**KARANKAWA INDIANS**. The now-extinct Karankawa Indians played an important role in the early history of Texas. The name Karankawa became the accepted designation for several groups or bands of coastal people who shared a common language and culture. Those bands, identified in early historic times, included the Capoques (Coaques, Cocos), Kohanis, Kopanes (Copanes), and Karankawa proper (Carancaquacas). They inhabited the Gulf Coast of Texas from Galveston Bay southwestward to Corpus Christi Bay. All spoke a little-known language called Karankawa, and only about 100 words of that language have been preserved. The significance of the name Karankawa has not been definitely established, although it is generally believed to mean "dog-lovers" or "dog-raisers." That translation seems plausible, since the Karankawas reportedly kept dogs that were described as a fox-like or coyote-like breed. The Karankawas were poorly equipped, nomadic people who migrated seasonally between the barrier islands and the mainland. Their movements were dictated primarily by the availability of food and secondarily by climate. They obtained food by a combination of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Fish, shellfish, and turtles were staples of the Karankawa diet, but a wide variety of animals and plants contributed to their sustenance.

Always on the move, the Karankawas rarely remained at a single campsite for more than a few weeks. Their principal means of transportation was the dugout canoe, a crude watercraft made by hollowing out the trunk of a large tree. Those primitive dugouts, unsuited for deep, open water, were used primarily in the relatively shallow waters between the islands and the mainland. Each canoe was spacious enough to carry an entire family along with their household goods. The Karankawas traveled overland by foot, and were often described as powerful runners, as well as expert swimmers. A portable wigwam, or ba-ak, provided shelter for the coastal people. The crude structure, large enough to accommodate seven or eight people, consisted of a willow pole frame that was covered with animal skins and rush mats. Karankawas crafted baskets and pottery, both of which were often lined with asphaltum, a natural tar substance found on Gulf Coast beaches. The chief weapon of the tribe, for both hunting and warfare, was the long bow and arrow. Bows were made of red cedar and reached from the eye or chin level to the foot of the bearer. Karankawas were known for their distinctive physical appearance. The men, described as tall and muscular, wore deerskin breechclouts or nothing at all. They painted and tattooed their bodies, and also pierced the nipples of each breast and the lower lip with small pieces of cane. They often smeared their bodies with a mixture of dirt and alligator or shark grease to ward off mosquitoes. Women also painted and tattooed their bodies and wore skirts of Spanish moss or animal skin that reached to the knees. The social and political organization of the Karankawas was determined by their nomadic lifestyle. They traveled in small bands of thirty to forty people headed by a chief. Those bands often subdivided into smaller groups, probably individual family units, to facilitate foraging. Communication was maintained by a well-developed system of smoke signals that enabled the scattered groups to come together for social events, warfare, or other purposes.

Karankawa ceremonialism centered around gatherings known as "mitotes," which were held for a variety of purposes, each involving different activities. The ceremonies often included dances and the consumption of an intoxicating beverage brewed from the parched leaves of the yaupon (*Ilex cassine*or *vomitoria*), a small shrublike tree native to south Texas. That "black drink" was consumed exclusively by the men of the tribe. The Karankawas also participated in competitive games demonstrating weapons skills or physical prowess. Wrestling was so popular among Karankawas that neighboring tribes referred to them as the "Wrestlers." Warfare was a fact of life for the Karankawas, and evidence indicates that the tribe practiced a ceremonial cannibalism that involved eating the flesh of their traditional enemies. That custom, widespread among Texas tribes, involved consuming bits and pieces of the flesh of dead or dying enemies as the ultimate revenge or as a magical means of capturing the enemy's courage.

The Karankawas' entrance into the historical record in 1528 represents the first recorded contact between Europeans and Texas Indians. Two small boats carrying survivors of the ill-fated Spanish expedition of [Pánfilo de Narváez](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fna22) landed on a small island to the west of Galveston Island. That island, named Malhado, or Isle of Misfortune, by the Spanish, was inhabited by Karankawas. The written account of [Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fca06), one of those shipwrecked survivors, provides our earliest knowledge of the coastal people. Cabeza de Vaca lived among those hunting and gathering groups for several years and provided invaluable ethnological accounts of those Native Americans. After Cabeza de Vaca's encounter with them, the Karankawas were not visited again by Europeans for more than a century and a half. In 1685 a French expedition, led by [René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fla04), established Fort St. Louis on Garcitas Creek near Matagorda Bay, in the heart of Karankawa country. After La Salle and a contingent of men set out for Canada to find help for the struggling colony, Karankawas attacked the remaining settlers, killing all but six children who were taken captive. Those children, five of whom were members of the Talon family, were later rescued by Spanish expeditions in the early 1690s. Two of the former captives, Pierre and Jean-Baptiste Talon, were returned to France in 1698 where they were interrogated by French officials (*see* [TALON CHILDREN](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fta60)). The resulting transcript provides valuable information on Karankawa culture in the late seventeenth century.

In the early years of the eighteenth century, French interest in the Texas coast was rekindled, and Karankawa country again became the center of Spanish-French rivalry. The French continued to explore the coastal area, and in 1719 the Karankawas captured a shipwrecked sailor named [François Simars de Bellisle](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fbe42). The Frenchman lived with the tribe for fifteen months before escaping to Louisiana, where he provided French authorities with extensive information about the Texas coastal tribes. In 1721 a French land expedition, led by [Jean Baptiste Bénard de La Harpe](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fla01), crossed Karankawa territory. In response to that French incursion, the Spanish established Nuestra Señora de Loreta Presidio and Espíritu Santo de Zúñiga Mission near the site of former Fort St. Louis. Because of their locations near Matagorda Bay, both became known as La Bahía. The mission was established specifically to civilize and Christianize the Karankawas and make them loyal Spanish subjects, but hostilities quickly developed between Spaniards and Indians. By 1726 no neophytes remained at La Bahía, and the mission was moved to the Guadalupe River where it remained until 1749. At that time, it was relocated to the San Antonio River near present Goliad.

Despite the lack of success at La Bahía, the Spanish continued their efforts to missionize the Karankawas for the dual purposes of subduing the hostile tribe and establishing a permanent hold on the Texas coast. In 1754 a new mission, Nuestra Señora del Rosario de los Cujanes, was established for the Karankawas on the San Antonio River, upstream from La Bahía. Rosario Mission enjoyed some success, and in 1764 it boasted a neophyte population of 101. That success was short-lived, and in 1781 the mission was closed due to a high rate of Indian desertions. A third mission, Nuestra Señora del Refugio, was built for the Karankawas in 1791. That mission, relocated three times, was finally situated at Rancho de Santa Gertrudis, near the site of present Refugio. A reported 190 mixed Karankawas and Coahuiltecans occupied Refugio Mission in 1814, but by the early 1820s repeated Comanche attacks had caused the virtual depopulation of that mission. The two struggling Karankawa missions continued to operate until they were secularized in 1830 and 1831. For more than a century, the Spanish attempted to missionize the Karankawas but with little success. A few were eventually gathered into missions, but most rejected that way of life. Additionally, [Athanase de Mézières](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fme69), a Frenchman employed as Indian agent by the Spanish, made no progress in his efforts to establish peace through trade with the Karankawas. In the late 1770s Mézières advocated extermination of the tribe, but his proposed plan was not carried out. However, by the end of Spanish rule in Texas, the Karankawa population had been greatly reduced by epidemic diseases and other effects of European invasion. An 1819 confrontation with [Jean Laffite](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fla12)'s pirate colony on Galveston Island was particularly costly for the Karankawas. The incident occurred when Laffite's men kidnapped a Karankawa woman, and the tribe retaliated by assembling 300 warriors to attack the pirate compound. Laffite's force of 200 men armed with two cannon inflicted heavy losses on the Indians and forced them to retreat. That encounter was a major defeat for the once powerful Karankawas.

Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, and the new government encouraged Anglo-American immigration to the sparsely populated province of Texas. As settlers entered Karankawa territory, confrontations became frequent. Mexican authorities attempted to protect the colonists by making peace with the Karankawas, but their efforts were unsuccessful. The colonists, spurred by empresario [Stephen F. Austin](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fau14), banded together to rid themselves of the Indian threat. Austin was convinced that extermination provided the only acceptable solution to the Karankawa problem. In 1824 he personally led an expedition of some ninety men that drove the Karankawas to seek sanctuary in La Bahía Mission. A priest at the mission arranged an armistice between the colonists and Indians. According to terms of the agreement, the Karankawas, led by Chief Antonito, agreed to remain west of the Lavaca River. That treaty was renewed in 1827 by empresario [Green DeWitt](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fde55) and two Karankawa chiefs, Antonito and Delgado. Despite the treaty the Karankawas continued to range east of the Lavaca River, and conflicts between colonists and Karankawas were frequent. The tribe's population steadily diminished as they fought the growing Anglo-Texan population, as well as hostile Tonkawas and Comanches. When Texas became an independent republic in 1836 the Karankawas had been so reduced that they were no longer considered a formidable enemy. By the 1840s only scattered remnants of the tribe remained along the Texas coast. One of those bands, camped on the Guadalupe River below Victoria, was attacked by Texans in 1840 in retaliation for Karankawa raids on area settlers. Many Indians were killed in the attack, and the survivors fled down the coast where they settled about fifty miles southwest of Corpus Christi. Other small groups of Karankawas were located on Aransas Bay near the mouth of the Nueces River and in the vicinity of Lavaca Bay. During the mid 1840s most of the surviving Karankawas moved south into Tamaulipas, Mexico, to escape pressure from the growing Texan population, but they encountered similar problems south of the Rio Grande. Accused of plundering settlements in the Reynosa area, the tribe came under continued attack from Mexican authorities. By the late 1850s the Karankawas had been pushed back into Texas, where they settled in the vicinity of Rio Grande City. Local residents did not welcome the tribe, and in 1858 a Texan force, led by [Juan Nepomuceno Cortina](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fco73), attacked and annihilated that small remaining band of Karankawas. After that last defeat, the coastal Texas tribe was considered extinct. The Karankawas, who had managed to survive 300 years of European contact, ultimately fell victim to rapid American colonization and direct exterminatory warfare. To the end of their existence, these coastal people retained their hunting, fishing, and gathering culture.

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