

The Original Social Network

Trade was more than an exchange of gourd rattles and glass beads to the Agua Caliente — it was a cultural enterprise.

BY KATE ANDERSON



CULTIVATING MEANINGFUL relationships with others has always been important to the Agua Caliente people — especially when it comes to trade. Long before Highway 111, Interstate 10, and Interstate 5, the Agua Caliente and other Native American tribes used walking trails to conduct commerce and develop a deep social network throughout California. In fact,

the entire state was covered in trails at one time, according to *Trade and Trails in Aboriginal California*, a 1950 report from the University of California, Berkeley, Department of Anthropology. For Native Americans in the Golden State and for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians specifically, primary trade routes ran east and west. The report states:

Myriad Indian trails crisscrossed each other in the valleys of California. Early (non-Indian) travelers were often confused by the multitude of choices; they needed and used Indian guides to show the correct paths. George Biggs, with Col. Redick McKee's expedition in 1851, became lost on the way between

Sonoma and Humboldt Bay even with a guide: 'We halted for half an hour, while the guides sought a route; no easy thing in a country presenting such an endless succession of hills and cut up everywhere by Indian and deer trails.'

In 1863, the William Bradshaw Trail stagecoach sought a route

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ILLUSTRATION BY STUART FUNK



Historically, trade between the Agua Caliente and other tribes would begin with olivella shell beads, which were broken into smaller pieces and strung on fiber; the more beads one had, the greater one's relationships with other tribes. **OPPOSITE:** A map sampling the vast network of trading routes that ran through Southern California and parts of the Southwest. Some of these east-west routes would have passed through Cahuilla territory and would have been their means of communicating with other tribes.



ABOVE: Indian Canyons Trading Post, circa 1930s. As tourism grew in Palm Springs, Tribal members began selling baskets and other handmade items here.

through the Banning Pass from Los Angeles to Arizona. The Agua Caliente embraced the advent of the stagecoach in the desert, using the traditional trade routes and watering sites to establish trade with travelers.

Trade representatives, such as those solicited by travelers like Col. McKee, would have been talented individuals with the ability to cross harsh terrain and explain their purpose to those they encountered along the way by speaking various dialects and languages.

Thanks to these interconnecting routes and knowledgeable guides, California tribes could communicate and interact with others who lived hundreds of miles away. For instance, the same UC Berkeley study mentions trade of gourd rattles and glass beads taking place between the Yuma and the Cahuilla. There is also archaeological evidence of Pacific Coast shells found as far as the Pueblo ruins and at other

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Southwestern archaeological sites that could have come only from the Southern California coastline.

The exchange of these items, as well as pinyon nuts and seeds for specialized crops or other goods or services, enriched the lives of California Native Americans. Many trade relationships developed when a tribe could provide goods and services that were not readily available to those living a great distance away.

One trail route that still exists, known as the Jo Pond Trail, begins in the Indian Canyons in Palm Springs, stretches to Garnett pass, then pushes well into the Lake Hemet area, traversing at least 20 rugged miles in all. It was one of the pathways the Agua Caliente used to patiently move cattle in the summertime from the desert floor to higher elevations — then back down again in cooler temperatures.

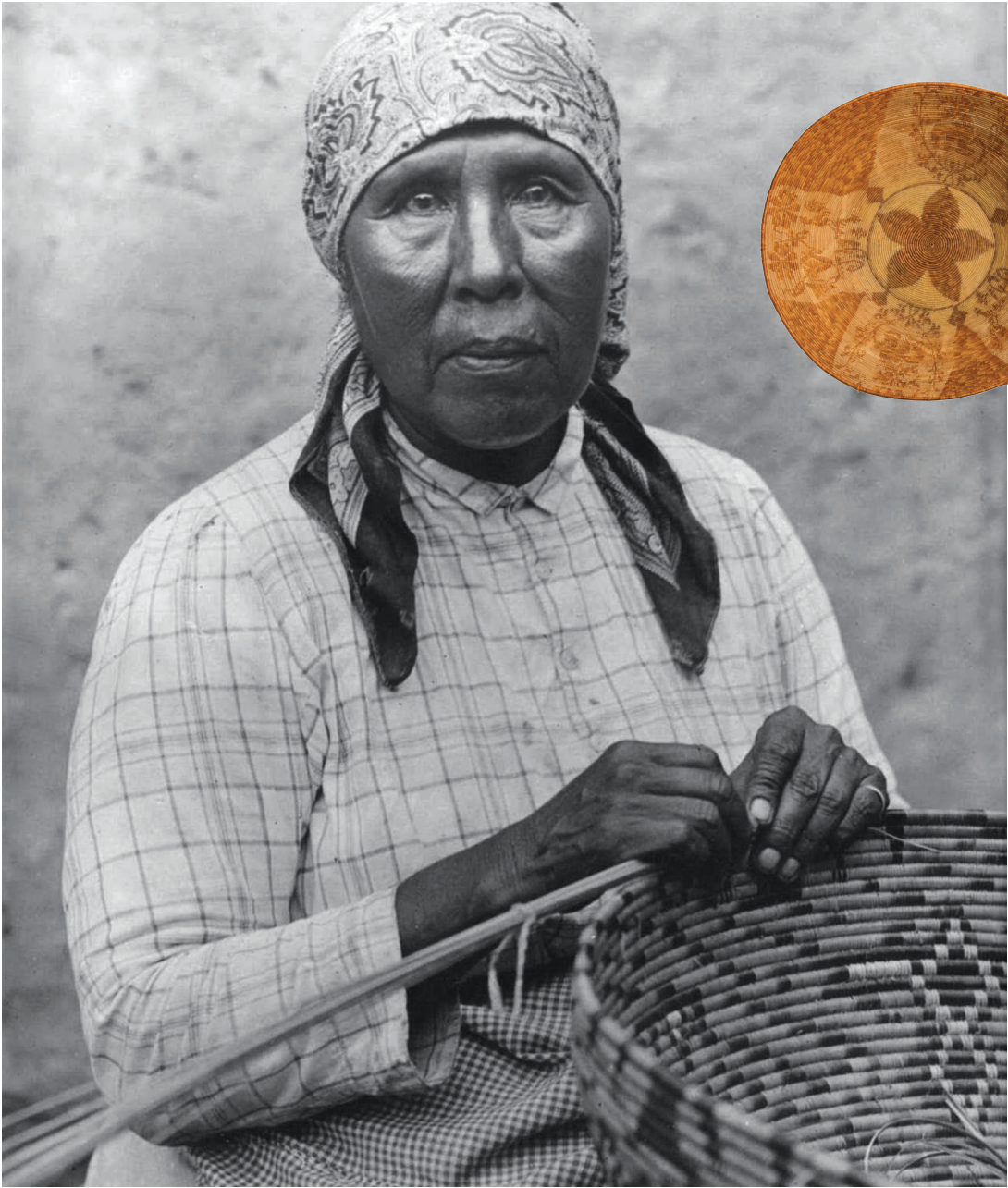
For the Agua Caliente, “the development of the trade

relationship was the development of an understanding,” says Moraino Patencio, an Agua Caliente Tribal member. “Those relationships our ancestors had built across the Southern California territory would have been respected.” One such individual who understood the significance of these newfound bonds was Francisco Patencio, an Agua Caliente political and ceremonial leader in the early 20th century who spoke several languages and dialects, including Cahuilla, English, Spanish, and French.

Historically, trade did not happen quickly; it was a major ceremonial event that included many days of travel. Moraino Patencio explains that trade with another tribe would begin with an invitation that involved olivella shell beads, which were broken into smaller circular beads and strung on fiber or sinew.

“We would send out the beads as an invitation to come and trade,” he says. “These

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AGUA CALIENTE CULTURAL MUSEUM (DOLORES PATENCIO), ETHAN KAMINSKY (BASKET)

trade beads marked you as someone significant. The passing of the beads was to solidify the trade agreement between the people. The beads were part of the ceremonial bundle, which was made with seaweed and different objects that held cultural significance that were used for different purposes and kept in the roundhouse and under the protection of the *net*, or chief.”

The trading process involved ceremonies every few years. The beads would be passed back and forth throughout — like a sister-city relationship, Patencio explains. The trading took place prior to European contact and into the era of the Spanish missions and well after, he adds.

Eventually, trade for the Agua Caliente evolved into tourism. In the early 1900s, Agua Caliente

women sold baskets at the Indian Canyons Trading Post and elsewhere.

“The items people really enjoyed from the Cahuilla were the masterfully designed baskets,” Patencio says. “They had a tight weave, and the designs showed the meticulous nature of these baskets. The designs were breathtaking; they were beautiful. One thing

LEFT: Dolores Patencio is known by many as the wife of Tribal leader Francisco Patencio, but she was also recognized for her beautiful, handcrafted Cahuilla baskets, which became a popular item of trade in the 20th century. She would often instruct Tribal members on the art of basketry.

people don’t realize is that these baskets were woven without the aid of a drawn-out plan. All these basket designs were held in the mind of the basket maker and then woven over a period of months into the design of a basket. Those cultural icons were able to do that work. The work demanded a premium, and that’s when people started collecting the baskets, and they became a big trade item.”

For generations, the Agua Caliente cherished their trade and commerce relationships — and still do. In the late 1880s and into the mid-1900s, visitors traveled to Palm Springs to enjoy the healing waters of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring in downtown. Now, people from around the globe travel to the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation for golf, hiking, and resort-style entertainment in both Palm Springs and Rancho Mirage.

“It wasn’t just about the food, and it wasn’t just about the trade,” Patencio says, “but it was about the relationships we created in bringing people together and bringing our children together. It was important that they knew of each other and could be aware of each other, and eventually they could extend those into relationships with one another. Having good trade relationships has always been important to the Cahuilla and the Agua Caliente.”

Though most evidence of the Tribe’s trade routes has vanished over time, the stories of their impact and the cultural-preserving relationships that were made endure. 🍌