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Forgotten Woman of the Channel Islands



The Forgotten Woman Of San Nicolas Island

Sixty miles off the coast of California lies the barren island of San Nicolas. Somehow, a woman abandoned on this deserted rock lived alone for 18 years. Her story remains shrouded by myth and conjecture, because when she was finally rescued, nobody could understand what she had to say.

BY STEVE TEMPLE

San Nicolas is the outermost of the Channel Islands, a rocky speck some eight miles long and four miles wide, located southwest of Los Angeles. When first settled, it was a lush piece of land covered with grass and shrubs, sustaining as many as 1500 Nicoleno Indians at one point. Their origin remains obscure—authorities believe they came from Catalina, or were Shoshonean.

By 1835, the population was decimated, possibly by Kodiak Indians from the Aleutians hunting sea otters. Only 20 Nicolenos were still alive on the island when Franciscan mission fathers decided to bring the tribe to the mainland for conversion to Christianity.

The fathers dispatched Charles Hubbard, skipper of a dilapidated little schooner called *Peor es Nada*—"Better than Nothing"—to transport the Indians to San Pedro. After landing on the island, he and his crew rounded up the Nicolenos, and described in sign language

what the fathers proposed, with assurances they would have an easier life on the mainland with plenty to eat.

As the Indians gathered up their few possessions and boarded the vessel, a storm arose. According to one account, when the *Peor es Nada* set sail, a woman cried out that she had to go back for her baby, leaped over the rail, and swam ashore. The ship sailed on, leaving the woman and her child alone on the island.

Why Capt. Hubbard left her behind is unclear, the usual explanation being the difficulty of remaining at anchor in the

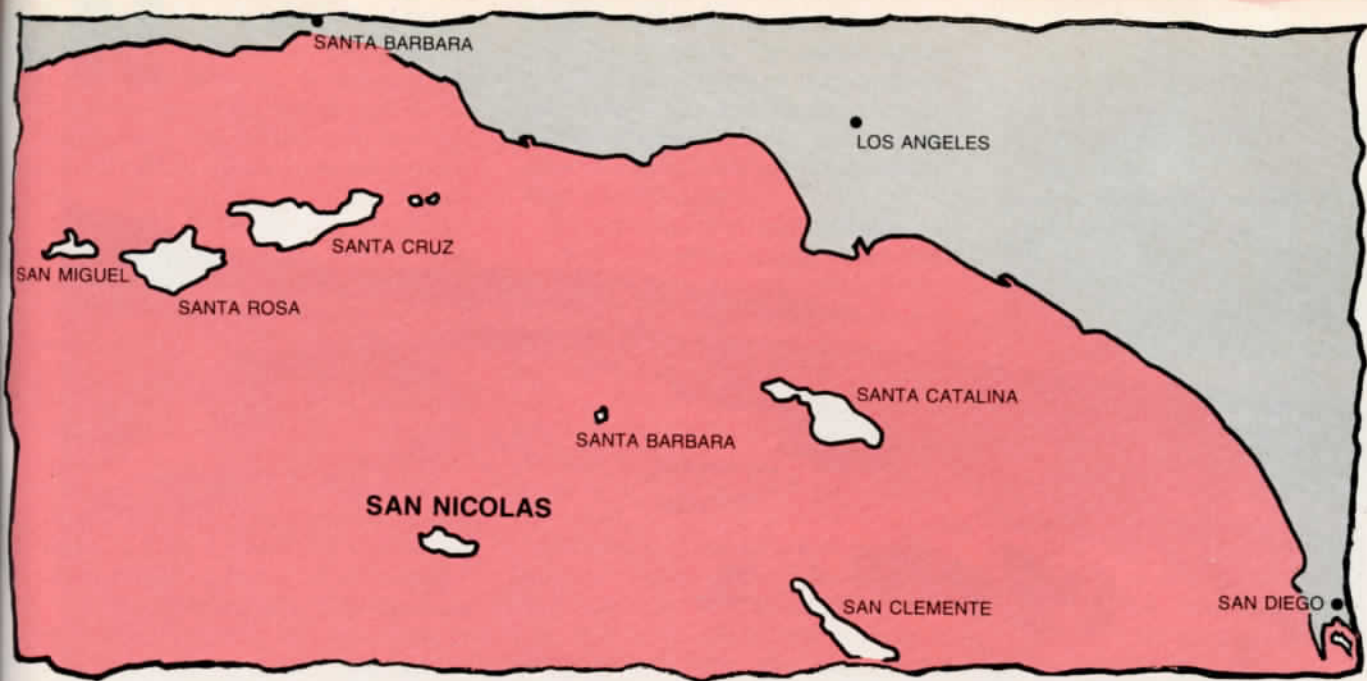
storm. He wanted to return to pick up the woman, but had a commitment to carry a group of otter hunters to Santa Rosa Island, and then up the coast to San Francisco. He hoped to go back to the island soon after his voyage to the Bay area. Neither he nor the *Peor es Nada* had the opportunity, however, for in less than a month, the boat sank in San Francisco Bay with Capt. Hubbard aboard.

From time to time people on the mainland thought about the lost woman of San

This photo, obtained from the Southwest Museum, is presumed to be of the lone woman of San Nicolas after she was brought to the mainland.



PHOTO BY HAYWAR AND MULZELL



OFFICIAL PHOTO BY U.S. NAVY

Today, San Nicolas has a Navy airstrip and is home to about 180 employees, both military and civilian.

Nicolas, but no one sought to find her for 15 years. Vessels able to make the trip were scarce, and demands on them were heavy. Few people believed she or her child could have survived alone for very long—the island was overrun with packs of vicious wild dogs. Even when the whole tribe of Indians was still on the island, they had difficulty defending themselves from the animals.

But in 1850, Padre Gonzales of the Santa Barbara Mission offered a reward of \$200 to Thomas Jefferies if he could find and rescue her. People said the father was almost crazy on the subject. Jefferies and his crew hunted otter around the island for six weeks, and found a crude shelter made of whale bones. Then, one night, a story says, a crewman who had been hiking around the island returned to camp, flushed with excitement. He had seen a figure running in the distance—perhaps the lost woman! He tried to catch up, but was unable to identify the person. The men failed to learn who it was.

These reports led to several trips to the island under the leadership of George Nidever, a Santa Barbara trapper and hunter. On the first two visits, he saw signs of a lone inhabitant, but no woman. Once, during a storm, one of the crew thought he saw a human figure high on the cliffs, but a search turned up nothing.

Three years and several expeditions after Jefferies' initial reports, Nidever and a companion, Carl Dittman, nicknamed Charlie Brown, came back to the island to hunt otters. They spotted a footprint



PHOTO BY SOUTHWEST MUSEUM

in the sand and a basket containing a robe made of bird feathers.

Nidever immediately abandoned his hunt for otter and ordered his men to comb the island canyon by canyon, cave by cave, until the woman was found. Since earlier searches had failed, he deployed his men in a line spaced about 200 yards apart. They moved slowly forward, examining every acre of the land, and came across a basket of feathers. Nidever scattered the contents of the basket to see if they would be replaced. Later that same day, they found the feathers back in the basket.

The next day, Brown made the discovery. He traced footprints to a grass and whalebone shelter at the top of one of the island's hills. He noted from a distance a small black object about the size of a crow that appeared to be in motion. Advancing cautiously, he and his men soon discovered the object to be the Indian woman's head and shoulders, barely visible above the walls of the hut. Here, the woman, wearing a dress of green cormorant feathers tied at the waist with sinew rope, was seated in her hideaway, skinning a sea lion and watching Nidever's party searching for her on the beach below. One story says she was startled when surrounded by the men, but regained her composure and proudly offered them roasted wild onions.

Once a lush island, overgrazing by sheep caused sand dunes to spread over much of the land at one time.

Incredibly, this woman who swam back to the island 18 years earlier to find her lost child was still alive.

She was not dark, one report says. Her hair was light brown and knotty and disheveled, and she appeared to be about 40 years old. A different source claims she was a withered, gray-haired hag. Yet another account describes her as being quite attractive and in excellent physical condition, with a large supply of food in her hut, two pet ravens, and a pack of dogs trained to answer her commands.

She told the men the story of her years on the island, not in words, but by signs, for no one could understand her language, not even some Indians brought along on the ship. She said the day she jumped overboard from *Peor es Nada* and swam to the island, her child was killed and eaten by wild dogs.

She never lacked for food, but lived on birds, fish, sea lions, abalone, and sea urchins, and obtained water from the many springs on the island. Among her personal effects were a sinew rope a half-inch in diameter and 25-feet long, probably for snaring seals, along with sinew fish line, bone fishhooks, a necklace, and bone knife. Her watertight baskets were woven grass, coated inside with asphalt.



Nidever and his men helped the woman gather up her primitive possessions and put them aboard ship. Although she indicated she had hidden from previous search parties, she went with them cheerfully. An anthropology journal reports she sang the following song, committed to memory by one of the Indians in the party (California Indians were noted for their ability to memorize the songs of others, even when the language and meaning were unknown to them):

tokitoki yamymna tokitoki weleleshkima yaamymina weleleshkima yaamymina tokitoki.

An aged Chumash Indian translated the song years later. The words meant: "I leave contented, because I see the day when I want to get out of this island."

On the ship's arrival at Santa Barbara, the woman was astonished to see men on horseback and was equally amazed at the sight of cattle. Nidever took her into his home and put her under the care of his Spanish wife. The story of her discovery spread, and people came miles to see the

strange "wild" woman, the last survivor of the Nicoleno tribe. The mission fathers brought Indians from all over southern California in the hope of finding someone who could speak with her, but only one old woman was found who could understand a word or two.

One unpublished account says she used to stand alone at the railing on the back porch, open her arms and speak toward the sea. She talked incessantly, but nobody knew what she was saying. All her fellow Nicolenos had died or disappeared. Even though she had returned to the world of people, she was emotionally isolated, cut off from human contact as surely as if she was still marooned on the island.

Ultimately, civilization proved to be a greater challenge to her than life alone on San Nicolas, and her health began to fail. Within six weeks after landing in Santa Barbara, she was dead. Some people thought the radical change in diet killed her, or the lack of immunity to



A 1959 research team at a dig.

mainland diseases. Others felt she finally succumbed from loneliness.

On her deathbed, the woman had been baptized Juana Maria, and was buried in the graveyard of Mission Santa Barbara. Most of her possessions were lost in the intervening years. Father Gonzales sent her birdfeather dress to the Vatican, but it never arrived there. He sent her other personal articles to San Francisco, where they were later destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906.

Sorry days were also ahead for her island home. Herds of sheep introduced to San Nicolas overgrazed the short grass, and deep gulleys developed from the erosion of wind and rain. Sand dunes spread over areas once covered by grass and brush. The soil seemed to blow into the sea so rapidly, San Nicolas became known as the "passing island." Despite this bleak prospect, a real estate promoter divided the island into lots in 1886, but there is no record that any ever sold.

About 1940, the last of the sheepherders left the island, and it later became part of the Navy's missile test range. Gradually, some grass has taken hold in places, but San Nicolas remains desolate and inhospitable. Even with the servicemen stationed there, it's still a lonely island. Not nearly as lonely, though, as it was during the 18 years when its only inhabitant was a forgotten woman.

In 1961, novelist Scott O'Dell fictionalized Juana Maria's tragic life in his *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.), which was filmed by Universal Studios in 1964. A new book by Marla Daily of the Channel Islands Archive—California's Channel Islands: 1001 Questions Answered (Santa Barbara: McNally/Loftin Publishers)—claims that Juana Maria was not originally a Nicoleno at all, but an Indian from the North, perhaps Aleut, who was left on San Nicolas by shipwreck. ❁



PHOTO BY F.M. REINMAN

Even though deep gulleys have developed from erosion, grass is beginning to take hold once again. The island once supported over a thousand Indians. All Indian artifacts on San Nicolas are protected by the Dept. of the Interior.