
Tribal Homeland

During the past two centuries, Catalina Island has been relatively unpopulated. This was not the case centuries ago when large numbers of Native Islanders called Catalina their home. Experts believe that as many as four different tribes have lived on Catalina during the past 30,000 years.

Although most of the information about Catalina's earliest tribes has been lost, archaeologists have discovered a great deal about the more recent tribes. Much of the evidence we have of them has been gathered from "middens"—ancient dumps where they tossed everything they no longer needed. These middens mark their settlements and have given archaeologists information about their diets and their habits. It has been estimated that there are more than 2000 middens on Catalina, only half of which have been discovered. One can still identify the locations of these ancient middens by finding soil that has been blackened by fish oil and littered with mounds of crumbling abalone shells. Even today, almost every time a foundation for a new building is dug on the Island, remains of her once-flourishing tribes can be found.

Evidence from these middens indicates that around 2000 B.C. as many as 2500 lived on Catalina Island at three major settlements, near today's Little Harbor, Avalon, and Two Harbors (Isthmus Cove and Cat Harbor). In addition to these major settlements, hundreds of other smaller sites have been located. Some of these smaller sites were permanent, while others served as temporary hunting and fishing bases.

There is much that is unknown about Catalina's Native Islanders. Our written knowledge of them did not begin until the Spanish arrived in 1542 and began chronicling their observations. Before

their arrival, we have only theories based on the evidence that has been discovered from middens, burial grounds, and cave paintings. One of these theories is that Catalina was populated by a series of racially different groups.

Many believe that the first of these tribes were unusually tall. This is based on evidence gathered when burial grounds were excavated and looted in the 19th century. Many of the oldest and most deeply buried skeletons were over seven feet tall. By the time the Spanish arrived, there was no evidence of these extremely tall Islanders. There is evidence, though, that the people described by the Spanish were racially different from the tribes on the mainland. The Spanish described the people they found on Catalina as "fair and ruddy of complexion" and "white and blonde."

Experts question the origins of these different civilizations. Some believe that the Mongolians, who crossed the land bridge which connected Siberia and Alaska and settled much of the American continent, may have made Catalina their home. Some contend that Aztecs migrated north from South America to settle on the Island. Others maintain that Catalina tribes are the descendants of the Shoshonean tribes of the Great Basin. While it is possible that any or all of these groups settled on Catalina Island, none of these theories accounts for the evidence of the extraordinarily tall or of the fair, blonde Islanders. For now, these questions remain unanswered.

Life on Catalina

Experts agree that a pure form of the Stone Age existed on Catalina Island longer than anywhere else on the North American continent, with the possible exception of Canada. This is probably because soapstone, an easy-to-carve stone, was available in large quantities on the Island. This soapstone (also called steatite) was used to make bowls, mortars, pestles, and a variety of other implements for use and for barter with other tribes. In 1878, an archaeologist reported that he had located more than 300 soapstone quarries in a two-square-mile area in the middle of the Island.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1906 poetically described one of these soapstone quarries:

The largest workshop of the Indians lies far in the heart of Catalina and had never been disturbed. Here goats roam over trails which their little feet have worn smooth as satin, and kick out of their way many a precious thing the Indians chiseled.

It is very strange, this magic. . . . There are tiny pots small enough to have been used as a child's bowl and others too heavy for a white man to lift! . . . You come across them in all stages, from the largest one not yet loosened from its base and still standing firmly two feet high, to the chiseled ones rounded and modeled so that a mere touch of hand or foot will set them rolling. . . .

Catalina Native Islanders used lava to make weapons, and bones to make musical instruments. Shells were used to make fishhooks and hair ornaments and to decorate their bone flutes and pipes. They did not make pottery. They wove reeds and lined them with melted asphaltum to make watertight jugs and bowls. Most of the items that the Catalina tribes produced were for their own needs. They were, however, successful traders of jewelry and stone carvings. There is evidence that they traded these items with tribes as far away as Nevada and New Mexico.

Some Islanders lived in large circular huts that were sixty feet in diameter and covered with closely-woven mats. Each of these huts accommodated fifty people. Other groups lived in caves. Pictographs drawn in red ocher can still be found in some of these caves.

They ate fish, abalone, acorns, cactus, and a sweet potato-like root that they took to the mainland to barter. Acorns and cactus seeds were ground into meal and baked into a flat bread. During feasts, large fish would be cooked in a hole in the ground.

They crafted fine canoes made of pine planks lashed together with cordage made from red milkweed. These canoes were as long as twenty-five feet by four feet wide and carried from eight to ten people. According to the log of Viscaino, an early Spanish explorer:

They have well-made canoes made of pine planks fastened together with thongs of sealskin. They have poops and bows like barks. Some of them are so large that 20 men can man them. They have double, sharp bladed paddles which they ply in unison on one side and the other. They go flying like the wind.

Records indicate that the Catalina tribes were regarded as fierce, sinister, and evil wizards by the mainland tribes. It is likely that their isolation, the threatening oceans they braved, and their dominance in the region's most important religious ceremonies gave them this air of power, prestige, and mystery.

The First Recorded Observations

When the Spanish arrived, their observations of the tribes living on Catalina were faithfully recorded. It is from their journals that we have our first written historical records of Catalina's Native Islanders.

In 1542, only fifty years after Columbus had first discovered America, General Rodriguez Cabrillo briefly anchored his ship in White's Landing, near Long Point, and recorded the following in his log:

. . . when the boat came near, a great number of Indians emerged from the bushes and grass, shouting and dancing, and making signs that they should not be afraid. Immediately they were assured, they laid their bows and arrows on the ground and launched in the water a good canoe which held eight to ten Indians, and came to the ships. The Spaniards gave them beads and other articles

with which they were pleased. Afterwards the Spaniards went ashore and they and the Indian women and all, felt very secure. Here an old Indian made signs to them that men like the Spaniards, clothed and bearded, went about the mainland.

In addition to this rich description of the people of Catalina, this journal entry introduces a mystery that has never been solved: Who were these "men like the Spaniards, clothed and bearded?"

Sixty years after Cabrillo's brief visit, Catalina had a second visitor. On November 24, 1603, General Sebastian Viscaino arrived. He named the island Santa Catalina, after Saint Caterina, on whose day he had arrived. According to Viscaino's log:

The Indians are robust and well-made. The men are all naked. Their women are well shaped, have fine eyes and beautiful features. They are modest and wear clothing of sealskin from their breasts down. The boys and girls are white and blonde. All are affable and smiling.

The Islanders guided his ship into a safe anchorage and prepared a feast for the entire crew. Almost immediately, the Spanish began their attempts to convert them to Christianity. The day after their arrival, Viscaino and his crew built an altar on shore and a Mass was conducted at which "more than one hundred men and women were present. . . They marveled not a little at seeing the altar and the image of our Lord Jesus crucified, and listened attentively to the saying of the Mass, asking by signs what it was about. They were told it was about heaven."

Religious Beliefs

In return for the invitation to the Spaniards' Mass, they honored Viscaino and his crew by allowing them to attend a ceremony in their awesome temple. The oldest, wisest, and most powerful leaders of tribes from the entire region came to this temple once a year

to worship. According to an 1877 United States Geological Survey map, this temple was located on the flat meadow between Isthmus Cove and Cat Harbor. Here, ceremonies celebrating the important life events, including birth, puberty, marriage, and death, were performed. The eagle, raven, and rattlesnake were worshiped as reincarnated ancestors who had returned to earth to guard the living.

When Viscaino's soldiers attended the ceremony, one took a far more active role than anticipated. According to Viscaino's log:

There was a great circle all surrounded with feathers which must have come from birds which had been sacrificed. Inside the circle there was an idol that resembled a demon painted in various colors. It had no head, but two horns and a dog at its feet. The sun and moon were painted in its sides. Eagle feathers were stuck to it, and on stakes around it, with asphaltum.

The General told the Indians that the idol was evil, and placed the sign of the cross on it. When the soldiers arrived there were two huge crows inside the circle, larger than ordinary crows. One of the soldiers took aim with his harquebus and killed them both. At this time the Indians began to lament and show great emotion. In my opinion, the devil talked to them through these crows. I saw with my own eyes Indian women cleaning fish on the beach for food for their families. Some crows came up and with their bills took fish out of the hands with no protest from the Indian women.

Despite this killing of their sacred ravens, the Catalina tribes continued to welcome the explorers, hunters, and smugglers who frequented Catalina Island during the 17th and 18th centuries and the early years of the 19th century. Each brought changes and new diseases to their isolated culture.

In addition to the prestige the Catalina tribes received for building their great temple, they were also honored for initiating an impor-

tant religious ceremony—the “Jimson Weed Cult.” This ceremony initiated adolescent boys into manhood. The jimson weed is native to Catalina Island. It is an extremely potent narcotic that can make cattle seriously ill. Native Islanders dried the roots of this jimson weed and ground them into a powder. They brewed it with boiling water and gave it to young men who had fasted for three days. These adolescents danced until they passed out. Their dreams during this stupor were believed to be prophetic and to predict their future. Unfortunately, the jimson weed drink made many very ill and killed a number of these young men. As the source of this cult, the Catalina Native Islanders were viewed with awe and became the religious leaders of the region.

Death of a Civilization

In 1806, Captain Joseph O’Cain and his partner, Jonathan Winship, joined forces with the Russian-American Fur Company, based in Sitka, Alaska, to hunt otter. The luxurious furs of these gentle animals were used by Russian nobility for cloaks and were so prized that each skin brought \$50 to \$100. O’Cain and Winship planned to make a great deal of money very quickly by gathering as many skins as possible from the otter-rich waters of Catalina Island. The Russian-American Fur Company supplied O’Cain and Winship with one-hundred-and fifty Aleut hunters, bidarkas (canoes made of hides), and guns in exchange for a percentage of the profit. It is suspected that these Aleut hunters had been enslaved and forced to journey south for the otter kill. These Aleuts killed not only enormous numbers of otters, but also brutally looted, raped, and slaughtered the Catalina Native Islanders. Many who survived this brutal onslaught contracted a variety of diseases introduced by these Aleut hunters.

Catalina’s Native Islanders never recovered. Between 1820 and 1832, hopeless and broken, those who still survived left the Island forever. They were relocated to the San Gabriel Mission. The result was the total demoralization of a once proud civilization. Those at the mission soon died of disease, poor diet, and, possibly, broken

spirits. After thriving for centuries, a great civilization disappeared almost overnight. They left only an island rich with memories from a happier time.

Artifacts

During the last half of the 19th century, tourists entertained themselves by collecting relics as souvenirs, while archaeologists took these artifacts in the name of science. Much interest was focused on locating the great temple at Isthmus, for little remained to validate its existence. According to Paul Schumacher, in an *Overland Monthly* article published in 1875, the archaeologists were too late.

The archaeology of this island is said to have been ransacked by a scientific gentleman of merit, who lingered formerly around the picturesque isthmus. He told me himself, some time ago, that he had even spotted the . . . temple . . . To my deep regret, I found that there was but little left for our party to gather, and nothing new to science.

No one knows who carried away all the relics of the great temple or why. Were the remains of this religious center taken as souvenirs or scientific discoveries? The result is the same: nothing remains of this great temple.

Today, some Catalina artifacts are on exhibit at the Heye Foundation Museum of the American Indians in New York. Others are in the Catalina Island Museum in the Casino at Avalon. Many more of the relics have been lost, destroyed, or forgotten. Little seems to remain of this once-thriving civilization.

Catalina Almost Became a Tribal Prison

During the Civil War, the Union army occupied Catalina Island. The captain in command, Captain West, believed Catalina would be an

excellent reservation. When he shared this opinion with colleagues in Washington, Brigadier General Wright agreed and wrote the following to the Adjutant-General of the Army:

From a special report that I have just received from the officer commanding on the Island [West] I am well satisfied that it is better adapted for an Indian reservation than I at first supposed.

Others agreed. James Curtis stated in his report of January 2, 1864: "No more fitting place could be found for a general hospital or depot for Indian prisoners." Orders were given to the Department of the Interior to begin the work needed to convert Catalina into a reservation.

Suddenly, Brigadier General Wright, who had initially supported this action, changed his recommendation. Action was put on hold, but, as late as 1886, Senator James Fair, the multi-millionaire owner of the Comstock Lode, wrote this letter to the Secretary of the Interior:

It (Catalina) is isolated and too far from shore for any ordinary boat to reach it. My idea is that if the Apaches were put on the island, they would require no guards, and all that would be required would be a small tender and crew to run between the island and Wilmington for the purpose of communication and supplies. This would, in my opinion, set the Apache question at rest forever, and would save the country many valuable lives, and the government millions in money.

The *Los Angeles Herald* responded that Catalina was "too good for the proposed occupants" for, in the ensuing years, Catalina had soared in value. During the second half of the 19th century, Catalina had become the focus of many dreams as speculators and developers competed for ownership of the Island. A complex succession of entrepreneurs purchased Catalina Island—each willing to pay more. As prices rose and plans for commercializing Catalina grew, the

ideas of turning the Island into a reservation or an Apache prison were forgotten.

Catalina had become a piece of valuable real estate and was never to be a tribal homeland again. Thankfully, it was never to become a prison or reservation, either.

Despite this total exodus of Catalina's Native Islanders, if one climbs high into the hills of Little Harbor and looks down, one can still envision the vanished civilization that lived, loved, worshiped, and died on this incredible island known to us as Santa Catalina Island.