

# The Early Years Of Seabrook

By Debbie Pomeroy

Long before Ritson Morris brought his family to the western shore of Galveston Bay in 1830 or Seabrook Sydner set up the Seabrook Townlot and Improvement Company in 1896, the Attakapas, Karankawas and the Cohuilecan Indian tribes wandered throughout our area. Excavations by state, local and national archeologists have shown that the entire Clear Lake area was occupied for at least 7,000 years before any white man set foot in Texas and that, in fact, the entire perimeter of Clear Lake is one huge Indian site. The Spanish ruled Texas as a colony, dealing with "savages" for 300 years, and the French had been trading with the Indians for 200 years before Ritson Morris got his land grant from the Mexican government on November 14, 1832.

According to archeologists, man first came to Texas over 40,000 years ago, crossing the Bering Land Bridge from Asia into Alaska during the last of the Great Ice Ages and wandering south in subsequent centuries. They searched for food and hunted the now-extinct Columbian elephant, mammoth, mastodon and ancient bison. These Paleo-Americans left little to mark their passage but a few spear points and the great stone heads along the Trinity River.

Then, about 8,000 years ago, the Amerinds (American Indians) discovered the earlier Paleo trail and spread across the land. Of Mongoloid or Asian stock, the "Real Humans", as they called themselves, eventually migrated into Central America to form the agrarian civilizations there.

The coastal region west of Galveston Bay became the habitat of the imposing Karankawa tribes. Standing over six-feet tall, with fine physiques, they pierced their nipples and upper lip with pieces of cane and smeared their bodies with alligator fat. Carrying six-foot long bows and large arrows, they most certainly presented a frightening picture to the early settlers. Their practice of cannibalism, now thought by most to have been strictly for ceremonial purposes, only served to enhance their fierce reputation. Although the Karankawa tribes, along with the Attakapas and Cohuilecans, roamed the coastal region from Galveston Bay to Corpus Christi Bay,

their total population was probably less than a few thousand.

Nomads, always in constant search of food, these tribes did not have permanent shelter or camp sites. They skillfully traveled the rivers and bays in dugout canoes but did not venture far out into the rougher waters of the Gulf. During the winter months they lived on the coast and the islands where the climate was milder and a good food supply, fish, oysters, crabs, and the roots of sea grass, was widely available.

During the summer months they moved inland to hunt the plentiful deer, antelope and buffalo. Numerous large camping sites have been discovered surrounding the Clear Lake area with significant finds containing bodies, artifacts and shells. Short-term camp sites have been identified at Armand Bayou and arrowheads are often turned up during development of the area.

The first reported contact between Texas Indians and Europeans came on November 6, 1528, when Cabeza de Vaca washed up on Galveston Island and was "rescued" by a band of Karankawas. He was their captive for the next eight years. But de Vaca wasn't the last white man to arrive and, in later years, notorious pirate Jean Lafitte would mount an all-out campaign to eradicate the fierce warriors from Galveston. By 1850, Stephen F. Austin's settlers would finally succeed in driving the last remaining tribes of Karankawas to Corpus Christi Bay where they vanished forever, victims of wars with the settlers and European diseases such as smallpox

and chicken pox. By 1908, only nine Attakapans were alive and all the other tribes were considered extinct.

But Virginia Morris, daughter of Ritson and Minerva Morris, remembered vividly her close brush with a large group of warriors, most likely Attakapans. She was only five years old when 20 canoes were spotted coming up the bay from the direction of Clear Creek. Her mother, fearing that the Indians were hostile, sent for help and hid Virginia and all the slave children under the beds. Mr. Morris and several slaves arrived quickly only to discover, to their relief, the the Indians were a peaceful hunting party heading up the Trinity River after game. They asked for water and food, which the Morris family provided, and were gone quickly.

Today there are, of course, no fierce warriors to give little children nightmares. And all that is left of their nomadic way of life lies in the shell middens and burial grounds that surround Seabrook. The next time you kick a shell at the bay or dig up an odd-shaped rock in your garden, look closely. You could be getting a glimpse into our past.

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## Flash Back



Small feed and hardware stores were some of the few places boasting a telephone during the early 1900s.