Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island – Discussion Questions

1. What is difference between historical fiction and non-fiction?

Most people are familiar with the Lone Woman story from Island of the Blue Dolphins (IBD), the award winning children’s novel by Scott O’Dell. This is often a good jumping off point for a discussion of the true story. The distinction between historical fiction and non-fiction needs to be addressed. I am careful to never put down IBD, but students need to know that this is not the true story and what it actually represents. Most of what we know as the true story today, was not known when O’Dell wrote IBD.

2. How do we know what is true about the story?

The nature of historical research and documentation. The difference between primary source documents, secondary sources, and tertiary sources and the need to evaluate each piece of information for accuracy and bias. I think it is extremely important to get young students to understand the nature of research, and since this example can be tied to a beloved book, it can be very effective.

3. What is the historical context of the story?

Most equate the story with the mission period of California history. However, the background is much more involved with missionization and otter hunting forming the foundation for the story. The story itself evolves as the mission system is breaking down and ends in the Gold Rush era. The fact that there were no newspapers in Los Angles or Santa Barbara at the time, has a lot to do with the lack of first person documentation.

Missionization

Otter hunting

Gold Rush

4. What is needed to survive alone on the island?

Discussion of what is actually needed to survive alone.

Food

Water

Shelter

Clothing

5. What resources are available on the island to meet these needs?

People often assume that mere survival would have been extremely difficult for her, but actually, due to the abundant resources available on the island, she would have had a very easy time of physical survival. She was abandoned on her home turf so she already knew all she needed to know about plants and when to harvest, how to collect shellfish, where water sources were, etc.

Water

Fish

Shellfish

Plants

Birds

Seals

6. Need for companionship

What would have been much more difficult, would have been the psychological toll of being alone. We assume she would have befriended the animals on the island. Indians had dogs on the island for hundreds of years, and they would have made excellent companions. She had dogs with her when she was found. Foxes are also present and may have become companions as well.

7. Why did she decide to leave with Nidever in 1853?

People had seen her during the 18 years and people had tried to coax her to leave the island, but she refused to leave all of those years. But, in 1853, she seemingly willingly left with Nidever’s crew. Why?

Tired of being alone

Bleak future if she stays

Did she feel more secure with Nidever’s crew since it included Indians?

8. The story is still not fully known.

The nature of historical research and how a story can continue to evolve after so many years. We are still uncovering more about the true story, and these new insights are likely to continue for many more years. Why don’t we know the whole story? And how can new facts keep coming to light?