

HARVEST-TIME IN THE SAGUARO FOREST

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Photographs by the author

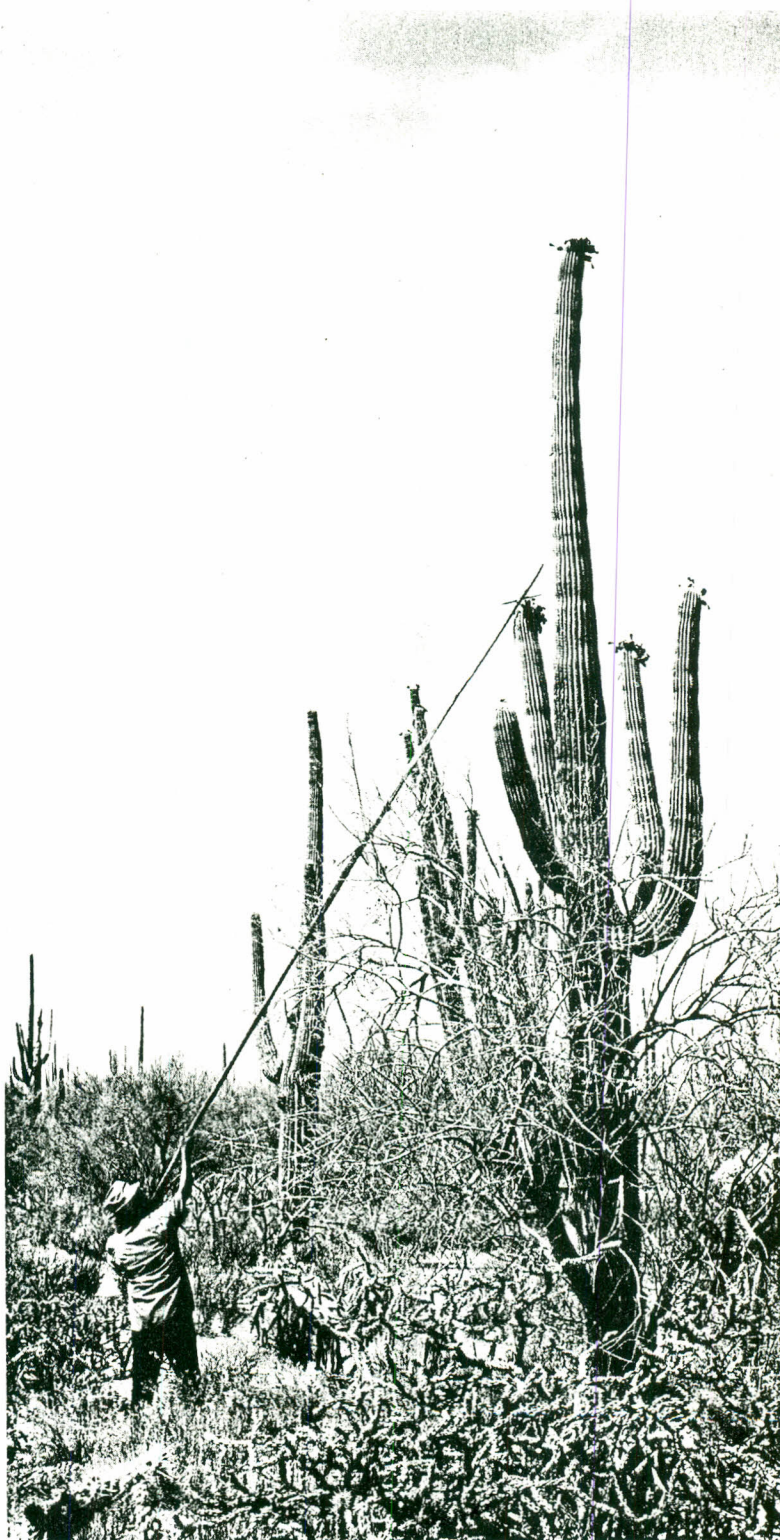
MID-JUNE is often the hottest and driest time of the year in the saguaro cactus forests of southern Arizona. Day after day the desert sun beats relentlessly down from a cloudless sky, drawing what little moisture is left from the already parched and browning vegetation. Plants which can shed their leaves during times of drought—such as the ocotillo and the limberbush—have long since done so, for this land has not felt a drop of rain since late February.

The stately saguaros show little effect from this situation, however. They have stored up enough moisture in their thick stems to last them until the coming summer rainfall, and the only sign of the drought upon their massive structures has been the gradual reduction of space between their accordion-like pleats as this water supply has been slowly depleted. In early May they had begun to produce clusters of waxy, white blossoms encircling the crown of each trunk and arm, and now—a month later—large, green fruit pods swell beneath the dark and withered shape of each spent flower.

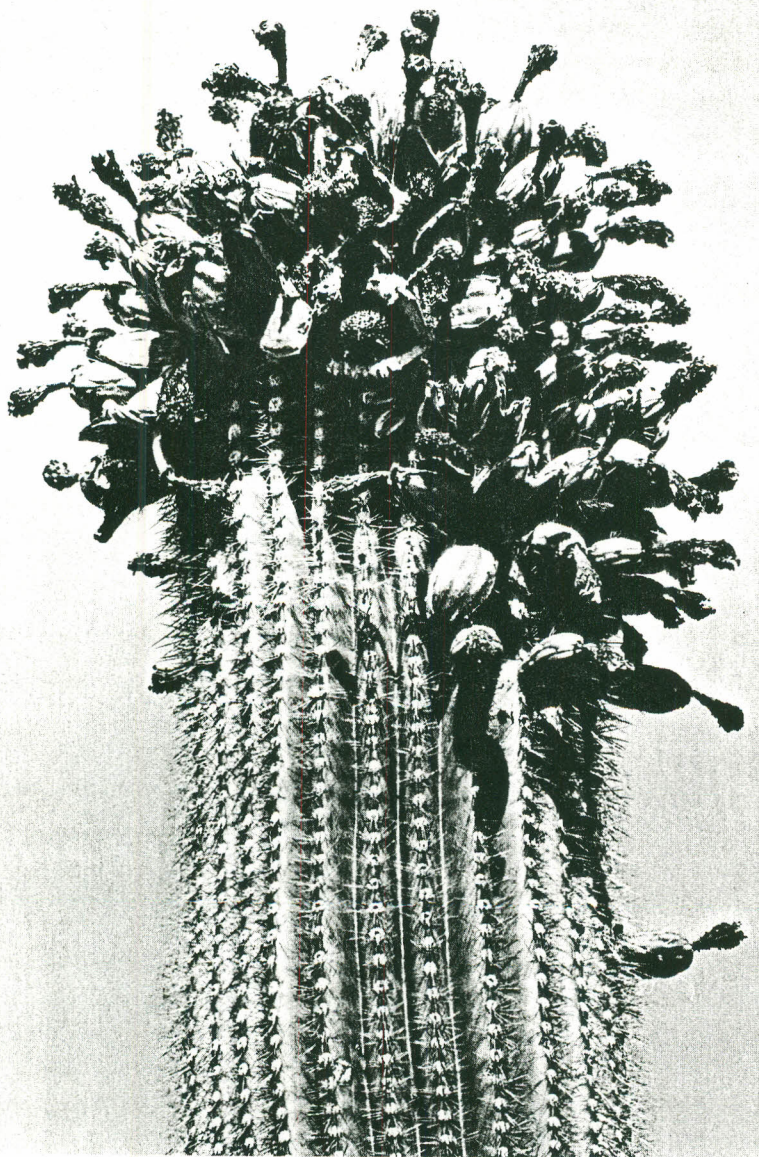
Under the heat of the summer sun the fruit ripens quickly, and here and there among the towering saguaro tops, bright tints of scarlet begin to show as the pods split open, revealing their juicy interiors. Woodpeckers, thrashers, orioles, and many other birds flock to this newly-found source of food and moisture, while ground squirrels and other small rodents rapidly clean up any fruit which has fallen to the ground.

But the birds and the squirrels are not the only ones keeping an eye upon the ripening fruit. By the time the first pod has split open, camps have been set up among the vast stands of giant cacti. As they have been doing for centuries, the Papago Indians prepare for their annual fruit harvest.

In many ways the Papago saguaro camps are little changed from the way they were before white people first came to this strangely beautiful desert land. Galvanized tubs and enameled pans replace the earthen ollas, water is stored in steel drums or aluminum kegs, and screen wire has taken the place of woven basket strainers—but the age-old feeling of the camp remains. Many of the methods and



Picking ripe saguaro fruit with the help of a saguaro-rib pole.



Above, ripening saguaro fruit bursts open, revealing the deep red, seedy interior. Right, the saguaro-harvest camp.

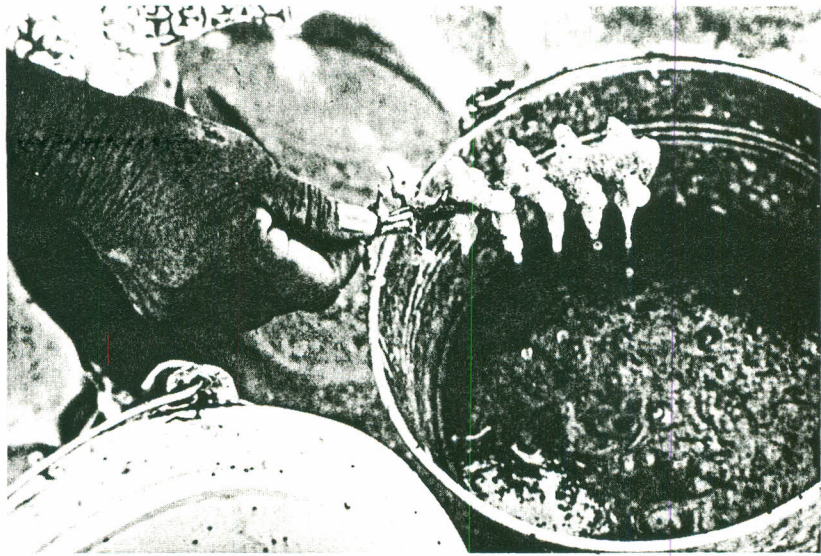
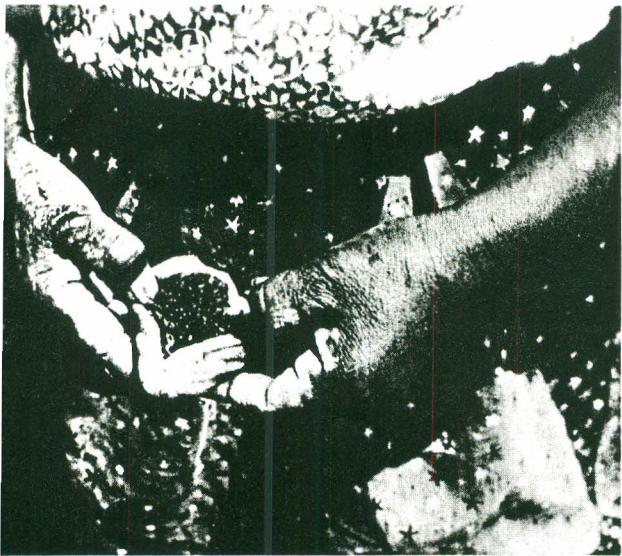
implements used to harvest and prepare the fruit are still the same. The shade ramadas are constructed of palo verde poles with a roof made of ocotillo branches, saguaro ribs, palm fronds, and tar paper. Saguaro ribs are used for stirring sticks, the framework for strainers, and, most notably, in the construction of the "kuibit," or gathering pole.

Often thirty feet or more in length, these poles consist of two or three strong ribs carefully selected from the skeletal remains of a dead saguaro. Tied or wired together, they are then equipped with two small, wooden cross-pieces, each approximately ten inches in length and fastened at a forty-five degree angle—one near the top and the other a third of the way down the kuibit. These "mat-suguen," as they are called, are the prongs which are used to push or pull the ripened fruit from the tops of the tall cacti, which can reach well over thirty feet in height.

In order to become better acquainted with the entire fruit harvest process, I paid several visits to the saguaro camp of a Papago woman of past acquaintance—Juanita Ahill. Her camp is located in the exact same spot each summer, just outside the Tucson Mountain section of the Saguaro National Monument, approximately twenty miles west of Tucson, Arizona. Although the park officials do not allow the Indians to camp in the Monument, they do allow them to pick the ripening fruit.

My first visit found Juanita and her son, Warren, busily tidying up the campsite. These two friendly Papagos are quite used to such visits—





annually being questioned and photographed by newspapermen, freelance writers, ethnology students, and an occasional tourist. They are also visited weekly by grade-school classes from the special summer program of the nearby Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. Completely ignoring any camera pointing their way, Juanita and Warren are perfect subjects for the photographer, quietly going about their business and stopping only to answer a question directed their way.

How many years she has been coming back to this same location, not even Juanita knows, for time means little in the saguaro camp, and each year's routine is much like the last. Her only recollection of her first trip to the camp with her mother was that she was a very young girl then—and that she and the now ten-foot-high saguaro standing next to the camp's shade ramada were about the same height.

Work in the saguaro camp begins each morning at the rising of the sun, for the Indians must hurry out into the desert to get to the freshly-ripened fruit before the birds and the squirrels have had much time to do likewise. But this is a friendly competition, for the fruit is plentiful and all get their share.

The saguaro fruit is knocked from the cactus with the long pole, the outer hull is discarded, and the bright red pulp—full of tiny jet-black seeds—goes into the pail. Juanita walks out far from camp and then begins to fill her pails, working her way back home. In this manner, the heavier the load becomes the less distance she has to carry it. Often filling two large pails in the early morning hours, she may then go out again in the afternoon for more.

Upon return to camp the fruit is dumped into a tub of water and is soaked for two or three hours.



Top left, opening a nearly ripened fruit,
Top, separating pulp and seeds with a thorny ocotillo stick.
Above, cooking down the saguaro syrup to make jam.



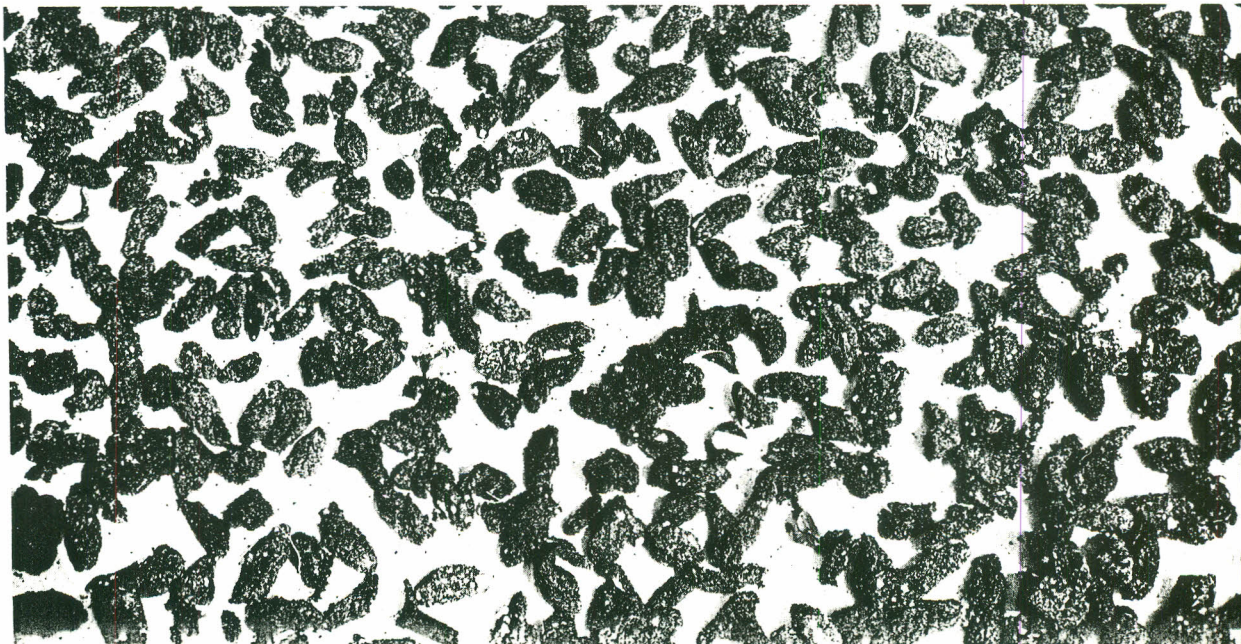
Juanita then mixes the pulp and liquid thoroughly, kneading it between her gnarled, work-worn fingers. If company is present, she pulls the floating pulp to the side of the tub with one hand, and with the other dips out a cup of the dark red juice. Motioning toward an empty five-gallon oil can, she offers the visitor a seat in the shade and a drink of the natural beverage. It is thick and sweet and warm, and is somewhat strange-tasting to the unaccustomed palate. Although not unpleasant, it is a drink of which one would not want too much.

Toward the end of the picking season some of the saguaro juice is stored in jars and allowed to ferment, creating the intoxicating beverage known as "tis-win," which is used in the rain-making ceremonies. This is not done until after the picking is over, however, for the Indians do not want the rain to fall before that time. Heavy storms knock down the ripening fruit prematurely, and the saguaro camps are not constructed to provide much shelter from bad weather.

Once the tub of fruit is thoroughly soaked and mixed, the contents are poured into a black, enameled cooking vessel. Using a few dry pieces of bur-sage as kindling, Juanita then starts a fire of mesquite wood, which has been hauled into camp in the back of Warren's dilapidated old Chevrolet. After boiling over the open fire for about half an hour, the mixture is strained through a fine wire mesh to remove most of the pulp and seeds. It is boiled again for a short time and then strained through a fine cloth sack, leaving nothing but the pure, red juice. This is put back on the fire to continue cooking. Although some of it is used as a syrup, most of it will be further processed into jam.



Top, straining the cooked pulp through a screen wire attached to two saguaro ribs. Above, straining the saguaro juice through a cloth sack. Right, the dried saguaro seeds.



The pulp and seeds which have been removed in the straining process are spread out in the sun on a layer of burlap or cardboard. Once the mixture has thoroughly dried, many of the seeds are removed by rolling the pulp back and forth between the hands. These seeds are used for several purposes. Some will be ground into a powder which, when mixed with water, makes a gravy for use on tortillas or bread. Some will be mixed with sugar, forming a candy treat for the children. The excess will be fed to the chickens.

The dried pulp—still containing numerous seeds—is packed into small containers. As needed, it is removed, dropped into a small bucket of water, and allowed to soak for a few minutes. A unique seed-removal process then begins. First the seeds which have floated to the top are skimmed off with a bent wire mesh skimmer. Then a short ocotillo branch is dipped in and out of the bucket, the pulp sticking to the long spines, but many of the seeds remaining behind. The material clinging to the branch is knocked off into another bucket of water. Again and again this is repeated until all the pulp has been transferred to the second bucket. The first bucket is emptied of its seeds and is refilled with fresh water, and the process is then repeated back into this bucket.

When enough of the pulp has been processed it is dumped into the pot of cooking juice and the contents boiled down to a thick consistency. This jam is truly a natural food, for no sugar or preservatives are added to its pure fruit contents. After cooling, it is poured off into glass jars which have been gathered from many sources. Many of these are brought to the camp by visitors who know of

Juanita's need for them. Some of the thick, rich jam is sold to these same visitors, but much of it is taken home.

Occasionally during the saguaro harvest Juanita takes time to gather other materials. Early in the season the green buds of the cholla cactus are pickled and canned. Strips of yucca are gathered for use in the baskets which she often works upon while waiting for the saguaro juice to cook. For the black designs on the baskets she strips off pieces of the large, curling seed pod known as "the devil's claw."

When the last saguaro fruit has ripened and been gathered—usually within four to six weeks—Juanita begins to pack up her few belongings. The last thing she does is to securely fasten her gathering pole straight up within the branches of a large ironwood tree. There it will be safe until the following year. Now she may go home to work on her baskets—but not for long, for the mesquite beans are ripening in another part of the desert, and she will soon be setting up another camp for this harvest.

The saguaro season is over, and during the rest of the year the giant cacti will stand with naked head and arms. But next spring flower buds will burst forth, crowning them again with brilliant whiteness. Then the bees and wasps and bats and birds will crowd around, carrying out the act of pollination as they gather nectar and pollen from the waxy, white flowers. The green fruit pods will ripen and swell in the summer's heat, and at the first tint of red upon a desert monarch's brow the activity in Juanita's saguaro camp will signal that it is harvest-time once more.

Saguaro seeds, used in making gravy and candy, and as chicken feed.

