California's Gabrielino Indians

By
BERNICE EASTMAN JOHNSTON

SOUTHWEST MUSEUM
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
1962

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Foreword

BY THE END OF THIS YEAR, according to statisticians, California will surpass New York by becoming the most populous state in the Union. Should this not prove to be the case, certainly by the end of this decade the Golden State will be able to boast of having the greatest population in the United States of America. To many people this might seem quite extraordinary. However, in view of the fact that ethnologists believe the area now comprising the State of California once supported the largest aboriginal population in North America, present statistics would indicate that population problems are "par for the course" of California history.

Favorable geography, climate and abundant nature made living conditions in what is now Southern California as attractive to prehistoric Americans as it is to today's inhabitants. Anthropologists may not be able to prove that ancient Indians were drawn to Southern California, as peoples have been in recent times, but they do know there were movements and migrations of peoples in California's primitive past.

Not that shifts in population are "as old as the California hills," but it is important to realize that primitive man was as much a searcher after a better life, or the better things of life, as his modern counterpart. Along the same shores, now dotted with highly developed harbors

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the eager viewers, together with the hasty tempo and the competitive pressure of modern life, tend to devalue for the Indian himself the heritage from his more leisurely past. In Father Boscana's time, and in Hugo Reid's, the separation from their roots in nature had already begun for the Gabrielinos. We owe to these two men, and to the later investigators among the related tribes, all that we can glean of the subtle and poetic veil of imagery through which these people viewed their inner, subjective world, and with which the daily life of each of them was so mystically interwoven. We have John Peabody Harrington to thank for the preservation of a phrase which sounds as though it might have been the first tenet in a Gabrielino's statement of his religious faith, *"Tavi hetekrinuj atavin tuvangnar,"* —"God has placed the whole world."

The Seacoast and the Rivers

Along the ocean shore of their own homeland the Gabrielino villages teemed with well-fed fishermen and their thriving families. The kitchen-middens, or ancient refuse heaps, which mark these forgotten sites are like all coastal village remains, deep, darkened with innumerable bits of charcoal from old fires, and with a telltale oiliness that adds its own evidence to the myriads of fishbones and broken shells.

Most of these middens, as well as the burial grounds, have long since been robbed of their mortars and pestles, of their fine chert and obsidian arrow points and knives, of their exquisitely shaped fish hooks of haliotis shell, by casual or commercial souvenir hunters of a day long before such activities earned from the systematic archeologist the contemptuous term "pot-hunting." Because such amateur excavations have forever destroyed or scattered valuable clues in regard to ancient man the federal government and some states now prohibit them on lands within their jurisdiction.

Mainland woman trading with islanders. (Drawing by Allen W. Welts).

In the heydays of these coastal settlements men came to them from the inland villages to barter for dried fish and shell, no doubt bringing deer hides and perhaps acorns and "chia" seeds to exchange. Clamshell beads were used as currency in trading. From Santa Catalina Island, in the great plank canoes, came prized objects of steatite: cooking pots, ceremonial bowls and pipes, fine little carvings of animals, fish, and birds, and blocks of the raw stone for the use of artisans on the mainland. The islands could offer, as well, the precious sea-otter skins. We cannot altogether imagine what the mainland could supply to match these riches, but the wide dispersal of the steatite objects bears witness to a brisk trade.

The river valleys, too, were dotted with rancherias,

their locations chosen with an eye to the vagrant habits of the streams. Not even an Indian, however, could always outguess such prima donnas as those temperamental rivers which the Spanish were finally to name the Santa Ana de los Temblores, the San Gabriel, and the Porciuncula, the latter in honor of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula, which was the name to be given to the tiny pueblo which would one day be founded near the river bank.

Many years later, following the floods of 1914, when it became obvious that these streams must yield to a civilizing restraint, interviews were held with the old settlers still able to recall the storms of earlier decades. The report thus gathered could compete in suspense with mystery fiction, as one after another of these long-time residents told which way the waters ran after too copious winter rains, such as those of 1814, '24, '51, '67, '87, and '89. From it we learn what to us is startling information. With few exceptions old residents recalled that, until the floods of 1824-25 sent it careening off through the lowlands to the south, the Los Angeles River ran below a high bluff between the present Main and Los Angeles Streets, turning westward on its meandering way to the "cienegas," the great marshlands that lay between the Baldwin and the Beverly hills. This course can be traced roughly today by observing the trend of the low ground in the region of Venice, Adams and Washington, between La Brea and La Cienega Boulevards, in the present city of Los Angeles.

From some unknown prior date, or perhaps always until the winter of 1824-25, this was the course the Los Angeles River followed to its mouth in the Santa Monica Bay. Thereafter, during every major storm, until a deep, concrete-lined channel formed a strait-jacket for its deceptive strength, this was the way it threatened to take and deep sands exist to prove its right to such a course. "The river needed to rise only a few inches to send it down the old channel," reported one old resident. In 1867 this actually happened and for a while the water stood like a great lake all the way to the "cienegas." From that point to the sea the course had