

“Talk at Ten”
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MARK: This is Marfa Public Radio’s Talk at Ten program. I’m Mark Glover. Today’s guest is Richard Walter, an archaeologist at the Center for Big Bend Studies. Good morning Richard.

RICHARD: Good morning.

MARK: Richard – you spent five years on the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico. What were you doing there?

RICHARD: I just happened to land there. I was going with this Apache girl for a long time and wound up staying with her family over there.

MARK: And was life there much different from the American mainstream?

RICHARD: Yes. [both laugh]

MARK: Well, rock art in the Trans Pecos and the Big Bend—what was the inspiration of these drawings and how old are they and where did they buy their paint?

RICHARD: Historic rock imagery I’d rather label it because I don’t consider all of it to be really artwork. It’s typical of showing biographical scenes. Most of it has elements of European dress and European goods such as guns and a lot of religious paraphernalia is incorporated into it like Spanish crosses.

MARK: So, then, those biological sketches I think you called them—

RICHARD: Biographical.

MARK: Biographical. They’re fairly recent, I mean, if they’re—

RICHARD: Oh, compared to thousands of years prior to that, yeah.

MARK: So there were crosses, crucifixes...

RICHARD: A lot of people on horses, stuff that was brought in from the Europeans. So, obviously it was a big impact on these people.

MARK: You mentioned some of the things that were from Europe, the technology. Speaking of technology, what do you think were some of the items that the Europeans brought that changed the native way of life?

RICHARD: A lot of metal items, glass items, guns especially.

MARK: *Guns.*

RICHARD: Yeah.

MARK: *So the natives at that time were not into metallurgy and glassmaking?*

RICHARD: There are some isolated occurrences in Mexico where they practice metallurgy prior to European contact. But overall, the people in this area especially had stone technology. So when these new European goods were brought in, it was quite the thing, you know.

MARK: *And the horse, and the bow and arrow, was that part of that introduction?*

RICHARD: No, the horse was part of the introduction but the bow and arrow was already here.

MARK: *So the bow and arrow dates back to 700 A.D.?*

RICHARD: Bows started in late prehistoric times which was five to six hundred years prior to contact with the Europeans.

MARK: *And before that the weapon of choice for our area was the atlatl? And then the bow and arrow came.*

RICHARD: And then the bow and arrow came, gradually, of course.

MARK: *And both of those weapons required a sharp point.*

RICHARD: Correct— they manufactured projectile points made out of stone.

MARK: *As I understand it, you are a flint knapper, among other things.*

RICHARD: I'm not a very good one but yes, I can make a crude point.

MARK: *If we walk through this, the men for the most part were the hunters of this hunter-gatherer system and they would go out into the desert with their bow and arrow and hunt rabbits or javelina or whatever came their way.*

RICHARD: True. Archaeologically, it's hard to really determine gender roles but some ethnographic records mention women basically did most of the work as far as food processing and hide preparation and set camp and all that while the men were more responsible for hunting and warfare and things like that.

MARK: *And so they would take these projectile points and fit them on sticks and—I mean, where are we finding most of these arrowheads? Were they in the camps or were they just scattered about where impact was made with an animal, or—if you're an arrow hunter/collector, where do you look?*

RICHARD: Not that I really agree with collecting since I'm a professional archaeologist but most of the projectile points are found at their camps. And in some cases there are isolated occurrences where they cached arrow points. Some of that is believed to have been a ritualistic kind of thing. They cached them ritualistically, instead of planning on coming back and using them later.

MARK: I see. So, as I understand it, up in the Davis Mountains there was a very large cache of arrow heads that wasn't necessarily something that they were storing for future hunting uses. It was more a religious thing.

RICHARD: It was more ritualistic, yes.

MARK: So if you ran out of arrowheads while you were hunting, you'd just stop, find a rock, chip it away, and keep going. Is that how it worked?

RICHARD: That's what I do. [Both laugh] Actually, it doesn't really take a long time to make an arrow point.

MARK: And that process is one rock against another? Is that how you do it?

RICHARD: True.

MARK: And the best rocks for making arrowheads are what?

RICHARD: Any rock that has a conchoidal fracture, you know, that stone—be it a siliceous stone, cryptocrystalline stone like flint or chert or obsidian, or agate.

MARK: And we have quite a bit of that out here.

RICHARD: This place is loaded with it.

MARK: So the major tribes in our area, in the historic age, which basically started from when Cortez came through here, or was it Cabeza de Vaca?

RICHARD: Cabeza de Vaca. Archaeologists have formed a chronological framework where they call the time of contact around 1535, protohistoric, and it goes on to about 1700. And then, from 1700 on, it's called the historic period.

MARK: This historic period then—so, the last free-roaming natives in our area was when?

RICHARD: Probably in the 1880s.

MARK: And that was Chief Victorio, I believe?

RICHARD: He was the last one. He was actually massacred in Mexico.

MARK: He was a Lipan Apache?

RICHARD: No – he was an Eastern Chiricahua.

MARK: An Eastern Chiricahua.

RICHARD: Or a Hot Springs Apache.

MARK: And their range was—they made it up to the Guadalupe Mountains and, I think, down to the river?

RICHARD: Oh yeah. One of their frequent excursions was in the Davis Mountains, on to El Paso and on down into Northern Chihuahua.

MARK: And he was hunted for quite some time?

RICHARD: Yeah, relatively so, but he was pretty much forced to raid, you know? The U.S. Government provided conditions intolerable for his family and therefore the only option was to raid Rancho Ruiz and other settlements to make a living.

MARK: Prior to the raids, what was a day in the life of a native, someone in Victorio's tribe?

RICHARD: It was mostly hunting and gathering. During historic times raiding was a serious component in the economy. They would take their goods from different—Rancho Ruiz, and they'd use some of that material to trade for other materials and so on and so on. But hunting and gathering alone didn't make a living.

MARK: Speaking of that lifestyle, in the year of the battle of the Alamo—everybody knows this, 1836—but further north at a place called Groesbeck, Texas, Comanches attacked and kidnapped a nine-year old girl named Cynthia Ann Parker who then spent 24 years with the Comanche and eventually married a Chief and gave birth to Quanah Parker who went on to be a fierce Chief himself. How often did these kidnappings occur?

RICHARD: Actually, the taking of captives was part of the economy, the raiding economy, and the Comanche in particular commonly took in some of these captives just to live with them instead of trade with other tribes

MARK: And this young lady, you would think if she spent 24 years there, she probably felt like they were family?

RICHARD: She pretty much became Indian.

MARK: And she's not the first. This happened quite often.

RICHARD: No, there's several accounts of the same scenario happening.

MARK: Sam Houston, the first president or the second president of the Republic of Texas, also spent some time with the Comanche, I believe.

RICHARD: I'm not familiar with that.

MARK: So these hostages were sometimes taken in as part of the family and sometimes used as commodity.

RICHARD: True. The Comanche in particular liked Mexican blacksmiths because they could repair some of the metal implements that were traded to them. Some of these guns for example, the Spanish and Mexicans intentionally traded cheap guns to the Indians because it was a money-making deal and a lot of times they would break. And a lot of times you'll see occupation sites where broken components of guns had been reworked and made into other tools like perforators, scrapers, whatever. So, they utilized even broken pieces of utensils to make other tools.

MARK: What were some of these cheap guns? Do we know who was responsible? Was it Colt?

RICHARD: No, it was prior to that. I'm not sure.

MARK: Now, the Comanche War Trail, or the Comanche Trail, I think it's called on a roadside sign around Persimmon Gap, that was a trail that went from, well I think from the Stockton Plateau into Mexico. What can you tell us about that trail?

RICHARD: Well, the Comanche Trail was pretty much used as a corridor to go back and from Mexico on raids. Unlike the Mescalero—the Mescalero resided in the mountainous areas of the Trans-Pecos—but the Comanches and other Plains tribes like the Kiowa Apache, Southern Cheyenne and so on, they basically just used the Comanche Trails as a corridor to go back to Mexico.

MARK: On raids?

RICHARD: Right.

MARK: Which brings us to Cormac McCarthy and his book "Blood Meridian." There were bounties being paid by the Chihuahuan Government to certain groups to take the scalps of certain natives. When did that start?

RICHARD: It was after Mexico became Mexico. Anyway, it was a policy—Apache raiding became so intense that they thought that would be a way to solve it, by just offering a bounty on scalps, but that got out of hand because at one point I believe Durango offered as much as \$200 a head. So people would come in here and try to get rich and they would even kill anybody who had black hair and claim it to be Indian.

MARK: And they would take these dried out scalps and bring them to the capital in Chihuahua and they'd pay up?

RICHARD: That's right.

MARK: Some of these men or scalp hunters were on their way to the California gold fields at the time?

RICHARD: That's true. And some of them decided to become scalp hunters because they thought it was more profitable than striking it rich in the gold fields.

MARK: Two hundred dollars – that was quite a bit of money back then.

RICHARD: Yes.

MARK: We're speaking with Richard Walter, archaeologist for the Center for Big Bend Studies, on today's program. Cabeza de Vaca coined the term 'Jumano' but it seemed this was a very general term. Was there a Jumano tribe?

RICHARD: Yes, there was a Jumano tribe. The term "Jumano" has been subject to debate because the early Spanish explorers, every expedition they would name tribes. Unfortunately, every expedition had their own version and so you have versions of Jumano. We know the Jumano were generally known as a nomadic people that were hunter-gatherers. They'd go out to the plains around the Pecos River and hunt bison and occasionally they would visit villages in La Junta to trade.

MARK: La Junta being the confluence of the...

RICHARD: The area where the Rio Conchos meets the Rio Grande.

MARK: So the buffalo, or American bison, provided, as I understand, the Plains Indians with food, shelter, art, and certain spiritual identity. Can you tell us about the relationship the Indians had with buffalo?

RICHARD: Not so much for this area because there were certain nomadic groups that hunted bison but not so much as groups living in the plains. Bison was a major element in sustenance strategies but I'm not sure how much of an impact bison had on people's lives, people that lived around here.

MARK: Prior to the Spanish invasion or exploration of our area, what was the spiritual aspect of some of the tribes that lived in our area. Do we know much about that?

RICHARD: No, we really don't, we really don't know.

MARK: We had their artwork, but it's not always depicting their god or goddesses or—

RICHARD: Who knows? A lot of the prehistoric rock imagery is abstract in nature and you could just go on and on trying to interpret what it really means. Since there's no written record or no written accounts, it's really hard to confidently say what it means.

MARK: The last free-roaming Indians in the Trans-Pecos, Mescalero Apache.

RICHARD: Partial. By that time, at the very end, there was Chiricahua and Mescalero and Lipan – everybody was just mixed.

MARK: And these bands or tribes were cited as late as, I think you told me earlier, 1890 near Shafter.

RICHARD: That's true and even as late as 1920 in Northern Mexico.

MARK: So at this point I guess the culmination of manifest destiny or the European expedition across our continent basically conquered the natives and sent them to Oklahoma.

RICHARD: Not so much here – I don't know about here. Most of them were sent to Mescalero or San Carlos, in Arizona.

MARK: These are reservations in New Mexico and Arizona?

RICHARD: True.

MARK: And the reservations in Oklahoma were, I guess, the—

RICHARD: —a lot of Plains tribes, that's home for many Plains tribes, and also Eastern tribes like the Cherokee and Choctaw—

MARK: The Trail of Tears, I believe it was called.

RICHARD: Right.

MARK: And Texas itself has no reservations at all?

RICHARD: There's three here. There's Alabama-Coushatta, the Tigua, and Kickapoo.

MARK: One of them is Ysleta in El Paso?

RICHARD: Yeah.

MARK: That's Tigua?

RICHARD: Yes.

MARK: And that's just a small area in El Paso, within the city limits or—

RICHARD: No, it's not what most people think of as a reservation; it's more of an urban area set aside for them.

MARK: We're speaking with Richard Walter, an archaeologist with the Center for Big Bend Studies. Richard, tell me—some tribes were friendly to the white settlers and often there was reciprocation. But the famous saying “White man speak with forked tongue,” any truth to that?

RICHARD: That's an understatement. Of course.

MARK: I guess we're all guilty of some infraction along the line. Now, when I bought my house in Alpine, I had to sign a document stating that there was a lawsuit which would eventually come to trial stating that the Tigua tribe claimed that land, claimed a lot of land out here. What do we know about that?

RICHARD: You know, I have no idea what this means. I don't know the history of how that came about but I've heard several other people in this area that had to sign some kind of paper saying they acknowledged the Tigua claim, wherever their property is was once Tigua lands.

MARK: Getting back to every-day life of the historic native in the Trans-Pecos, what was it like to be a woman in one of these tribes?

RICHARD: Frankly I don't know. I guess, like we were talking earlier, their role would be doing a lot of the labor-intensive daily domestic tasks during the day.

MARK: And the language of these tribes—could a Lipan Mescalero Indian—sorry, that's wrong—

RICHARD: Lipan.

MARK: Lipan—speak directly with a Comanche; could they understand each other?

RICHARD: They would have probably had to use sign language because they're both distinct linguistic groups. They have different linguistic groups. Apache is Athabascan linguistic group, while Comanche is Uto-Aztecan.

MARK: Okay, so they're far removed, I guess, as far as language.

RICHARD: True.

MARK: That's been our program today. Richard Walter with the Center for Big Bend Studies. Richard, thank you for being our guest today.

RICHARD: You're welcome.

MARK: That's today's program. Talk at Ten, Marfa Public Radio. I'm Mark Glover.