

JUANA MARIA---THE FEMALE ROBINSON CRUSOE
OF SAN NICOLAS ISLAND

Lonely San Nicolas Island rests awash in the Pacific Ocean some sixty five miles southwest from San Pedro, California like a storm battered derelict dying under the pounding of the waves. It is ten miles long and approximately ~~four~~^{four} miles ~~wide~~ in width at the widest part. It is a strange place peopled with mewling sea birds, shy gray foxes with shortened tails and colonies of seals, sea lions and a sprinkling of sea elephants. The east end of San Nicolas is known locally by the sheep men who have been running the woolly, four legged locusts on this isolated island for nearly ninety years, as "The Roughs". Here the escarpment of eroded sand stone cliffs is channeled by wind and rain into a thousand irregular folds and narrow canons. It is the dry part of the island where no springs break through the tilted strata. Along the crest of the island some eight hundred feet above the sea the grass lands spread in slightly rolling waves ~~to~~ to the edges where the cliffs break away sharply on the east, north and south sides. Here has been the best feed for the ever hungry sheep and here in times past were scattered some of the habitations of the former Indian occupants. At the northwest end the island tapers off into a series of long sandy slopes, gray with the disintegrating remains of ancient Indian sites. Between the bases of the cliffs and the ocean are short sloping plains cut by many arroyos and harried by the howling blasts of the northwest wind. There are springs of potable water along the north^{and}/west sides of San Nicolas. There is one spring near Ranch House Landing on the north side but this is bitter and unfit for human consumption altho the sheep seem to drink it without ill effects. Near Corral Harbor a mile or so north east of Ranch House Landing, is a small spring of good water that wells out of a crevice in the rocks, virtually at tide level. Usually one may find a clean abalone shell at this spot from which to drink.

The best spring is at a place now called New Gardens but which in times past has born various names. Here at one time was a sod house, built against the base of the rocky cliff from which the waters flow. The house has long since disappeared under the encroaching sands but the rotting remnants of old wooden fences indicate the attempts of former occupants to create a home like atmosphere and to protect the vegetable garden, also sand covered, from the ravages of the sheep. A mile or so from this spring another flow of sweet water emerges from a small rock pile on the beach.

The precise history of San Nicolas is yet to be written. Perhaps it may never be ^{known} ~~known~~ because written records are fragmentary and few and one may only guess at the aboriginal history as told by the mute remnants of old village sites, burials and wind whipped artifacts scattered on the surface of the sands.

Judging by such evidences, San Nicolas was a veritable paradise for the natives. ~~That is,~~ ^{were} there ~~\$\$\$~~ plenty of sea mammals, fish and shell fish as well as fresh water. All of the necessities of life were available. The Indians had laced plank canoes in which they traveled to and from the mainland as well as the adjacent islands of Santa Catalina, San Miguel, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz. The islanders were too isolated to fear tribal enemies...that is until the white man made his appearance upon the scene.

~~###~~ We have no definite historical records concerning the first visitation of Europeans to San Nicolas. All we know is that sometime during the first decade or so of the 19th century, American and British ships carrying native hunters from the Alaskan and British Columbian coasts invaded the waters around the islands of the Channel ^{Santa Barbara} group as well as San Nicolas in search of the valuable pelts of the sea otter.

Many of the Indian hunters employed by the Russian-American Fur Company were Haidas from the southwest coast of Alaska, as well as Aleuts from further north and west. The Haida tribesmen however were the bad boys of the Northwest Coast. They were good hunters, fire eaters, head takers and slave makers. They feared no man, not even their rough white employers.

According to the most definite report that can be found at this time, and in the interests of historical accuracy, even this account must be taken with a liberal grain of salt, a ship, presumably the Charon owned by P.T. Jackson of Boston and captained by Isaac Whittemore dropped anchor off San Nicolas sometime in 1812 with a crew of about thirty Kodiak hunters on board. Captain Whittemore left his sea otter hunters on San Nicolas with their gear and provisions while he sailed off in quest of furs in other waters.

At this time San Nicolas had a rather small population of native islanders living on their ancestral sites. The northern tribesmen being without women, and accustomed to having their own way, proceeded to poach on the territory of the San Nicolenos and trouble ensued. It is to be presumed that the handful of San Nicolas islanders fought their best against the numerically superior and better armed Kodiaks but to no avail. According to traditional history as recorded later by John J. Warner, ~~himself~~ a hunter of the 1830s, all but two San Nicoleno males over the ages of ten years, were slain and the women taken captive. ~~Then,~~ at the end of the year, or perhaps early in 1813, the Charon returned and picked up the sea otter hunters and their booty, ^{of furs and women.} When the death ship had left the island, the surviving islanders ^{emerged from} ~~left~~ their hiding places. They were the two men and two women who had joined them. From these four people the population gradually increased to seven, ~~four~~ males and three females.

This small group of people lived unmolested upon San Nicolas until the year 1836 when a ship captained by Marcus Harloe of mixed Scottish and English ancestry took Isaac Williams of Chino Rancho and a small crew out to San Nicolas with the express purpose of removing the surviving Indians and bringing them to the mainland where living was a bit easier.