

## Karankawa Indians and Cabeza de Vaca

The area extending along the Texas coastline from Galveston Bay to the Nueces River was occupied by various bands of natives known collectively as the Karankawa. The five groups, including the Cujane, Coapite, Capoques, Copan and Carancahuas, were independent and autonomous of one another, although they were related by similarities in culture and language. The Karankawa were a nomadic tribe of hunters and foragers who inhabited the area from as early as 700 AD.

The group known as the Capoques roamed the territory from Galveston Bay southward to the Brazos River. Rarely remaining at a campsite more than two to three weeks at a time, they roamed about as seasons and food sources dictated, often exhausting all resources before moving onward. The winter months were most likely spent inland, where the climate would have been somewhat warmer and wild game, such as deer and waterfowl, more accessible. During the long, hot, summer months, camps were built on shell islands in the bay. These "middens," large mounds composed of discarded clamshells and refuse, were the result of centuries of reliance on the rangia clam for sustenance. These clams would have been abundant in the shallow waters of Galveston Bay. [Examples of these middens, and evidence of Karankawa camps, may be seen at the present-day Pine Gully Park located on the bay, off of Todville Road.] Large, dugout canoes were crafted from hollowed tree trunks and used as a primary source of transportation between various locations along the bay shore and the island.

Very little is known of the natives prior to their initial encounter with European explorers from the Narváez expedition. In November 1528, Spaniard Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca and three companions were shipwrecked on a long narrow island on the Texas coast which was inhabited only by natives. Cabeza de Vaca called the island *Malhado*, or misfortune, as testament to the ill-fated circumstances which brought them to Galveston Island. As the hapless Spaniards lay naked and cold on the island shores dying of exposure, they were discovered and rescued by a band of natives, probably the Karankawa. The explorers were carried inland, stopping intermittently to be warmed by the fires laid en route to the campsite where they were eventually nursed back to health.

Cabeza de Vaca kept a detailed journal of his expedition where he recorded the following description of the Karankawa and their lifestyle:

The people we found there are large and well formed; they have no other arms than bows and arrows, in the use of which they are very dexterous. The men have one of their nipples bored from side to side, and some have both, wearing a cane in each, the length of two palms and a half, and the thickness of two fingers. They have the under lip also bored, and wear in it a piece of cane the breadth of half a finger.

The stay they made on [Galveston] island is from October to the end of February. Their subsistence then is the root...got from under the water in November and December. They have weirs [nets] of cane and take fish only in this season...the Indians who kept me, left the island, and passed over in canoes to the main, into some bays where are many oysters. For three months in the year they eat nothing besides these, and drink very bad water. There is great want of wood: mosquitoes are in great plenty. The houses are of mats, set up on masses of oyster shells, which they sleep upon....In this way we lived until April [1529], when we went to the seashore, where we ate blackberries all the month...

Under threat of starvation by the natives, Cabeza de Vaca and his men were forced to care for the sick. The Spaniards' reputation as great physicians became widely known and they traveled among the various tribes performing their healing rituals for eight years. In 1532, Cabeza de Vaca left for Mexico City, where he remained until the spring of 1537, when he eventually returned to his native Spain.