

The Karankawa--An Often-Misunderstood People

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

Learn more about ETHA by visiting the website at www.easttexashistorical.org.

(Aug 28, 2022) When I was young and first heard about the Karankawa I became fascinated with them, although at the time I did not know that what had caused my enthrallment with this group of indigenous people was largely myth. For years, children and students of Texas history were told the Karankawa were cannibals, but we know now that was not the case. The stories also tended to suggest that the Karankawa were a fierce, war-like people who enjoyed combat. Certainly, the Karankawa could be vigilant in protecting their homes and land, but the image of them as warlike is generally inaccurate as they did not engage in armed violence unless provoked or attacked by a force outside their community. Finally, I think many people saw the Karankawa as somewhat mystical because we were told they had become “extinct” as a Native tribe. Recent scholarship disproves that as we know that while the Karankawa’s numbers were greatly reduced by succumbing to European disease and being violently evicted from their lands, they did not become “extinct,” but instead joined with other indigenous groups. Today, many descendants of the Karankawa are making an attempt to resurrect their language, customs, and distinct culture that made them one of Texas’ most celebrated groups of Native Americans.

The traditional homeland of the Karankawa was along the Gulf Coast roughly from Galveston Bay to Corpus Christi Bay and then a hundred or so miles inland. “Karankawa” became a collective term to several groups of people who shared a language and a culture and called themselves various different names such as Cocos, Cujanes, Copanes, and a few others lost to time. Where the name “Karankawa” emerged historians and anthropologists are not sure, but it could be a Choctaw or Cherokee word that meant “dog-lovers” or “dog-raisers,” so applied because they kept dogs, possibly originally foxes or coyotes that they domesticated and bred to become a distinct species. The dogs they kept with them were aids in their hunting.

The Karankawa were semi-nomadic who moved equally between Texas' barrier islands and the mainland. They chased food, generally bison and deer, but as a coastal people they also fished as well as gathered native edible crops. They traveled on foot on land and in a dugout canoe when traversing the water. Their canoes were fairly large vessels for that type, ones that could carry household goods and an entire family. They lived in what they called a ba-ak, but what we might term a "wigwam." As many as ten people might live inside a ba-ak, which had a willow pole frame covered with either animal skins or sea-rush mats. The Karankawa crafted pottery and baskets that they lined with natural tar found on the Gulf beaches and hunted with and used as a weapon a long bow and arrow made of red cedar that was almost as tall as the adult male who carried it. The Spanish described the Karankawa as tall and muscular, although the idea that most Karankawa males were seven feet tall or taller is another myth. They also extensively tattooed their bodies (both men and women) and each gender pierced the nipples of both breasts as well as the lower lip with canes.

The first instance of the Karankawa in the historical record came through the accounts of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish sailor/soldier who was a survivor of the doomed Pánfilo de Narváez expedition. It was Karankawas who found Cabeza de Vaca and his small band washed up on San Luis island and the Spaniard lived among the Karankawa for a number of years. No other accounts of the Karankawa surface until the reports of the 1685 La Salle expedition write about the reception they received from the Karankawa when they established Fort St. Louis near Matagorda Bay. Some of La Salle's men stole goods from a Karankawa village, which subsequently led the Natives to attack the French fort. In fact, the repeated conflict between the European invaders and the Karankawa is what led La Salle to leave Fort St. Louis to seek aid from Canada. Of course, La Salle's men killed him and the Karankawa attacked and burned the French fort, killing all but six children which they took captive but who were later liberated by a Spanish party.

Hoping to keep any other French incursions out of Texas, the Spanish established a mission near the site of Fort St. Louis in an attempt to Christianize the Karankawa. Such attempts were unsuccessful and Spanish aggressiveness toward Karankawas that refused to enter the mission exacerbated tensions between the two groups. The original mission closed, and the Spanish built another one farther inland on the San Antonio River, but while it was able to convince some Karankawas to move into the mission, it, too, eventually failed.

The tensions between the Karankawa and Spanish erupted into open warfare in 1779 after a band of Karankawas attacked a Spanish expedition in order to liberate ten Indians the Spanish had taken captive. Most Karankawa bands tried to remain out of the conflict, but the Spanish saw open warfare as a way to seize Karankawa lands and generally did not differentiate between peaceful and warring bands. The war lasted for over a decade, which had devastating results for the Karankawa. If war was not bad enough, in 1780 the tribe

suffered through a horrible smallpox epidemic, which eventually led the Karankawa to ask for peace. The Spanish authorities, however, refused such entreaties and a ceasefire did not occur until 1790.

The Karankawa had an uneasy peace with the Spanish, but when Mexico gained its independence in 1821 and encouraged American migration to Texas, tensions sparked between the new settlers and the Natives. Mexican authorities were unable to find a peace, so the American migrants, led by Stephen F. Austin, took an “initiative” and attacked the small group of Karankawas left alive in Texas. The Karankawas, now overwhelmed by numbers, agreed to move west, but by the time of the establishment of the Republic of Texas, the Karankawa homeland was fully subsumed and the few numbers of the tribe that were left had to incorporate into other Native groups for survival. For almost two hundred years the Karankawa were often referred to as “extinct,” which was not true. Today, the Karankawa Kadla (people of mixed Karankawa ancestry) have begun to band together to try to revitalize the language and customs of this proud people that once dominated the Gulf Coastal lands of Texas.

#