

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island

By Jessica McBirney
2017

*In 1835, a Native American woman was left on San Nicolas Island for 18 years by herself. Scott O'Dell's award-winning novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is based on her life. As you read, take notes on the experiences of the lone woman.*

- [1] Every year thousands of kids across the country read Scott O'Dell's book *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, which tells the story of a woman living alone on a small California island for many years. O'Dell's story is actually inspired by the true story of a woman in the early 1800s. Her story has intrigued¹ and inspired readers and historians ever since she was rescued.

Why was she alone?

In the 1800s, hunters from Russia often traveled from Alaska down to the California coast looking for sea otters. Their hunting soon caused clashes with the native groups living on the remote² Channel Islands off the coast, especially with the Nicoleño³ people on San Nicolas Island.

Franciscan priests⁴ who lived on the mainland in California heard about the danger the Nicoleño people faced because of Russian hunters. They decided to send a ship out to the island to bring the people back to one of their missions,⁵ where they could live more peacefully.

The ship landed on San Nicolas Island in 1835. As people boarded it, a strong wind began to blow across the shore. One woman realized her child had been left behind in the chaos.⁶ She let some of the people know and headed back to their village to find her child. Unfortunately, the wind became so strong that the sailors decided they had to leave the island, even though they knew one person had been left behind.



"Juana Maria (Hayward & Muzzall)" by Edwin J. Hayward and Henry W. Muzzall is in the public domain.

1. **Intrigue (verb):** to create curiosity
2. **Remote (adjective):** far away from the main population; distant or isolated
3. a Native American tribe who lived on San Nicolas Island, California
4. a religious group within the Catholic church who adopted a lifestyle of poverty and travel to preach to others
5. When Catholic Spanish priests colonized California, they set up "missions" for the local people. These missions served religious functions and provided the priests and the people with a place to live, learn, and commune.
6. **Chaos (noun):** complete disorder and confusion

- [5] Tragically, her child died soon after the rest of the Nicoleño left. This is how the woman came to be alone on San Nicolas Island. She probably lived knowing she would never see her people again.

At first, the priests meant to send the ship back to rescue the lone woman. Sadly, the ship sank before it could return to San Nicolas Island. There were no other ships large enough to make the trip on the coast at the time. Soon, the rescue mission and the lone woman were forgotten.

Discovering the Lone Woman

Over the next 18 years, rumors traveled around the mainland that San Nicolas Island might still be inhabited.⁷ Sometimes hunters who landed on the island found human footprints, but they could never find the person who made them.

One local hunter, George Nidever, finally decided he would go and find this mysterious person once and for all. He tried twice and was unsuccessful. But on his third attempt, in 1853, he followed a trail of footprints from the beach to a hut inland. The hut was constructed out of old whale bones. There he found the lone woman preparing seal meat and wearing a skirt made of animal skins and large feathers.

Even though she had not seen another person for 18 years, the lone woman seemed happy to see Nidever and his men. She willingly went back with them to the mainland. She brought a few of the possessions she had made during her time on the island, including baskets and clothes. She was around 50 years old.

Life on the Mainland

- [10] The lone woman became a sensation⁸ on the mainland. She stayed with the priests at the Santa Barbara Mission. Her people had scattered, and no one in the area spoke the same language as she did. She could communicate through signs and symbols, but she was not able to tell the priests details about her life on the island. They could only guess how hard it must have been for her.

Even though she had trouble communicating, she seemed very enthusiastic about her new life. She expressed fascination at the European food and clothing that the priests had introduced to the area. She especially liked horses. As she became famous around the town, many people came to see and visit with her. She danced and sang traditional songs for them.

The lone woman had survived on her own for so long that the food the priests and locals cooked for her made her very sick. She died of disease after only seven weeks on the mainland. Before she died the priests baptized⁹ her and gave her the Spanish name Juana Maria. The priests buried her in an unmarked grave in the cemetery next to the Santa Barbara Mission, where she remains today.

7. **Inhabit (verb):** to live in

8. **Sensation (noun):** a popular topic of interest

9. Baptism is a Christian ceremony in which a person has a small amount of water placed on their forehead, or they are completely submerged, to represent that a person has been saved by Jesus.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Island of the Blue Dolphins doesn't accurately capture the lone woman's experiences.
 - B. The lone woman's unique experiences on San Nicola were interesting to many people.
 - C. When the lone woman came to the mainland she was overwhelmed by the new culture.
 - D. The lone woman would have preferred to stay on the island she considered home.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "Her story has intrigued and inspired readers and historians ever since she was rescued." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "There were no other ships large enough to make the trip on the coast at the time. Soon, the rescue mission and the lone woman were forgotten." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "Over the next 18 years, rumors traveled around the mainland that San Nicolas Island might still be inhabited." (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "Before she died the priests baptized her and gave her the Spanish name Juana Maria." (Paragraph 12)

3. PART A: How was the lone woman's life and health impacted by her move to the mainland? [RI.3]
 - A. She became ill shortly after arriving and died.
 - B. She was treated as more of an attraction than a person and this made her sad.
 - C. She grew to miss her life on San Nicolas Island and became homesick.
 - D. She realized that her people were gone and died of a broken heart.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "She willingly went back with them to the mainland." (Paragraph 9)
 - B. "She stayed with the priests at the Santa Barbara Mission. Her people had scattered, and no one in the area spoke the same language as she did." (Paragraph 10)
 - C. "As she became famous around the town, many people came to see and visit with her." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "The lone woman had survived on her own for so long that the food the priests and locals cooked for her made her very sick. She died of disease after only seven weeks on the mainland." (Paragraph 12)

5. How does the text describe the relationship between the Nicoleño people and the Franciscan priests? [RI.3]

Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Do you think anything could have been done to help Juana Maria when she came to the mainland?
2. In the context of the text, what does it mean to feel alone? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of the text, how does a person overcome adversity? What obstacles did Maria encounter on the island, as well as on the mainland?
4. In the context of the text, who is in control: man or nature? What does Juana Maria's survival show about humans' ability to survive in nature?