

## 7. Were the Karankawa Indians “Savages” and “Cannibals”?

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Research Group \_\_\_\_\_

Cabeza de Vaca is credited with one of the most remarkable journeys. His mission had been to find new riches for Spain. Over an eight-year period between 1528 and 1536, he traveled from Florida to Texas. After living with the Karanakawas, he walked across Texas to El Paso, then across northern Mexico to the Gulf of California. He and his companions traveled more than 5,000 miles. During his travels he kept a journal that described the vast wilderness, the people, the plants and animals between Florida and the Gulf of California. Before his expedition, no one imagined such animals as the opossum or the armadillo, or the variety of the tribes of Indians.

Cabeza de Vaca traveled from northern Florida by horsehide boat to the coast of central Texas. Here, his expedition was blown ashore on November 6, 1528. He and his men landed near a Karankawa campsite and took an earthen pot, a small dog and a few fish. A short time later he and his men were surrounded by a group of Karankawas. This is the first time that the Karankawas came in contact with Europeans. Cabeza de Vaca lived with the Karankawas for several years and his journal is considered the most complete account of the coastal Indians found among the 300 years of reports from Spaniards, Frenchmen, priests, pirates, soldiers and settlers. You and your researchers are going to survey the historical record to determine if the Karankawas were indeed the “savages” and “cannibals” as they were often referred to by early explorers and later the settlers.

**Materials:** none

**Procedure:**

### Part I: What were the Karankawas like when they met the first Europeans?

1. On a separate piece of paper, create a chart using the following format. As you read the journal entries, complete your chart.

**Chart 1: Journal Writers and their Attitudes**

Date	Journal entries by	Attitude towards Indians

Upon finding his group surrounded by the Karankawa, Cabeza de Vaca used sign language to pledge friendship and gave them gifts of beads. De Vaca recorded in his journal *Relacion* that the Indians promised to return with food. He stated that they came in the morning and at night for several days laden with fish and roots. These gave his men enough strength that they tried to leave on their makeshift boat. In trying to leave, three of

his men drowned and the rest were half-dead and naked. The Indians arrived with the usual evening meal. This is the reaction recorded by Cabeza de Vaca:

“The Indians, at sight of what had befallen us, and our state of suffering and melancholy destitution, sat down among us, and from the sorrow and pity they felt, they all began to lament so earnestly that they might have been heard at a distance, and continued so doing more than half an hour. It was strange to see these men, wild and untaught, howling like brutes over our misfortunes. It caused in me as in others, an increase of feeling and a livelier sense of our calamity.”

Based on this entry in Cabeza de Vaca’s journal about this meeting with the Karankawas, how would you describe the Karankawas?

2. In a later entry in his journal, Cabeza de Vaca writes: “...the natives were visited by a disease of the bowels, of which half of their number died. They conceived that we had destroyed them, and believing it firmly, they concerted among themselves to dispatch those of us who survived. When they were about to execute their purpose, an Indian who had charge of me told them not to believe we were the cause of those deaths, since if we had such power we should also have averted the fatality from so many of our people, whom they had seen die without our being able to minister relief, already very few of us remaining, and none doing hurt or wrong, and that it would be better to leave us unharmed.” What inferences can you make about the Karankawas from this journal entry?
3. Another incident that Cabeza de Vaca recorded in his journal involved Spanish cannibalism. He stated, “Five Christians, quartered on the coast, came to such extremity that they ate their dead; the body of the last one only was found unconsumed. . . This produced great commotion among the Indians, giving rise to so much censure that had they know it in season to do so, doubtless they would have destroyed any survivor...” Explain this journal entry. Look up the meaning of unfamiliar words.
  - a. Who were the cannibals?
  - b. What was the reaction of the Indians?
4. De Vaca wrote the following about the Karankawa and their children, “Those people love their offspring the most of any in the world and treat them with the greatest mildness.” He went on to note that, “When a child died, particularly a boy or young man, the whole village would weep morning, noon and night for an entire year; the elderly, however, “whose season had passed” were shown no sorrow. Cabeza de Vaca expressed his astonishment at children being nursed until they were 12 years old. He was told that this was necessary if the children were to stay strong in times when little food was available. What do these observations tell us about the Karankawas?

5. In their daily activities, de Vaca noted that the men hunted the game and the women set up and took down the camps. They also cooked, gathered firewood and cared for the children. He also noted that they were primarily monogamous. Rarely did parents divorce. However, divorce was common among childless couples. Married couples normally became part of the husband's family or band.

A successful hunting or fishing trip always led to a rousing celebration. He noted that they never failed to observe their festivals and danced and sang around roaring fires despite the white man's diseases that had killed half of them. He also noted that the environment was often hostile with cold northers in the winter and heat in the summer. In spite of these bad situations, Cabeza de Vaca remarked that these coastal Indians were "a merry people." Based on these observations what conclusions could you reach about the Karankawa social structure and attitudes?

6. Based on Cabeza de Vaca's observations, what conclusions could you make about the Karanakawas?
7. After Cabeza de Vaca lived with the Karankawas for several years, it was nearly 200 years before the Karankawas would encounter Europeans again. This time it was the French expedition lead by Rene-Robert Cavelier de La Salle. He landed at Matagorda Bay in 1685 and established Fort Saint Louis on Garcitas Creek. La Salle's party was well received by the Karankawas, who invited them to go on a Buffalo hunt. However, La Salle ordered some of his men to steal several Indian dugout canoes. The Karankawas had worked hard to make the dugouts using shell and stone tools and their lives depended on these boats. The Indians retaliated by killing several Frenchmen. Within a four-year period, La Salle was murdered by his men and his colony was reduced to five. They were the only ones to survive disease and regular attacks by the Karankawas. Jean Baptiste Talon, a boy who was adopted by the Indians after he was captured during an attack on Fort Saint Louis wrote:

"M. de La Salle would never have had war with the Karankawas if on arrival he had not high-handedly taken their canoes and refused them some little article that they asked him in return for them and for other services that they were ready to render to him. Nothing is easier than to win their friendship (than by giving them presents). But also, as they give voluntarily of what they have, they do not like to be refused. And, while they are never aggressors, neither do they ever forget the pride of honor in their vengeance."

Compare La Salle's and Cabeza de Vaca's interaction with the Karanakawa by completing the tables in Chart 2.

## Chart 2: Comparison of La Salle's and Cabeza de Vaca's Interaction with Indians

Explorer	Similarities	Differences
Cabeza de Vaca		
La Salle		

Explain the differences.

### Part II: What were the Indians like during the time of Spanish missions?

1. In the 1750s, a new relationship was established between the Karankawas and the Spaniards. The Spanish began an effort to convert the coastal tribes to Christianity and to the Spanish lifestyle. See Figure 7.1 for a location of the Spanish missions. The Spanish wanted them to live in the missions and to grow crops and raise cattle. The first such effort was the Espiritu Santo mission. In the fall of 1723, disagreements occurred between the Indians and the soldiers at the presidio of La Bahia. This resulted in fighting and the death of two Indians and Captain Domingo Ramon. The cause of the fighting was the attempt of Ramon to kill all the Indians. He had invited them to take part in a feast and instead tried to massacre them. A report by Fray Benito de Santa Ana noted:

“For the past twenty years, they have been living in heathendom and with mortal hostilities between the Indians and the soldiers.”

In an inspection visit in 1767-1768, Fray Jose de Solis noted:

“They are all barbarians, given to idleness, lazy, indolent. They are very gluttonous and ravenous and eat meat almost raw, roasted and dripping with blood. . . They are idle and given to all kinds of vices, especially the vices of lasciviousness, robbery, systematic thieving and dancing.”

In the 1770s, Fray Augustin Morfi reported, “the Karankawa nation was vile, cowardly, treacherous and very cruel . . . Many of them speak Spanish with great fluency, being in many instances, apostates from our missions.”

In your own words summarize the perception that the Spaniards held about the Indians.

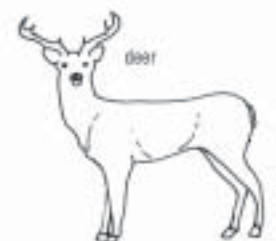


Fig. 7.1. Locations and relocations of Spanish Missions on the central Texas coast. (Source: Ricklis: The Karankawa Indians of Texas)

2. In the first instances of European and Karankawan meetings (de Vaca, La Salle), the Indians appeared to have an open attitude toward visitors to their lands. Barroto's report of a visit with Indians near Aransas Pass stated that the Indians "came to the beach to play games next to the galley" and Captain Yriarte received gifts of fish from the Indian women and he gave them presents of beads. In 1720, Beranger spent several days near a large shoreline camp and reported that the Indians offered his men food. They also helped his men gather enough acorns to fill six casks. Why do you think this early relationship changed?



3. Before domesticated animals were introduced, the reports indicated that bison were plentiful and were a source of food for the Indians. As late as 1768, reports indicate that bison abounded in the region. In his report about the La Bahia mission, Fray Lopez noted that there were more than 15,000 branded cattle on the mission ranches and those unbranded were a much greater number. A 1793 report of the plants and animals of the region makes no mention of the bison when it listed the region's edible animals
- What was the effect of the increasing number of cattle herds on the bison? Explain.
  - How would the decrease in bison affect the Indians?
  - What could they use to replace the bison as a source of food?
4. As early as 1751, the Spaniards considered the Indians a threat to their herds. Captain Piszina wrote from Mission La Bahia that he sent his lieutenant with a group of men, "...not to trouble them, but only to find out what they wanted and to prevent them from doing damage to the mission cattle, as they are known to have done in the past." As late as 1798, Fray Antonio Garavito wrote from the Refugio mission, "I fear that if the Indians from Rosario do not have enough to eat in their mission, they will wander about doing damage...the cattle will be destroyed, the herds driven off, the tame horses taken."
- Why do you think that the Indians took the cattle from the missions? Why would they want the cattle?
  - Why do you think the Indians replaced game animals such as bison with livestock as their main source of food?
  - What effect might the introduction of cattle to the coastal prairies have had on the relationship between the Indians and Spaniards?
5. The Karankawa lifestyle was hunting and gathering while the Spanish lifestyle was farming and ranching. How would people of different lifestyles living in the same area affect each other?



6. By the 1780s, fighting between the Karankawas and the Spaniards was frequent. The Indians would take livestock. The Spaniards would send out troops to find the Karankawas to punish them. The Karankawas would flee to the coast. The Spaniards did not have the equipment or knowledge to chase them in the maze of marshes and lagoons. Don Luis Cazorla, commander of La Bahia wrote to Governor Pacheco in 1787 that it was impossible to follow the Indians into marshes and bays to punish them. He proposed gathering them all in the mission and if there were problems, “we could make reprisal and expel them once and for all. With this, without violating our treaties with them (for which I can see no justification in humanity, hospitality or natural law), we would achieve extermination. This is the view which I have developed of the aforesaid coastal Indians—with no other purpose than that of serving God and the King and the public interest.” Explain the attitude presented by Carzorla.
7. In 1791, Fray Manuel de Silva who was in charge of all the missions in Texas visited the missions. He also visited with the Karankawas to evaluate the possibility of a new mission for the coastal Indians. See Figure 1 for the location of the missions. The Refugio mission was more successful than the Rosario mission. In de Silva’s report to the king, he stated, “Finally, in spite of their crudeness, they heard, without fear or intimidation, the high nature of the venerable mysteries of Our Holy Faith. Nor did the subordination to the civil laws and mercies of Your Majesty appear too hard on them.” He also wrote to the King in 1793 that “...attracted by the kindness with which my companion and I treated them, they would later come to establish and keep an inviolable peace with us Spaniards, a peace that so far they have not broken, whereas previously they made hostilities, committing robberies and murders.” What was the difference in the attitude towards the Karankawas between Carzorla and de Silva? What are some possible explanations for these differences?
8. Fray Juan Garza who was along with de Silva actually recorded a Karankawan leader’s response to the new mission. “Father, don’t deceive yourself, for we don’t want to go to the Mission (of Rosario). We will do nobody harm, we will go our own way, and let the Spaniards come also to our country, with the assurance that we will receive them as friends, but we do not want to leave our country. If you want to, put a mission here on the coast for us. We will gather in it, all of us who are Christians, and we will bring with us all the heathens that are on this coast.” Explain the significance of this in the Indian and Spanish relations.
9. On the whole, the new mission at Refugio appeared to provide a peaceful connection between the Karankawas and the Spaniards. In 1797, Elquezabel wrote, “From what I have seen of their (the Karankawas’) manners and ways of doing things, there does not appear

to be any bad intention, or anything that one could find suspicious, or any artfulness in their thinking.”

Examine the location of the missions (Figure 7.1). It was reported that the Indians would not settle in the missions around San Antonio. The other coastal prairie missions except the short-lived Espirtu Santo were located beyond the inland edge of the Karankawan home territory. The Refugio mission appeared to have the greatest success in converting the Indians to Christianity and getting the Indians to adapt to the Spanish cultural patterns. The Indians would visit the missions for food. The missions used gifts and food to bring the Indians into the missions. Depending on the time of year, the Indians would stay a short time and then leave for the coast or the inland prairies. What might be the explanation for the success of the Refugio mission?

10. The records of the Spanish missions between 1722 and 1798 indicate that the Indians would enter a mission in the spring and then leave and return again in the fall. During the winter they would leave the mission for their coastal camps. Table 1 shows the arrival times of the Karankawas and the number of groups that arrived per month at the coastal missions. Based on the data, what is the pattern of Indians at the missions? What might explain the pattern?

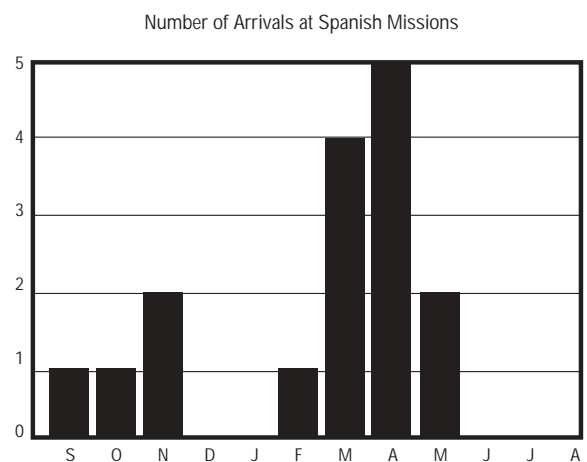


Table 1. Arrival of Karankawas at Coastal Prairie Missions and the Number of Arrivals per Month. (Source: Ricklis: The Karankawa Indians of Texas)

11. Archeological evidence shows that Karankawas had a seasonal adaptive pattern. Examine Figures 7.2 and 7.3.

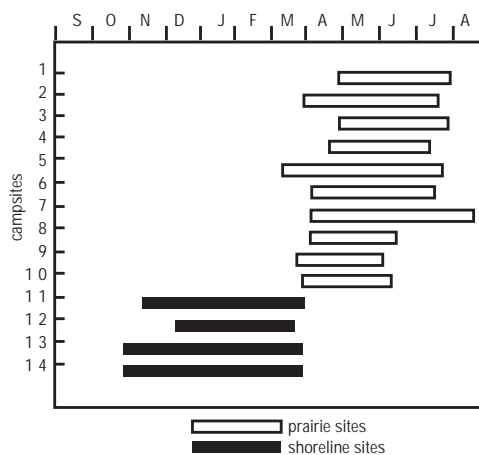


Fig. 7.2. Months Karankawas camped on the Group 1 shoreline and Group 2 prairie sites.

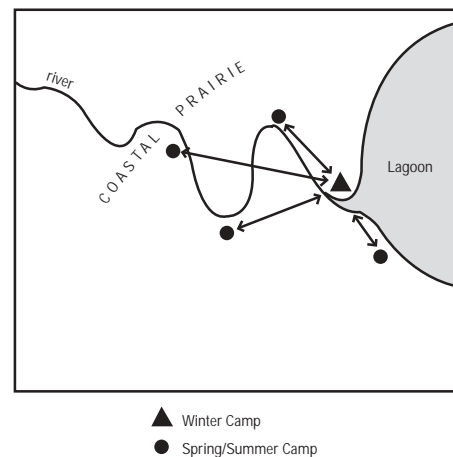


Fig. 7.3. Diagram showing basic patterns of seasonal patterns of Karankawas.

Source for 7.2 and 7.3: Ricklis: The Karankawa Indians of Texas)

- a. When did the Indians set up camp along streams in the prairie?
- b. When did they camp along the bay shore lines?
- c. When did they move between the shore lines of bays and the inland prairie camps?

12. Analyze the data from Table 1 and Figure 7.3. Is there a relationship between the Karankawas seasonal patterns and that of their appearances at the missions?

**Part III: What were the Karankawas like after 1830?**

1. From 1790 to about 1830, the Karankawas had established an ongoing, peaceful relationship. What was the relationship of the Karankawas adaptive strategy of moving between the coastal and prairie environments and their visits to the missions? Did they change their patterns to visit the missions? Explain.
2. An archeologist has stated that the Karankawas were able to adapt to the Spanish because the Indians treated the mission as an ecological resource. Explain.

**Part IV: What were the Karankawas like during the Anglo-American settlement?**

1. The Spaniards maintained a policy toward the Indians of getting them to adapt to the Spanish cultural patterns and converting the Indians to Christianity. The Anglo-Americans wanted to permanently acquire land to build settlements. How would the Anglo settlers desires and lifestyle affect the Karankawas?

2. At least five epidemics were recorded in Texas prior to 1751, any of which might have reached the Karankawa. Records indicate that the smallpox or measles epidemic of 1749 did reach the Indians. By 1767, the number of Karankawa were greatly reduced. The numbers then appeared to remain stable until about 1820. Analyze the population curve for the Karankawas in Figure 7.4. What are some possible explanations for the population drops and the level periods?

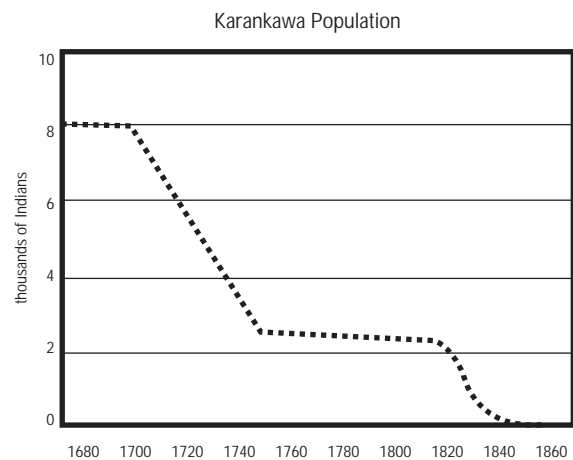


Fig. 7.4. Historical population curve for the Karankawas.

3. Beginning around 1820, Anglo-Americans began to receive land grants for settlement on the coastal prairies just inland from the Karankawa territory. Hypothesize as to the impact of the land grants on the Indians.

4. From about 1820, hostilities between the Karankawa and Anglo-Americans were ongoing. By 1825, Stephen F. Austin was successful in campaigning against the Karankawas. They signed a peace treaty, but continued to harass the settlers by stealing cattle and produce. Why do you think the Indians continued to take cattle, produce and other items? Could their taking or “stealing” be related to their hunting and gathering lifestyle? Explain.
5. The problems between the Karankawas and the settlers continued. The Mexican government was finally called in and about 50 percent of the Indians were killed. Even more died during the Texas Revolution. The Indians were confused about whose side they were on. They would act as allies of both the Mexicans and the Texans. By the 1850s, the Karankawas had disappeared as a group. Most of the Anglo settlers were glad to see the “man-eaters” gone. The “giant Kronks” driven by their “love of human flesh” had been wiped out. Reports stated these “filthy savages” couldn’t ranch or farm and they were lazy. They ate the horses they stole. They reported that the Karankawas smelled very bad and ran around naked. It was also reported that the Karankawa tortured and murdered decent people and showed no mercy toward children. The Karankawa crossed the territorial line that Stephen F. Austin had drawn so he proclaimed there would be no way to subdue the “Kronks, but by extermination.” This “disgusting race” was justifiably doomed. These were the feelings and thoughts of the new Texans. How are these descriptions different from those of Cabeza de Vaca and other early Europeans?

How do these descriptions differ from those of the Spaniards during the mission period and how are they alike?
6. What are some possible explanations for the different relationships and interactions with the Karankawas? (Refer to your completed Chart 1, page 547).
7. Based on what you have learned, how would you describe the Karankawas?
8. Were the Karankawas “savages” and cannibals? Explain.
9. Use Chart 1 (page 547) to create a graphic time line to indicate the Karankawas’ interactions from Cabeza de Vaca in November 1528 to the 1850s. Use drawings to illustrate the interactions on your timeline.