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The
Lake Charles Atakapas
(*Cannibals*)

PERIOD of 1817 TO 1820



*Written by request for the Howard
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New Orleans*

By DR. J. O. DYER
GALVESTON, TEXAS

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The Lake Charles (Calcasieu) Atakapas or Cannibals of 1817-20

In 1739 De Nouaille described a tribe called Apapapas or Atakapas, who resided on the seashore of Louisiana, and who lived mostly on fish. In the language of the tribal confederacy of the Caddos, and in the Choctaw the term of Atakapa was applied to coastal tribes of Louisiana and of Texas who were "man eaters." As, however, many other tribes were guilty of the same custom, it occurred to the writer that the name may have had a deeper signification. Similar climate and local conditions frequently cause clans or tribes although of different physical characteristics, of different racial stock, to adopt the same customs and habits. Thus we find the coastal (Gulf) Indians of Louisiana and Texas, the Atakapas, Karankawai, Coanas (Cujanes), the Co-coswai (Cokes), the Mai-a-wai and the Ar-ana-isa (Xaranemes) and even the Rio Grande Pakawai making use (especially in their names) of an ancient dialect; also they employed similar methods of cooking and preparing flesh by curing the same. They went bare-headed and bare-footed (being fishermen) and their religious and tribal customs, often very peculiar, frequently were not far apart. In 1815 there were still a few Carancahuas (Karankawai) encamped at the mouth of the Sabine, who came in close contact with the Atakapa clan situated near the mouth of the Calcasieu River, which clan forms the object of this sketch. In races of ancient origin it is in the proper names (those determinative of person, of location, of religious rites or objects of veneration) that the language of a decadent nation survives the longest. Thus the Carancahuas in 1817 still retained names in a language, as different from their neighbors, as they themselves were in their physical appearance. Luckily the writer has been enabled to preserve about twenty or twenty-five names which he believes belonged to a very ancient tongue, because the words were mono-syllabic, of two or three letters each, and grouped in short sentences consisting of mostly nouns and verbs, with a few adjectives (other parts of speech being understood). The names derived from members of the Laffite Commune and of Perry's buccaneer camp, who were thrown in contact with the Carancahuas for three years will be fully described in a work now nearly completed (the History of the Carancahuas). The vocabulary derived from Mrs. Oliver, who in 1839 came in contact with the remnant of the tribe in Matagorda County, does not contain any of the old words, excepting in a few instances, and then with a different meaning. Dr. Gatschet, who got out this vocabulary, admitted that the words of the vocabulary had affinity with some of those of the Tonkawai, the Pakawai, and of the Shetimasha of Southern Louisiana.

In 1839 the chief of the forty or fifty people still called Carancahuas at Baca River, Matagorda County, was one Antonio, a half breed Tonkawai, (from a Carancahua mother) his wife being a Comanche woman. There were no full bloods in the tribe; the men having been exterminated in 1835 and the women captured by the Tonkawai. The clan was a conglomeration of outcasts from neighboring tribes, who kept alive by begging, stealing, and fishing, and their language in 1839, a jargon mostly of Spanish-English mixed with Indian dialects.

In endeavoring to trace the origin of A-ta-ka-pa in the old dialect of the Carancahuas, we find the following: The shark—the buffalo of the coastal tribe—for it supplied skin, flesh, oil, sinews, bones, fins and bile, all of which integral parts found a use in the everyday life of the clan—was an object of sufficient importance to retain the ancient name "Hai-a," which translated means fish (Hai) and mouth (a) or more properly the fish (with a) mouth. As all fishes have mouths, the designation meant a significant mouth, a large one, or one capable of inflicting injury. In the Coke clan at Red Fish bar, Galveston Bay, the daughter of the head man was Ta-Ka (daughter of the chief) and her brother was a skillful harpoon thrower called Pa-ra-hai-a, which translated meant "throws (the) arrow (into the) fish (with big) mouth;" in short, the "Shark harpooner." From these two names by transposition of the words we can

translate A-ta-Ka-pa as follows: "a" (pronounced as a guttural with the mouth open) is indicative how it became the term for "mouth;" "ta" meant daughter, "Ka" chief, and "pa" to throw. "(In the) mouth (of the) daughter (the) chief throws." To us such a sentence would be unintelligible, to the natives on the Gulf coast a century or two back it was the contrary, for they knew that which the chief threw in the mouth of the daughter.

The chief as a rule did not bother with the daughters (the females of the clan) except on certain ceremonial occasions. This happened whenever the victorious warriors captured a brave, swift or strong enemy; or killed one in combat. The body, stripped of certain portions of the flesh, was left on the field, but the human steaks, dried and smoked, were carried back to the camp. Before all others, the pregnant females were lined up, and the chief placed a morsel of the enemy's flesh into each mouth, expressing the sentiment that the unborn babes might acquire the particular attribute (of valor, strength, or fleetness), which of late was inherent in the body now partitioned.

Having found the key to the words A-ta-Ka-pa, it may be of interest to note that the extreme western Texas tribe—the Pa-ka-wai's name can be translated to mean "throws (the) chief (to the) people." The neighbors of the coastal tribes, such as the Caddos and Choctaws, thus probably incorporated words of the old dialect into their language.

* * * * *

It was in the year 1819, when an American officer entered the Lake Charles village of the Atakapas on a cold October day. Colonel Graham had been on official business at the Laffite camp at Galveston, and was making his way from Bolivar by land to the Vermillion Bridge.

An attack of acute dysentery compelled Graham to spend a week at the village, and thus we have an interesting description handed down to us. (Graham became later associated at New Orleans with the writer's father.) The savages, who were the coastal clan of interior tribes, were of a very low type of civilization. They were dark skinned, with dirty, short, coarse black matted hair; their bodies stout, stature short, and heads of large size placed almost between the shoulders. The ears were very large, as were the mouths, and the cheek bones and nose prominent. Col. Graham thought they resembled the Orcoquisas, but they were much stouter and their necks shorter. Fish oil was used as a food, consequently they were extremely fat, and the custom of oiling their bodies added to the sleekness. In spite of their frequent presence in the water as fishermen, they were offensive to the sight and smell. However, they received Graham hospitably, and placed him in a vacant hut. This was extremely filthy, filled with vermin, and in one corner were the remains of human excreta; it's sides were made of poles interwoven with vines, and the conical top was open in the center to allow the smoke from below to escape; the fireplace of oyster shells (a mere pit) being in the middle of the dirt floor. Only one opening was provided, serving as door and window, and closed by a heavy hide suspended from a crossbar.

The shaman took charge of Graham, and started in by giving him hot decoctions of a red root, so astringent that he said "he felt his insides pucker up." His bed was a slightly raised platform of drift wood, covered with moss and skins. A fire was kept up day and night and water poured on the hot oyster shells of the fireplace, keeping the hovel steaming hot. Graham said that the steam and the smoke from the fire and torches, kept him blind for days, and his skin shrivelled; however, he got well rapidly, but his diet was confined for some days to a broth made from shell-fish. He learned from the shaman, who talked some English, that his services were frequently required in the Mermentau River settlement, and that he could cure most diseases, except the white man's disease (smallpox). He said that some years before a number of the clan had died, rotting away before his medicines could take effect. Several of the older members of the clan were pockmarked. The shaman would not reveal the name or the nature of the red root, saying that he learned from the Carancahuas the

secret of curing by its means all bowel troubles. (This statement was undoubtedly true, for that tribe never suffered from the dysenteries that decimated the Bidai, Koasoti and Tonkawai.)

The tribe were skilled fishermen, but their dugouts being frail, they never ventured into the Gulf for any distance. They did not use the bow and arrow to any extent in fishing, but depended upon darts and spears, which they were able to fling with unerring accuracy. Graham saw them hit (in the salt water lagoons connecting with the Gulf) small fish but ten inches long at a distance of twenty paces. The darts tipped with bone were used for short distances and floated, while the heavier flint tip harpoon had a wooden floater attached to a thong, which enabled them to retrieve their weapons, as well as tire out a wounded fish. Flounders were speared by torch light, with a short-handled dart, tipped with a bundle of sharp fish bones. Flounders were cooked whole in a pit, the fish being placed one above the other. When dried, they were split in halves, but the flesh was insipid, tough and stringy. Small fish of all kinds were dried by being impaled on reeds and smoked over banked fires. A fish with such oily flesh that Graham could not eat it (probably a menhaden) when smoked and salted became very palatable. These fish formed an article of barter with tribes of the interior, and were esteemed a delicacy by the Opelousas, who traded flints for them. This tribe (Atakapa) ate all kinds of shellfish; in fact, seemed to have no taboo-food. Oysters were obtained from the salt water lagoons, being dragged from the shell bottoms with rakes made of two strong poles, curved at the ends and interlaced with strong vines. The drag brought up clumps of live oysters, fastened to the shells of former generations. The old shells were always detached and thrown in the water, while the heaps of shells accumulating from oysters consumed were placed in a mound in the village, upon which stood the lodges of the head man and of the shaman. Graham, curious whether the dead were buried in the mounds, was told by the shaman that the dead and living could "not live together." Hence, it is presumable that the dead were placed, at first, in out-of-the-way places, in shallow trenches easily dug in the quicksand. The tribe had no cattle, horses, firearms or whiskey, and but few iron implements. Whilst Graham was ill his whiskey bottle disappeared, as did the buttons of his military cloak. These were probably adopted by the medicine man

The tribe was far from the nearest settlement, hence their thieving propensities had not developed as fully as in later years. The dugouts were propelled by paddles and poles, and were clumsy logs, hollowed out and one end sharpened.

Small lagoons, subject to tidal flow, were cut off by traps made of brushwood, in which the receding tide left behind numerous small fish.

The shaman powdered dry roots or herbs in a wooden mortar and sprinkled the fine powder upon the surface of lagoons. In a few hours the fish rising to the surface were stupefied and killed by a blow from the paddle.

* * * * *

Col. Warren D. C. Hall visited the village several times in 1817, 1818 and 1819, as he made journeys by land from Bolivar to Calcasieu.

Col. Hall was with Commodore Perry, who first came to Bolivar in 1815, and Hall was the first white man to land on Galveston Island. He was born in Rapides Parish, La., studied law and medicine at Nacogdoches, and became a free lance in the various Texan revolutionary movements sequent to 1812. Later he figured in Austin's settlement, and finally aided in the 1836 revolution, when Texas secured independence. Hall from his boyhood associated with Indians in Louisiana, and later in life he made friends with the various tribes he came in contact with, the Atakapa, Carancahua, Toncahua, Kaosoti and Orcoquisa. His knowledge of Indian customs, and his observations of race characteristics, were accurate and reliable. After Perry lost his vessels in Galveston Bay, and Hall's men deserted, he made his way on foot to the Atakapa village to await supplies and new men. Early in 1817 the village contained forty miserable, dirty huts, the chief's and shaman's being on an oyster mound, and somewhat larger in size. They had no temple and no religious ceremonies, except the "chi" dance, which was patterned after that of the Carancahuas; likewise they had no food-taboos, which were so irksome to their western neighbors. The tribe, Hall likened to the type of the Toncahuas; men of short stature, large heads, dark skins, and prominent facial features of an unpleasant cast; especially noticeable were the high cheek bones and protruding lips. Whilst in many customs, such as hunting, fishing, cooking, dancing and others, the Atakapas followed the Carancahuas, rather than their kindred away from the coast, there was no racial affinity whatsoever, the Carancahuas being tall, slender, agile, light skinned, yellow haired, and with regular features and white teeth. The Atakapas used tobacco and whiskey whenever able to secure it, and were actually willing to perform hard labor

to satisfy their wants. Their teeth were stained from the various leaf substitutes they used for tobacco. Head deformation, cuts on the nose and chin, and tattooing were noticeable, especially in the older members. They used the yaupon leaves as a beverage, but did not drink large quantities of the decoction, as was the case in the ceremonies of the Trinity River Indians. Possibly it was taken at certain seasons to cleanse the system. The writer in a historical sketch recently published drew attention to a custom of some of the Gulf coastal Indians, which caused them to change their names, either on the birth of a male heir, or upon the said heir becoming famous. The Atakapas thus called themselves after their sons. An illustration of this was secured by names of Indians who visited the Laffite camp. The Coke clan was but fifteen miles distant; and the headman, whose previous name was unknown, had some twenty years previously, when his first son was born, adopted the infant's name of Hai-a or Shark; he thus became Ka-hai-a, or father of shark. One day the young man dived below a twenty-foot shark and stabbed him to death with a bone knife. The feat caused the tribe to change the youth's name to Hai-a-wai, or shark-killer, and the old chief promptly changed to Ka-hai-a-wai, or father of the shark killer. The term wa-i is of interest to ethnologists, because it really meant man, or people who kill, or warriors. Thus the term "wa-i" was found as the terminal of many of the Gulf coastal tribes, for instance Ka-ra-ank-wai, Tonk-a-wai, Pak-a wai, Mai a wai and Co-cos-wai, in each case meaning "warrior-people." The Atakapa, at the period mentioned, were gentle and timid, but undoubtedly the race had become decadent. The early French speak of their valor and propensity to devour the body of the slain enemy.

From a trader who represented the Laffite Commune, we know that the last act of cannibalism committed by a part of the clan was previous to their removal to the coast. An old man stated that in his youth he belonged to the clan which lived near the Opelousas on the "Mermento" River. The Opelousas went to war with the Avoyels, because the latter refused to barter flints, which were plentiful in their country. Some Avoyels were captured then, and "made good eating." The storm of 1810 was very disastrous on the Gulf, and the Atakapas' huts and supplies were washed away. Some bodies of shipwrecked sailors at that time were washed ashore near the mouth of "Calcasieu." A council deliberated whether the bodies should be cooked for food, for food was scarce. The bodies were roasted in a pit, but finally the shaman gave it as his opinion that if the Atakapa were to eat the flesh of white men, their skin would become spotty. Albinism, somewhat prevalent and well known among Indians, was not considered a desirable possession, so the cannibal feast did not take place. At the time a hunter brought in an alligator's carcass, and thus the tribe escaped another calamity.

From the Greek trader who commanded the Arabelle, one of the trading feluccas of the Laffite camp, further habits and history of the clan at Lake Charles, at the period mentioned, were obtained.

Nicholas, the sailor, ran away from Mytilene when a boy, joined the British navy, and at seventeen years of age was made a mate of the Jupiter at Charleston. He came with Jean Laffite to Galveston Island in 1817, and went with him to Yucatan in 1820, when Laffite evacuated Galveston Island. Twenty-two years later Nicholas returned, and for half a century supplied the local markets of Galveston with fish and charcoal. Born in 1800, he lived the entire century. At eighteen years of age Nicholas married Or-ta, a Carancahua girl, who accompanied him on his various trading trips, and acted as interpreter. The Laffite Commune found it more profitable to trade off merchandise captured in prizes than to send them to New Orleans or Baltimore, where the brokers or fences charged exorbitant commissions. Thus from the Ar-anemes in the west to the Mermenteau in the east of the Gulf litoral, the trade schooners kept plying, entering likewise the navigable rivers, some of which were already colonized by whites. Nicholas had picked up another Greek lad, a waif of Jewish parentage, who could read and write and thus acted as supercargo for the Arabelle. His name was Xenippe, and with the curiosity of his race, on the first visit of the Arabelle, managed to sneak into the shaman's hut in order to investigate. He was soon discovered by the shaman and knocked senseless. The shaman's hut was taboo to everyone, and a crucifix left some years before by a Catholic missionary was stuck over the doorway to "warn intruders away." Xenippe after this experience kept aboard the felucca. He said the hut contained a lot of snake skins, feathers, fancy shells, and curiosities. In baskets on one side of the hut were human skulls and bones. This is mentioned, because it may have been the custom of the tribe to exhume the body, after some months, clean the bones, and pack them in a basket. The Koasoti exposed their dead on frames, and when cleaned by the birds, they were washed, placed in baskets, and stored in the "holy hut." The chief articles of barter that the tribe offered were mil, moss and pinal. Mil were bunches of dried or smoked small fish. The word was probably of French origin, being used jocularly "thousand

in a bunch." The moss was gathered from the trees of swamps and was in great demand on Galveston Island for mattresses and bedding. Pinal, probably a corruption of *piedernales*, meant hard stones or flints. The Carancahuas took all the flints they could obtain by barter.

Formerly they traded for flints with the Atakapa, rather than make a warlike or peaceable journey into the lands of the tribes to the north of them, such as the Wekoes, Ketchies and others of the Caddo Confederation. The Carancahua women were very handsome, and usually the trading trips ended in battles for the possession of the Carancahua squaws. The tribe owed its extermination to this, for even the white men of Velasco by their acts turned the peaceable, timid, giant Carancahuas into demons, spurred on by a blood-vendetta.

The Atakapa of Lake Charles in their intercourse with the whites spoke the Caddoan dialect, though possibly they had their own tongue; a few of the words, especially those relating to fish and fishing, were identical with the ancient Carancahuan words.

In 1819, on a visit by Nicholas, the mosquitoes were so fierce and plentiful that large brush fires were built. At that early date the people of the South associated the presence of so many mosquitoes with yellow fever. Col. Hall contracted the disease that year in Louisiana, where it raged fatally. Nacogdoches had some cases of vomito, but the Laffite camp escaped.

The Atakapa were too lazy to tan skins of beasts or of large fish; their pottery was made by tribes to the north of them, except a few of the globular or conical oil jugs of the Carancahuas, so serviceable, fitted in cane frames, to the canoe voyager. The tribe furnished the Indians to the north with sharks' teeth, marine curios, dried or smoked fish, feathers and seaweed, esteemed as medicine. The plumes of the heron, crane and pelican, as well as of the wild geese, were especially in demand. The small breast feathers (eiderdown) attached to the skin, were obtained by inserting small hollow reeds between the skin and flesh of the breast, and blowing air between them; these feather pelts were dried and prized for ornamentation by the Creoles. Birds were killed with small, blunt arrows to prevent the blood from staining the white feathers. The infant was strapped to a piece of wet bark, which was bent to conform to the shape of the body. The head was left free, so that the mother could pick up the strapped bundle and hold it to the breast to nurse. The infant was removed from its cage twice daily, fresh moss being placed between the legs to absorb the natural discharges.

Skull deformation resulted from the infant lying so much on its back, and the head resting on a hard substance, such as a piece of bark or hide. Col. Hall stated the deformation was unilateral, therefore not caused purposely. Women as wives were bartered for with other tribes, the men in the clan outnumbering the females. The tribe frequently picked up valuable wreckage on the coast, which they traded to the whites for whiskey; and whiskey or rum was the currency that always secured the wife; therefore, some women had new husbands at frequent intervals, especially those that were barren. The Atakapas did not fancy shark meat, but they specialized in alligator dainties. The saurian was speared in the eye, and disemboweled in the median line, where the skin is thin. Owing to the difficulty of cutting the horny hide, the carcass was left whole after gutting. Along each side of the spine a long trench was made by removing the flesh, and the belly skin was replaced and tied. The carcass was now placed in a pit of red-hot oyster shells, and covered with live charcoal. In a few hours the skin, though charred, still held the baked flesh and oil that had gathered in the trenches. This oil was served as a delicacy, and placed in jugs for future uses; an essential one was for body inunction, which kept off mosquitoes and gnats, prevented the terrible "water sunburn" of the body, and lastly was believed to render the swimmer more buoyant. The alligator oil was used in their lamps; as torchwood was often scarce or wet. The lamp was a large shell containing a wisp of moss, curled into a wick. The smell was abominable. The whites of the Mermonteau used to place a small piece of sulphur in their fish oil lamps, which they claimed prevented smoke or odor (?) Col. Hall, who was versed in Indian languages,

stated that this tribe believed it came out of the sea, being cast up in large oyster shells, from which the first men grew. This tribe, however, was probably an inland one some centuries back, and the legend possibly borrowed from the Carancahuas, with whom the oyster was taboo-food. Men that were eaten by men, and those that died from snake bite, were believed to be incapable of entering a second life, hence were eternally damned.

The tribe, although careless of the young, was by no means desirous of race suicide. Procreation was encouraged and the man of family respected. The soon-to-become-a-mother was removed to a hut set apart for the purpose and there attended by the old crones of the village; for no matter whether your old woman is black, white, red or yellow, she always delights to dabble in the offices of the lying-in chamber.

Whilst the pregnant female was banished from the hovel of her "man," this red vagabond by custom was allowed to rest, or lay up for imaginary repair. In this clan, however, he escaped the fasting ritual, and anxious friends and relatives made the week pass pleasantly for him by providing an ample supply of dainties, such as alligator fat crisps, or raw shrimp.

After 1819 the last record of the clan reached the writer through the agency of Mrs. Jane Long, wife of the buccanier chief, General James Long. After Long established himself at Fort Mina on Galveston Island in 1820, he sent for his wife at Shreveport. The Atakapa's village was the place of meeting between her and an escort under Hall. The clan was described by Mrs. Long as being filthier even than niggers

With a woman's aptitude she particularly noticed the ornaments worn, and the methods of the cuisine. The strong strap around the left wrist worn by the men, and sometimes by the women, found it's use as a knife sheath, to hold the weapon securely when the native was swimming and fishing. Flounders and other dry fish, when cooked, were larded with a piece of blubber from an alligator or large fish, the skewers used being long and sharp fish bones. Oysters in the shell were barbecued in a pit, and small fish were placed in the cavities of the large ones to be baked. The skirt of the women was very primitive. A skin was trimmed into circular shape; in its center a circular hole was cut, and the garment was slipped over the head and fastened around the waist with thongs. Mrs. Long was left late in 1820 at Bolivar in his old fort by General Long, when he went on his Mexican expedition. He left with her as companions a physician and his wife, for Mrs. Long was with child; also a small guard and a cannon in the fort. When General Long failed to return, Mrs. Long, declining to leave, was left by her companions with only a slave girl to care for her infant daughter. The winter of 1820 to 1821 was so severe that Galveston Bay froze over (which took place again in 1886). Mrs. Long finally learning of her husband's death, was taken by settlers to Austin's colony, and resided for half a century at Richmond, Texas. In the revolution of 1836 Mrs. Long's brick outhouse stored the powder supply of the settlers of Austin's colony.

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The Atakapas after 1820 were soon surrounded by white settlements, and the remnant of the clan which had survived the smallpox, syphilis and tuberculosis, which always accompanied white civilization, was gradually amalgamated with the superior race.

Late last century at Beaumont and in Orange descendants of the Atakapa clan had their residence.



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