

INDIAN LIFE IN TEXAS  
Alvar Nunez, Cabeza de Vaca (1528)

This is an edited version of part of *The Relation of Alvar Nunez, Cabeza de Vaca* taken from the translation of B. Smith. It discusses some of the strange things related in this first written account of Indian life in Texas. The Indians described are primarily Karankawa and Coahuiltecans.

The Indians of Malhado:

[Most historians agree that he landed near the southern tip of Galveston Island.]

To this island we gave the name Malhado [misfortune]. The people we found there are large and well-formed. They have no arms but bows and arrows, in the use of which they are very skillful. They have their under-lip bored and wear in it a piece of cane the breadth of half a finger. Their women are accustomed to great toil.

These people love their children more than any other people in the world, and treat them with the greatest gentleness. When a son dies the parents and kindred weep, and so does everyone else. The wailing for him continues a whole year. They begin before dawn every day, the parents first, and after them the whole town. They do the same at noon and at sunset. After a year of mourning has passed, the funeral rites are performed. They mourn in this manner for all the dead except the aged. For these they show no regret. They say their season has passed, that they have no pleasure, and that while they live they only occupy the earth and take food from the young people. Their custom is to bury all the dead, except such persons as have been physicians. These they burn.

When they are sick they send for a doctor. He cures by blowing his breath and laying his hands upon them. After he has applied the remedy they give him not only all that they have themselves, but seek among their relatives for more to give. The doctor sometimes makes a small cut over the seat of the pain and then sucks the wound. They also make cauteries [burns] with fire. This is a remedy held in high repute by them, and I have tried it on myself and found it beneficial. After burning the sick man they blow on the spot, and then the patient thinks that he is relieved.

The men in all of this region go naked. The women cover the loins with wool that grows on trees. The damsels dress themselves with deerskins.

These people have a custom of weeping half an hour when they meet or when they go visiting. The weeping over, the one that is visited rises up and gives the other everything that he has and the guest accepts it. After a little while the visitor carries the gift away, often going without saying a word.

## The Indians of The Interior:

[Most historians agree that, in their wanderings, they went southwest, crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico, then crossed back into Texas, before going southwest again and again crossing into Mexico – perhaps near El Paso.]

Castillo and Estevan went inland. The people there are all good archers. They have fine forms, although they are not so large as those we left near the coast. Roots of two or three kinds are their principal food, and they hunt for them over the face of all the country. The roots are hard to dig. They require roasting two days, and then many of them are very bitter. Occasionally they kill a deer, and at times catch fish; but the quantity of food thus obtained is so small and the hunger so great that they eat spiders, the eggs of ants, worms, lizards, salamanders, snakes, and poisonous vipers. They also eat earth and wood, and I honestly think that if there were stones in their country they would eat them. They save the bones of the fishes, snakes, and other animals which they consume, so that they may afterwards beat them together and eat the powder.

The women toil very hard and do a great deal of labor. Of the whole day they have only six hours in the night for repose. The rest of the night they pass in heating the ovens to bake the roots which they eat. At daybreak they begin to dig the roots, bring wood and water to their houses, and prepare other things that may be necessary.

The majority of the people are great thieves; for, though they are free to divide with each other, on turning the head, even a son and a father will steal from one another. They are great liars, and also great drunkards, which they become from drinking a certain liquor made from roots.

These Indians are so used to running that without rest or fatigue they can follow a deer from morning to night. In this way they kill many of them. They pursue them until tired down and then overtake them in the race and kill them with a curved club. Their houses are of woven matting placed upon four hoops. They move every two or three days to look for food, carrying their houses on their backs.

They are a merry people, considering the hunger they suffer, for they never cease their festivities. They plant nothing for food. To them the happiest time of the year is the season of eating prickly pears, for then they are hungry no longer, but eat day and night, and pass all the time in dancing and fornication. They squeeze out the juice of the pears, open them, and set them to dry. When dry they are packed in baskets like figs. The peel is beaten to powder.