Sun goes down where no Karankawa lives

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Roy Bedichek, the great Texas naturalist, called this part of the coast "Karankaway Country." He wrote a book by that name in which he related the story of a Karankawa warrior mesmerized by watching the evening sun go down.

A long time ago, the Karankawas occupied the coast from Galveston Island to Corpus Christi, drifting in and out of their favorite haunts. The men were tall, over 6 feet, and carried bows of red cedar as tall as they were. They could use those bows with great accuracy. They smeared their almost naked bodies with alligator grease. The men's hair was braided, with rattlesnake rattles tied at the end; they made a rustling sound when they walked. They poled their dugouts on the lagoons and bays and ate great quantities of shellfish. Their guttural language consisting of whistles and sighs was like nothing ever heard. And they were cannibals.

Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked on the coast in 1528. When he encountered Karankawas, the curious Indians reached out to touch his face, which Cabeza took to be a gesture of shared human identity.

Two decades later, 300 survivors of a shipwrecked Spanish fleet washed ashore on Padre Island. It was summer, when Karankawas camped on the island. The Indians gave food to the survivors, but the Spanish noted that, for friends, they had many arrows. They soon put them to use, slaying the Spanish as they tried to flee in the sand dunes. All but two of the 300 were slain.

In 1684, Sieur de la Salle's French colonists built Fort St. Louis on Garcitas Creek off Matagorda Bay. The Karankawas attacked the fort, killing all the colonists but five children, whom they took away. A Spanish expedition later recovered the five children. One of them told how he went hungry for three days during a cannibal feast. And he told how the Karankawas cried when the French youngsters were taken away.

French seaman Jean Beranger explored the coast in 1720. He landed on Harbor Island where he watched Karankawas whip the water to attract fish, then shoot them with their arrows.

Fray Gaspar Jose de Solis in 1767 recorded a Karankawa celebration in which a victim was tied by a fire, while the Indians with sharp knives would dance up to the victim and slice off a morsel, roast it in the fire, and eat it before the victim. But de Solis didn't see this himself; he got it secondhand. He said Father Joseph Escovar of the Mission Nuestra Senora del Refugio found the Karankawas to be "barbarous and lazy." Escovar's low opinion was shaped by the fact that the Indians preferred their liberty as cannibals than living as converted Christians by the mission.
About 1818, Jean LaFitte's pirates on Galveston Island kidnapped a Karankawa girl. In retaliation, the Indians captured and ate two of Lafitte's men. This led to a battle in which 30 warriors were killed. They left Galveston Island to the pirates.

Not long after this, a de Leon of Victoria grew tired of the Indians eating his cattle; they didn't get the concept of ownership. This de Leon tried to poison the whole tribe. He bought what he thought was arsenic, but the storekeeper, not wanting to be a party to murder, gave him cream of tartar instead. He cooked a pot of hominy, added the supposed poison, and gave it to the Indians. He was amazed next day when they came back for more.

In the 1820s, Stephen F. Austin's colonists signed a treaty with the Karankawas, but killings on both sides continued. Austin wrote that the cannibals were "universal enemies to man" and that the approach of civilization "will be the signal for their extermination."

Mexico's Gen. Manuel de Mier y Teran, on an inspection tour of Texas, wrote in admiration that Austin's colonists knew how to deal with the Karankawas. "If the Indians kill a settler, a large party of settlers would set out to hunt down and kill 10 of the tribe, of any age or sex." By such decimation, the Karankawas had become almost extinct.

By the time of the Texas Revolution, they were very few. J. W. Willbarger saw a pitiful remnant of the tribe near Refugio. In 1844, a few ragged survivors were killed near Corpus Christi by a ranging company from Mexico under the command of Capt. Rafael Aldrete. Ten years later, J. H. Kuykendall reported that the last of the Karankawas - a dozen families - were living in Tamaulipas, Mexico. From there, they disappeared.

But they were not quite the last. A Karankawa sister and brother - Mary and Tom Amaroo - were taken in by the Welder-Power family. Tom enlisted in the Confederate army and was killed in action. Mary married a man named Pathoff, who was also killed in the war. Mary (Amaroo) Pathoff, the last full-blooded Karankawa, was buried in Beeville.

Almost nothing about the Karankawas remains, not even the place names of their old coastal stomping grounds. With no written record, and with history being written by - or distorted by - the winners, the Karankawa story from their point of view will never be told. They were hunted like animals, pushed off their land, reduced to misery itself. Their world collapsed. Were they the ferocious, savage man-eaters as depicted? Probably. But still I return to the text of Roy Bedichek:

"Early explorers . . . report a curious habit of the Karankawan warrior. At times he was fascinated by the sight of the sun submerging itself in the sea. The wonder of sunset over water was too much for the mind of this simple savage. He became still as a statue, oblivious to his surroundings, gazing spellbound at the point on the horizon where the waters had closed over and quenched this great ball of fire . . . Finally, in the deepening dusk, he stirs. The fire has gone out. The sea is gray again. The rattles awaken as he moves away toward his camp behind the dunes."
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