Winter 2013

THOSE HERE FIRST

Ed Neely

Wandering through Doheny State Beach, thoughts drift to what this beautiful area was like before the explosive growth of south Orange County, before the freeway or PCH. Perhaps back to the days Richard Henry Dana anchored off the coast to retrieve hides from Mission San Juan Capistrano. But what about before then, when the first humans entered the Capistrano Valley? Who were the first people to live here and around what we call Doheny? How did they live? What was it like? The following article is drawn from Acjachemen and Juaneño documents and Internet sites, The Handbook of North American Indians (Vol. 8), American Indians (Vol.2) and the writings of local Dana Point and San Juan Capistrano historians Doris Walker (Dana Point: Home Port for Romance) and Pamela Hallan-Gibson (Two Hundred Years in San Juan Capistrano).

An estimated 20,000 years ago during the last ice age, it is theorized that the earliest human immigrants came to the Americas from Asia. They crossed the Bering Straits land bridge between what is now Siberia and Alaska, a 1,000-mile north to south wide neck of land that remained a free flowing human and animal passageway for 10,000 years. It then disappeared under the sea as the ice age ended, the earth warmed and melted glacial waters raised the sea level. From this entry point and over those thousands of years, these first Americans spread throughout the continents and islands of the Western Hemisphere. Carbon dating procedures have identified a woman's skull found in Laguna Beach as approximately 17,000 years old, while pieces of pottery that are the oldest discovered in the western hemisphere were found around Newport Bay. Details of those early South Orange County residents are, however, sketchy at best.

Some 10,000 years ago, evidence indicates the first major population explosion moved into the Capistrano Valley and surrounding areas including the lands that would one day make up Doheny State Beach. It was brought about by climate change to what had been dry south coastal lands. The wetter environment fed lush, year-round native grasses and woodlands, much of the vegetation edible. Inland lakes and streams flourished. These basic subsistence inhabitants known as the "Oak People" lived along the coast, probably in semi-subterranean cliff and canyon caves. As "gatherers," they ate seeds and leaves, rodents and reptiles; clams, muscles and other shellfish trapped within the tide pools. They appeared to be unaware of the bounty of food in the ocean as there is no evidence they had hooks, lines or fishing nets. Further, they did not hunt the massive mammoths, sloths and saber-tooth cats that lived in the area as there is no evidence of bows, arrows, spears or traps, nor bones of these animals in their middens (trash heaps). Only the crudest chipped stone tools have been found.

After a few thousand years, climate change again affected the area and a much dryer environment returned; an environment to which these natives could not adapt. The Oak People disappeared and the land became barren and probably uninhabited for the next few thousand years.

In about 2,000 BC, another rainy period began. A new migration of humans from the drought-stricken inland deserts moved into the Capistrano Valley's lush land; people attracted to the moderate climate, flowing streams, rich vegetation and an array of food sources. These were the ancestors of the Juaneño Mission Indians of the Acjachemen [ah/**ha**/she/ mahn] Nation (named "*Juaneño*" by the Spanish because of their location near Mission San Juan Capistrano). They are believed to be of Shoshone ancestry because of cultural similarities. They were joined later by a migration of Gabrielino Indians from the north, also of Shoshone stock (just like in the 1950's through 1970's; those LA folks moving down into Orange County). They lived in sedentary, self sufficient, autonomous villages in the Capistrano Valley and beyond.

These were adaptable people with many skills. Although the sea was not their primary food source, they developed and used spears, hooks made of shells and bones, and lines and nets of plant fibers to take advantage of the fish in the estuaries, creeks, lakes and ocean. They built boats for use on the creeks and lakes by tying bundles of reeds together to create a raft. With these, they would fish or paddle between villages. They hollowed out logs or cut them into planks for boats on which they could paddle into local ocean waters. Their diets included various freshwater and saltwater fish, abalone, clams, sea urchins, limpets and other shellfish, lobsters and crabs. They used bows, arrows, throwing sticks and spears to hunt the larger slow moving land animals whose flesh they ate and hides they wore when the weather cooled, having scraped and softened the skin with sharp stones.

Their dietary mainstay centered on seeds and the acorns from the oak trees that grew in abundance in the valleys, canyons, and meadows along the riparian streams. Using beautifully decorated baskets, they carried acorns and water with them as they moved about their tribal lands. The early Juaneños developed a nine-step process to remove the toxins and tannic acid from the acorns by grinding them, then leaching the meal with water. The final product called "wi-wish" became their staple food source. Wi-wish could be eaten plain or mixed with native plants such as clover, poppies, or sage; and livened up with taste delights such as meat scraps, insects, grubs and grasshoppers. Their beverages of choice were a tea made of herbs and another drink made from berries. They would smoke the wild tobacco; a potentially lethal pleasure if done incorrectly, that still grows on the cliffs of Dana Cove. Although not farmers, they had observed that the most fruitful years for gathering edible vegetation came after a fire. They set low impact fires in meadows to provide rich minerals for plants to grow more abundantly in the following seasons. Fire was also used to create rabbit and smaller mammal drives for hunting.

A special gift from the sea would arrive when the body of a dead whale washed up on shore, an event much more prevalent then with the larger populations of seasonal whales off the California coast. Meat from one leviathan could feed several villages. Word was spread and many Indians from the coast and valley settlements appeared with sharp stone knives to butcher the flesh and roast it on beach fires, pushing oily black plumes of smoke into the sky. Whalebones were divided, as they too had great value when shaped into scraping tools, awls, spears, knives, tools for prying abalone and limpets from the rocks and for body ornamentation. Whale ribs, some as high as 10 feet, would be used as bracing for thatched shelters.

Section of a painting at San Juan Capistrano Mission, Acjacheman Exhibit Room

The family shelter, known as a "kiicha," was a single room, dome structure with a central fire pit, built with willow limbs, cattail and tule reeds, and mud. There was a smoke hole in the ceiling that could be covered with hides when it rained. The doorway faced east towards the morning sun and could be covered with hides for privacy. When these huts became dirty or infested with fleas, flies or other vermin, the natives would simply build a new hut and burn the

old one. Within a village, special structures would be built using cobblestones from the shoreline or hauled from inland. One such building, a "puberty hut," was found near the area where Dana Hills High School is today (how appropriate!).

Around 500 BC, the climate became dryer, but the Juaneño adapted themselves to their changing environment. They hunted the new and faster game that migrated into the area: deer, antelope, elk and mountain lions. They continued to live off the vegetation of the land and the fruits of the sea, never learning to farm. Juaneño land, especially in the Capistrano Valley, became the most densely populated, Indian-inhabited area in all of what would make up the United States.

Trade occurred among local villages as well as across great distances. The Channel Island Indians, especially those from Catalina, would cross the channel in their strong wood planked boats to trade with the coastal people of the Capistrano Valley. They were often attracted to the mainland by the dark smoke plumes caused by roasting whale flesh. Knowing that a great number of coastal Indians would be present at these fires, they hoped to trade for dried meat (as their diets were primarily fish) and stone tools. The islanders brought seal and otter skins, and their most valued commodity, carved soapstone. This steatite stone was found only on Catalina. It was easily carved yet resistant to water and fire, thus giving it great value. Another commodity for both the island and coastal Indians were shells, especially those of abalone. These colorful shells were practically used as bowls and fashionably as jewelry. They have been found as far north as Alaska and as far inland as New Mexico.

Much like today, the bounty of Capistrano Bay and Valley attracted "summer tourists". Indians from the Riverside and Elsinore areas came to the coast through mountain canyons to camp on the beaches and bluffs; to catch, feast on and dry fish, and to collect the useful shells of abalone and other creatures to take back to their home settlements. Some of these "tourists" stayed, and camps grew into villages creating a loosely shifting society along the shoreline. One of the largest such villages, Toovanja, housed several hundred Indians. It was build along the bluffs near the mouth of the San Juan Creek overlooking Capistrano Bay and the estuary that is now Doheny State Beach. The remains of the village were discovered during freeway construction in the late 1950's. Local historian Doris Walker wrote, "Its treasures and trash were reburied as fill for the massive San Diego Freeway ramps that bisect the current Capistrano Valley … stone tool to cement wall … mortar to mortar."

In 1769, a 62-man expedition of Spanish soldiers and Catholic missionaries lead by the Governor of Baja California, Gaspar de Portola, moved north on the land from San Diego to Monterey Bay. It is in their journals that the first written accounts of the Juaneño Indians are found. By this time, the Acjachemen tribal lands occupied the territory from Las Pulgas Creek near Oceanside, northeast to the hilltops above Elsinore, northwest to Saddleback Mountain, and west along Aliso Creek to the Pacific Ocean. The bulk of the population occupied the Capistrano Valley outlet of San Juan Creek (and its major tributary, Trabuco Creek), and San Mateo Creek (combined with Arroyo San Onofre) south of San Clemente. The highest concentration of villages was along the lower San Juan Creek / Capistrano Valley area where Mission San Juan Capistrano would be built.

Father Juan Crespi, a member of the expedition, described the Capistrano Valley in a journal entry from July 1769. "A little before eleven we came to a very pleasant green valley, full of willows, alders and live oaks and other trees not known to us. It has a large arroyo, which at the point where we crossed it, carried a good stream of fresh and good water, which, after running a little way, formed into a pool in some large patches of tules." He writes that the valley was dotted with Indian settlements. Of his first encounter with the Juaneños, "… we found a village of heathens who, as soon as they saw us, began to shout and they came out as if to meet us at the watering place where we went to stop." He goes on to describe them as friendly and excited, staring openly at the marchers. In his diary, he noted that all the men went about naked, while the women wore woven aprons in front and deerskin behind, their breasts covered with rabbit skin.

The Acjachemen resided in permanent, well-defined villages and seasonal camps. Father Geronimo Boscana, one of the early Franciscans assigned to the San Juan Mission, divided the Acjachemen into two classes: the "Playanos" (who lived along the coast) and the "Serranos" (who inhabited the mountains, some three to four leagues from the Mission [a league equaling about 3 miles]). Village populations ranged from between 35 to 300 inhabitants, consisting of a single lineage in the smaller villages, and of a dominant clan joined with other families in the larger settlements. Leadership consisted of the Nota, or clan chief, who conducted community rites and regulated ceremonial life in conjunction with the council of elders that was made up of lineage heads and ceremonial specialists. This body decided upon matters of the community, which were then carried out by the Nota and his subordinates. While the placement of residential huts in a village was not regulated, the ceremonial enclosure and the chief's home were most often centrally located.

Father Boscana described Indian daily life, and his observations would greatly aid the work of renowned 20th century California Indian anthropologist A.L. Kroeber. Krober wrote that the Juaneños had an organized, ritualistic society that included worship of an omniscient supreme deity, *Chinigchinich,* and called for adherence to strict cultural patterns. There were rules governing courtship, marriage, food distribution, warfare, and strict and exceedingly harsh rituals for children entering adulthood (see Hallan-Gibson, Two Hundred Years in San Juan Capistrano, p. 13. The girls' ritual was tough; the boys' was brutal). Religious leadership was also part of the Nota's duties, thus giving him even greater power within the village.

The arrival of the Europeans, and soon thereafter, the other Americans from the eastern side of the continent would greatly change; even decimate native populations and cultures across the Western Hemisphere. Although less than 250 years since the de Portola expedition entered the Capistrano Valley; just a mere blink of the historical eye; the changes that have occurred in that quarter millennium took place at lightening speed compared to those in the thousands of years before. Today, the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians, Acjachemen Nation is centered in San Juan Capistrano and is governed by Tribal Council. The tribal citizenship of the nation is numbered at 1,941 blood descendants, verified through certified genealogist, who trace individual lineage to Acjachemen village ancestors. The Acjachemen citizenship is diversified by representation through their many tribal committees, community activities, and tribal gatherings. As the ancient inhabitants of their defined territory, they are extremely proud and protective of their heritage, their people, and the many relationships they call their friends.