

Rust, Horatio N.

1897 Catalogue of Pre-Historic Relics from San Nicolas Island, California. A privately printed pamphlet. On file, California Room, California State Library, Sacramento.

San Nicolas Island is about eight by four miles in extent and lies about eighty miles off the California coast southwest of Los Angeles city. The island is now nearly bare of vegetation, being wind-swept the greater part of the year so that it is unfit for human habitation.

It is properly called a desert, having very little water, nearly bare of vegetation, deserted by man and nearly so by animal life. The wind sweeps over the island so constantly that campers find it difficult to sustain themselves for a brief visit and the seal and otter hunters prefer to live on shipboard during the season that a vessel can safely anchor in the vicinity. The island once supported quite a large population, as evidenced by the implements of stone, bone, shell and wood which are found in the graves of their dead and upon the wind swept surface.

Tradition tells us that the early inhabitants of the Island San Nicolas were a weak and defenseless people; that they were reduced in numbers by the Russians who came to the Islands for furs, bringing Alaskan Indians and that hostile Indians from the mainland also visited them and that these visitors killed the men to secure their otter skin clothing and carried off the women, thus reducing them, until about 1835 when the Mexican government sent a sloop called the "Better than Nothing" commanded by a sea otter hunter named Sparks to bring the seven or eight persons that remained to the mainland.

They induced them all to come to the beach, but one poor mother having left her child returned for it, when this noble white man sailed away leaving the poor woman and her child to the mercy of the wild dogs that inhabited the island. Imagine her isolation! They said that she would not live long so they did not return for her.

In 1853 George Nidever and Charles Brown, sea otter hunters living at Santa Barbara, having seen human tracks on the island determined to find who it was and later they related to D.W. Thompson of Santa Barbara as follows:

We went to the island three times before we found her. On the last trip we took some Indians and two or three white men. We took all on shore except the cook. Expecting her to hide, we scattered two or three hundred yards apart to cover the whole ground. We saw small tracks indicating a woman's foot, and found a basket containing some feathers which we scattered and found them gathered together again the same day, showing that she had been there.

Continuing the hunt the next morning we found her at her hut which she had formed of whale bone and brush. She was sitting by a fire. She had a brush fence two feet high around her to keep off the wind. She was skinning a seal. When she saw the Indians of her own class she offered them food, and exhibited no fear. We made signs to her to induce her to go with us which she did readily, taking along all she had. She carried a seal's head. Arriving at the water she washed herself and we

gave her some biscuit, which she seemed to enjoy, and made skirts for her out of bed ticking and sailor clothes. We stayed about one month and she camped with us living on the same food we used, gathering fuel and water for herself and showing no disposition to leave us. She busied herself making baskets, working on several at a time, but finishing none. She would dance and play like a child and showed a kindly disposition.

When she reached Santa Barbara the priests tried to learn her history but no one could understand her talk and communication with her was made by signs. Her friends who left the island before her were all dead. She was named after the little vessel that rescued her, "Better than Nothing".

She enjoyed going from house to house and as Brown said "was happy as a lady". She would dance Indian dances to amuse the lookerson, and was delighted with clothes given her.

All persons treated her kindly and Nidever generously gave her a home at his house, refusing an offer from someone who wished to exhibit her for money. But the change was too sudden and great. After about five weeks she sickened and died under Nidever's roof.

She was apparently about forty–five years of age. The priests acquired from Nidever her dress, bone needles and knives of bone and wood, nails pointed for catching fish, a rope neatly twisted of sinews, bottle made of grass and dishes of wood. They sent them to Rome, relics of the last inhabitants of San Nicolas.

The following list of specimens were found on this island during the summer of 1897 and represent nearly all the necessary implements of a pre–historic family as well as the tools and manufactured ornaments and implements from a pre–historic workshop, a very remarkable find.

Especial interest centers about the site of this workshop. It was located on a ridge of earth and shells lying parallel with the southwest coast line, and the largest part of the following mentioned specimens were found there.

The steatite deposit nearest is on Catalina Island 50 miles away. The serpentine is from Piedras Blancas.

The picks formed from water worn boulders exhibit a wonderful degree of skill in forming them as they did, this with only rude stone tools. With these they were enabled to quarry the steatite from which they formed cooking vessels and all about the workshop were these picks of all sizes from the larger ones used in quarrying to the small ones used to break holes in shells preparatory to using the drills shown on card No. 23.

The drills shown on No. 23 of sandstone were very effective as shown on card No. 5, when the round drill exactly fits the hole made in the shell preparatory to finishing the hooks.

These hooks (commonly called fish hooks) I think were worn as ornaments and used to attach other ornaments to the person rather than for fishing.

Card No. 26 shows the stone files used in finishing the hooks and other ornaments.

Card No. 5 shows the work of smaller drills and files and the stone worker's efforts at ornamentation.

The stone knife on No. 8 with redwood handle indicates Alaskan origin.

Thus I have endeavored to gather the facts from the most reliable sources.

Card No.	1	Set of shells like those used.
"	"	2 6 shell knives.
"	"	3 33 " discs ready to be perforated by the picks.
"	"	4 26 " perforated ready for the drills.
"	"	5 40 stones and shells showing the drill work.
"	"	6 45 completed hooks of shell, imperfect.
"	"	7 25 whale and seal teeth.
"	"	8 7 bone whistles, 2 barbed spears, 1 Alaska knife.
"	"	9 9 bone awls.
"	"	10 21 bone knives and awls.
"	"	11 39 " awls, different forms.
"	"	12 9 rib bones pointed, 7 used for making arrow heads
"	"	13 13 bird bone needles and 6 seal whiskers.
"	"	14 18 bone awls.
"	"	15 19 awls of different forms.
"	"	16 8 bone awls, 9 seal bone awls (seal penis).
"	"	17 13 bone knives.
"	"	18 8 bone knives.
"	"	19 11 " " large.
"	"	20 6 " " larger.
"	"	21 6 " implements.
"	"	22 27 stone picks, small.
"	"	23 18 sand stone drills.
"	"	24 12 small stone implements.
"	"	25 31 spear and arrow heads.
"	"	26 stone files.

10 mortars and pestles 4 to 10 inches in diameter.

1 metate and mano.

Petrified vertebra grooved and used for hammer.

2 human skulls, 1 wild dog, 1 fox.

2 steatite bowls—cooking vessels—both imperfect.

9 stone picks from 3 to 13 inches long for quarrying stone.

28 stone knives or scrapers, mostly quartz flakes—rude.

11 stone net sinkers with natural holes.

18 stone rings 2 to 5 inches in diameter.

8 large bone implements, perhaps spades.

1 necklace of center of 150 keyhole limpets.
1 necklace of 25 cowries.
7 whale barnacles.
6 saucer shaped concretions from graves.

Besides the above there is a variety of perforated shells and some trifles found in the same place which go with the collection.

The cards upon which the specimens are mounted are 9x14 inches.

Horatio N. Rust.

South Pasadena, California.