

Morongo Culture Heritage

Morongo's Big Houses



Ceremonial Big House, late 1800s (from Weinland Collection, Huntington Library)

The Cahuilla and Serrano peoples have a rich cultural history. One of the main cultural centers for both cultures is the Big House. The Big House is the core of the villages and serves as the ceremonial building for religious practices. They provided the backbone of the community and were used in a number of ceremonies mostly funerary rites and clan ceremonies. In the early 1900s each clan at Morongo operated their own big house^[1] as more of the elders passed away and less people still held on to the traditions there were less and less big houses. In 1960 only one Cahuilla and one Serrano Big House remained the leaders of the Big Houses decided to operate one house for each of them Jane Penn was the leader of the Cahuilla and Sarah Martin for the Serrano.^[2]

The Cahuilla people had a clan based social structure where the village was all descended from one common ancestor and they had one ceremonial leader or net that was in charge of rituals and ceremonies. The net was originally an inherited position passed down from father to son whenever possible^[3] but later on became an elected position when multiple clans were forced to live in close proximity on reservations. ^[4] The last Serrano big house was located on the far west side of Morongo Road and was burned down in the 1970s after of the death of Sarah Martin.



The site of the Serrano Big House.

Anna Martin, the daughter of Sarah Martin talks about how the ceremonies would go. “It was just a Big House. Just, it didn’t have, you know, it didn’t have the inside, it was just built and in the corner where they kept the, the bodies of the deceased, the singers would sit up around the body, and then they had benches along the Big ... that’s where people sat at that time. Well, sometimes ... they’d hold the bodies three days. And they’d have the singers come and sing. I don’t, can’t remember, I don’t think they brought the feathers out over death. But they hung a lot of material up. But the meaning of hanging the material up, I don’t know. But they hang material all inside the Big House, the Morongo people from San, how do they say it, San Manuel, used to come, and they would make dolls to whomever, they were images for the people that had died before, and they were really beautiful at the time. This lady would embroidery the faces, and then she’d make the bodies just the size of the human that had passed away, and dress ‘em, if it was a man they’d be dressed in suit and pants. If it was a woman, it would be dressed with a scarf in the regular way that the Indian ladies dressed. And then they would take those – they would have them hung up in

the Big House. Nobody would see them, because I guess they worked on them during the day when no one was there. Then I think it would be on Wednesday, they would bring them down and they would take them and they would dance with them in the Big House. Then they'd put them up. And I think it was Saturday morning they would take them out, and someone had dug a big hole outside, and they'd take them out, the man that was head of the Big House would take them, and the women would go. And they'd sing all around the Big House for those people. Dance with them and sing all around the Big House. Then they'd take those people, sit down, and I don't know what was with the beads, but they'd do their beads, and then they'd put those dolls in a hole and they'd bury them, burn them and bury them." [1] The Big Houses used to be a staple in the Indigenous way of life but has been lost over time even though there may not be any more Big Houses we can do our part and keep the memories of those traditions alive.

Any Questions or Comments? Feel Free to Reach Out!

Contact Us

Bibliography

[1] Bean, *Morongo Indian Reservation* 180.

[2] Bean, *Morongo Indian Reservation* 180-181

[3] Godfrey, Greenwald, Strohmaier *Historic Rates of Compensation for Rights-of-Way Crossing Indian Lands* 77

[4] Bean, *Morongo Indian Reservation* 180

[5] Wilson, Britt 2005. Anna Martin and Ann Nelson Interview. Personal

Past History Stories

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