

Chief Solanos favorite wife tells her story

By Jerry Bowen

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If you have lived in Solano County for any length of time, you undoubtedly have heard or read some of the many stories of Chief Solano, for whom our county was named 150 years ago.

Little, however, seems to have been written about any of his wives. His favorite was White Heron, later known by her Christian baptismal name, Isadora Filomena.

In 1877, at the urging of Mariano Vallejo, a Mexican general and one of the first major land-grant owners in Solano and Sonoma counties, she reluctantly agreed to an interview with Henry Cerruti, a historian/author for Hubert Howe Bancroft.

Cerruti described her as a 5-foot, 10-inch woman, with deep, sunken eyes, small hands and feet, long, slightly gray hair, very nimble for her age and very shy when he interviewed her at Vallejo's home in Sonoma.

The following is a portion of the interview as recorded by Cerruti:

"My name is Isadora. The Indians who knew me when I was wife of Capt. Solano and who then called me 'Princess,' still give me the title, and some of the whites, such as Berryessa and Capt. Salvador Vallejo, and many others who from time to time come to Lachryma Montis (Vallejo's home) to visit me, still call me Princess.

"It is true that in my youth, like the rest of the Indians of my tribe, I worshipped the god called Puis, who was no more than a mortal being the same as I. He dressed himself entirely in white feathers, except the head, on which he placed black ones, and my people worshipped him as though he were a true god.

"Afterwards I married the great Solano, prince of the Suisunes, Topaytos, Yolotoys, and Chuructos. He became prince of the Topaytos after he had conquered them; and during his life he made the whole world tremble, both whites and Indians, with the exception of his friend Gen. Guadalupe Mariano Vallejo. He always rejected the friendship of Sutter, Yount and many other fair-haired persons who wished to be his friends.

"The priest Guias, as Prince Solano always called Father Fray Lorenzo Quijas,

baptized me and gave me the name of Isadora Filomena. He taught me to be very charitable towards the poor, very submissive to my husband and compassionate to prisoners. For this reason, when my husband, at the head of 3,000 men, conquered all his enemies, I prevented him from killing them. I said to him, 'Turn them loose with Vallejo, who will make them work the land.' Padre Guias gave him the same advice, and, since Solano accepted it, the lives of many poor people were saved.

"I belonged to Solano before I married him; even before I was baptized. I am not a Suisun like him, but I belong to the tribe of Chuructos, and one time Solano stole me. My father, together with many of the Satiyomi, pursued him, but he could not overcome him. My father's tribe lived near Cache Creek ...

"After Solano died, I was married again to a man named Bill, a man with a small heart. I had no children by him, but by Solano I had eight; all are dead except a son named Joaquin, who works for a living and gives me a monthly allowance of \$20. Vallejo allows me a house free, with ground.

"When Solano went out to fight, he armed his men with daggers made of flint, and lances and arrows pointed with flints, all dipped in poisonous herbs. I don't know whether they mixed anything else with the herbs or not; Solano's warriors did not wear coat, shirt, shoes, trousers, or hat! They were not foolish enough to have anything on the body by which a white man or another Indian could take hold, but went entirely naked, with only a bunch of feathers on the head. The Indians who carried the food wore gray feathers pulled out of wild fowl. The fighting men carried lances and arrows, with white duck feathers on their heads, except for the captain, who wore black feathers.

"In the beginning, Solano wore feathers on his head, but when all the Indians were required to dress like the whites, he carried good arms, given to him by Vallejo, and the missionaries also gave him a hat and boots.

"Before the arrival of whites at Soscol, we had plenty of very good food, without much work in obtaining it. There was an abundance of game, and wild onions growing in the fields. We called these onions 'ur.' We also had a wild soap, which we called amoles, and which still abounds near San Rafael, where I sometimes send Bill to look for it. The soap does better washing than any kind made by man. It takes out every spot, and does not burn the body or irritate the skin."

"In my country all of my race had a skin like mine, that is to say very red. All the women were very tall. I was perhaps one of the smallest. Many of us live much beyond a hundred years. The woman's hair does not turn white, but the man's does. We Indians have not large feet and hands like the fair Germans and Americans, for although we are

tall in body our hands and feet are small. We always went barefoot.

"My tribe and many others lived largely on fish. There were many kinds of fish in our rivers, but the most abundant kind were called salmon. We did not always catch them with nets, but sometimes when the river was low, we planted sticks in the middle of the river, and in that way caught a large amount of fish. Part of it was eaten fresh and the other part dried and kept for winter.

"We used to have a great many pretty dances, men dancing with men and women with women. The men danced naked, but the women with a skirt. When there were only Indians here, the women wore only a crown of feathers on the head, a string of beads, which we call abalarios, wrapped around the body from the breast up as far as the neck.

"There was a belt of shells around the waist, while from the ears hung earrings made of feathers and beaks of geese and ducks. These were suspended from the ears by means of a duck bone, well polished and made thin by scraping it with a flint. Some of the Suisun women wore a belt of feathers; many wore nothing but a skin hanging down the front. The Churucto Indians painted their bodies with charcoal and red ochre, which was not a permanent paint."

At the conclusion of the interview, Cerruti offered to buy her wedding dress, at which she replied, "These are treasures of my youth and of my people. I cannot part with them. They will be buried with me."

Unfortunately, she admitted being inclined to alcohol, and after plying her with more drinks, Cerruti made another offer, this time for \$24 and a partially full bottle of brandy. At that point, she turned her wedding dress over to him.

One can only wonder to this day whatever happened to her precious heritage that was so easily traded away to someone who should have known better than to make the offer in the first place.

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