

HISTORIC NATIVE TEXANS & DEER

By Jim Heffelfinger

Kiowa were the only tribe who maintained a friendly relationship and coexisted with the Comanche.



We can speak of "Native Americans" here, but we are specifically interested in native Texans and their customs and practices related to hunting and gathering between the time the Ice Age glaciers receded and the Europeans arrived. These groups of people occupied the same country we see out our windshields every day. Except they were not looking out from the inside. They spent 24/7 scratching an existence off the landscape that included hunting deer since the very beginning of deer hunting in Texas.

These native peoples existed in a complex and somewhat loose structure of groups, bands, tribes, and confederations. The history books have simplified the tribes, names, and relationships; but the

native people on the landscape were ever changing in response to natural and cultural shifts. The very word "native" is a relative thing. Many native Texas tribes actually came from far outside Texas and displaced other tribes residing in the state. One thing that was consistent was their use of native deer for just about everything they needed to survive.

The very big game hunters

The first people to enter North America came across the Bering Strait between Russia and Alaska. So much seawater was tied up in the vast ice sheets covering the northern part of North America that the sea level was 400 feet lower than today. This allowed bands of hunters and many species of wildlife to enter North America and spread throughout their new continent.

The first Texans arrived sometime after 12,000 B.C. and already had somewhat sophisticated cultural rituals and hunting equipment. These first inhabitants hunted the huge mammals of the Ice Age with big "Clovis" spear tips. (The fact that everything is bigger in Texas apparently began early in our history.) The people of this Clovis culture didn't hunt deer as much as they hunted mammoth and the large Pleistocene form of the bison.

At the end of the Ice Age, the climate started to change dramatically. Conifer forests gave way to the Great Plains and their grassy prairies. Their custom of hunting mammoth and mastodon went away as a changing climate caused those animals to go extinct along with the native North American horse and camel. As the larger bison disappeared, a smaller bison emerged which later played a large role in the life of the Plains Indians. Deer, rabbits, turkey, roadrunners, and vultures were all present in Texas at the end of the Ice Age. Changes in climate allowed deer to increase in abundance and distribution, and thus became an important source of clothing, food, tools, and other natural resources.

About 7,000 years ago Texans started to experiment with agriculture and the warming climate allowed

for an agricultural revolution that led to the domestication of plants, animals, and to some extent, people. Texans at this time were growing corn, beans and squash, weaving grass mats and baskets, hunting big and small game and fishing. Hunters primarily used a spear-throwing device called an atlatl until about 1,000 years ago when the bow and arrow came into common use. This improvement in weapons undoubtedly increased their deer-hunting effectiveness. Agriculture remained important, but diets were supplemented extensively with wild fruits, nuts, rabbits, turkey, and deer. Deer provided not only important protein and fat, but also raw materials for clothing, tools, jewelry, and ritual objects.

Around the year 1200, the climate became cooler in what is termed the "Little Ice Age" with increased precipitation, and this turned the dry southern plains of South Texas and the Chihuahua Desert into deep grassy prairies. During this period we saw bison on the Texas Gulf Coast and into Chihuahua for the first time. By the 1500s, Plains Indians from the center of the continent were drifting south, following the bison.

In 1528 the first Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca made contact with Native Texans when he was shipwrecked on Galveston Island. (Talk about a bad first impression.) Over the next couple decades, several Spanish explorations took place and thus began the written accounts of Texas' native inhabitants. The Spaniards brought with them horses domesticated in the Middle East. There were no horses among any Native American tribes prior to this, but horses fueled a cultural revolution in some tribal nations. The cultural changes among native Texans were many, but the best accounts of these early cultures come from information gathered by the first Spanish explorers.

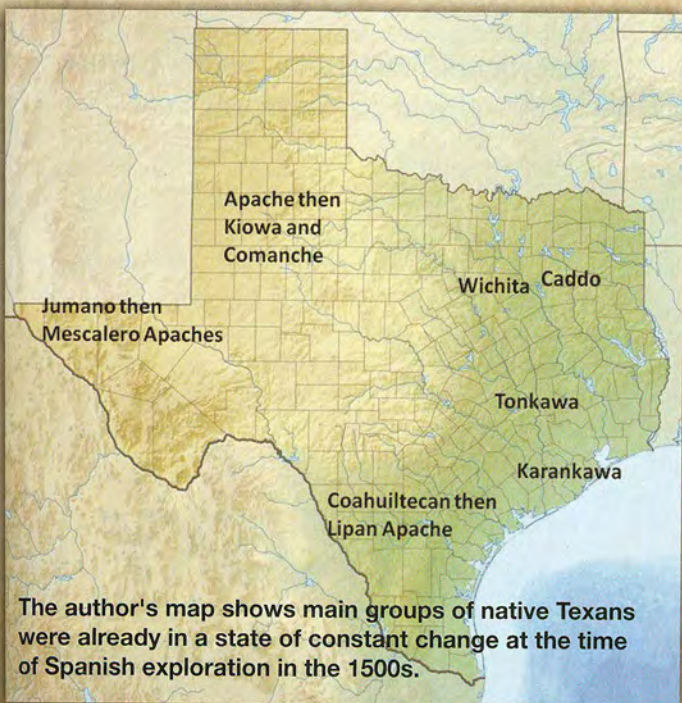
East Texas

This area was occupied by mostly farming tribes such as the Caddo and Wichita. They planted crops such as corns, beans, squash, and the women gathered acorns, persimmons, and berries. Although known for being farmers, they were not vegetarians (or bad hunters!). The Caddo men favored the bow and arrow, and were known for making bows to trade with other

groups. Hunting parties would travel into the southern plains for buffalo and hunt turkey, deer, rabbits, squirrels, and fished closer to home. On longer trips meat was dried before being transported back home. This helped preserve it and reduce the packing weight. Caddos are said to have made a practice of setting fire to the woods to attract animals to the newly burned areas. This probably accounted for the early Spanish reports of "park-like" forests. All Caddo tribes were organized into a confederacy called "Taysha," which was recorded at some point in Spanish as "Tejas" and that is where the name Texas comes from.

The Wichita were also farmers who migrated into Texas from Kansas and Oklahoma. They planted squash, beans, corn, pumpkins, tobacco, figs, and even plum trees; but corn was most important. They hunted bison herds all winter and returned to settlements in the spring to plant crops. They were good traders and wore bison robes and deer hides for clothing. Curiously, the Wichita did not eat fish. Like many of the native peoples, they had ornately tattooed faces and bodies. They even called themselves "raccoon-eyed" because of the dense tattooing around their eyes.

Clovis points were used by the earliest of all Texan hunters to take down Ice Age giants at the end of the Pleistocene.



Gulf Coast

The Karankawa Indians lived from Galveston Island southward past Corpus Christi to Baffin Bay and even farther south to the Rio Grande. Carancahua Bay by Matagorda Island is named after these people, although spelled slightly differently. This is the tribe that helped Cabeza de Vaca when he shipwrecked on Galveston Island in 1528. They treated him well and helped him and his men.

These were tall people with the males being at least 6 feet tall. The men were heavily tattooed and said to have pierced nipples and lower lips with small pieces of cane. Both sexes wore shell ornaments and there are reports of this tribe using shark liver oil or alligator fat on their bodies to repel mosquitoes. If the men wore clothes, it was always a deerskin breach cloth.

The Karankawa were hunter-gatherers who, perhaps because of their tall stature, used long bows up to 6 feet long and 3-foot long arrows made of cane. This culture stayed near the coast except to travel inland to trade with other tribes and to get flint, or "chert," to make arrow and spear points. They used

dugout canoes to navigate the bays, rivers and bayous and they lived in round thatch huts.

When hunting inland they would take deer ("doatn" in the Karankawa language), turkey, rabbits, and even bison. On the coast in winter they hunted waterfowl and harvested fish, crabs, oysters, mussels, alligators, and turtles. There were some rumors that the Karankawa were cannibals. They were not, but they and most tribes at the time occasionally partook in the flesh of their enemy as a ceremonial gesture.

Panhandle

The main tribes in the Panhandle were the Apache, Kiowa, and Comanche. Apaches first came to Texas in the early 1500s from the Pacific Northwest—Canada actually. Their Athabascan language is related to other native tribes in the Northwest and unlike anything in the southern U.S. We know about when the Apache arrived in the Southwest because in 1541 the resident Pueblo people told Spanish explorer Coronado about "the new people" who had moved in. At first they farmed corns, beans, and squash and were also hunters and gatherers; but that all changed when they obtained their first horses around 1680 from the Spaniards and the Pueblo tribes. They became proficient bison hunters and spread south farther into the Hill

into West Texas and New Mexico (Mescalero Apaches). The Mescaleros, in turn, displaced the native Jumano tribe there.

In "Texas Indian Myths and Legends," author Jane Archer relates a Comanche myth about deer keeping Indians in a cave in the mountains because the deer secretly ate humans. After a Comanche medicine man and woman confronted the deer, they freed many Indian warriors from the cave who then defeated the deer in an epic battle. When the dust settled, the medicine man told the deer, "We are the strongest, so hereafter we will eat you. Your skin and bones, all of your body, will be used to help the People." The deer raised its head and conceded, "So be it." The discussion of antler restrictions apparently came much later.

Hill Country

As might be expected, based on geography, this area was somewhat of a melting pot of historic tribes. The Tonkawa originally lived between Austin and San Antonio, but around 1600 the Apaches, and later (1750) the Comanche pushed them east of the Hill Country. Tonkawa means "people of the wolf" because they believed they all descended from a mythical wolf. Because they saw themselves as descendants of the wolf, they refused to farm, saying that the wolf does not farm.



LEFT: Native Texans left petroglyphs depicting deer and their hunts. CENTER: Antlers and bones were extremely valuable for their use as punches and awls. RIGHT: Local flint was collected and fashioned into effective arrowheads.

Country where Spanish explorers first came into contact with them.

It's not clear where the Kiowa came from, but the Comanche were originally (in about 1600) in Wyoming and they eventually made their way down to Texas in the early 1700s. The Kiowa were one of the few tribes who had an alliance with the Comanche and together they were fierce, long-distance raiders and bison hunters. They occupied the Panhandle and lived on the southern Great Plains in teepees and painted scenes of battles and hunts on tanned bison and deerskins. These groups followed bison herds, gathered roots and berries and wore big game hides, sometimes adorned with elk teeth for decoration. They hunted deer (they called "areca") when the opportunity presented itself, but they specialized in the abundant bison populations.

Comanche were fierce warriors who chased most tribes out of their occupied regions. By 1740, Comanche pushed the Apaches south into South Texas (Lipan Apaches) and also west

The Hill Country was an area of incredible plant and animal diversity. They hunted deer, but also harvested crawfish, fish, clams, pecans, fruits, and roots. This tribe also sported some ink, with tattooed black lines on their bodies and faces.

South Texas

Coahuiltecan Indians are always associated with South Texas. They were not a single tribe or culture, but rather a collection of many Indian groups. Journals of the time record more than 140 different names of these people from San Antonio to Corpus Christi south to Mexico. Men hunted with bows and arrows to take javelina, deer, rabbits, bison, armadillos, rats, mice, snakes, lizards, frogs, and snails. While the men were out hunting (snails?), the women and children collected plants, cactus, mesquite beans, and fruits. These people wore very little clothing, if any. They were often naked with sandals made from fibers of the lechuguilla plant. Women wore skirts made of deer and rabbit skins. Many Coahuiltecan eventu-

ally married into the families of Mexican and Spanish settlers in South Texas.

In the late 1700s, Comanche from the north began to push farther south and drove Lipan Apaches out of the Hill Country and into South Texas. For the next 100 years Lipan Apaches made a living out of raiding towns and ranches for horses and other goods to trade with other tribes. With the increase in Spanish settlement from the south and aggressive Comanche raiding from the north, the Coahuiltecas had all but dissolved into the history books by 1825.

Trans-Pecos

The Jumano tribe is associated with the Trans-Pecos area originally. By 1680, Jumanos were already traveling westward to obtain horses from the Spaniards and traded goods with other tribes in the Hill Country and New Mexico. Around 1700 the Comanche pushed the Apaches out of the Panhandle and into West Texas, where they in turn displaced the Jumano.

The Mescalero Apaches were also skilled hunters, with the men spending most of their time hunting. It has been estimated that 35–40 percent of their diet was meat. Deerskins provided the raw material for arrow quivers, wrist guards, knife sheaths, pouches, moccasins, bow cases, and sometimes elaborate buckskin clothing. Hides were processed with tools such as scrapers made from the lower leg bones of deer.

Apache deer hunts were highly ritualized, with special observances beginning days before the hunt. Several different hunting styles have been described; all variations of still-hunts, stalking, or driving deer. There were also many rules and taboos regarding the handling and preparation of meat. When a deer was killed, it was turned with its head toward camp before

Once Comanches obtained horses, their culture changed dramatically and they became fierce warriors and effective buffalo hunters on the southern Great Plains.



HOW HISTORIC TEXANS USED DEER

Hide	Clothes, blankets, pouches, leggings, moccasins, breechcloth, belts, quiver
Meat	Most was dried as jerky or pemmican (mashed meat, berries, and fat)
Antlers	Flaking tools, awls, hair pins, ceremonial uses
Skull	Ceremonial uses
Tendons	Bows, lashing parts together, thread, glue
Hooves	Glue, rattles
Brain	Tanning hides
Bones	Awls, punches, scrapers, knife handles

it was field dressed. Deer were usually butchered in the field, and only the meat was packed back to camp on horseback, where it was either eaten fresh or dried into jerky. Fresh deer meat from a kill by a mountain lion or wolf was considered a gift from the gods and eaten.

History today

There were several hundred different tribes that lived within the Texas borders in a confusing network of relationships that we will never fully unravel. These historic people hunted deer, bison, and many other sources of protein. Deer were important not only for food, but also for clothing, tools and ceremonial purposes. A 4,000-year-old grave in South Texas was reported to have a deer hide carefully laid over the body. It was not uncommon for members of these tribes to be buried with beads of antler material, rattles made of deer hooves, tanned hides, and whole antlers.

Later, more waves of different "tribes" continued to sweep into Texas; the British, French, and Germans followed the Spaniards, Apache, and Comanche. It's clear that deer were a very important part of life for not only the various tribal nations, but also the early explorers, military outposts, and cattlemen that settled what is now the state of Texas. 🦌