

The Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation

The San Diego Historical Society honored Daniel J. Tucker, Chairman of the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, with the George W. Marston Award for Civic Leadership at the 2007 History Makers Gala held at the U. S. Grant Hotel on June 2. Marston, founder and first president of the San Diego Historical Society



Daniel Tucker, Chairman, Sycuan Band.

in 1928, is well remembered for his many philanthropic activities. Tucker received the Marston award for his leadership and the outstanding service the Sycuan Band has given both to its tribal members and to the San Diego community as a whole. It is therefore important to recount the unique and remarkable history of the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation from earliest times to the present.

Ancestors of the Kumeyaay arrived in the San Diego area nearly 12,000 years ago. Currently, there are 130 Sycuan tribal members who proudly pass down many time-honored traditions to keep the heritage and customs alive. As a Native American Indian tribe, Sycuan is an independent, sovereign nation with its own democratically elected government, the Tribal Council. The people abide by tribal laws as well as state and federal laws. As an independent nation and independent government, Sycuan maintains government-to-government relationships with the city, county, state and United States governments.

The earliest documented inhabitants in what is now San Diego County are known as the San Dieguito Paleo-Indians, dating back to about 10,000 B.C.E. Different groups later evolved as the environment and culture diversified. It is from one of these groups that the Southern Diegueño emerged at about 3000 B.C.E. The name Diegueño was given to them by the Spaniards. The Southern Diegueño are the direct ancestors of the Sycuan Band currently living in Dehesa Valley. Today, Sycuan is one of thirteen Kumeyaay Bands in the county. There are a total of 18 Indian tribes in San Diego, more than any other county in the United States.

For thousands of years, the Kumeyaay lived peacefully and prospered in San Diego's temperate climate. Their ancestral territory ranged east to El Centro, north to Escondido, and south to Baja California. They were skilled hunters and took full advantage of the native plants, using them for shelter, food and clothing. The Kumeyaay established their rich cultural identity and traditions, many of which are still practiced and honored today. The Kumeyaay first encountered Europeans with the arrival of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542. By the year 1769, when Spanish soldiers and missionaries, led by Father Junípero Serra, founded the Mission and the Presidio of San Diego, the destruction of the Kumeyaay way of life had

irreversibly begun. Although the Kumeyaay were among the most resistant of all California Indians to subjugation, they still saw their ways destroyed and their land stolen. At the same time, even though they learned some useful skills, the ravages of deadly, newly introduced diseases, primarily smallpox and measles, decimated the Kumeyaay population.

Life for the Kumeyaay worsened following Mexico's overthrow of the Spanish government in 1821. All lands and power were transferred from Spain to the Republic of Mexico and, after 1835, when the mission lands were turned over to civilian administrators, they were further displaced. From the establishment of the San Diego Mission in 1769 through the end of the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848, the Kumeyaay population decreased from nearly 30,000 to approximately 3,000.

The period between California statehood in 1850 through post-Civil War reconstruction was one of the worst in Kumeyaay history. With virtually no protection, the Kumeyaay were at the mercy of the state and the federal government. With the passing of the "Government and Protection Act" of 1850, California imposed its authority over Indians, and even though treaties were made to give them land, they were never ratified. The Kumeyaay continued to be strangers in their own home as more land was taken, commitments ignored, treaties broken, and in some instances, their people physically removed to other areas.

In 1875, after over 100 years of unspeakable treatment of Native Americans, President Ulysses S. Grant took the first step towards an Indian Peace Policy. He passed an Executive Order that set aside specific lands in San Diego County for the exclusive use of the Kumeyaays. The current 640 acre, one-square mile Sycuan Reservation in Dehesa Valley was included in this order. The land given to Sycuan was remote, harsh and poor for farming. But the Sycuan people, through force of will, maintained their time-honored traditions and survived. In 1891, the U.S.



The U.S. Grant Hotel originally constructed in San Diego in 1910.



Sycuan Casino

finally recognized the sovereign status of California Indian tribes by passing the “Act For The Relief Of The Mission Indians.”

Sycuan has today diversified as a business enterprise. To date, the casino has been the Band’s most noteworthy economic success. To realize their goal of diversification, they established the **Sycuan Tribal Development Corporation (STDC)**. Their first acquisition was the golf course and resort property of Singing Hills in east San Diego County near their reservation. Since then, STDC has continued with development projects in downtown San Diego and National City, purchasing and upgrading the historic U.S. Grant Hotel. They have a capital management firm and have become boxing promoters with Ringside Promotions by Sycuan. They have sponsored a number of activities for sport fans throughout San Diego.

Today, the Sycuan Band again stands proud over its land. While not forgetting their past and their unique cultural heritage, the Sycuan people look forward to the future, and to becoming self-reliant once again. Their identity as a good neighbor is of utmost importance. They have contributed generously to hundreds of charitable and civic organizations over the years. It is an obligation that they have taken upon themselves to help their neighbors and make San Diego, their native homeland, a better place to live.¹

The San Diego Historical Society features an exhibit of the Kumeyaay heritage at the Serra Museum in Presidio Park and a future display will be a part of the permanent exhibit in Balboa Park.

1. Information in this article has been adapted from the Sycuan Band website that may be visited at www.sycuan.com