



An industrial park is rising amidst a sacred Indian burial site.

Berman donates land to Ohlones

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

When the sun rose on the morning of March 20, 1975, a construction site on Lee Road was an armed camp. A contingent of about 65 Ohlone Indians and their supporters, equipped with shotguns, M-1 rifles with banana clips and other weapons, readied themselves for a confrontation with sheriff's deputies, saying they were "prepared to die" to defend the site, which contained the skeletal remains of the Ohlones' ancestors.

Violence was averted later that day when Aaron Berman, the owner of the land, agreed to sell the burial ground, and the Indians accepted the offer.

Almost five years later, the "final solution" to the controversy has been hammered out. Tuesday night the City Council is expected to approve a land subdivision that will allow Berman to donate almost six acres of land to the Ohlones so that the site can remain untouched forever.

The agreement is a result of a meeting on March 5 arranged by Pajaro Valley Supervisor Chris Matthews. Berman, his sons Les and Steve, Watsonville real estate consultant Chuck Allen, Matthews and three representatives from the Ohlone Indian Cultural Assn., huddled in a back room of the Del Monte Cafe at West Beach and Walker streets.

"It was the first time the Bermans and the Indians had sat down and talked," remembers Matthews, an early supporter of the Ohlones. "Before that, they'd only contacted each other through lawyers."

In 1975, Berman had agreed to sell two acres of land for \$17,500, but at the meeting he quickly offered to give the Indians the six acres for nothing. (In four years,

the Indians had raised about \$9,000 for the purchase.)

Matthews and the Ohlone representatives had nothing but praise for Berman.

"Such an act is unprecedented to my knowledge in the history of any kind of negotiations between the American people and the Indians," wrote Matthews in a letter to Berman. "The step you have taken is one that will have an historic import."

Subsequent months were spent taking care of the necessary red tape — which was particularly lengthy because the burial site was located in the state Coastal Zone. But, with the help of state Assemblyman Henry Mello, the site was eventually removed from the zone and the land annexed to the city of Watsonville. As a condition of the annexation, the Local Agency Formation Commission required that the land be subdivided so that the burial site would be preserved. The final subdivision map will probably be OK'd tomorrow night.

"We could have had a hell of an uprising here," said Berman in an interview last week.

What did he think of the Indians' actions several years ago?

"I didn't think it was right," he replied. But now, he says, his relations with the Indians couldn't be more amiable.

The only rivalry nowadays occurs on the softball field. Earlier this year, Berman Steel's team defeated the Indians' team in a close playoff series in the city league.

Ray Marquez, president of the Indian association, said this morning that a fence will be built around the burial site. The fence will probably be built on pillars, he said, so that no stakes penetrate the sacred ground.

Near the Lee Road site, several new industrial buildings have appeared in the years since the incident, as Berman proceeds with development of an industrial park. Under construction now is a large parking lot that will be used for trucks from Berman Steel Co. on Walker Street. (Businesses in the area have grumbled to city officials about the trucks blocking traffic.) The Indian association will be immediately notified if any new bones are discovered during construction at the industrial park.

Berman Steel, which began 40 years ago as the Watsonville Iron and Metal Co., is the largest recycler of non-ferrous metals (brass, lead, copper and aluminum) in the U.S., according to the 59-year-old Berman.

WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
December 17, 1980

REFERENCE