

Island of the Blue Dolphins
Analyzing the Lone Woman's Death

Grade Level

High School: Ninth Grade through Twelfth Grade

Subject

Literacy and Language Arts, Social Studies

Common Core Standards

6–8.RH.1, 6–8.RH.2, 6–8.RH.3, 6–8.RH.9, 9–10.RH.1, 9–10.RH.2, 9–10.RH.3, 9–10.RH.9, 11–12.RH.1, 11–12.RH.2, 11–12.RH.3, 11–12.RH.9

Background Information

The goal of this lesson is to have students engage with several primary sources and then consider how they, as historians, might explain the cause of the Lone Woman's death given incomplete and contradictory evidence. This activity asks students to read several accounts, weigh the evidence, and determine whether the cause of death can be reasonably known.

The Lone Woman lived on San Nicolas Island alone for eighteen years (1835–53), beginning when the rest of her people (the Nicoleños) were removed to San Pedro, California, and ending when sea otter hunter George Nidever brought her to his home in Santa Barbara.

Contemporary accounts described the Lone Woman as being about 50 years old and in good health when she arrived on the California mainland. However, within seven weeks of her arrival, this healthy, active woman died. How do we explain her rapid decline and death?

First, we want to understand the context. California has one of the most diverse indigenous populations in North America, with many linguistically and culturally distinct peoples. With Spanish colonization, however, the population began to decline dramatically as native peoples, particularly on the coast, were gathered into missions where disease spread and many suffered from labor exploitation and abuse. This result is not exceptional. Research has shown that within the first 100 years after initial European contact, indigenous populations throughout the western hemisphere declined by 80–90 percent.

The Lone Woman arrived on the mainland following the Mexican-American War, so California had been transferred to American hands and the Spanish missions operated more as local churches than as institutions for managing native populations. But the California Gold Rush of 1849 brought renewed threats to native people. As fortune seekers poured into the region, they disrupted ecosystems by extracting natural resources (gold) in large quantities. Their activities paved the way for new settlements throughout the region even as they upended life for the indigenous peoples, who were

exposed to disease and who were unable to grow, harvest, and gather their traditional sources of food and manufacture (clothing, shelter, tools).

Materials

- Copy of readings and activity sheet for each student (provided)

Procedure

1. Prepare materials and familiarize yourself with the texts.
2. Introduce students to the lesson by having them read the background material on the activity sheet individually. Then, discuss the information and purpose of the activity as a class.
3. Review directions for completing the chart, as well as the activity questions. Ask students to work individually or in pairs to complete the activity sheet.
4. Come back together as a class to debate the following question: Can the cause of the Lone Woman's death reasonably be known? If so, what do you think caused her death?

Enrichment Activities

Further reading:

Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016)

Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

Name _____

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Background Information

The Lone Woman lived on San Nicolas Island for eighteen years after the rest of her people were removed to San Pedro, California in 1835. Sea otter hunter George Nidever brought her to his home in Santa Barbara, California, in 1853.

Contemporary accounts described the Lone Woman as being about 50 years old and in good health when she arrived on the California mainland. However, within seven weeks of her arrival, this healthy, active woman died. How do we explain her rapid decline and death?

First, we want to understand the context. California has one of the most diverse indigenous populations in North America, with many linguistically and culturally distinct peoples. With Spanish colonization, however, the population began to decline dramatically as native peoples, particularly on the coast, were gathered into missions where disease spread and many suffered from malnutrition, labor exploitation, and abuse. This result is not exceptional. Research has shown that within the first 100 years after initial European contact, indigenous populations throughout the western hemisphere declined by 80–90 percent.

The Lone Woman arrived on the mainland following the Mexican-American War, so California had been transferred to American hands and the Spanish missions operated more as local churches than as institutions for managing native populations. But the California Gold Rush of 1849 brought renewed threats to native people. As fortune seekers poured into the region, they disrupted ecosystems by extracting natural resources (gold) in large quantities. Their activities paved the way for new settlements throughout the region even as they upended life for the indigenous peoples, who were exposed to disease and who were unable to grow, harvest, and gather their traditional sources of food and manufacture (clothing, shelter, tools).

With this context in mind, we next want to think about the Lone Woman's death specifically. A number of sources present explanations of her death in 1853, but they disagree. This activity asks you to read several accounts, weigh the evidence, and determine whether the cause of death can be reasonably known.

Document 1: “Narrative of a Seafaring Life on the Coast of California”

Background

Carl Dittman (1825–1901, also known as Charley Brown) was a Prussian-born member of George Nidever’s hunting crew. In 1853, he accompanied Nidever to San Nicolas Island, where the men searched for the Lone Woman as a side task to hunting sea otters for trade. It was Carl Dittman who actually first spied the Lone Woman on the island. In 1878, he dictated his first person account of “discovering” the Lone Woman to E. F. Murray, a researcher for the historian Hubert Howe Bancroft. The manuscript is located at the University of California, Berkeley.

Nidever’s family took good care of the old woman but I think they allowed her to eat freely of fruit & vegetables. About a month after we brought her ashore Nidever & I went up to San Francisco & while away the old woman died.

Source: Carl Dittman, “Narrative of a Seafaring Life on the Coast of California.” *Manuscript C-D67*, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Document 2: “The Life and Adventures of a Pioneer of California Since 1834”

Background

George Nidever (1802–83) was an American sea otter hunter who captained the schooner that brought the Lone Woman from San Nicolas Island to Santa Barbara in 1853. After their arrival on the mainland, Nidever brought the Nicoleño woman into his family home, where she lived until her death seven weeks later. Like Dittman, he told his life story to E. F. Murray, a researcher for the historian Hubert Howe Bancroft. The manuscript is located at the University of California, Berkeley. It was also published in book form and is still in print today.

About 5 weeks after she was brought over, she was taken sick from eating too much fruit & 7 weeks from the day of her arrival died. The Fathers of the Mission baptised [sic] her sub conditione [conditionally—they could not determine whether she had been previous baptized] & named her Juana Maria. I left here for San Francisco just before she died having first made her a rough coffin. My wife can tell you better about her after I brought her ashore.

Source: George Nidever, “The Life and Adventures of a Pioneer of California Since 1834.” *Manuscript C-D133*, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Document 3: “Eighteen Years Alone: A Tale of the Pacific”

Background

Emma Chamberlain Hardacre (1844?–1930) was an Illinois-born journalist who traveled widely and wrote for a number of newspapers in the Midwest and East, including the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, *Chicago Times*, and *New York Herald*. Her article about the Lone Woman, published in *Scribner’s Monthly* in 1880, was widely reprinted and treated as an authoritative source. After Hardacre’s grown daughter settled in California, Hardacre moved to Santa Barbara. Here, she was acknowledged as a local expert on the Lone Woman.

She was greatly disappointed when none of her kindred were found. She drooped under civilization; she missed the out-door life of her island camp. After a few weeks she became too weak to walk; she was carried on to the porch every day in a chair. She dozed in the sunshine, while the children played around her. She was patient and cheerful, looking eagerly into every new face for recognition, and sometimes singing softly to herself. Mrs. Nidever hoped a return to her old diet would help her. She procured seal’s meat, and roasted it in ashes. When the sick woman saw it, she patted her nurse’s hands affectionately, but could not eat the food. She fell from her chair one morning, and remained insensible for hours. Seeing the approach of death, Mrs. Nidever sent for a priest to baptize her protégé. At first he refused, not knowing but that she had been baptized previously, although the burden of proof was against it. At length, heeding the kind Catholic lady’s distress, he consented to administer the rite, conditionally. As she was breathing her last, the sign of the cross was pressed on her cold brow, and the unknown and nameless creature was christened by Father Sanchez in the beautiful Spanish, “ Juana Marie.”

Source: Emma Hardacre, “Eighteen Years Alone: A Tale of the Pacific.” *Scribner’s Monthly* 20, no. 5 (1880): 657–64.

Document 4: “An Indian Woman Eighteen Years Alone on the Island of San Nicolas, off the Coast of Southern California. Physical Condition Good; Recollected Events, but had Lost all Knowledge of the Computation of Time and the Dialect of her Tribe.”

Background

Absalom B. Stuart (1830–87) was a prosperous doctor born in Pennsylvania. He trained at the Berkshire Medical College at Williams College in Massachusetts and at the Bellevue Medical College in New York. He then relocated to Minnesota Territory and to California, where he was licensed to practice medicine. In 1879, more than twenty years after the Lone Woman’s death, he appears in the Santa Barbara voting records. It is likely that he met with George Nidever and Carl Dittman, then wrote the article below. Stuart’s account of the Lone Woman was published in 1878 in the Minnesota

newspaper the *Winona Republican*. The article was then reprinted, in whole or in part, many times, across the United States and abroad. Finally, in 1880, it was published in the *Sanitarian*, a medical journal.

She did not wish to sleep in a bed; and when in bed, did not desire bed-covering; but was careful not to expose her person. Her manners were not rude, and in many things she was more refined than many who enjoy civilized privileges; yet in many things she was very much like a child. She wanted everything which she saw that appeared pleasant to the eye, or seemed good to the taste; and if fruit was withheld from her she would plead for it in such a childlike manner that it was hard to refuse her. When found, she was in excellent physical condition, strong and active; but the eating of fruit and vegetables brought on a diarrhæ or dysentery in about three weeks after she landed; and that, in connection with an injury to the spine, received by falling from a porch, terminated her life four weeks later, or seven weeks from the time she landed. During her sickness she reluctantly permitted her kind hostess to dress her in flannel underclothes, and took her bed under proper covering; but positively refused to return to her former plain diet, as was proposed by some of those who called to see her.

Statistics in civilized life show a greater longevity in the marital and social relations than in celibacy and the life of the recluse; but here is one who had attained the age of fifty years with a physique indicating that a period in the future might be reached equal to that of the past, that for eighteen years had been absolutely alone. With the exception of the sickness immediately [sic] after her desertion, she reported no illness during the time of her exile. She appeared to enjoy perfect health, with no failure of any of the bodily functions, excepting that of sight, which may have been either hypermetropic or presbyopic; if the former, most likely it was congenital; if the latter, it may have been hastened by the little use made of the power of accommodation for near objects—she daily cultivated the power of distant vision, in commanding a view of the island and looking seaward. The extremes of heat and cold are unknown on the islands off this coast; frost is seldom seen in the winter, and the heat of summer is not oppressive, owing to the ocean winds, which give a most equable climate the year round, favorable to an outdoor life. During the rainy season she probably took shelter in a cave, or under shelving rocks, as found upon the island; but be that as it may, the vicissitudes of the weather did not appear to affect her unpleasantly. Her outdoor life gave a digestion equal to the use of the seal blubber, and her supply of the small variety of vegetables assisted in nourishing her without deranging the secretions. On this island, estimated at fourteen miles in length and averaging about four in width, its highest elevation being not more than six hundred feet above sea level, but sparsely timbered, with its rocks, sandy plains and limited vegetation, clear spring water, which invited repeated ablutions, with no roof to intercept the welcome rays of the sun, our Female Crusoe possessed and used the means conducive to a long life. But the change from such a life to one of more luxury and indolence soon demanded the penalty of the violated laws of health—sickness and death!

Source: Absalom B. Stuart, "An Indian Woman Eighteen Years Alone on the Island of San Nicolas, off the Coast of Southern California. Physical Condition Good; Recollected Events, but had Lost all Knowledge of the Computation of Time and the Dialect of her Tribe." *Sanitarian* 8, 90 (1880): 402–06.

Document 5: Harrington's Field Notes

Background

Ethnographer John Peabody Harrington (1884–1961) was a noted anthropologist who specialized in the native cultures of Southern California. As a researcher for the Bureau of American Ethnology, he collected a tremendous amount of data about California languages. In the first decade of the twentieth century, he posed questions about the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island to Luisa Ygnacio, a Chumash Indian whom he regularly consulted for information about local tribes. (Anthropologists often describe such people as "native informants" or "native consultants.") Harrington refers to Luisa Ygnacio by the initials "SA." The following document is excerpted from his unpublished field notes, which are handwritten notes he took during oral interviews. The Smithsonian holds these field notes.

Luisa Ygnacio would have been in her mid-twenties at the time of the Lone Woman's death; however, she did not meet her. In 1920, when Harrington interviewed her about the Lone Woman, she was about 90 years old, living in Santa Barbara with her daughter. She spoke Spanish.

If they had let the woman stay with the Indians here, she would have been all right. But they kept her with Qorqe [George Nidever]. Martina and Pilar came from Ventura one time and got some clams and maybe some other things on the road, and when they passed by here, in Santa Barbara, they visited the woman and gave her the clams. The woman was greatly pleased. Martina and Pilar had just made a little trip to Ventura. SA [Luisa Ygnacio] thinks they had seen the woman before that time.

Source: J.P. Harrington's field notes as reprinted in Travis Hudson, "Recently Discovered Accounts Concerning The 'Lone Woman' of San Nicolas Island," *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 3, no. 2 (1981): 193.

Note-taking Chart +

	Date source created	Kind of source (memoir, professional journal, field notes)	Origin of author's information about the Lone Woman (LW)	Proposed cause of death	Positive (healthful) aspects of SNI life for the LW	Positive (healthful) aspects of Santa Barbara life for the LW	Your thoughts about the source
George Nidever							
Carl Dittman							
Emma Hardacre							
Absalom Stuart							
Luisa Ygnacio (JP Harrington)							

Questions:

1. Is one or more of the sources more reliable than the others? Why or why not? (Consider everything you filled into the chart in answering this question. There is not a “right” answer.)
2. Read Emma Hardacre’s excerpt closely. How does its language differ from that of the other sources? How does the difference in style affect the way you read and interpret the account?
3. Read the physician’s account closely. How is it unique? Why do you think he wrote the article?
4. Read Luisa Ygnacio’s account closely. She was a native “informant” or “consultant” to J.P. Harrington. Does this make her document unique? If yes, how so?
5. A number of the accounts suggest that eating fruits and vegetables contributed to the Lone Woman’s death. Today, in the twenty-first century, we might consider this hypothesis strange since fruits and vegetables are deemed healthy foods. Does their hypothesis have merit? Why do you think those who blame fruits and vegetables might have named these foods as a cause of sickness? Remember the year: 1853.
6. Write a paragraph that explains how and why the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island died. Incorporate evidence from the sources above. To do so, you must both evaluate the documents’ merit and cite your evidence. Use the chart as a guide to your thinking.