

Tonkawa Indians

Before the time of the Spanish explorers, Native Americans inhabited the open ranges and woodlands of Texas. One group that made its mark in history is the Tonkawa Indians. These people were thought to have come to Texas as early as the seventeenth century. Tonkawa, a Waco Indian word, means, “they all stay together,” which eloquently describes this group of nomadic Indian tribes.

There is scant archeological evidence of the Tonkawa people, and historians have several theories on the tribal structure and lifestyles of this group. Some believe the Tonkawa were actually a group of independent bands of Indians, which may have included the Sana, Toho, Tohaha, Cantona, and Cava Indians. In the early eighteenth century these bands of Indians were thought to have joined together to form Tonkawa Proper. There is some evidence that the Tonkawa actually came to Texas much earlier as one cohesive group of Tonkawa Indians that lived further north.

These nomadic hunters lived in tepees made from buffalo hide, grass and other materials. Tepees allowed bands to easily pack their homes and move with the migrating herds of buffalo or to outrun their enemies. An elected tribal chief led each band of Tonkawa, and each band was composed of maternal clans. Unlike many societies that are patriarchal, the Tonkawa clan membership followed on the side of the mother. When a couple got married, the man would go live with his wife’s clan, and the children would become members of their mother’s clan as well. As a society that always stays together, the Tonkawa established a system that ensured all widows, widowers, and orphaned children were taken care of if their family members died.

There is little evidence that sheds light on the Tonkawa life style, but what is known is that they were not a people that practiced elaborate ceremonies. Marriage was not marked with an elaborate ceremony, but death was. When a member of the tribe died there would be a three-day period of mourning, followed by a several day pipe cleanse to purify those contaminated by death.

As change came to the Texas landscape, the Tonkawa continued to adapt by forming partnerships over time with bands such as the Apaches, Comanches, and finally even the Anglo settlers. As their alliances shifted, the areas in which the Tonkawa lived also changed, and subsequently so did their way of life. Turning from buffalo hunting to gathering of oysters and pecans, the Tonkawa had to adjust their way of life to the different environments that they inhabited. During the Civil War, the Delaware, Shawnee, Wichita, and Caddo Indians attacked the Tonkawa, killing half of their population.

After the war the Tonkawa Indians settled near the abandoned Fort Griffin in northern west Texas, and as time went on they intermarried with the Lipan Apaches. Today the remaining members of the Tonkawa are making efforts to preserve their heritage. Though only a few remaining descendants of the Tonkawa are alive, they are staying true to their name as a people that “all stay together.”

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