

Indians, grizzlies succumb to newcomers

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In early days, Putah Creek passed just south of what is now the city of Davis. There along the banks, Patwin Indians - the Pooewin - built their villages some 1,500 years ago. Archaeologists have determined that they lived in dome-shaped structures common to Patwin tribes. Sadly, these natives became extinct shortly after the white men arrived, as it proved they were fatally susceptible to the newly introduced diseases. Hence little is known of these people.

What information has been culled is that they were hunters and gatherers. Antelope, deer, elk, and bear were in abundance, and there were a great variety of birds and fish. Foods such as seeds, berries, fungi and greens were gathered by the women. Acorns were also an important staple, collected in the fall and stored.

The Pooewin made no pottery, but they made sturdy baskets, which served their many needs. Some baskets held water. Some were food bowls. Still others were cooking vessels, with heated stones dropped into the baskets to cook the food.

It can be supposed that one man in the village may have presided or been looked up to, but he apparently did not have absolute authority. The shaman, being the healer, would have been a very important figure within the tribe. This was true communal living; lands and food were shared by all. Disputes between neighboring villages likely arose, but there is no evidence of organized warfare of any kind.

The Pooewin were part of the trading system encompassing many groups of Indians in the chain, which ran from the coast to far inland. Feathers, cordage for nets, obsidian for arrow and spearheads, marine shells for beads and other ornaments and materials were thus obtained. The Pooewin bartered for items from the coast with items they had received from inland Indian tribes.

In Davis history, yet another account of the naming of Putah Creek is given. According to this account, the naming of the stream, which coincidentally sounds like the Spanish "puta" and translates to harlot or whore, is purely that - a coincidence.

The name comes from the local Indians. In mission records of 1824, the natives are

mentioned with various spellings from Putto to Puttato. The name of the Patwin Indian village is assumed to have been Puta-to, the name containing the Patwin word for East, "Pu."

During the time of the Indians, it has been assumed that beavers were making their homes in Putah Creek and other local waterways and that their dams aided the natural flooding that occurred. In this manner, water spread over the land, leading to a flourishing of plant life and trees. In Gold Rush days, it is known that much wood came from this area as fuel for stoves and steamboats.

When white people arrived, the dominant creature was the grizzly, a beast that could easily fell an ox in its tracks with one blow. The grizzly was everywhere. Hunters killed a large number for their meat supply and to safeguard themselves and their farms.

It can also be imagined that some hunters met their match tangling with this giant. In 1850, grizzly meat was selling for a dollar a pound. The last grizzly was killed in this area in 1864.

During the early 1830s, hunters, trappers and explorers came to the area and a significant number in the Indian populace succumbed to diseases. When Jedediah Strong Smith, a trapper, made a trip to California in 1830, he and his party camped at Cache Creek.

Kit Carson came out with the Young expedition in 1829-30. Its members trapped in the tributaries of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. It is interesting to speculate whether one of those tributaries might have been Putah Creek. The party netted \$24,000 when it sold its pelts; the going rate at the time in Santa Fe was \$12 a pound.

In 1844, Don Jose de Los Santos Berryessa, the mayor of Sonoma, made a trip out to the Davis area and named it Laguna Calle. "Laguna Calle" described the long narrow lake that then existed. The lake was where waters from the Willow Slough sprang from underground springs. Berryessa added his middle name, "Santos," making the full title "Rancho Laguna de Santos Calle."

Col. Joseph Chiles was deeded the Mexican land grant, Rancho Laguna de Santos Calle, in 1844. The colonel had come out West with the wagon train often referred to as the "Pilgrims of the Pacific." This was a group of men, women and children who left Missouri in 1841.

After following the Santa Fe Trail for two days, they left the trail and forged a path - the Emigrant Trail - through uncharted land. Of the original 69 pioneers, only 32 and a baby survived the trip to California.

Rancho Laguna de Santos Calle was a total 11 Spanish leagues, or 47,600 acres. When Col. Chiles purchased this land, John R. Wolfskill had already settled here, his land grant forming the western boundary to Chiles land.

Vaca and Pena were also established on their land grant, which formed the southern boundary. Before Chiles arrived there were already about 800 head of undomesticated cattle and a few horses roaming the land. They had been taken there in 1843 by the Vaca brothers and were cared for by mission-trained Indian vaqueros.

In 1845, Chiles sold his grant to Marcos Vaca, son of Manuel Vaca and Victor Prudon (Prudhomme). Marcos had asked Prudon of Napa to draw up the papers as Marcos could neither read nor write. Prudon included himself on the deed. Marcus Vaca bought the grant because his cattle were "used to the place." In 1845 or thereabouts, the Indian vaqueros built a rustic corral and a small dwelling. These were the first structures on the land around present-day Davis.

Starting in 1849, the area started to slowly become somewhat populated. These were pioneers arriving after the Mexican-American War and disgruntled miners. Those who had been raised on farms back home and knew the ins and outs of farming saw the opportunity in this land. But not all were delivered the sweet smell of success. Victor Prudon deeded over his half-interest to one farmer for \$30,000. The farmer sold it for a loss, \$10,000, after his crop was destroyed by roaming stock.

Due to the wild cattle, foot travel was considered unsafe, so horses and wagons were the main mode of travel. Those farmers who were established were hauling their 100-pound sacks of grain to Knights Landing or Maine Prairie for shipment. William Knight operated a rope ferry at Knights Landing, and in 1846 this was the only crossing on the Sacramento River.

Such was the situation in 1849 when Jerome Davis arrived in Yolo County. Family lore has it that Davis first came to California in 1845 as part of John C. Fremont's topographical survey expedition. Family tales state that Davis was part of the "Bear Flag" revolt.

Afterwards Davis returned East, but was reportedly summoned to appear at Fremont's court-martial trial. When he came out the second time, he panned for gold for a while but quickly decided better opportunity lay in "mining the miners."

He did so by establishing a dairy in Yolo County. At the time, milk sold for about a dollar a quart. He augmented this income by going into the ferry business with Chiles, who as it turns out was to become his father-in-law. The two operated a rope ferry big enough to accommodate a wagon at a site between the Chiles property and city of Sacramento.

Teams of oxen on either side provided the “pull” power.

Gold Rush rates were \$6 for a man and two horses or mules. The nighttime toll was \$16. They purportedly made in excess of \$10,000 a month.

Next week: Land titles are in question; early-day farming; and the railroad arrives.

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