

The Lipan Apaches: Southern Plains Indians in Eastern New Mexico And Texas

In Bandera County Texas in 1866 a fourteen-year-old orphan named Frank Buckalew was captured by a band of Apache Indians raiding settlements in the rugged Hill Country south of Austin and west of San Antonio.

As he was being taken northwest out of the Hill Country and into the plains of West Texas, young Frank must have wondered what was coming next in his tumultuous life. He had been kidnapped by the Apaches after his uncle Berry, with whom he had been living, had been killed by Indians in an earlier raid.

Frank was born in Union Parish, Louisiana, in 1852, and his father had moved the family to Texas in hopes of a new life and the opportunity to settle on free land. Their hopes were dashed, both parents dying as they lived in several central Texas locations, including Cherokee County, where his father passed away and left Frank an orphan.

The Indians who had captured Frank at his uncle's farm were Lipan Apaches, one of three "eastern Apache" groups that included the Jicarillas and Kiowa Apaches. As they had been for a century, the Lipans were on the run from marauding bands of Comanches, fierce and superior horseback warriors who were driving all Apaches, including the Lipans, Jicarillas, and Mescaleros, from the Southern Plains of Texas and northern Mexico.

When the Lipans first took Frank into their tribe, they treated him harshly. In the first days with them, he was savagely beaten by just about everyone in the band, initially making him run through a gauntlet



of men, women, and children who lashed him with tree branches, leather harnesses, or anything else they could get their hands on. The Lipans were testing him to see if he was tough enough to become a tribal member and live under the harsh conditions that were part of everyday life for the the tribe.

Frank survived the punishment, and just when he thought one elderly Lipan woman was going to cut his throat and he would die, the woman simply broke the surface of his skin enough for him bleed slightly and then she embraced him as part of her family. At just fourteen years of age, Frank was now part of the third family in his brief life.

I guess the Lipans practiced what today we call tough love.

Frank may have been tougher than even his new Indian family members were aware because eleven months after he was

taken prisoner, he escaped from the Lipans who were preoccupied with other matters, which included escaping the wrath of the Comanches, who were in those years following the Civil War, the most feared of all the Plains Indians. In fact, among all Native American tribes only the Apaches in Western New Mexico and southeastern Arizona, developed the warrior reputation of the Comanches.

Late in his life, in 1925, Frank Buckalew wrote a memoir of his life and his times with the Lipans. It is titled, "Life of F.M. Buckalew: The Indian Captive as related by himself". The book tells much about the practices and beliefs of the Lipans, but even with his description of his experiences among them,

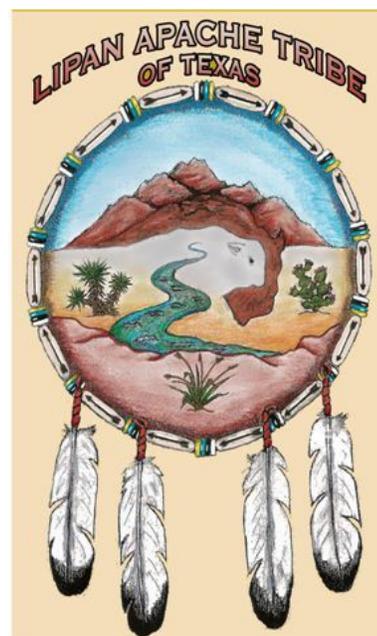
the Lipans continued to be one of the least known of all the Plains Indians. Even in Texas, school children learn much more about the Comanches, the Tonkawas, the Karankawas, Kiowas, and the Mescaleros than they learn about the Lipans. In fact, it was with the Mescaleros that the Lipans finally merged, both tribes taking refuge in the Sacramento Mountains of south central New Mexico in the last years of the 19th century.

Thus, if Lea County folks want to know specifically about the Native Americans who occupied the southeast corner of the state, they need go no farther than the Mescalero Reservation three hours to the west where descendants of the Lipans still reside. It was these two tribes, Lipan and Mescalero, who in historical times frequented Lea land to camp at such places as Ranger Lake, Monument Springs, Dug Springs a few miles to the south, or other playa lakes in the north and south of Lea.

Long time New Mexico journalist and syndicated columnist Sherry Robinson has just published a new book about the Lipan Apaches, "I Fought a Good Fight: A History of the Lipan Apaches." It is released by the University of North Texas Press, and sometime this fall she will appear at the Lea County Museum to give a powerpoint presentation about her research and her new book.

Robinson's book has received much critical praise, and copies of "I Fought a Good Fight" are presently on their way to the Lea County Museum's bookstore. More about her book in other History Notebooks and local news releases.

More information about the Lipans can be found at the tribal web site, "lipanapache.org." The tribe is now a State of Texas recognized Indian tribe, and the tribe has a museum in Corpus Christi and headquarters in McAllen, Texas. There is also another band of Lipans headquartered in San Antonio, and their web site is "lipanapachebandofTexas.com."



The information about Frank Buckalew in this History Notebook can be found in the excellent and readable book "The Indians of Texas by W.W. Newcomb, Jr. published in 1972.

More about Buckalew's experiences as a boy with the Lipans can be found in his book, first published in 1925 five years before his death.

Buckalew's descriptions bring to mind the thoughts of most American and Mexican peoples living in the Southwest during the 19th century. Native Americans were considered "savages," uncivilized peoples because their civilization just had not progressed to the advanced state of European civilization. They thought Indians were primitives still living thousands of years back in the development of humanity.

However, in light of what is happening around the world today, particularly in Syria and the Middle East

where Sunni Muslims slaughter Shiite Muslims by the thousands with weapons unimaginable 150 years ago, just how savage were the acts of the Lipans who murdered Buckalew's relatives and kidnapped the young boy they wanted to be part of their tribe? Just how savage were the Lipans who kidnapped the boy Buckalew so their people would continue as a tribe?

Were they predisposed to savage acts because of a primitive state of mind or because they were culturally taught to live the life of their fathers, mothers, and ancestors?

In other words, was it nature or nurture that programmed the Lipans to live as they did?