A Interactive Digital Story
By the REACH Iron Clad Pythons

The Tongva People of Orange County

Introduction

Hello!
We are the Iron Clad Pythons, seven REACH PYLUSD First Lego League Challenge Robotic students: Claire Liu, Steven Yeh, Fan Weng, Khang Le, Lucas Kim, Yan Weng, and Kei Tsuchida.

We are excited to share the amazing stories of the Tongva people who lived in what we now call Orange County, California!

Long before there were cars, schools, or even roads, the Tongva people lived happily in beautiful villages near rivers and creeks. They knew how to live with nature, find food, and take care of each other.

In 1769, Spanish soldiers arrived for the first time. But this book is about the time BEFORE they came when the Tongva people had their own way of life.

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Our Discovery

On Wednesday, October 8th, we discovered a real story of a person named Maria Rufina who lived right here in Orange County over 250 years ago!

How We Discovered Maria's Story

Mr. Eric Plunkett, a local historian, math educator, computer programmer, and speaker shared something incredible:

- He translated old Spanish mission records - baptisms and marriages from the 1770s
- He wrote a computer program to map all the names and connections between Tongva villages
- That's how he discovered Maria Rufina's name and her story!

Before Orange County was Orange County

Before there were streets like Esperanza Road (which used to be an old Indian trail!), before Anaheim Hills had houses, the Tongva people lived on the land for thousands of years.

Key Facts:

- 100 villages across Orange County and Los Angeles Basin
- 5,000 people living in connected communities
- Thousands of years of sustainable living
- Rich culture with their own language, art, and traditions

Chapter 1

Maria Rufina's Morning by Walnut Canyon

Gathering Acorns in Anaheim Hills

A Morning in the Village of Hutuuknga (say: HOOT-uk-nga)

Maria Rufina woke up to the smell of sage and sunshine. Her family's tule house shimmered in the early light near a sparkling creek. The oaks whispered secrets as she stretched and smiled. Today was a gathering day! Her sister, Tava, handed her a woven basket. Together they walked to the water pool, laughing as the cold creek splashed their ankles. The village of the Tongva people surrounded them – homes shaped like domes, families grinding acorns, children chasing butterflies. Maria listened to the birds sing. Her grandmother said the birds carried the stories of the land. The Tongva had lived here for thousands of years, in harmony with the oak trees, rivers, and hills.

Interactive Moment:

Close your eyes and imagine you are walking with Maria.
What sounds do you hear? What smells do you notice? Draw or write about it!

Life in the Village

Where did Maria sleep?

Housing:

- Dome-shaped homes made from willow branches and tule reeds
- Cool in summer, warm in winter
- Built near water sources

Location:

- Village of Hutuuknga was by the Santa Ana River
- Near where the 91 and 55 Freeways cross today
- Extended into Walnut Canyon for acorn gathering

The Acorn Gathering Process

Today was an acorn-gathering day! Maria and her sister Tava carried their amazing baskets - woven so tightly they could hold water without leaking. The women of Hutuuknga were known throughout the villages for their incredible weaving skills.

Why Walnut Canyon?

The Santa Ana River would flood and dry up, so oak trees couldn't grow right next to it. That's why the Tongva traveled to the hills - they knew their land perfectly!

A Southern California Indigenous Village. Courtesy of Phil Brigandi, OC Historyland

Activity

From Acorn to Food: Follow a Step-by-Step Process to turn acorn into tortillas

1. Gather - Walk to oak groves in the canyons
2. Crack - Remove the hard outer shell
3. Grind - Use stone mortars to grind into flour
4. Soak - Rinse in water to remove bitter taste (tannic acid)
5. Shape - Form into flat cakes
6. Cook - Place on hot stones (like tortillas!)

Did you know?

One oak tree could provide enough acorns to feed a family for months!

Amazing Discovery

The Santa Ana River

The Lifeline of the Tongva People

The Santa Ana River was everything to the Tongva:

- When it flooded: It would change course and push villages to move
- When it dried up: They relied on springs in the canyons
- Navigation: It guided travel between villages
- Food source: Fish and water plants
- The river shaped where and how they lived

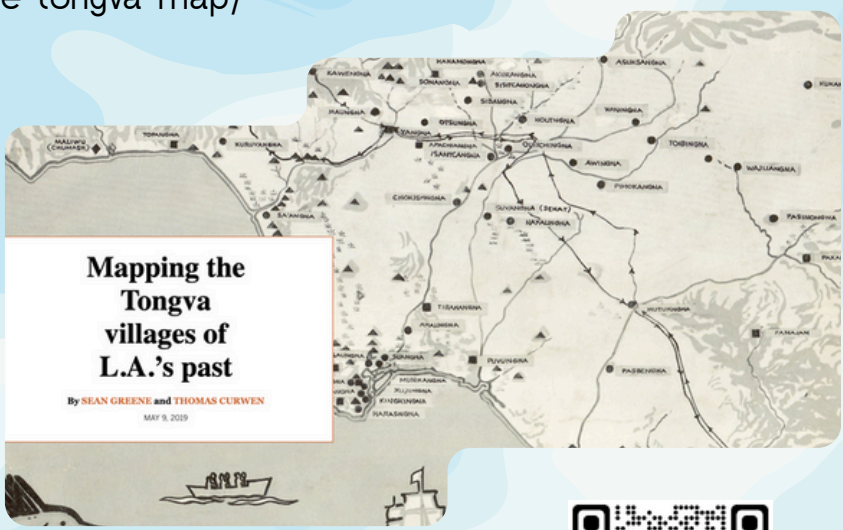
This is why Maria Rufina's people had to be flexible and know multiple locations for gathering food!

Interactive Activity

Map the Migration of the Tongva People
Draw a map showing:

- Hutuuknga Village (Santa Ana River at 91 & 55 Freeways)
- Walnut Canyon (acorn gathering area in Anaheim Hills)
- Brea Creek Village (small pool near Arovista School)
- The trails connecting them (including what's now Esperanza Rd!)

Click on the link or scan the QR Code to access an interactive map: https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-tongva-map/



Chapter 2

The Day Everything Changed

Spanish Soldiers Arrive - July 28, 1769

Maria Rufina was near the small village on Brea Creek when she heard shouts. Her cousin ran up, breathless: "Strange men on giant animals are coming!"

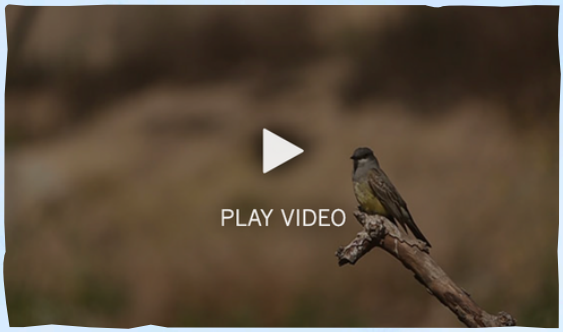
The Tongva Communication Network

About 70 people from the village gathered. They had received messages from Hutukunga - runners had come ahead saying:

"Don't be afraid. These strangers seem peaceful."

The Tongva had an amazing communication network! Messengers would run between villages to share important news.

Scan the QR code or click on the image to an LA Times article. Watch a short video and hear their language!



The Tongva's Response

The Tongva Response: Kindness

Do you know what Maria Rufina and her people did?
They welcomed them with open arms!

- Offered food and water
- Showed the Spanish their village by the small pool
- About 70 men and boys came to greet them - with no weapons
- They came in peace and friendship

Father Crespí's Journal Entry

Father Juan Crespí, a priest with the soldiers, wrote in his journal: "We found a small, very green little canyon with a small pool of water and a large village of very friendly gentiles [unbaptized individuals]... there must have been around seventy of them, men and boys... The whole village came over without any weapons to our camp." He continued:
"They wished for us to stay in their village... We gave it the name "The village of the small pool and valley of Santa María, Saint Martha."

Did you know?

Grizzly Bears!

The Tongva people told the Spanish explorers that California Grizzly Bears lived in the San Gabriel Mountains nearby!

- These huge bears were part of their world
- The Tongva respected the bears and knew how to stay safe around them
- Sadly, the last wild grizzly bear in Orange County was killed in 1908
- Now they're gone forever, but the Tongva people lived alongside them for centuries!

<u>The Brea Creek Village</u>

Location: Near today's Arovista Elementary School in Brea.

Special Features:

- Home to about 70 people (men, women, boys, and girls)
- Had a small pool of fresh water - very precious!
- Very green and grassy valley. On an important trail system (like highways of the Tongva world!)

<u>Connection to Hutukunga:</u>

This village might have been connected to the bigger village of Hutukunga, like a camping spot where families would go during certain times of the year. The Tongva people didn't just stay in one place - they traveled around their territory!

Interactive Activity

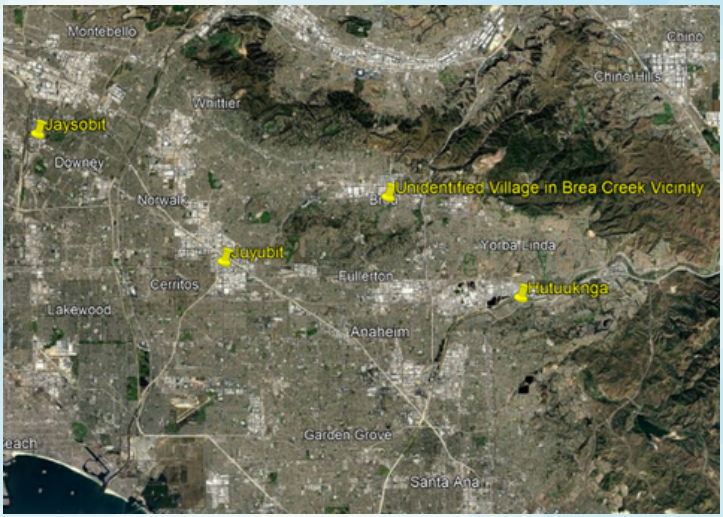
Timeline Challenge

Create a timeline of July 27-28, 1769:

- July 27: Portolá Expedition reaches Hutukunga on Santa Ana River
- July 28 morning: Expedition departs, heads north to Brea Creek
- July 28 afternoon: Arrive at Brea Creek village, meet 70 Tongva people
- July 28 evening: Earthquake during Father Crespí's Mass
- July 29: Expedition moves north toward Monterey

Discussion Question:

Why do you think the Tongva people welcomed the strangers even though they had never seen horses, metal armor, or guns before?



Chapter 3

After the Spanish came, life changed forever for the Tongva people. Many, including Maria Rufina, were eventually brought to Mission San Gabriel. That's where Mr. Plunkett found her name in the old baptismal records!

Mr. Plunkett's Detective Work

How did he discover Maria Rufina?

1. Translated Spanish mission records from the 1770s-1800s
2. Found baptisms, marriages, and burials of Tongva people
3. Wrote a computer program to map names and village connections
4. Discovered patterns in who married whom between villages
5. Found Maria Rufina's story preserved in these records!

<u>Village Connections Through Marriage Records</u>

By studying marriage records, Mr. Plunkett discovered that Tongva people married people from nearby villages:

People from Hutukunga most often married people from:

1. Hutukunga itself (same village)
2. Juyubit (on Coyote Creek in West Coyote Hills) - 20 marriages
3. Jaysobit (in today's Montebello) - 16 marriages
4. Guaspet (in West Los Angeles) - 10 marriages

This showed: The closer two villages were, the more marriages between them! Villages were like neighborhoods connected by family ties.

Remember Marina's Legacy

Maria Rufina's Message to Us:

When you drive on the 91 or 55 freeways, you're passing through Hutukunga.

When you visit Brea, you're walking where Maria Rufina walked.

When you see oak trees in Anaheim Hills, remember the Tongva who gathered acorns there for thousands of years.

When you drive on Esperanza Road, you're following an ancient Tongva trail.

Why This Matters

History isn't just dates and facts - it's real people who laughed, worked, loved, and lived right where we live now.

The Tongva people:

- Had a sustainable lifestyle for thousands of years
- Knew the land better than anyone
- Created beautiful art and culture
- Lived in harmony with nature
- Welcomed strangers with kindness

We honor them by remembering their story and sharing it with others.

Resources & Credits

Created by: REACH FLL Students, Iron Clad Pythons Team & Coaches Ms. Gisele Nguyen & Alfie Lin

Special Thanks to:

- Mr. Eric Plunkett - For translating mission records and discovering Maria Rufina's story
- Phil Brigandi - Orange County historian
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- Dr. Luiza Silva - UCI Professor of Egyptology & Archaeology
- Sarah Hoemke, Cultural Resource Specialist, Archaeologist from Ralph B. Clark Interpretative Center
- Ryo Demu, Paleotologist from Ralph B. Clark Interpretative Center

Based on Historical Research:

- Mission San Gabriel baptismal, marriage, and burial records
- Father Juan Crespí's journal from the Portolá Expedition, 1769
- Early California Cultural Atlas
- Archaeological and anthropological studies of Tongva villages
- For more information on the Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, scan this QR code