Tragic demise of “People of the West Wind”

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Stone Age people were the first inhabitants of Solano County. This is known through artifacts found in Green Valley some years ago and dated by archaeologists to 2000 B.C. The next residents that we know of were the Patwin Indians. These people were the southern branch of the Wintun group and they lived in the region for a thousand years or more; some figures are as high as 4,000 years.

Telling the story of these native people is riddled with uncertainties as nothing was ever chronicled. What has been recorded is based on what was known of similar Indian groups, lore and best guess. Spellings vary from record to record, as these names were written phonetically.

How many Patwins inhabited the section Solano County between what is now Suisun, Vacaville and Putah Creek? Estimates put the number between 2,500 and 5,000. These were the Southern Patwins and they formed themselves into small tribes - Ululatos (Vacaville), Labaytos (Putah Creek), Malacas (Lagoon Valley), Tolenas (Upper Suisun Valley) and Suisunes (Suisun Plain).

The relations between tribes were generally good and trade routes were well established with Indian tribes farther away. Occasionally, however, the tribes became hostile toward one another and the usual argument was over poaching on another’s land for game or fish.

When clashes would break out, it was “take no prisoners” and women suffered the same fate as the men. However, just as often peace was negotiated before things came to this.

Most accountings show that each tribal village consisted of 100 people; nevertheless, at least one account says 1,500.

No on-site sketches were made, but it is believed that the Patwins of this region lived in conical-shaped huts made of tule thatch. A separate house was constructed for women in menstruation or childbirth.

For social gatherings there was a sweathouse for the men. This would be beside a stream or river and the ritual was much like a Finnish sauna; bake in the sweathouse, then jump in cool water.
Food was plentiful; the diet varied. The people were hunters and gatherers. The main staple of their diet was the acorn, which they would leach with sand and ash-water to take out the bitterness and poison and make it palatable for meal or flour for bread.

(Here’s a recipe for acorn mush: Shell dry acorns. With a meat grinder, process acorns into find flour. Put flour into a muslin-lined colander and run warm water through, stirring occasionally, until flour loses its bitterness. Squeeze out excess water. Dry flour. Cook 4 cups of flour to 12 cups of cold water, stirring constantly at a slow boil for 1/2 hour. Reduce heat and cook another 1 1/2 hours. Eat hot or cold. Add dash of salt if you wish. Bon appetit!)

Other foods were the buckeye ball, pine nuts, juniper and manzanita berries, blackberries and wild grapes. Sunflower, aliflaria, clover, bunchgrass, wild oat and a yellow flower provided seeds that were dried and pounded into a meal. Brodiaea bulbs and tule roots were some other plant foods collected and stored. Bulbs were baked or boiled.

The people were, of course, adept at stalking local game: deer, antelope, tule elk and bear. They also had the hunt of wild duck, geese, and quail. Fish were abundant in Suisun Bay and rivers and sloughs that prevailed.

They built canoes out of tule rushes and fished for salmon with spears. Nets were strung between the tule reeds in narrow waterways and sloughs to gather other fish. The deer meat and salmon were sun dried and pulverized into a meal to be stored.

Basket weaving was a highly developed art among the Patwins. Some uses of baskets were to hold babies and as pots for cooking. They were also adept at making tools. Local rocks were shaped into implements. Points and diggers were fashioned from basalt near Vacaville.

Indians of this area made due with little clothing; a loincloth, an apron woven with tule rushes or made of rabbit skins did the trick. Shell beads and feather headdresses were much the fashion. Dances and rituals were a deep part of their culture. To this, women tattooed their faces and men painted themselves excessively.

Europeans were to make their presence known by the early 1800s. However, as early as 1775 they were here. The vessel San Carlos entered San Francisco Bay and for several weeks Jose de Canizares went exploring. For one night he and his men found shelter in a bay at Benicia. No contact with the Indians was made. We can only wonder if the local Indians saw this alien presence.

In the early 1800s, Spain controlled California and the building of the missions was well
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under way. Indians from various tribes along the way were captured, removed form their native places and while becoming “civilized” labored to build missions, pueblos and presidios. The first mention of the Suisun Indians in any records is a baptismal record at the San Jose Mission dated 1807. By 1810 and 1811 the number recorded is much larger. Other small tribes - Tolenas Malacas and Ululatos - appear in San Francisco and San Jose records in 1816, 1817 and 1819.

Masses of Indians were caught in the convert-or-else net in the missions in San Jose and San Francisco. Needless to say, a number of Indians were reluctant converts. The main village, Yulyul, of the Suisuns, the “People of the West Wind,” is believed to have been where Rockville is today. The distance of the Suisun tribe from the missions appealed to those Indians unwilling to take up the faith and give up their native ways. These “rebels” stole horses to seek their freedom and a return to the natural ways by joining up with the Patwin tribes of the Solano County region.

With the stolen horses in hand, slowly but surely the Suisun Tribe hod a serious increase in horse herds and by the early 1800s a small cavalry developed that launched angry attacks on various mission outposts.

This was not taken lightly by the Spaniards and in May 1810 Gabriel Moraga and 17 soldiers crossed the Carquinez Strait to launch an attack on the hostile Indians. They were met by 125 warriors and a fierce battle took place.

Outmaning the Spaniards was of no avail. The Indians were driven into three huts. Those in the first two huts were killed. The Indians in the third hut set themselves afire. This is, we gather, a Spanish accounting of the event. A supposed Suisunes version reads that, as the Suisunes proved to be unwilling prisoners, they were fired upon and flaming torches were tossed on their huts.

In 1817 the commandant of the Presidio of San Francisco was Jose DeArguello. He sent his lieutenant Jose Sanchez, with a small army to conquer the Indians of the Suisun Tribe. The exact battle site is lost to time, but it is assumed to have been in the low-lying hills behind Benicia. A poisoned arrow pierced the air, and the war was on. How long it lasted, how many lives were lost is for us to wonder about. What is known is that the Spaniards gained ground to what is Fairfield and Suisun today. This was where the main village of Chief Malica, sachem of the Suisun Tribe, was located, and where the Chief Malica chose to meet his death and that of the “People of the West Wind.”

A mass suicide took place before the Spaniards’ very eyes. The conical huts, rush-built wickiup, burst in flames one by one. The chief, singing his own death song, leaped into the burning rush. Braves of the tribe followed. Soon the entire village took up the
droning chant till their voices rose higher and higher, ending in shrieks of pain. Hut after hut burst into flame. Women with babes in arms or children clinging to their hands, singing their death songs, plunged to their doom.

The sight horrified the Spaniards. They rushed in to save the frenzied Indians, but their efforts were in vain. A few Indians fled their fate and sought refuge in the nearby hills, but as a whole, the “People of the West Wind” perished.

Sem Yeto, at 6-foot-7, was an imposing young brave of the Suisun Tribe. He purportedly was in line to become chief by virtue of his noble birth. One story has him off hunting at the time of the battle and ensuing mass suicide. Another tale is that chief Malica convinced Sem Yeto to flee and take his rightful place as leader of the remaining tribe. Exactly when he was captured and what numbers of the Suisun people remained is not substantiated. Perhaps he fled to the hills with a small group for the next six years. Perhaps he was captured and living at mission outposts. We get a fix on him through the missionary baptismal records.

The Franciscans established their last mission in Sonoma in 1823, and it was given the name San Francisco de Solano. Shortly thereafter, Sem Yeto was baptized and given the name Francisco Solano. Thus it is for this Indian chief that Solano County was named. The converted Sem Yeto lived in Sonoma and Suisun Valley outposts.

The Suisun tribe had represented the eastern wing of the Sonoma tribe, which was scattered through Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Solano counties. It was Sem Yeto, a man of peace and not war, who would bring under his command all the Sonoma Indians and bring about peace between the remaining Indians and the Spaniards. Sem Yeto was also to be of great assistance and became a friend to Gen. Mariano Vallejo in the ensuing years. He and Vallejo are often mentioned together in history of Solano County; theirs was as friendship and an alliance.

Though a converted man and basically a man of peace, Solano was often influenced by the instincts of his past. Stories cropped up that he would occasionally join a band of Indians and attack the Spaniards; but he was always foreign and bought back onto the fold.

Chief Solano’s position came to an abrupt end at the Bear Flag Revolt in 1846, when Gen. Vallejo was taken prisoner by Americans from Sutter’s Fort. Though only jailed, rumor was widespread that the general had died. Believing this, Sem Yeto, wanting to avoid the same fate, fled north and traveled form tribe to tribe in Oregon and Washington and possibly Alaska.

Then, lonely for his native land, he returned in 1850. He died of pneumonia soon after
at the old Yulyul village site in Rockville. True to custom, this old Indian chief was
buried by his people secretly. The precise burial place of Chief Solano is unknown, but
legend is strong that this bones rest at the entrance of what is today Solano Community
College.