

THE INDIAN FORERUNNERS

This story about St. Peters Church and the Coupland Community, to be balanced, must begin at the very beginning. In this case the beginning has to do with the original human inhabitants of this land. The gently rolling hills and valleys that surround Coupland provided a beautiful wilderness home for the American Indians for many centuries before the white people ever dreamed of crossing the sea to the "new world".

But, unlike the later German and Swiss settlers to the region, our Indian predecessors did not leave us copies of the minutes of their powwows, or any other written documents for that matter. It is really unfortunate that such records are not available because without them we can never adequately reconstruct the whole story of this land and all of its people.

What we do have, nevertheless, is a remarkable number of "things" that the Indians left behind--arrow points, pottery, tools and other artifacts of their culture. These stone and clay treasures are still being unearthed even today by the plough shares of the farmers and by arrowhead collectors who comb the valleys after a heavy rain, picking up and adding to their collections precious little chunks of ancient history. Dr. McWhorter, Philip Johnson, Otis Hardi and many other local people have amassed hundreds of these artifacts in their private collections.

By carefully studying such materials, historians have been able to piece together educated guesses concerning the way our Indian forerunners lived and the kind of people they were. One such historian is W. W. Newcomb, curator of the Memorial Museum at the University of Texas and author of the book, THE INDIANS OF TEXAS. In his analysis of arrow points from the Coupland region, he has concluded that Indians occupied this area from about 6,000 years before Christ.



A second source of information about Indian life in these parts is provided by a number of written eye-witness accounts of white settlers and explorers of the nineteenth century. When a certain measure of bias is taken into account, this information also helps us to develop our understanding of the past. For instance, in 1828 a Mexican citizen by the name of Jose Maria Sanchez visited central Texas. In a letter

that he wrote to his folks back home, he described the natives of this area in the following way:

"Their Huts were small and barely numbered thirty, all conical in shape, made of an occasional buffalo skin. In the center of each is located the fireplace around which lie the male Indians in complete inaction, while the women are in constant motion either curing the meat of the game, or tanning the skins, or preparing food, which consists chiefly of roast meat; or perhaps making arms for their indolent husbands." *

The Indians who inhabited the Coupland area were more or less independent tribes, and they called themselves TICKANWATIC, a name which meant "the most human people". Perhaps that Indian word is a clue as to how they liked to picture themselves. The Indian neighbors to the north called them TONKAWWEYA which has a similar sound but a different meaning — a clue, perhaps, to the way they were viewed by their closest neighbors. The word means "they all stay together". From these two Indian words TONKAWA is derived, the label most commonly given to these people by historians and others who study their culture and write about them today.

The Tonkawa Indians were not adept at agriculture though they tried it for a brief period in their history. Rather they lived a style of life that harmonized quite well with their environment. They were not affluent by our standards or even by Indian standards, but they supported themselves to their own satisfaction by hunting and trapping animals such as rabbit, skunk, rattle snake, deer, and some buffalo. Berries, nuts, cactus, mesquite beans and other types of wild vegetables and herbs rounded out their simple diet.

Their clothing was made from the skins of animals; however, they wore only what was required by weather conditions, preferring rather to wear little or nothing at all. The crude shelters they lived in were also constructed of the skins of animals.

The beautiful stream that meanders its way around the north side of Coupland was christened by the Spanish "The Creek of the Blessed Souls." It is now known as Brushy Creek. Through the years it provided the Indians with an abundance of fish as well as a more or less constant supply of fresh water. With its thickly wooded banks, Brushy Creek was probably the main attraction that brought a group of Indians to this particular area and kept them here through the years.

(* A Trip to Texas, Southwestern Historical Quarterly. Vol 29:249-288)

In recent years when the city of Austin was considering the name of its Town Lake, a suggestion was made that it be called Tonkawa after these central Texas Indian tribes. The idea was dropped, however, when some people complained that these Tonkawa Indians were treacherous cannibals. It was not an altogether fair indictment of these people though it was based on a certain thread of truth. Evidently, on rare occasions, the Tonkawas carried out rites in which they ate the flesh of their human enemies who had been killed in battle. It was a primitive superstition or religious rite through which they thought they could acquire some of the spiritual powers of their foes. An additional idea was that by a frenzied ceremony the whole community could join in celebrating the victory and in continuing to punish or destroy their enemy even after death.

The Tonkawa Indians of this area were weak and poor compared to the Comanches and Apaches who controlled the buffalo country to the north. They also became somewhat subservient to the whites and joined them in fighting other Indian groups. As the years went by their life and their culture were gradually squeezed out as between the two jaws of a vice--the raiding parties of their more war-like Indian brothers on the one side, and the advance of white man's civilization, his diseases and his bullets on the other. By 1840 all the Tonkawa Indians had been destroyed or pushed out of the area. By 1948 only about 50 Tonkawas were left in existence, and they had long since been moved to a reservation in a northern State.

