**COAHUILTECAN INDIANS**. The lowlands of northeastern Mexico and adjacent southern Texas were originally occupied by hundreds of small, autonomous, distinctively named Indian groups that lived by hunting and gathering. During the Spanish colonial period a majority of these natives were displaced from their traditional territories by Spaniards advancing from the south and Apaches retreating from the north. The Spaniards had little interest in describing the natives or classifying them into ethnic units. There was no obvious basis for classification, and major cultural contrasts and tribal organizations went unnoticed, as did similarities and differences in the native languages and dialects. Spaniards referred to an Indian group as a *nación*, and described them according to their association with major terrain features or with Spanish jurisdictional units. Only in Nuevo León did observers link Indian populations by cultural peculiarities, such as hairstyle and body decoration. Thus, modern scholars have found it difficult to identify these hunting and gathering groups by language and culture.

The first attempt at classification was based on language, and came after most of the Indian groups were extinct. In the mid-nineteenth century, Mexican linguists designated some Indian groups as Coahuilteco, believing they may have spoken various dialects of a language in Coahuila and Texas (*Coahuilteco* is a Spanish adjective derived from *Coahuila*). Two friars documented the language in manuals for administering church ritual in one native language at certain missions of southern Texas and northeastern Coahuila. Neither these manuals nor other documents included the names of all the Indians who originally spoke Coahuilteco. In time, other linguistic groups also entered the same missions, and some of them learned Coahuilteco, the dominant language. Identifying the Indian groups who spoke Coahuilteco has been difficult. As additional language samples became known for the region, linguists have concluded that these were related to Coahuilteco and added them to a Coahuiltecan family. This encouraged ethnohistorians and anthropologists to believe that the region was occupied by numerous small Indian groups who spoke related languages and shared the same basic culture. Scholars constructed a "Coahuiltecan culture" by assembling bits of specific and generalized information recorded by Spaniards for widely scattered and limited parts of the region. This belief in a widespread linguistic and cultural uniformity has, however, been questioned. In Nuevo León, at least one language unrelatable to Coahuilteco has come to light, and linguists question that other language samples collected in the region demonstrate a relationship with Coahuilteco.

The early Coahuiltecans lived in the coastal plain in northeastern Mexico and southern Texas. The plain includes the northern Gulf Coastal Lowlands in Mexico and the southern Gulf Coastal Plain in the United States. It is bounded by the [Gulf of Mexico](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/rrg07) on the east, a northwest-trending mountain chain on the west, and the southern margin of the [Edwards Plateau](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/rxe01) of Texas on the north. The northeastern boundary is arbitrary. The course of the Guadalupe River to the Gulf of Mexico marks a boundary based on changes in plant and animal life, Indian languages and culture. The Coahuiltecan region thus includes southern Texas, northeastern Coahuila, and much of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. The region has flat to gently rolling terrain, particularly in Texas. In Nuevo León and Tamaulipas mountain masses rise east of the Sierra Madre Oriental. The Rio Grande dominates the region. It flows across its middle portion and into a delta on the coast. Small drainages are found north and south of the Rio Grande. The coast line from the Guadalupe River of Texas southward to central Tamaulipas has a chain of elongated, offshore barrier islands, behind which are shallow bays and lagoons. The region's climate is megathermal and generally semiarid. Though rainfall declines with distance from the coast, the region is not a true desert. [Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fca06) in 1534–1535 provided the earliest observations of the region. About 1590 colonists from southern Mexico entered the region by an inland route, using mountain passes west of Monterrey, Nuevo León. Tamaulipas and southern Texas were settled in the eighteenth century.

Hunting and gathering prevailed in the region, with some Indian horticulture in southern Tamaulipas. A wide range of soil types fostered wild plants yielding such foodstuffs as mesquiteqv beans, maguey root crowns, prickly pear fruit, pecans, acorns, and various roots and tubers. The introduction of European livestock altered vegetation patterns, and grassland areas were invaded by thorny bushes. The deer was a widespread and available large game animal. Bison [(buffalo](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/tcb02)) roamed southern Texas and northeastern Coahuila. Smaller game animals included the peccary and armadillo, rabbits, rats and mice, various birds, and numerous species of snakes, lizards, frogs, and snails. Fish were found in perennial streams, and both fish and shellfish in saline waters of the Gulf.

The Coahuiltecan area was one of the poorest regions of Indian North America. In it Indian groups became extinct at an early date. Documents written before the extinction provide basic information. European drawings and paintings, museum artifacts, and limited archeological excavations offer little information on specific Indian groups of the historic period. European and American archives contain unpublished documents pertinent to the region, but they have not been researched. Information has not been analyzed and evaluated for each Indian group and its territorial range, languages, and cultures. Group names and orthographic variations need study. Little is known about group displacement, population decline, and extinction or absorption. After displacement, the movements of Indian groups need to be traced through dated documents. As many groups became remnant populations at Spanish missions, mission registers and censuses should reveal much. Territorial ranges and population size, before and after displacement, are vague. Language and culture changes during the historic period lack definition. With such limitations, information on the Coahuiltecan Indians is largely tentative.

During the Spanish colonial period, hunting and gathering groups were displaced and the native population went into decline. Two invading populations-Spaniards from southern Mexico and Apaches from northwestern Texas plains-displaced the indigenous groups. As the Spaniards arrived, displaced Indians retreated northward, with some moving to the east and west. These groups, in turn, displaced Indians that had been earlier displaced. The Indians also suffered from such European diseases as smallpox and measles, which often moved ahead of the frontier. Spanish settlers generally occupied favored Indian encampments. Their livestock competed with wild grazing and browsing animals, and game animals were thinned or driven away. The Indians turned to livestock as a substitute for game animals, and raided ranches and Spanish supply trains for European goods. Poorly organized Indian rebellions prompted brutal Spanish retaliation. Most of the Indians left the immediate area.

In the north the Spanish frontier met the Apache southward expansion. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Apaches acquired horses from Spanish colonists of New Mexico and achieved dominance of the Southern Plains. In 1683–84 [Juan Domínguez de Mendoza](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fdo52), traveling from El Paso eastward toward the Edwards Plateau, described the Apaches. The Apache expansion was intensified by the Pueblo Indian Revolt of 1680, when the Apaches lost their prime source of horses and shifted south to prey on Spanish Coahuila. Domínguez de Mendoza recorded the names of numerous Indian groups east of the lower Pecos River that were being displaced by Apaches. Variants of these names appear in documents that pertain to the northeastern Coahuila-Texas frontier. By the mid-eighteenth century the Apaches, driven south by the Comanches, reached the coastal plain of Texas and became known as the Lipan Apaches. The Lipans in turn displaced the last Indian groups native to southern Texas, most of whom went to the Spanish missions in the San Antonio area. By 1790 Spaniards turned their attention from the aboriginal groups and focused on containing the Apache invaders. In northeastern Coahuila and adjacent Texas, Spanish and Apache displacements created an unusual ethnic mix. Here the local Indians mixed with displaced groups from Coahuila and Chihuahua and Texas. Some groups, to escape the pressure, combined and migrated north into the Central Texas highlands.

The [Spanish missions](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/its02), numerous in the Coahuiltecan region, provided a refuge for displaced and declining Indian populations. Early missions were established at the forefront of the frontier, but as settlement inched forward, they were replaced. Because the missions had an agricultural base they declined when the Indian labor force dwindled. Missions were distributed unevenly. Some were in remote areas, while others were clustered, often two to five in number, in small areas. A large number of displaced Indians collected in the clustered missions, which generally had a military garrison (presidio) for protection. A few missions lasted less than a decade; others flourished for a century. Several moved one or more times. Eventually, all the Spanish missions were abandoned or transferred to diocesan jurisdictions.

The number of Indian groups at the missions varied from fewer than twenty groups to as many as 100. Many groups contained fewer than ten individuals. Missions in existence the longest had more groups, particularly in the north. Mission Indian villages usually consisted of about 100 Indians of mixed groups who generally came from a wide area surrounding a mission. Some came from distant areas. Although survivors of a group often entered a single mission, individuals and families of one ethnic group might scatter to five or six missions. Some Indians never entered a mission.

A majority of the Coahuiltecan Indians lost their identity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their names disappeared from the written record as epidemics, warfare, migration, dispersion by Spaniards to work at distant plantations and mines, high infant mortality, and general demoralization took their toll. Small remnants merged with larger remnants. By 1800 the names of few ethnic units appear in documents, and by 1900 the names of groups native to the region had disappeared. Missions and refugee communities near Spanish or Mexican towns were the last bastions of ethnic identity. The Indians caused little trouble and provided unskilled labor. Ethnic names vanished with intermarriages. By the end of the eighteenth century, missions closed and Indian families were given small parcels of mission land. Eventually, the survivors passed into the lower economic levels of Mexican society. In 1981 descendants of some aboriginal groups still lived in scattered communities in Mexico and Texas.

For this region and adjacent areas, documents covering nearly 350 years record more than 1,000 ethnic group names. Studies show that the number of recorded names exceeds the number of ethnic units by 25 percent. Names were recorded unevenly. Some come from a single document, which may or may not cite a geographic location; others appear in fewer than a dozen documents, or in hundreds of documents. Two or more names often refer to the same ethnic unit. A substantial number refer to Indians displaced from adjoining areas. Some groups became extinct very early, or later were known by different names. The best information on Coahuiltecan group names comes from Nuevo León documents. More than 60 percent of these names refer to local topographic and vegetational features. Others refer to plants and animals and to body decoration. Group names of Spanish origin are few. Fewer than 10 percent refer to physical characteristics, cultural traits, and environmental details. Some Spanish names duplicate group names previously recorded. A language known as Coahuilteco exists, but it is impossible to identify the groups who spoke dialects of this language. Also, it is impossible to identify groups as Coahuiltecans by using cultural criteria. The best information on Coahuiltecan-speaking groups comes from two missionaries, [Damián Massanet](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fma71) and Bartolomé García. In 1690 and again in 1691 Massanet, on a trip from a mission near Candela in eastern Coahuila to the San Antonio area, recorded the names of thirty-nine Indian groups. On his 1691 journey he noted that a single language was spoken throughout the area he traversed. This language was apparently Coahuilteco, since several place names are Coahuilteco words. Coahuilteco was probably the dominant language, but some groups may have spoken Coahuilteco only as a second language. By 1690 two groups displaced by Apaches entered the Coahuiltecan area. Massanet named the groups Jumano and Hape. García (1760) compiled a manual for church ritual in the Coahuilteco language. He listed eighteen Indian groups at missions in southern Texas (San Antonio) and northeastern Coahuila (Guerrero) who spoke dialects of Coahuilteco. However, these groups may not originally have spoken these dialects. García included only three names on Massanet's 1690–91 lists. He also identified as Coahuilteco speakers a number of poorly known groups who lived near the Texas Gulf Coast. García indicates that all Indians reasonably designated as Coahuiltecans were confined to southern Texas and extreme northeastern Coahuila, with perhaps an extension into northern Nuevo León. Nineteenth century Mexican linguists who coined the term*Coahuilteco* noted the extension. The belief that all the Indians of the western Gulf province spoke languages related to Coahuilteco is the prime reason the Coahuiltecan orbit includes so many groups. Some scholars believe that the coastal lowlands Indians who did not speak a Karankawa or a Tonkawa language must have spoken Coahuilteco. Since the Tonkawans and Karankawans were located farther north and northeast, most of the Indians of southern Texas and northeastern Mexico have been loosely thought of as Coahuiltecan.

The ranges of the hunters and gatherers of this region are vague. Early Europeans rarely recorded the locations of two or more encampments, and when they did it was during the warm seasons when they traveled on horseback. Winter encampments went unnoted. Two or more groups often shared an encampment. The Indians probably had no exclusive foraging territory. Cabeza de Vaca recorded that some groups apparently returned to certain territories during the winter, but in the summer they shared distant areas rich in foodstuffs with others. The Mariames, for example, ranged over two areas at least eighty miles apart. The summer range of the Payaya Indians of southern Texas has been determined on the basis of ten encampments observed between 1690 and 1709 by summer-traveling Spaniards. The range was approximately thirty miles. Winter camps are unknown. The Pampopa and Pastia Indians may have ranged over eighty-five miles. The annual quest for food covered a sizable area.

The total Indian population and the sizes of basic population units are difficult to assess. The number of valid ethnic groups in the region is unknown, as are what groups existed at any selected date. Population figures are fairly abundant, but many refer to displaced group remnants sharing encampments or living in mission villages. Most population figures generally refer to the northern part of the region, which became a major refuge for displaced Indians. For group sizes prior to European colonization, one must consult the scanty information in Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 documents. The most valuable information on population lies in the figures for the largest groups at any time. The largest group numbered 512, reported by a missionary in 1674 for Gueiquesal in northeastern Coahuila. The Pacuaches of the middle Nueces River drainage of southern Texas were estimated by another missionary to number about 350 in 1727. Documents for 1747–72 suggest that the Comecrudos of northeastern Tamaulipas may have numbered 400. Limited figures for other groups suggest populations of 100 to 300. Cabeza de Vaca's data (1533–34) for the Mariames suggest a population of about 200. Estimates of the total Coahuiltecan population in 1690 vary widely. One scholar estimates the total nonagricultural Indian population of northeastern Mexico, which included desertlands west to the Río Conchos in Chihuahua, at 100,000; another, who compiled a list of 614 group names (Coahuiltecan) for northeastern Mexico and southern Texas, estimated the average population per group as 140 and therefore reckoned the total population at 86,000.

Descriptions of life among the hunting and gathering Indian groups lack coherence and detail. Only two accounts, dissimilar in scope and separated by a century of time, provide informative impressions. The first is Cabeza de Vaca's description of the Mariames of southern Texas, among whom he lived for about eighteen months in 1533–34. The second is [Alonso De León](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fde06)'s general description of Indian groups he knew as a soldier in Nuevo León before 1649. These groups ranged from Monterrey and Cadereyta northeast to Cerralvo. These two sources cover some of the same categories of material culture, and indicate differences in cultures 150 miles apart. De León records differences between the cultures within a restricted area. The two descriptions suggest that those who stress cultural uniformity in the Western Gulf province have overemphasized the generic similarities in the hunting and gathering cultures.

The Mariames (not to be confused with the later Aranamas) were one of eleven groups who occupied an inland area between the lower reaches of the Guadalupe and Nueces rivers of southern Texas. These groups shared a subsistence pattern that included a seasonal migration to harvest prickly pears west of Corpus Christi Bay. The Mariames are the best-described Indian group of northeastern Mexico and southern Texas. They spent nine months (fall, winter, spring) ranging along the Guadalupe River above its junction with the San Antonio River. In the summer they moved eighty miles to the southwest to gather prickly pear fruit. The Mariames numbered about 200 individuals who lived in a settlement of some forty houses. Each house was dome-shaped and round, built with a framework of four flexible poles bent and set in the ground. This was covered with mats. Poles and mats were carried when a village moved. During his sojourn with the Mariames, Cabeza de Vaca never mentioned bison hunting, but he did see bison hides. The principal game animal was the deer. In the Guadalupe River area, the Indians made two-day hunting trips two or three times a year, leaving the wooded valley and going into the grasslands. They carried their wood and water with them. They controlled the movement of game by setting grassfires. When traveling south, the Mariames followed the western shoreline of Copano Bay. When an offshore breeze was blowing, hunters spread out, drove deer into the bay, and kept them there until they drowned and were beached. The Indians also hunted rats and mice though rabbits are not mentioned. They killed and ate snakes and pulverized the bones for food. They collected land snails and ate them. They combed the prickly pear thickets for various insects, in egg and larva form, for food. Other faunal foods, especially in the Guadalupe River area, included frogs, lizards, salamanders, and spiders. The Mariames occasionally ate earth, wood, and deer droppings. During the April-May flood season, they caught fish in shallow pools after floods had subsided. They also pulverized fish bones for food. The Mariames depended on two plants as seasonal staples-pecans and cactus fruit. In the autumn they collected pecans along the Guadalupe, and when the crop was abundant they shared the harvest with other groups. They mashed nut meats and sometimes mixed in seeds. The prickly pear area was especially important because it provided ample fruit in the summer. When water ran short, the Mariames expressed fruit juice in a hole in the earth and drank it. In the winter the Indians depended on roots as a principal food source. Edible roots were thinly distributed, hard to find, and difficult to dig; women often searched for five to eight miles around an encampment. They baked the roots for two days in a sort of oven. Little is known about Mariame clothing, ornaments, and handicrafts. They may have used a net, described as 5.5 feet square, to carry bulky foodstuffs. Matting was important to cover house frames. The only container was either a woven bag or a flexible basket. The Indians used the bow and arrow as an offensive weapon and made small shields covered with bison hide. Several factors prevented overpopulation. The Indians practiced female infanticide, and occasionally they killed male children because of unfavorable dream omens. Men refrained from sexual intercourse with their wives from the first indication of pregnancy until the child was two years old. Mariame women breast-fed children up to the age of twelve years. Male contact with a menstruating women was taboo. Since female infanticide was the rule, Maraime males doubtless obtained wives from other Indian groups. The "bride price" was a good bow and arrow or a net. No Mariame male had two or more wives. Divorce was permitted, but no grounds were specified other than "dissatisfaction." Female infanticide and ethnic group exogamy indicate a patrilineal descent system. Cabeza de Vaca briefly described a fight between two adult males over a woman. Only fists and sticks were used, and after the fight each man dismantled his house and left the encampment. Little is said about Mariame warfare. Some behavior was motivated by dreams, which were a source of omens. The documents cite twelve cases in which male children were killed or buried alive because of unfavorable dream omens. Little is known about ceremonies, although there was some group feasting and dancing which occurred during the winter and reached a peak during the summer prickly pear hunt.

In his early history of Nuevo León, Alonso De León described the Indians of the area. In the same volume, [Juan Bautista Chapa](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fch70) listed 231 Indian groups, many of whom were cited by De León. Some of the groups noted by De León were collectively known by names such as Borrados, Pintos, Rayados, and Pelones. A few spoke dialects designated as Quinigua. All were hunters and gatherers who consumed the food they acquired almost immediately. Some settlements were small and moved frequently. Some families occasionally left an encampment to seek food separately. One settlement comprised fifteen houses arranged in a semicircle with an offset house at each end. The women carried water, if needed, in twelve to fourteen pouches made of prickly pear pads, in a netted carrying frame that was placed on the back and controlled by a tumpline. In summer, prickly pear juice was drunk as a water substitute. The Indians of Nuevo León constructed circular houses, covered them with cane or grass, and made a low entrances. Each house had a small hearth in the center, its fire used mainly for illumination. A fire was started with a wooden hand drill. The occupants slept on grass and deerskin bedding. The families abandoned their house materials when they moved. With eight or ten people associated with a house, a settlement of fifteen houses would have a population of about 150. The Indians of Nuevo León hunted all the animals in their environment, except toads and lizards. The animals included deer, rabbits, rats, birds, and snakes. The principal game animal was the deer. When a hunter killed a deer he marked a trail back to the encampment and sent women to bring the carcass home. The hunter received only the hide; the rest of the animal was butchered and distributed. The Indians used the bow and arrow and a curved wooden club. The club served as a walking aid, a weapon, and a tool for probing and prying. At night each man kept his club in easy reach. Both sexes shot fish with bow and arrow at night by torchlight, used nets, and captured fish underwater by hand along overhanging stream banks. The Nuevo León Indians depended on maguey root crowns and various roots and tubers for winter fare. In the summer they sought prickly pear fruits and mesquite bean pods. Maguey crowns were baked for two days in an oven, and the fibers were chewed and expectorated in small quids. When a food shortage arose, they salvaged, pulverized, and ate the quids. The Indians ate flowers of the prickly pear, roasted green fruit, and ate ripe fruit fresh or sun-dried on mats. Mesquite bean pods, abundant in the area, were eaten both green and in a dry state. The Indians pulverized the pods in a wooden mortar and stored the flour, sifted and containing seeds, in woven bags or in pear-pad pouches. Mesquite flour was eaten cooked or uncooked. The Indians added salt to their foods and used the ash of at least one plant as a salt substitute. In Nuevo León there were striking group differences in clothing, hair style, and face and body decoration. The men wore little clothing. No garment covered the pubic zone, and men wore sandals only when traversing thorny terrain. In some groups men wore rabbitskin robes. Women covered the pubic area with grass or cordage, and over this occasionally wore a slit skirt of two deerskins, one in front, the other behind. To the rear deerskin they attached a skin that reached to the ground, with a hem that contained sound-producing objects such as beads, shells, animal teeth, seeds, and hard fruits. On special occasions women also wore animal-skin robes. Males and females wore their hair down to the waist, with deerskin thongs sometimes holding the hair ends together at the waist. In some groups (Pelones), the Indians plucked bands of hair from the forehead to the top of the head, and inserted feathers, sticks, and bones in perforations in ears, noses, and breasts. Ethnic identity seems to have been indicated by painted or tattooed patterns on the face and the body. The face had combinations of un-described lines; among those who had hair plucked from the front of the head, the lines extended upward from the root of the nose. Body patterns included broad lines, straight or wavy, that ran the full length of the torso (probably giving rise to the Spanish designations Borrados, Rayados, and Pintos.)

The descriptions by Cabeza de Vaca and De León are not strictly comparable, but they give clear impressions of the cultural diversity that existed among the hunters and gatherers of the Coahuiltecan region. The principal differences were in foodstuffs and subsistence techniques, houses, containers, transportation devices, weapons, clothing, and body decoration.

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