

Before Our Time

A Journey into Santa Cruz Prehistory—Excerpts

Micki Ryan

5-11-84

The place names catch your tongue a little: Aptos, Soquel, Zayante—they don't quite glide as easily as the Spanish sound of Santa Cruz, or Monterey, or declare their meaning like "Scotts Valley." The unusual sounds are a clue, suggesting another layer of history beneath the obvious.

This was still very much the home of the Ohlone Indian when explorers were sent by King Charles III of Spain to secure his claim to the Alta California frontier. In 1769 a land party under the leadership of Captain Gaspar de Portola stumbled into an Ohlone village on the banks of the Pajaro River near Watsonville. The exploration party continued up the coast, remarking on the large size of villages near streams and marshes, the robust handsomeness of the people and their friendliness.

Portola's party was the first, but not the last, to provide descriptions of Ohlone appearances and lifeways. The explorers were enthusiastic in their recommendations to locate mission outposts among the friendly people in their excellent land. They were immediately followed by Franciscan missionaries and soldiers, then by civilian settlers and worldwide traders.

The records of those observers in the past, the retold stories of the Ohlone of this area today, and carefully recovered archeological evidence together offer a rich picture of the ancient Ohlone culture.

The Ohlones ("People of the West") followed seasonal cycles in the gathering of food, and in movement from encampments or temporary villages close to coastal marshes to their permanent winter villages in the coastal hills. The seasons also determined the correct time for celebration of important astronomical and social events. Such celebrations and daily routine took place in what are now pleasant neighborhoods on the south-facing slopes below the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Here, archaeologists and mission baptismal records tell us, was once the site of a major village, possibly the same one recorded under the name "Chalumu" in mission records. The village would have appeared as a collection of dome-shaped houses made of bundles of tule reed tied in layers over a willow lattice framework. The houses measured some 15 feet in diameter and were partially excavated into

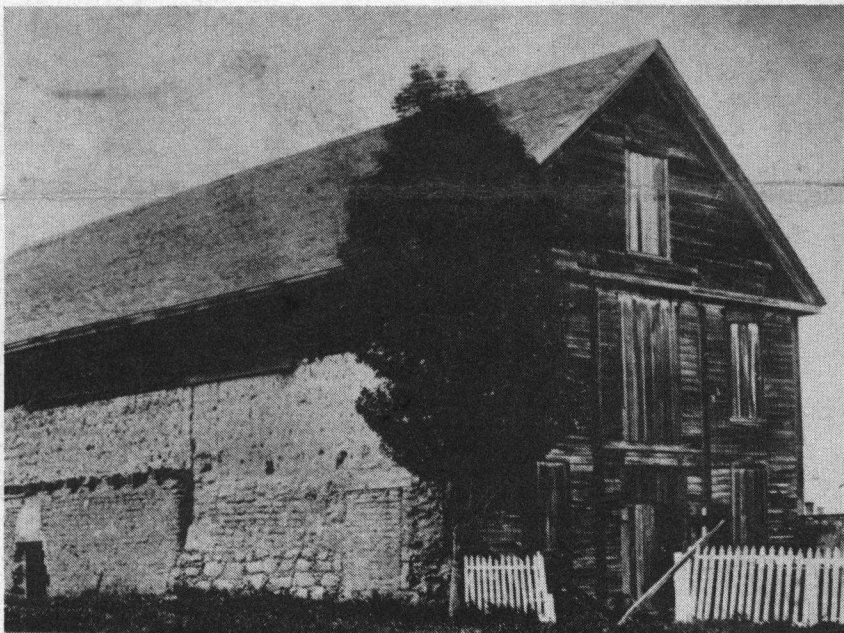
the ground with a smooth, hard packed earth floor. Sleeping mats of tule and rabbit skin blankets would be stored inside, while the pole framework would offer projections and hooks for hanging baskets of food, or neat bundles of basketry grasses.

Scattered among the houses would be communal acorn storage granaries, brush-roofed ramadas providing shade for the tedious job of acorn grinding, perhaps a brush-lined dance enclosure, and not far away at the edge of a stream was the sweathouse, where men and boys roasted away their ailments and bad habits.

hills, hunting blinds of rock and brush were constructed along the game trails. To the east of the village men chipped Monterey banded chert from a quarry, using the fine-grained stone as a substitute for obsidian arrow points, knives and hide scrapers when trade supplies were interrupted.

A never-ending supply of fresh water bubbled from springs that were later to supply Mission Santa Cruz, still later to form the focal point for elaborate Victorian gardens, and spill forth—although not as copiously—to this day.

The continuity of the Ohlone Way was broken nearly two hundred



The remains of the old Mission Church before its demolition in 1886.

The Ohlone of Chalumu were surrounded by a great natural abundance of food and raw material for tools and decoration. Below their vantage point the San Lorenzo River meandered to the bay, dissolving into a delta of marshland where the Boardwalk now plays. Here, the Ohlone captured waterfowl with skillfully made decoys and bow and arrow, using not only the meat, but also the feathers for decoration of baskets, bodies, dance costumes and capes, while the hollow bones made flutes.

The village of Aulintak lay below them, where abalone were gathered from the rocky shoreline. Above and around the village, the dead were interred in carefully planned cemeteries, some with tools or decorative objects that marked their wealth or standing in the village, and some outcast to the periphery of the burial ground.

Beyond, in the densely forested

years ago, and the fragments of their heritage left to us modern-day "people of the west" are all the more precious because of their rarity and mystery.

To see and touch some of the objects used by the Ohlone of Aulintak, Chalumu, Aptos, Sokel, Sayant and Kalenta-Ruk villages, and to learn more about the Ohlone Way, visit the Santa Cruz City Museum, 1305 West Cliff Drive between the Boardwalk and the Yacht Harbor at Seabright Beach. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 until 5.

Micki Ryan is an historical research consultant, author and founding president of the Santa Cruz Archaeological Society.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE CALIFORNIA HISTORY SOCIETY