

61. Fragments of the History of a Lost Tribe¹

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During an interview had about three years ago with one of the few representatives of the Indians who formerly inhabited the region round about Santa Barbara, California, the following notes were made from statements of Justo, a Santa Barbara Indian, in answer to questions in relation to their habits and customs, which, in view of the fact that the aborigines of the region referred to are almost, if not entirely, extinct and the opportunities for learning anything in relation to them have passed away never to be again offered, may be considered worthy of record.

Through the kindness of a friend, who at a cost of some considerable trouble and outlay of money had brought together some of the oldest and most intelligent of the few living representatives of tribes which formerly occupied the islands and mainland of Santa Barbara county and adjacent country, an excellent opportunity was offered to learn something of the habits and customs of an almost extinct people.

The following notes were jotted down from the answers to questions which were slowly and carefully asked of Justo and which he answered after consulting with his Indian friends who were present (representatives of different tribes):

He stated that at the age of about ten years he accompanied the expedition which brought the remnants of the Indian tribes from the islands off the coast of California and distributed them at the missions of Ventura, La Purissima, Santa Barbara, and other localities on the mainland.

He had been told by his uncle that when the Indians of Dos Pueblos (Santa Barbara county) first saw a Spaniard on horseback, the Indians, who had been assembled in the "sweat-house" (Te-mas-carte, or Te-mas-cal), rushed out to witness the (to them) wonderful sight. The Spaniard in alarm threw his lance among them and fatally wounded one of their number. In revenge for this the Indians killed him with their arrows.

When Justo was a small boy he had witnessed some fighting at the Estero, about one mile from the city of Santa Barbara, between the Indians of El Rincon (a point about 15 miles distant) and those who lived where Santa Barbara is located.

Their method was to open a battle by tossing up a lot of feathers. One Indian would leave his companions, advance toward his enemies, and shoot a number of arrows, which were generally dodged by the opposing forces. When the Indian got tired he retreated or fell back, and another would advance.

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The fighting did not result in much loss to the participants. In the instance referred to, the Santa Barbara Indians lost one of their number; the Rincon party, two.

He stated that the arrows were sometimes poisoned.

When a declaration of war was made a messenger was dispatched by the aggrieved party, who repaired to the tribe with whom they desired to open war, with a polite invitation to meet at a certain place and on a stated day.

On the day agreed upon the opposing parties, painted and equipped for the fight, repaired to the proposed battle-ground and opened fire by throwing handfuls of fine feathers into the air, accompanying the action by certain peculiar sounds and a repetition of ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, increasing the rapidity of enunciation until it culminated in the exclamation Wau-Kap-pée!!!

In these battles very few were killed; but the fighting was continued for some time after the loss of a man by either party.

When either side was satisfied they built a fire, which signified that their opponents were valiant warriors, and that they were satisfied and wished to bury the hatchet for the present.

Dwellings.—Their houses were made by placing sticks of sycamore wood so as to form a conical building, which was covered with tules, leaving an opening at the apex for the escape of smoke. The fire was placed in the center.

The ground in the interior was smoothed off, and dirt thrown up around the base at the outside to keep the water from running under.

On the islands, bones of whales were used instead of sticks, at least in some instances, the writer having been present at the exploration of their sites.

Sleeping.—They drove forked sticks in the ground, across which other sticks were placed, and on these mats of woven tule were spread, upon which the inmates slept.

For covering, the Indians on the islands used blankets made of skins of birds and sea otters, and also rabbit skins; the last named he estimated to be worth about \$2.50 each.

Eating.—On short days they had two meals a day.

Squirrels were usually cooked. Birds were killed by small-pointed arrows. Grasshoppers were not used as food here, but the Indians farther down the coast made pinoles of them, which they ate.

Chilla (a gelatinous seed) was also used as food, from which a great loaf was made and cut into slices.

They knew nothing of the use of salt.

Acorns were largely used, which were harvested and stored up. A kind of filter shaped like a basket, and called chaleel, was used to get the bitter out of them, which required three washings to be palatable.

The wild cherry (islaya) was boiled, and bruised in a mortar; the seeds or pits were taken out. Both pulp and seed were used as food.

Their meat consisted of squirrels, birds, sea otter, seals, and whales, which last was called páhát. When they found a whale they had a big feast. If there was enough to go round, it was all right; if not, they had a general fight over it.

Fish were generally roasted or baked in holes in the ground, but they were considered best when boiled.

Bait.—Black mussels were largely used as bait, the fish-hooks being made of bone and shell. Justo recognized figures shown him in Wheeler's Report.

Hunting Ducks.—They built an enclosure of tules, leaving an opening through which the ducks were driven. The hunters followed them into the enclosure and captured the game.

For catching rabbits they used a kind of "figure 4" trap, with a stone suspended so as to fall upon the game.

Dress.—The men wore a kind of jacket made from the breasts of water fowl. The women wore two buckskins tied around the waist, falling to the knees, and a kind of petticoat made of tule.

Beard.—Some of the Indians had beards, which they plucked by the aid of pieces of shell.

The medicine men were called Ach-ie and were celibate.

The men had one wife each. There was no marriage ceremony and no provision for divorce. No price was set or offered for a wife, but a suitor insinuated himself into the good will of the family of his intended by showing his skill in hunting and collecting seeds.

Burials.—Various methods of burial were practiced, of which much has already been written. Among other things buried with the dead, quartz crystals were mentioned as being admired for their beauty.

It is much to be regretted that so little has been learned in relation to the habits and customs of tribes which formerly occupied the islands off the coast of California, and who were in many respects much more advanced in aboriginal art than the tribes who occupied the mainland, aside from those branches of the same tribes who inhabited the coast region of Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

When Mr. H. W. Henshaw visited the region, several years ago, only one Indian remained of the Santa Rosa Island branch, and two more dialects were spoken by two or three individuals only, and it is more than probable that some of those branches have since become entirely extinct.