

Reading History in the Soil

is a lengthy and difficult process,
but archaeological research offers
the only means of learning about the
early inhabitants along the Texas Gulf Coast

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*Barbara Bruce
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Photo: Hank Rhodes



IN LATE SUMMER OF 1975 our party of Rice University archaeological excavators found its first skeleton in the sands of Galveston Island. He was a Karankawa, a member of a band of Indians who had made Galveston their winter home for hundreds of years.

We knew he was Karankawa for several reasons. He had been buried in a fetal position. The strong teeth in his powerful jaw were badly worn from the abrasive materials in his diet. A rough comparison of the length of his legs and those of some of our crew suggested he had been a large man, approximately six feet tall. This combination of traits did not characterize whites of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, but it did fit the Karankawa Indians.

The discovery of the first skeleton and, later, of five others buried nearby was important. For months we had been excavating the dwelling areas of the site and had made sizable collections of pottery, flint, shell, and bone. We had found the house floors of the prehistoric inhabitants, their fire hearths, and their trash pits. Based on these remains we had formed some ideas about when the site had been occupied and why these people had chosen it. Because many of the Indian groups of the Texas Gulf Coast had used similar tools and materials we did not know exactly who the inhabitants of this site had been. Galveston had been home to at least two groups of Indians, and in historic times members of other nearby tribes had lived on the island from time to time. It was only when we uncovered the human remains that we were certain we had been excavating a Karankawa Indian site.

Among the remains were those of a Karankawa woman. We found her skeleton in a shallow grave, her skull showing marks of possible violence. Dr. Joseph A. Jachimczyk, medical examiner of Harris County, whom I asked to look at the woman's skull, confirmed our suspicion. After measuring the depth and diameter of the skull fracture Dr. Jachimczyk said it was impossible for anyone to survive this sort of injury, which was probably caused by a club. The angle of the fracture also indicated to him that the woman probably saw what was about to happen to her. Dr. Jachimczyk estimated that the victim was between twenty-five and thirty years old at the time of her death.

Dr. Jachimczyk's visit to our archaeological laboratory in Sewall Hall marked the first time that we had called upon a forensic pathologist to help us determine the cause of death of one of our finds. As for Dr. Jachimczyk, the Karankawa woman's death was probably the "oldest" murder he ever investigated, since the victim must have lived on Galveston Island

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Photo: Lorel Dowden



Drs. Jachimczyk, left, and Hole examine skull of Karankawa woman in Rice archaeological laboratory. Note severe fracture in skull's temple area.

before 1821—the year the Karankawa were driven from the island.

Although important, the recovery of skeletons and artifacts was not the primary purpose of our investigation. As an archaeologist, I am interested in cultures of the past. The tangible remains are valuable only insofar as they allow me to make inferences about the intangible culture, the social organization, religion, system of values, and patterns of behavior unique to a people.



Rice students Yumiko Igarashi, left, and Daryl Jill Drickman were among enthusiastic "diggers" at the Karankawa site. They are measuring the depth at which some artifacts were found.

Photo: Hank Rhodes

Very little is known about the coastal tribes of Texas. They were among the first Indians in Texas to come in contact with white settlers and also among the first to be annihilated by disease and warfare. By the 1850s the Karankawa were extinct. Unfortunately, few descriptions of their way of life were made. From these fragmentary records it is clear, however, that the Karankawa Indians and their way of life were distinctive among American Indians and that they had made ecological adjustments allowing them to survive in a harsh physical environment. Today the only way we may learn anything further about these people is through archaeological research.

Only three Indian sites are known for Galveston Island. Two years ago it became possible to excavate the largest of these, known as Mitchell Ridge, one of the oldest beach ridges and the highest natural point on the island. The area is adjacent to a bayou where the Indians were able to obtain fish, oysters, crabs, shrimp, and in those days alligators. In addition, freshwater ponds in the area provide crayfish, turtles, frogs, waterfowl, and the roots that were staples of the Karankawa diet.

In addition to food, the site also provided reeds for basketry and materials for pottery. The area was probably chosen by the Karankawa as a prime camp site because of the availability of all these resources and because its altitude provided protection on the lee side from storms and an overall visibility of the surrounding countryside.

We chose Mitchell Ridge for our excavations because it is the largest site on the island and one of the few in the area still undamaged by relic hunters, land subsidence, and erosion. The ridge has been recognized as an Indian site for fifty years. During the 1920s a Galveston dentist interested in local history dug on the site and reported his findings in a series of articles for local publications. Until recently, however, no systematic testing of the site had been undertaken. Intensive study of the ridge became possible when the land was purchased by Mitchell Development Corporation of the Southwest for a new recreation and housing area. During the preliminary survey of the property Charles Magan, director of survey and drafting for the Mitchell concern and an amateur archaeologist, recognized that the property included a large Indian site.

He notified W. L. Fullen, a past president of the Houston Archaeological Society, who informed Frank Hole, professor of anthropology at Rice. Dr. Hole suggested that the site be excavated as my dissertation project.

Our excavations began in the fall of 1974, with the weekend participation of a group of students from Dr. Hole's introductory archaeology class and the volunteer assistance of members of the Houston Archaeological Society. The society is composed of Houstonians who wish to contribute to an understanding of local cultures and Texas history by working with professional archaeologists. Professionals from other fields, including geologists, botanists, chemists, physicians, and draftsmen belong to the society and provide services which would otherwise be difficult or expensive to obtain.

Funding of our excavation has come from two sources. George Mitchell, Houston industrialist with a long-time interest in Galveston history, arranged for all the necessary supplies. The equipment was acquired and/or built by Magan. Funds to hire student labor during the summer of 1975 were provided by the Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund of Galveston. Both sources are financing additional laboratory tests of our finds.

The most important among the few historic records of the Karankawa is *La Relacion* (in print as *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*), published in Spain in 1542 and written by Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who served as treasurer of an expedition into Florida in 1528 headed by Panfilo de Narvaez. Of the four hundred members of the expedition only four survived to return to Spain.

These four were the first explorers from the Old World to travel across the American Southwest. The lands over which they traveled and the people and customs they observed were completely alien to these Europeans. These hardy, adaptable men learned to withstand hunger, exposure, and pain during their trek and were able to survive conditions that killed their comrades. When they returned to Spain, after eight long years in the New World, the reports of their experiences encouraged further Spanish exploration and missionizing in the Southwest.

The Narvaez expedition sailed from Cuba in the early spring of 1528. After a short voyage, the company disembarked in the vicinity of Tampa Bay and began marching north along the Gulf Coast of Florida. By late summer the Spaniards were in deep trouble. They

Karankawa finds are carefully packed and brought to the Rice archaeological laboratory where some of them are examined by author Burger, left, and Debra E. Hendry, an archaeology major.

Photo: Frank Hole



had lost their ships, eaten their horses, and watched 150 of their comrades die of disease and injury. At Apalachicola the company built crude barges which they hoped to navigate along the Gulf Coast until they reached some Spanish settlement along the Mexican coast.

In November, 1528, two of the barges carrying some ninety men were cast ashore on what many scholars believe was Galveston Island. During the severe winter that followed most of the Spaniards and many of the Karankawa Indians who befriended them died of exposure and disease. As a reflection of their experiences there, the Spaniards named the island "Malhado," Island of Misfortune.

Cabeza de Vaca was one of the few who survived that winter. After many years as a trader and healer among the Indians, he was able to work his way to Mexico and from there to Spain, where he wrote his fascinating account of the first European contact with the Indian societies of the American Southwest.

Anthropologists investigating the native cultures of the Gulf Coast are particularly interested in that part of Cabeza de Vaca's narrative describing the first years of his travels when he was at or near Malhado. The first winter the Spaniards spent on the island was particularly severe, but life there had rarely been easy for the Karankawa in any season. Their women in particular labored long and hard gathering and preparing food, keeping smudge fires burning to discourage insects, making mats and pottery, and caring for children. Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were soon forced to help with the collection of food and firewood, tasks which the mosquitoes and bad weather made almost intolerably difficult. Conditions were so bad that the Spaniards later remembered those times as among the worst of all their experiences.

These Karankawa impressed the Spaniards as being unique in a number of ways. Cabeza de Vaca wrote: "They love their offspring the most of any people in the world, and treat them with the greatest mildness." Because mother's milk was the only totally dependable food supply the children were frequently nursed to twelve years of age to spare them the pain and hunger the adults had to endure periodically when no food was available.

The Karankawa had neither a stable source of food nor the knowledge of agriculture to enable them to produce one. Although they lived along the Gulf, rich in marine resources, they were unable to exploit its possibilities fully because they did not have the necessary tools and equipment. They survived by following a migratory cycle, exploiting a variety of plants and animals as the seasons changed. From November to February they lived on Galveston Island and subsisted primarily on the roots of a plant, probably a species of *Sagittaria*, "duck potatoes," dug with difficulty from the

water's edge. At other times they lived exclusively on blackberries or oysters or the fruit of the prickly pear cactus. Since these foods were seasonal, they often experienced periods of want and sometimes of starvation.

Karankawa men were very tall, muscular, and well-built. Many were near six feet in height, much taller than the average American or European settler of that time, and also taller than their immediate Indian neighbors from different tribes. These men appear to have been as strong as they looked. On many occasions they demonstrated their ability to shoot an arrow so far, so accurately, and with such force that the white settlers were amazed. The bows they used were nearly as tall as the men were, and it was said that no average settler was capable of bending one.

Perhaps the Karankawa are most impressive because they managed to survive under harsh conditions without the benefit of sophisticated technology. They took pride in their ability to withstand hardship and to endure conditions of life that are inconceivable to most Americans, who live in climatically controlled environments, have plenty to eat and wear, and friends, family, and institutions to turn to in time of need. The early settlers of Texas could not understand why the Karankawa preferred the freedom of their traditional ways to the security of the Christian missions. This independent attitude, no doubt, contributed to the demise of the Karankawa.

Written accounts of the Karankawa have often referred to them as cannibals. The practice is so abhorrent to the whites that it attracted immediate attention. The Karankawa were well aware of this shock effect, and apparently delighted in telling tall tales to the white settlers to see their reaction. The settlers were only too willing to believe all they heard and to pass the stories on to their neighbors, probably with added embellishment. If cannibalism ever did occur among the Karankawa, it was probably introduced after contact with the white people and was never a part of the precontact culture. It was certainly never practiced by the Karankawa of Galveston Island, if this passage from Cabeza de Vaca is representative: "Five Christians quartered on the coast came to the extremity of eating each other. Only the body of the last one, whom nobody was left to eat, was found unconsumed . . . The Indians were so shocked at this cannibalism that, if they had seen it sometime earlier, they surely would have killed every one of us."

Cabeza de Vaca writes that the island people with whom he lived buried all their dead except the shamans, who were cremated: "When it occurs that a son dies, the parents and kindred weep for him, and so does every one; and the wailing continues a whole year. They begin it in the morning of every day before sunrise, the parents first, and after them the whole town. They do the same at mid-day and at sunset. . . . They lament all the de-

funct [their dead] in this manner, excepting the aged, for whom they show no regret, as they say that their season has passed, and there is no enjoyment for them, and that living they would occupy the earth and take away the support of the young. . . . When a son or brother dies, at the house where the death takes place, for three months they do not go after food, but sooner famish, and their relatives and neighbors provide what they eat. . . .”

The winter of 1528 must have been one of the worst experienced by the Indians as well as by the Spaniards. Many died of starvation, exposure, and the European dysentery. More than half of the Indians were dead before the following spring. Since no household which had lost a child or adult male could gather food, the few families which escaped such a loss were particularly burdened in collecting food for the rest. Only sixteen Spaniards and half the Karankawa band survived that winter. We have not yet determined if the small group of Karankawa skeletons we found at Mitchell Ridge represented victims of this tragic winter. However, if any Spanish remains are found in future excavations, they will prove conclusively that Galveston was indeed “Malhado,” the Island of Misfortune, and the starting point of Cabeza de Vaca’s long trek across the American Southwest.

Texas has an impressively long history of human occupation. Although Texans are justifiably proud of their

state’s history, many are unaware of the tremendous number and variety of peoples and cultures that existed in Texas long before Stephen F. Austin’s colony was established. Some of the oldest evidence of the very first people on the North American continent comes from sites in Texas, which date thousands of years before the birth of Christ.

We are only beginning to learn the details of the history of some of these early people. Reading their history in the soil is a lengthy and difficult process, but since the prehistoric occupants left no other records, archaeological research is the only means we have of learning about them.

Texas archaeological sites on public property are protected by the State Antiquities Code. Others, such as Mitchell Ridge, that are on private land have no protection other than that afforded by the inclination of their owners. Fortunately, an increasing number of owners and companies are coming to realize the value of the historical sites on the land they own and are voluntarily cooperating with archaeological authorities in preserving them. The sites have thus become records of the heritage of Texas, records which can be destroyed but not renewed. If archaeology continues to receive the support of a growing number of civic-minded individuals and corporations, important sites such as Mitchell Ridge may be investigated properly, thereby providing us with a better understanding of our past. □

Members of the Houston Archaeological Society take a break from their labors at the Karankawa site.

Photo: Carl Burger



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