

# DESERT SAN NICOLAS



The large sandspit at the southeast end of San Nicolas, where Captain Nidever and Charles Brown landed in 1853.

The wind blows away the sand covering San Nicolas' ancient cemetery, and now and then a robust Nicoleño skull is revealed. (Courtesy Clement W. Meighan; see his "The Nicoleño," *Pacific Discovery*, January-February 1954)



## ROBERT M. NORRIS

SIXTY MILES south of Port Hueneme lies San Nicolas, a barren, flat-topped island of about twenty square miles. Of all the southern California islands, San Nicolas is the most distant from shore. Politically, it is a part of Ventura County, although the county authorities there, like most other southern Californians, are seldom concerned with it.

An unknown visitor to the island shortly before the turn of the century was much impressed with the wind-swept desolation he saw there; the island seemed to him to be blowing into the sea. This traveler referred to San Nicolas as the "Passing Island," an appropriate name in many respects. The past century has seen the disappearance of the last of the Channel Island Indians—the famous Lost Woman of San Nicolas—and even the dogs that lived with the Indians. Now, there are only one or two survivors of the thousands of sheep that were grazed on the island after 1860. As if this weren't enough, the persistent winds and occasional rains are carrying the island itself into the sea, particle by particle.

Although the island was named by Sebastián Viscaíno in 1602, the first white man to see it was prob-

# AND THE LAST NICOLEÑO

ably Ferrelo, Cabrillo's pilot, who left Santa Cruz Island one February day in 1543 in a small launch to search for other islands reported off the inner group. Doubtless, many travelers during the 17th and 18th centuries passed close by San Nicolas, but few of these took the trouble to land and fewer still bothered to comment on it in their journals. The lack of even a fair anchorage and the forbidding, barren appearance of the island probably caused many of these early travelers to seek other more favored landfalls. By the early part of the 19th century, when many trading ships were operating illegally in Californian waters, San Nicolas had more frequent visitors because of the relative safety afforded by its isolation. Many of these traders and hunters found it advisable to elude the Spanish authorities by spending some of their time at the outer islands. One of these men, a Captain Whettemore, who was in the sea otter trade, visited San Nicolas in 1811. He landed his otter hunters, a group of thirty well-armed Aleutian Indians from Sitka. The Captain had business in Baja California which did not require his crew of otter hunters and he therefore sailed without them, returning a few months later. During his absence the Aleuts got into

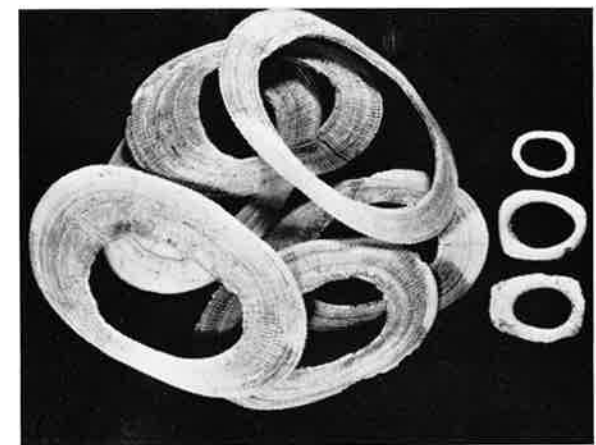
cisco in the *Peor es Nada* and was lost at sea. During the following years, the islanders, who were eventually taken to Mission San Gabriel, all died, and the last survivor of their race, still on the island, was probably forgotten by nearly everyone but the padres at Mission Santa Barbara. They remained hopeful that one day the Lone Woman might be found because they continued to receive occasional reports from visitors to the island who claimed to have seen a woman's footprints on the beach sands. Finally, in 1853, Padre Gonzales of the Mission persuaded Captain Nidever of Santa Barbara to go in search of the last surviving Nicoleño.

Captain Nidever failed to find the woman on either his first or his second visits. However, he did find unmistakable evidence that she was still living. Thus encouraged, he made the third trip accompanied by Mr. Charles Brown and a number of Barbareño Indians. Brown landed on the southeastern end of the island—on the large sand spit. Here he arranged his Indians in line, a hundred yards or so apart, but within speaking distance, and had them move slowly forward, painstakingly combing every inch of the island. Late in the morning they came upon a hut

## *Eighteen years alone on California's desert island, an Indian woman outdid Robinson Crusoe*

a dispute with the islanders, probably about the women, and systematically butchered all the poorly armed island men and boys, or so the story goes.

Word of the massacre eventually reached the Mission padres at Santa Barbara who arranged with Captain Sparks of that city to set out with his little schooner, the *Peor es Nada* ("Better than Nothing"), to bring back the remaining women. Captain Sparks sailed in 1835, twenty-four years after the Aleuts had done their terrible work. When the *Peor es Nada* reached San Nicolas, seven or eight women were taken aboard—some accounts say as many as twenty. One of the women either hung back when the rest went aboard, or later jumped over the side and swam ashore, supposedly protesting that she had forgotten her child; it is not clear what actually happened. In any event, she alone remained on the island, for faced with a developing storm Captain Sparks feared to wait in San Nicolas' dangerous anchorage and set sail, intending to return for the Indian woman later on. The islanders were landed at Santa Barbara and later taken to San Pedro. A short time after his return to Santa Barbara, Captain Sparks sailed for San Fran-



Limpet shells (*Megathura*), with the centers broken out and the edges ground down, became favorite Nicoleño ornaments. Fishhooks and beads were also of shell. Other objects—whale figures, whistles, pipes, miniature canoes—were carved out of steatite (soapstone). (Courtesy Clement W. Meighan)



Indian shell-mound filled with quantities of land snails, abalones, and sea urchins. (Author)



made of whale ribs and brush, near which they found a basket of feathers. Brown ordered the Indians to scatter the feathers and temporarily abandoned the search. Later the same day, upon revisiting the hut, they found that the feathers had been replaced in the basket, but still no woman was in sight.

The next day when the search was renewed, Brown caught sight of a figure struggling up the hill toward the hut and bearing a heavy load. By the time Brown and the Indians reached the hut, the Indian woman was sitting skinning a sea lion, guarded by her dog who growled menacingly as Brown and the Indians approached. She rose as Brown drew close, and bowed toward him. When the Indians reached the hut, and saw her, they all knelt. Upon seeing people of her own race, she came toward them and offered them food. She indicated by signs—none of the Indians could understand her language—that she would have come to them, even if they had not first found her. Brown and his party spent the following month on the island and gradually learned from the lone woman how she had lived alone eighteen years by catching fish, abalones, and sea urchins which were plentiful along the island shore. She showed them how she occasionally crept up on a sleeping sea lion and killed it with a heavy rock.

On the way back to Santa Barbara, the weather was bad and the sea rough and she was much frightened. She begged the sailors to placate the wind or sea gods, or so they interpreted her signs. She recognized all the islands and had names for them. Upon landing at Santa Barbara, she was terrified at her first sight of horses and cattle and doubtless much impressed with the city itself. In all likelihood she was

born on San Nicolas and had never been away before.

After her arrival on the mainland, she was cared for by Captain Nidever and quickly adapted herself to the strange ways of the people in whose midst she found herself. She became a favorite in the community and spent much of her time visiting the various Mexican families and dancing for them. The padres at Mission Santa Barbara christened her Juana Maria, to which the townspeople added Peor es Nada in memory of the little schooner that had brought her relatives to the mainland years earlier. Although the padres at the Mission had Indians from all over southern California brought to Santa Barbara, none could speak her language. Only one very old woman was even able to understand any of her words. Juana Maria Peor es Nada was therefore forced to make all her desires known by means of sign language.

After only six weeks in Santa Barbara, she sickened and died, most probably because of the great change in diet. She was about 45 years old at the time. It is reasonably certain, however, that her last days in Santa Barbara were happy ones because Captain Nidever did his best to see that she was comfortable and not in need. With her passing went the last member of a once numerous and prosperous people.

For some years after the departure of the Lone Woman, San Nicolas had no inhabitants save the foxes, mice, lizards and the more or less itinerant birds. Sometime after 1860, sheep were brought to the island and grazed by a succession of solitary herders, many of whom were Basques. As is so often the case, the efficient sheep ate the short island grass faster than it could grow, and large tracts of the island formerly protected by grass and chaparral

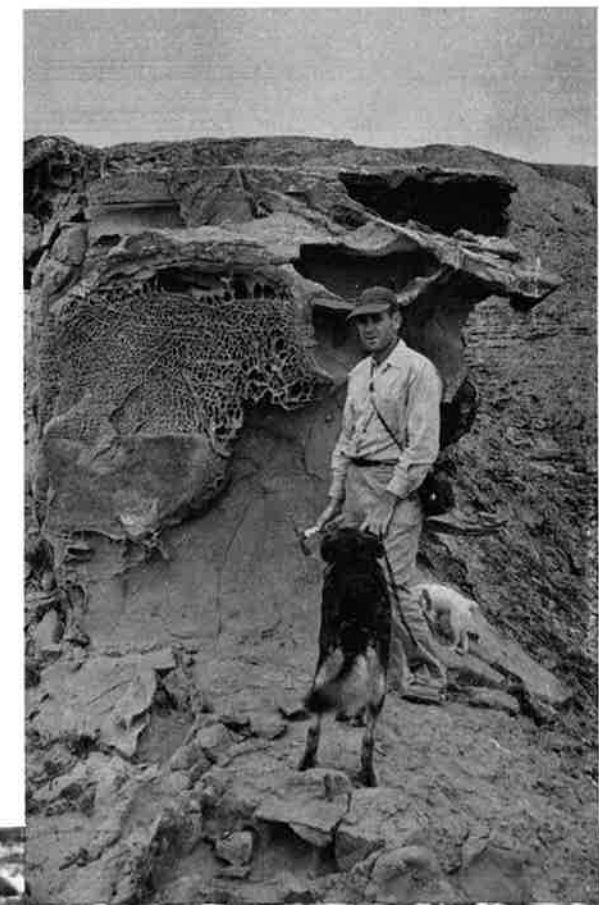


Abalone exposed on the rocks along the northwest coast during low tide—this was an important part of the Nicoleño diet.

were laid bare to the savage attack of wind and rain. About 1940, when the military removed the last of the herders and most of the sheep, many deep gullies and barren tracts of sand dunes had spread over areas formerly covered by short, thick island grass. Thousands of bleached, empty snail shells cover the drifting sand where vegetation once flourished. In recent years, with no sheep to interfere, the grass is gradually creeping back over the bare spots and loose sand.

Surprisingly enough, even San Nicolas did not escape the wild enthusiasm associated with the land boom of the 1880's in southern California. In 1886, an unusually optimistic real estate promoter divided the entire island into lots. It is not known whether any of these were sold, but if they were, we have no record of any owners coming to claim their share of California's desert island.

Today, San Nicolas is a Naval reservation and is closed to the public. The Indians and their dogs are gone; the sheep herders and their sheep are gone—only the descendants of the foxes, lizards and mice are there to form a living link with the past. ❁



The author's brother, Kenneth Norris, standing beside a fretwork carved over the years in sandstone by sand-laden winds. (Author)

ψ Some areas are covered with shells of land snails stranded by the receding tide of grass. (Author)