

## The First People of Ballona

The Tongva Native Americans who populated the Ballona Wetlands area arrived from the east, as desertification made the formerly lush Great Basin a less hospitable place in which to live. This westward migration occurred between 9,000 BP (before present) and 2500 BP. The Tongva are distantly related to the Comanche and the Hopi Pueblo indigenous populations. Their name means simply "The People".

The Tongva were the indigenous inhabitants of the Greater Los Angeles area. They could be found as far east as the base of Mount Wilson, about 40 miles inland. Their territory was bound by Malibu in the north and Laguna Beach to the south. They also occupied some of the Channel Islands, including Santa Catalina, San Clemente and San Nicholas.

The people were somewhat short and heavy-set by European standards. They were also lighter skinned than the indigenous people further to the south, in Mexico and Central America. They had brown or reddish hair, and no baldness. The Tongva washed their hair with urine as necessary to kill lice; this practice might have accounted for the lightness of their hair color. (Some Spanish explorers made written mention of the "blond "Indians of California). The women used red ochre, a type of clay heavy in iron, as sunscreen.

Women wore their hair loose and long. The men also wore their hair long, but wound the top part in a top knot bun, fastened with pins of bone or wood. Only the men wore hairpins! This was done to keep the hair out of their eyes when hunting or fishing.

Women wore knee-length skirts or front and back aprons of skins, grasses, shredded bark or strings made from yucca fiber. Men went naked or wore loin cloths. The children wore no clothing. Of course, this minimal approach to clothing was practiced during the warmer months of the year. The Tongva also created garments and wraps of animal skins, usually rabbit, to be worn during the cooler seasons. All went barefoot except when traveling in cactus country or rough mountain areas.

Their village site in the Ballona area is known as Area 62. However, the Tongva called it Sa-Angna. It is believed that the actual location was east of the saltmarsh, along the base of the Westchester bluffs, in the area of what is now Playa Vista. At that time Centinela Creek flowed freely in this location, providing a source of fresh water for the settlement. It is thought to be approximately 1500 feet long and consisted of several clusters of dwellings, known as "Kiiys" (pronounced like "keys" with a slight accent, or glottal stop). The Spaniards called these structures "jacals". Each cluster contained four or five kiiy, placed 15-20 feet apart. It is estimated that about 100 people resided here.

The kiiy were dome-shaped and framed with bent poles. The branches of the Arroyo Willow, which can still be found in abundance at Ballona, were used as the framework poles. Tule grass, a type of bulrush found in freshwater habitats, was dried out and used to cover the frame. Tules were also dried and

woven together to serve as floormats inside the kiiy. There was a hole at the top of the dwelling to let out the smoke from a fireplace in the center of the structure. The model of a kiiy located at the entrance to the wetlands is much smaller than the actual kiiys used by the Tongva. The Tongva's kiiys were probably three to four times larger than our reproduction, and served mainly as sleeping quarters for an extended family.

Cooking was done outside over open fires. It was a communal activity. Each group of dwellings had a large structure without walls to shade the Tongva as they worked, called a ramada by the Spanish. The ramada was also framed with willow branches, with the roof covered by tules.

Each cluster also had a raised storehouse, or granary, for acorns. The granary was a large basket woven from young, pliable willow branches and lined with the leaves of the Bay Laurel tree. The leaves served two purposes. They helped to keep the acorns dry, and the pungent laurel acted as a natural repellent, which prevented insect infestation of this very important food supply. The granaries were placed on a stand made of poles that elevated them about six feet above the ground, further protecting the acorns from contamination.

The acorns of various species California oak, particularly the Coast Live Oak, provided the source for the staple of the Tongva diet: acorn mush. Acorn gathering was often a group activity, which occurred annually in the fall, when the acorns became ripe and mature. Foraging groups walked to the nearby hills where Coast Live Oak grew in profusion. This includes the Baldwin Hills to the east, which are visible from Ballona. The Tongva carried the nuts back to their villages in burden baskets that were able to carry up to 200 pounds! Basketry hats were worn to ease the pressure of the carrying strap that went across the forehead. These hats were also used as measuring standards for acorns and seeds. After the acorns were gathered and shelled, they were pounded in a stone or wooden mortar. The bitter tannin in the meal was then leached out with water, with several rinse cycles necessary. After that the meal was boiled in tightly woven watertight baskets by dropping super-heated rocks of steatite, or soapstone, into the water. The rocks were moved constantly with looped stirring sticks, so as not to scorch the basket. The Tongva ate the mush cold. This and most other food preparation was done communally in a central area of each cluster of homes.

The Black Walnut was another important plant resource. The meat of the walnut was eaten and the inner shells were used to make a black dye. The Tongva were excellent basket weavers and used this dye to decorate their handiwork. The empty shells were then filled with asphaltum. Asphaltum is a sticky black substance that naturally seeps up from the ground in the Los Angeles area, like at the La Brea Tar Pits and on our local beaches. Pieces of the abalone shell were then pressed into the asphaltum, and the walnut halves were used to play a type of dice game. The Tongva loved gambling games!

The sea was an abundant source of food. The Tongva caught small schooling fish by using nets, and larger fish with hooks of abalone shell or bone. The fiber from both the nets and the fishing line came from the milkweed plant. Although they did not hunt whale, occasionally one would wash up on shore, and the meat would be harvested. They also dug for clams and collected shellfish and crustaceans at low tide. They steamed these shelled creatures in pits layered with hot coals and seaweed. Ballona Creek

also teemed with fish and freshwater crustaceans. Steel head Trout would head up the creek annually to spawn, as they did in all the local rivers and streams at that time.

Land animals were hunted for their fur and meat. The region was full of wild game, including bear. Grizzly Bears were present in the Santa Monica Mountains, and would come down to take advantage of that steelhead spawning. The Tongva kept dogs that were used to help hunt the bear, both Grizzly and the Black Bear (the Black Bear is still present in our local mountains today). Deer and Elk were hunted from blinds. Arrows were fashioned from Elderberry Branches, with heads made of obsidian. The Tongva traded for this volcanic rock with tribes from the north. Sometimes a hunter would dress in a full deerskin, head, antlers and all, and stand downwind from a herd of deer. They would also rub their bodies with California Sage Brush to camouflage their scent. This would allow them to get close enough to make a clean kill.

Smaller animals were also important to the diet. Burrowing animals were smoked out of their holes, and rabbits were herded into nets. According to village edict, neither a hunter nor a fisherman could eat his own kill or catch. This rule helped to prevent hoarding.

The many plants of Ballona augmented the food supply and also provided materials for various uses. California Sage Brush was dried and then brewed into a tea that eased childbirth. The roots of Saltbush were dried and ground into a type of flour, used to make bread or mush. The Salt Grass was beaten over a basket and salt crystals harvested to be used as seasoning. The berries of the Lemonadeberry plant were soaked in water to make a refreshing lemony drink. The fluffy down of Cattails was used as diapering material. It was also used as tinder to catch a spark made with a drilling stick. The roots and bark of the Arroyo Willow were chewed in order to relieve pain. The willow, which is in the *salix* family, contains the same ingredient that is used in aspirin, which is salicylic acid. The roots and leaves of the Jimson Weed (or Sacred Datura) were brewed into tea used for inducing dreams for religious purposes. Sometimes the leaves were also dried and smoked as a treatment for asthma. Mugwort tea was used as an antidote for poison oak. The seeds of the Lupine were chewed at times by the women to induce a miscarriage. As these people were hunter and gatherers, it was important that children be spaced properly for the survival of the group. While it is possible for a woman gather food with one infant on the hip, it is monumentally more difficult to perform these duties while trying to carrying two pre-toddlers. (This last bit of information is for your own personal knowledge, and need not be shared with the students!)

Due to these plentiful resources, the Tongva were able to establish a community of more permanence than that which is usually found in hunter and gatherer societies.

They also had a very effective and far-reaching trading network that enhanced their comfort level and provided social stability. In fact, abalone shells used for trade have been found as far east as the Mississippi. The Tongva's great skill as boat builders helped to facilitate this trading. The Native Americans of Southern California were the only early people of North America to make seaworthy boats out of planks instead of just one hollowed out log. Their boats were made of pine split into boards. The boards were steam bent in hot sand pits. They then sanded these boards with sharkskin. A sticky

mixture of asphaltum and pine pitch, called yop, was applied to the seams and joints in order to waterproof the vessels. They were then coated with ochre and pine pitch as further waterproofing. These incredibly seaworthy boats allowed the mainland Tongva to trade with the island-dwelling Tongva. This was very important, as steatite, or soapstone, was quarried on Catalina Island. Steatite can be heated directly over fire without breaking, so it was carved into cooking bowls. Steatite chunks were also superheated and dropped into watertight baskets in order to bring liquids to a boil. Meat, seeds and acorns were traded for this important material. The Tongva and the Chumash to the north were the only two groups that utilized this sophisticated boat building technology. It is unclear which group was the first to develop these techniques. The canoe builders were the members of elite guilds, and highly respected within their societies.

Specialized technologies also facilitated better food gathering and cooking techniques. The Tongva were highly skilled at basketry, and made seed beaters, winnowing trays and mush boilers using local plant materials. They also fashioned digging sticks, which were weighted with stones that had been carved into donut shapes. The digging sticks were used to hunt for roots and bulbs.

The Tongva also had a codified and complex leadership system. Each settlement had their own leaders, and several settlements would form a confederation overseen by a more powerful chief. Power was passed down along hereditary lines, but a generation could be skipped if it was thought that the next heir in line was unsuitable for the job. Women held positions of authority and leadership as well.

Strong spiritual traditions were in place as well. Every settlement had a shaman, or holy man, and complicated rituals were held for various occasions throughout the year.

The prosperity and success of the Tongva began its decline when increasing contact occurred with the western Europeans. In the winter of 1604-1605 the explorer Vizcaino came into Santa Monica Bay. He was followed by various exploratory parties, and then the Spanish monks. The Tongva were marched against their will to build a mission in San Gabriel. The Spanish gave them a new name: the Gabrielinos. This means the people of the San Gabriel Mission. Families were split up, and chiefs and leaders killed. European diseases to which the Tongva had no immunity further decimated the population. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century 250,000 people had been reduced to 9,000.

Today there are still surviving members of the Tongva that live amongst us. Some of them are very hard at work preserving what remains of their culture and educating other about the first inhabitants of the Los Angeles region. They are also pursuing the goal of achieving Federal recognition as a tribe. The state of California and the cities of Los Angeles and San Gabriel already recognize the Tongva as a tribe.

NOTE TO DOCENTS: This paper contains lots of information that can be used to share with the students to enhance their experience. Fourth graders in California study the missions as part of their curriculum, with not much time given to learning the ways and traditions of the peoples that were displaced (and worse) by the mission system. At Ballona we have a wonderful opportunity to show the children how natural materials were used by the Tongva to sustain their way of life. In fact, it could be said that

indigenous people were the original practitioners of the increasingly popular (and increasingly necessary!) sustainable living. That said, it is important to stick with providing information about the lifestyle that the Tongva lived pre-European contact. We do not want to politicize their field trip, so please avoid the use of words like “genocide”. Occasionally you will be asked “What happened to the Tongva?” The appropriate response would be to explain that they were taken from their villages to help to build the Mission San Gabriel. If your questioner is persistent you might ask how they would feel if someone asked **them** to leave their home to help them build a home for others thirty miles away. The inquiries rarely go this deep, but it is good to be prepared. Some of the students will only know the Tongva as Gabrielinos; the response to this would be that we refer to them as Tongva; Gabrielino was the name given to them by the missionaries. Please **do** always refer them as Tongva; it is historically correct. In addition, it is nice to point out that the Tongva still do live amongst us, they just live in houses like we live in, and fish with fishing poles instead of nets woven with milkweed fibers.

ABOUT “THE ISLAND OF THE BLUE DOLPHINS” BY SCOTT DELL: This is a very popular book, often included in the state’s fourth grade curriculum, about “the lost woman of San Nicholas Island”. Although it contains much information about how this woman lived alone on San Nicholas Island, it is not historically accurate. Upon her “rescue” from the island, she was taken to Santa Barbara, where it was discovered that she could not communicate with the Hokun speaking Chumash of that area, or with those who spoke the Tongva language. The latest theory is that she was the wife of an Aleutian fisherman, who were active in the area in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Upon her arrival in Santa Barbara she consumed large quantities of fruit and unfamiliar foods, and she perished within five weeks. There are some fun facts in the book that can be mentioned on your tours; specifically you can point out the cormorants that we often see on the creek and explain that this is the type of bird whose feathers she used to fashion a cape for herself.

#### SOURCES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Alcala, Martin *The Gabrielino/Tongva Indians of California Tribal History*

Altshcul, Jeffrey H. and Grenda, Donn R. *Islanders and Mainlanders: Pre-historic Context to the Southern California Bight* 2002, SRI Press, Tucson, Arizona

Eagle Rock-Highland Park 4-H Club *Mixed Nuts: Tongva Use of Southern California Mixed Oak/Black Walnut Woodland*, 1997

Thomson, Mary Leighton *The Gabrielino* Playa del Rey, CA AdProse

Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History-Chumash Section (Although our region was populated by the Tongva, the two cultures shared many technologies, especially the building of boats. The museum has a life sized reproduction of one of these vessels).

Bowers Museum in Santa Ana- Some great examples of Tongva basketry and other artifacts

Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History-Tongva Section

