

The Tonkawa Indians: Driftwood's Original Inhabitants

More than 14,000 years ago, long before Christopher Columbus landed, another group of people discovered what we now call the Americas. These people first appeared in what is now Alaska after crossing from Asia on a land bridge of frozen tundra. They traveled south and east eventually spreading across the Americas and forming numerous independent groups. Confirmed evidence points to the earliest inhabitants of Texas arriving between 10,000 and 13,000 years ago.

Specifics on the history of Native American groups in Central Texas are hard to come by. Early inhabitants had no written language and the earliest written accounts of their history only date back 600 years. So, the history of these people is based on stories passed down orally through generations, first-person accounts from early European explorers, and data taken from archeological digs. What we have garnered from these limited sources is that the earliest inhabitants of what is now Central Texas were nomadic hunter gatherers. Among these groups were the Caddo, Waco, Coahuiltecan, and the residents of what we know as Driftwood, Texas, the Tonkawa.

The exact time of the Tonkawa coming to Central Texas, is currently in debate by historians and could be rewritten as new information comes to light and is agreed upon as factual. Whether they inhabited this area 8,000 years ago or arrived 600 years ago, the Tonkawa are still the earliest known inhabitants of Driftwood, Texas.

The Tonkawa were long thought to be one of the original Texas tribes, but recent evidence points to their arrival as part of a migration from the southern portion of the Great Plains that occurred in the seventeenth century. It's possible that an original Tonkawa unit, the Mayeyes, absorbed smaller tribal units during the migration south. This could account for the organization of the Tonkawa into smaller bands based on linguistic groups. Another piece of evidence that supports this theory is the name "Tonkawa" itself, which is a Waco Indian word for "they all stay together". It can also be surmised that the Tonkawa were in Texas prior to this migration, and the move south by the Plains bands could have been an effort to reunite with the Texas bands. What we do know is that once the Tonkawa established themselves in Texas they ranged along the Balcones Escarpment, West to Bandera, North to the San Saba area, East across the Brazos River, and South to San Antonio, becoming one of the largest and most influential tribes in the area.

The Tonkawa were nomadic people and are believed to have lived in small tipis covered in bison hides. However, it seems unlikely that a small band of horseless, nomadic hunter gatherers would be able to carry something so heavy for very long. If they did have tipis, they would have been small and probably pulled by dogs, very unlike the Hollywood depiction of these shelters. Later, they would have horses which may have made toting larger tipis possible. More evidence points to them having lived primarily in crude huts covered in small hides, branches, and leaves. Upon leaving a seasonal encampment, they would have probably burned their huts to get rid of any parasites and other bugs they would have attracted.

The earliest of Texas Indian tribes (perhaps Tonkawa were among them) were hunter and gatherers. They survived by hunting the last of the big Ice-age animals; the Columbian mammoth, the mastodon, the giant sloth, and the bison. These large mammals were hunted by groups of men bearing stone spears and a projectile launching stick called the atlatl. The atlatl predated the bow and arrow and threw two-piece darts that were four to six feet in length. The main shaft and the fore shaft of the dart would separate when they hit their target. The main shaft, housing the flint point, would penetrate the animal's flesh, and the fore shaft would fall to the ground, enabling it to be reused. Later, they almost entirely followed the path of the buffalo across Central Texas. Spears and arrows (thrown by atlatl and later fired from bows) were the preferred weapon, but they also developed a technique of driving herds over cliffs. One such cliff can be found near Georgetown, Texas and is rightfully named "Tonkawa Bluff". The meat from buffalo was supplemented these with fish, shellfish, snails, black berries, pecans, prickly pear fruits, and baked bulbs of the sotol and Lechuguilla cactus.

One animal the Tonkawa never hunted was the wolf. The wolf was sacred to the Tonkawa, as their totemic religious beliefs were that they were descended from the wolf. The Tonkawa has many important spiritual dances, but the "Wolf Dance" was of special significance. It commemorated their origin story and the creation of the Tonkawa. The wolf dance was held in a large dance lodge. It was essentially ceremonial, and efforts were made to keep it secret from outsiders. Later, there were many attempts by different Christian denominations to convert the Native Americans, including the Tonkawa. These efforts were only partially successful with the Tonkawa adopting some Christian beliefs and values, combining them with their own and creating the Native American Church (NAC). Because the NAC uses the hallucinogenic peyote cactus as sacrament, it is sometimes referred to as the "Peyote Religion".

Tonkawa culture held little resemblance to our own. Men often had more than one wife, and often married sisters. Men were also expected to marry their sister-in-law should their brother die. The family ties created in this way ensured a strong bond and security of survival in an

otherwise hostile environment. Clan membership was traced through the mother and marrying within a clan was considered incestuous. A father was not of the same clan as his children. When he died, the father's property was inherited by his brothers and sisters or their families, ensuring that wealth and belongings were passed down through the clan.

The land that the Tonkawa inhabited was a geographic crossroads between tribes occupying the north, south, east, and west portions of Texas. This also put them at the cultural center of the region and the Tonkawa enjoyed friendly relations with many of their neighboring tribes and may have played host to large intertribal gatherings. In fact, early Spanish travelers document seeing multiple tribes, including the Caddo, Humano, Karankawa, and Coahuiltecan camped together at the springs in present day San Marcos, Texas. These camps were important to the exchange of trade goods and news and helped to establish political alliances. The ability of the Tonkawa to establish alliances would prove to be important when the Comanche and Apache later began to encroach on the region. In fact, many believe that at one point the Tonkawa allied with the Comanche against the Apache, who had pushed them out of the buffalo rich lands of the Great Plains. Then, in the early nineteenth century, the Comanche began to raid Tonkawa lands in the western Hill Country of Texas. This led to them switching alliances and turning to the Apache to help defend their homeland.

Early relationships with European settlers were tenuous at best. There was increased contact with the Spanish following the arrival of Alfonso De Leon's expedition in 1690. In the mid 1700's the Spanish established 3 missions for the Tonkawa along the present-day San Gabriel River. Several epidemics and Apache raids caused the Spanish to close these missions and consolidate their efforts at converting Native Americans to the Santa Cruz De San Saba Mission for the Apaches. In 1758, the Tonkawa allied with some of the northern Texas tribes, including the Lipan Apache, in raids that destroyed the San Saba Mission.

The relationship between the Tonkawa and white Texans didn't go much better. Though the Tonkawa were seen as friendly and often helped as scouts in rooting out the more hostile Comanche Indians, the cultural differences between the two groups were just too strong to allow for cohabitation in Central Texas. For one thing, the Tonkawa, like most Native Americans, had no concept of land ownership, instead preferring to roam freely across the plains. This put them at odds with settlers attempting to carve out their own little slice of Texas and fence it off. Also, the Tonkawa had little use for clothing, while the Texans came from cultures where nudity was not acceptable. So, when they did encounter each other on the back forty it must have been very awkward.

By the 1840's encroachment into Tonkawa territory by white settlers and hostile tribes completely eroded traditional hunting grounds and tribes often had to make the choice to steal or starve. The stealing part created hostility, so to help ease the tension, the Indian Bureau of the Republic of Texas settled the Tonkawa near San Marcos. We must remember that to settle means to remain in one place, something that was contrary to the Tonkawa way of life. They were given farming tools and seed for growing corn along with guns and bullets. With no knowledge of farming, hunting was their only option for feeding the tribe. Game was becoming scarce, so the introduction of another tribe to the area created hostility with local tribes already established in the area. Groups of Indians that had once been allies began to fight amongst each other.

More settlers came and the "starve or steal" issue arose once again. In the 1850's, the Tonkawa and other local tribes were moved to reservations near the Brazos River for their own protection. But, once there, local settlers began to complain that the Tonkawa were stealing from them. Quickly, any Indian seen off the reservation was considered hostile giving locals a reason to take action into their own hands. Vigilantism was not uncommon. The settlers petitioned the State of Texas to do something about the problem. The time of the Tonkawa in Texas had come to a close. In 1859 the Tonkawa and all reservation Indians were forced to leave Texas for Oklahoma under military escort.

Resources

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