entire family works out of the farm's trailer office, where daughter Brandy is a receptionist. Velvet works in the office and does hoeing in summer. Eddy irrigates and drives a tractor and hay baler. Ramona supervises a hoeing crew of 15 in the summer. Terry's sister Karen keeps the computerized books and two brothers, Dale and Karl, help with management.

The farm now stretches 20 miles in ☛

er and daughter ties remain strong in spite of
er work that can start at 2 a.m. on the farm. Brandy
attends Central Arizona College in Casa Grande.



Edward Button drives a tractor and helps bale hay on the farm in summer. Last fall the sophomore was a lineman for the junior varsity football team at Casa Grande High School.

Successful Farm Family

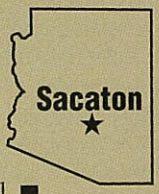
scattered across the reservation.
Buttons' cultivation of tepary
began in the early 1980s.
e older people in the community
l asking us to raise the tepary

rm at a glance

mona Farms of Sacaton,
zona, is a sole proprietorship
ned by Ramona Button. Its
00 acres include 10-acre allot-
nts leased from Ramona's rela-
s and Pima tribe members and
d managed or custom farmed.
details on tepary beans, call
farm at: 602/418-3642.

tivities

ry is board president of a local
ton gin company. Ramona is
sident of the local Johnson-
Malley program, which raises
olarships and works with par-
s to keep children in school. In
93 Brandy toured
U.S. and
rope with Up
th People.
lvet is an
glish equitation
seback rider.
dy plays football. ■



bean and some of the traditional crops," Terry says. "Since Ramona's dad passed away nobody was raising them. This particular bean is adapted to our climate. It's drought tolerant and resistant to some viruses, and it's extremely high in protein."

Terry learned cultural practices of raising the beans from Dave Hood, a Coolidge, Arizona, farmer who brought them back from obscurity. When Hood retired, Terry bought seed-cleaning equipment he adapted for the small beans, which come in tan and white varieties. The yield is half of pinto beans, about 700 to 1,000 pounds per acre. But teparies grow on 1½ acre-feet of irrigation water, making them the farm's most drought-tolerant crop.

Eating native is trendy

The beans, which have a slightly nutty flavor, are not only popular with native peoples of the Southwest. The Buttons have been able to sell them to the general public through food brokers in San Francisco and Minneapolis. Tepary beans are served in gourmet restaurants, he says. "There seems to be quite a bit of interest in native and traditional crops."

They grow only about 50 acres, not wanting to flood the new market yet. They've gotten up to $1 a pound for the beans, cleaned and bagged.

The Buttons are considering raising other native crops–mesquite bean flour, blue corn, and white corn coarsely ground and roasted for a native porridge. Terry thinks his old mentor, Francisco Smith, would be proud. "I think he would have really enjoyed what we're doing now." SF

Saving native seed

From their offices at a sunny corner of the Tucson Botanical Gardens, the staff of Native Seeds/SEARCH scours the countryside from Durango, Mexico, to Durango, Colorado, for plants grown by native peoples.

The colorful collection of 1,200 varieties of corn, beans and other seeds has value for farmers.

"Two years ago we learned that a sunflower we collected in the bottom of the Grand Canyon from the Havasupai people is the only one known to have 100% resistance to a new rust," says Angelo Joaquin, Jr., director of the nonprofit organization. "What we do here has significance to sunflower growers in North Dakota."

The Southwest's cultural richness makes good seed hunting. "The Spanish brought peaches 500 years ago that the Hopi and Navajo are still growing," says Joaquin, a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, a group related to Ramona Button's Pima tribe.

Production has fallen among native people recently, so Native Seeds/SEARCH has helped organize the Traditional Native American Farmers Association. It also sells more than 200 seeds. For a catalog, send $1 to:

Native Seeds/SEARCH
2509 N. Campbell Ave., #325
Tucson, AZ 85719 ■