

EARLY CALIFORNIA ECONOMY

Fifty years after Christopher Columbus was credited with discovering the North American continent, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sailed up the coast of Alta California, exploring as far north as the present state of Oregon. Cabrillo, and his crews in the ships SAN SALVADOR and VITTORIA and SAN MIGUEL, was the first Europeans to visit the area. This was in 1542. Juan Cabrillo was acting on the behalf of Spain. The official ownership claim for Spain made by this expedition was to influence the history and law and economics of this area even to the present day.

Becoming a "Spanish claim" did not have a great or immediate effect on this area of the Pacific coast, however, because of several factors: First, even though Spain had enjoyed 300 years of power and wealth, the "Golden Age" of the Spanish Empire was ending. Too many conflicts had drained the energy and the treasury of the country. Second, California was a Spanish possession that was distant and remote. Other colonies on the eastern coast of America, in South America and Mexico (New Spain) were of greater importance at the time and in closer proximity to the motherland.

Cabrillo would have been looking for new cities of gold such as what they had found in present day Mexico when Cortes conquered the Aztecs. Certainly, he was hopeful to discover a short route to China or a passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. What he found in this area, were the Chumash people who had villages scattered throughout an area that now encompasses Malibu north to San Luis Obispo. They resided on all of the Channel Islands except Anacapa because that island had no water supply.

The Channel Islands of California are a chain of eight islands. Five of the islands make up The Channel Islands National Park since 1980. The islands are located in three separate counties: Santa Barbara County (4), Ventura County (2), and Los Angeles County (2). The Archipelago extends 160 miles between San Miguel Island in the north and San Clemente Island in the south. The islands comprise about 346 square miles.

What we know of the Chumash from the explorers must be gleaned from records and reports that were written after a short visit and with a brief acquaintance with the people. The original maps and log from Cabrillo's

expedition were lost and those writings that remain are often more impressions than observations of fact.

Later, the Mission records relate much about the Chumash but, of course, the intent of the Mission Fathers was not to preserve knowledge of the Chumash history and customs but rather, in most cases, to supplant it with the Spanish culture.

Another source of information comes from many archaeological “digs” over the years. Middens give insight to the diet of the society during specific periods. The midden, a dump for domestic waste, tells us that early people in the area ate deer, bear, puma, elk, seal, porpoise, whale, swordfish and shark. Archaeological “digs” show us the tools and eating utensils used. At the nearby Albinger Museum, recently closed, we could see an area called “the pit” which was an earth oven used about 300 B.C. by people who preceded the Chumash or may have been ancestors. There are various theories on this. Some feel that the more recent artifacts are a later phase of an earlier culture. Others maintain that they are entirely separate. The “pit” contained milling stones and stone bowls. Also, in this area around the San Buenaventura Mission, archaeologists discovered shell beads, pieces of baskets, projectile points, bone whistles and many other Chumash artifacts. All this in our own back yard!

But our best source of knowledge of the Chumash comes from one man, John Peabody Harrington. In 1915, he became a field ethnologist for the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institute. He had a special interest in the Chumash and did his most intensive work between 1912 and 1928. As a researcher, he could be classified as brilliant but very eccentric. He spent all of his efforts in gathering information and very little in organizing or cataloging the results of his interviews. After his death in 1961, hundreds of boxes were put into storage at the Smithsonian. Later researchers were left with the monumental task of sifting through and deciphering his work. But that work has given us about 90% of what we know about the Chumash culture.

What we know from these sources is that the Chumash were a complex and vibrant society that they had a thriving economy, much of which centered on maritime activities.

We know that they had no metal. They used no pottery.

The Chumash clothing was made of tule or yucca or deerskin. They were often barefoot but sometimes wore sandals of woven hemp or yucca fiber. They were very fond of jewelry. Both sexes pierced their ears and the cartilage between their nostrils.

Tattooing was common. The skin was punctured with a cactus thorn or sharpened sliver of bone, then rubbed with vegetable dyes, soot, or colored clay.

They lived in Ops which were dome-shaped huts. The Op averaged about 18 feet in diameter but some were as much as 50 feet. The larger structure could hold up to 70 people. Openings for venting and the doors were covered with woven mats. When they got too dirty or vermin-filled, they simply burned them down and built a new one. The men used something like our modern-day Sauna. After being in the sweathouse, they would plunge into the river or ocean. Chumash villages usually consisted of domed houses, one or more storage buildings, a sweat lodge and a ceremonial center.

They had no cultivated gardens and their only domesticated animal was the dog. Perhaps this was because food supply was ample and varied and included fruits, nuts, seeds, roots, bulbs, berries, mushrooms, and seaweeds. Acorns were a staple. There were animals to hunt in the local hills and mountains and they fished in the rivers and streams and the ocean.

One of the larger villages in the area was Shisholop, which was located about where the Ventura County Fairgrounds is found today. It was a trading center for the region. Here the Chumash exchanged fish, otter pelts, seal meat, and beads from the Channel Islands for seeds and animal skins from inland. In Shisholop one could obtain STEATITE, which came from the Gabrielino, people on Santa Catalina Island or find OBSIDIAN, which came from the desert, or northern California Indians.

The Chumash had their own SHELL MONEY. They would string it on a long piece of cordage and wind it around their hand to indicate denomination. The value depended on the labor invested to make it and the rarity of the particular material. The main source of the shells for making the SHELL MONEY was Santa Cruz Island. To appreciate the extent of their trade network, we must be aware that some of this SHELL MONEY has been found in other states in the Southwestern United States. And to further amaze us, PIPESTONE (Catlinite), which is only found in Minnesota, was found occasionally on Chumash sites.

Much of the trade and quality of life was dependent on the Maritime activities. Steatite (soapstone) was used for eating bowls and cooking. The best source was Santa Catalina Island. Excavations on the island indicate by carbon dating that humans had lived there for 7,000 years. Some of the ancient quarries of the Gabrielino Indians show that mining was conducted for thousands of years. The native people quarried the stone, and then, manufactured steatite bowls and griddles that they then traded. These products were used for cooking by many different groups along the coast.

The TOMOL was of utmost importance to the way of life of the Chumash. They had to be very sea-worthy and had to have extremely skilled operators. Santa Catalina Island is a two-day, 100-mile voyage from San Miguel Island, the westernmost end of the chain of islands.

Constructing a tomol was the work of very skilled workers who belonged to a specialized "guild." Remember, they had no metal so all of their tools were from what nature provided in the area. First, planks were split and cut from redwood or pine using stone choppers, whalebone wedges and shells. They were carefully measured to a standard of two hands wide and one finger thick. An old man who was interviewed by Huntington stated: "Not the thumb; the finger." Then the wood was rubbed with sandstone and finished with sharkskin "sandpaper." After this process, the wood planks were soaked and bent to shape. Holes were drilled near edges and planks tied together on the edges. The holes were caulked with a mixture of pine pitch and asphaltum. The tomol was then painted red and decorated with a shell design to designate the village of origin.

The cordage used to connect the planks was made from local plants. Here is an example of cordage made from a yucca plant. After carefully scraping off the green pulpy skin of the plant with sharp shell, tiny threads inside are slowly twisted and dried. Note that this example still has the point of the plant attached.

The Tomol had no keel. On the center spreader plank, a navigation stone was placed – much like a sundial. Men knelt on woven tule mats on the floor of the craft and propelled the boat with kayak-like paddles.

In 1769, Father Junipero Serra and Captain Portola arrived in San Diego and proceeded to establish a system of missions and presidios throughout what is now California. They were directed by King Charles III of Spain to (1) Take control of the land, (2) Establish towns for trade, and (3) Convert the Indians to Christianity. During the next fifty-four years, the Franciscans would construct 21 missions, all in areas where there were large concentrations of native people. Under the tutelage of the padres, the Chumash made adobe bricks and assisted in the construction of buildings and aqueduct systems for each mission site. Trees were brought by ship and orchards created. Crops were planted. Various domestic animals were introduced, especially cattle and sheep and horses. Many of the Chumash men became very expert at handling horses and cattle. They were to become the vaqueros who worked on the large land grants that were to follow. With the labor of the native people, vast ranches were irrigated and trade was established with the Yankee vessels that came to the coast after sailing around Cape Horn. Hides, tallow, wine, brandy, olive oil, grain and leatherwork were exchanged for manufactured goods.

Hides and tallow, in particular, continued to be the principal export throughout the Mission Era and the Rancho Era that followed. Richard Henry Dana observed in his journal in 1835 that the hides were referred to as 'California Bank Notes,' the local people having no circulating medium but silver and hides. During all of this period, it was necessary for individuals to carry large balls of tallow and large bundles of hides down to the beach and load them into small boats. Then, the boats would row out to the ships where the bundles were pulled up to the deck and then lowered down into the hold. It was not until 1871, that Thomas Bard built the Hueneme Wharf. But, by this time a severe drought had killed about nine-tenths of the cattle in California (mid-1960s) and Thomas Edison's electricity had lowered the demand for tallow which was so important to making candles. The cattle industry no longer held first place in the economy of early California.

In years to follow, various crops would become extremely profitable. In 1898, the American Beet Sugar Company built a sugar factory and refinery. The town that grew up around the refinery became known as Oxnard, after the brothers who owned the company. Later, California's exports would include lima beans, walnuts, apricots and citrus, among others.

When Yankee ships were transporting the goods of the Californians and bringing them all of the items that they could not manufacture on the ranchos,

other ships were in the area for the purpose of hunting whales. Electricity was not to become common until the turn of the century. Oil obtained from the whale was particularly desirable for light so 'Whaling' was important to the economy of the world. In the 1870s and 1880s, there was a whaling station located in Goleta. It was easier to use small open boats and hunt the Gray Whales in the Santa Barbara Channel than to operate on the open seas. The carcasses could be towed to the beach station for flensing and rendering rather than doing so onboard a ship.

In the early years of this new land, forests were logged primarily for local construction and the Mission Indians who were trained in logging by the padres performed most of the labor. But gradually a trade developed in this commodity. In 1843, the first west coast lumber mill in a redwood forest was constructed near Bodega, California. By the mid-1880s, more than 400 such mills were located within the forests of Humboldt County and along Humboldt Bay. A very profitable route was the triangle trade between the West Coast of California to Australia to Hawaii and back to California. Lumber was sent to Australia. Then the ship would be loaded with coal, which was sent to Hawaii. A new cargo of sugar was then loaded and sent to San Francisco.

Lumber was a bulk cargo, which did not require shelter but was difficult to stow below deck. Soon enterprising shipbuilders designed a Lumber Schooner that had a shallow draft for crossing the coastal bars and an uncluttered deck arrangement for ease of loading. This new ship was easier to maneuver in the tiny ports along the California coast that served the sawmills. Chutes and trapeze rigging were often used for loading which could be extremely dangerous among the rocks and cliffs in treacherous surf. Sometimes these Lumber Schooners were called "baldheaded," when they were rigged without topsails.

Steam Schooners gradually replaced these smaller two-masted vessels. The Steam Schooners were still constructed of wood but were powered and were larger. Between 1886 and 1905, more than 50 major shipbuilders operated on the West Coast building more than 200 of these ships.

Lumber was not the only valuable natural resource that the California had to offer. The coast offered an abundant variety of sea-life that supported many a small fishing vessel.

Soon after the Gold Rush, a small group of Chinese fishermen and their families set sail from Southern China in 30-foot junks. Following the prevailing winds and ocean currents, they probably arrived at Point Lobos around 1851 and established what may be the first Chinese fishing settlement in California. They harvested abalone, squid, sea urchins and a variety of fish. Abalone meat was popular in eastern cultures so the fishing camps on the Channel Islands were very successful.

By the mid-1890s, the supply of shallow-water abalone had dwindled. It was at this time that some Japanese fisherman arrived with hard-hats and diving suits using hand-powered pumps. This industry spread up and down the California coast. In the 1920s, abalone “caught on” with other cultures. Soon supplies dwindled to the point that abalone was put on the endangered species list.




In 1861, the first oil well in California was drilled and soon speculators were securing oil leases throughout the Ventura area. After some wells proved successful, the first oil pipeline was built. It ran from Pico Canyon to Newhall. Later, it was extended to tidewater at Ventura, from which oil was shipped by sea to San Francisco for only 56 cents a barrel. Pacific Coast Oil Company, a forerunner of today’s Standard Oil Co., operated in the Newhall Basin. In 1890, the Union Oil Company was formed and Thomas Bard became the first president. Thirty years later, the Shell Oil Company and Associated Oil Company drilled very successful wells. These and subsequent discoveries made Ventura famous for oil production.

CONCLUSION:

In this address, I may have put a disproportionate amount of emphasis on the Chumash economy. In defense, I would like you to take a look at this time-line. Many renowned scientists feel that a human bone found on Santa Rosa Island in the area of Arlington Springs in the 1950s indicates that humans were there twelve to fourteen thousand years ago. If so, these are the earliest human remains found in North America. At that time, the five islands that comprise the Channel Islands National Park would have been one island and the ocean would have been 300 feet lower than it is today. Much of our continent would have been covered with an ice cap.

Our California history so clearly demonstrates how changes in society are constantly affecting the “demand for goods” and changes in ecology are affecting the “supply of goods.”

Fur traders trapped the sea otter to virtual extinction making tremendous profits for a short period of time. In 1890, one sea otter pelt sold for \$475. In today’s money, that would be approximately \$13,000. When the seals and otters became scarce, abalone proliferated throughout the Channel Islands because they had lost their natural predator. But that commodity was then fished until that supply was exhausted and they were declared endangered. Understanding the forces that meet market demands while balancing the needs of society and the environment is vitally important to our present and future. Being able to impart some of the history of the economy of early California is a valuable contribution that we, as Docents, can contribute.

<p>Thimgan, David (American) (1955 - 2003)</p> <p>BROOKLYN LUMBER SCHOONER, 1901 - 1930</p>		<p>Medium: Oil on Canvas 20 X 30</p> <p>About the Work:</p> <p>This painting depicts a Pacific northwest lumber port. The steam schooner Brooklyn, at 333 tons, was fairly typical of this type of vessel which was unique to the West Coast, carrying lumber from the Pacific Northwest to ports in Central and Southern California. She was wrecked on the Humbolt Bar in 1930.</p>
<p>Acorn in bowl</p>		
<p>Bards Wharf photo</p>		

Cattle photo from port



Chumash routes along coast and to islands



Signage for Chumash display



Tomol in case with Indian for perspective



Tomol model



Photos of tomols



Whale oil lamp

