

Shadows still cover the ancient Ohlone burial grounds

by Ellie Piazza

The ominous shadow of a giant bird circled slowly over the Pajaro Valley. Black-clad conquistadores shaded their eyes with their hands and squinted toward the sun, murmuring to themselves and their nervous horses.

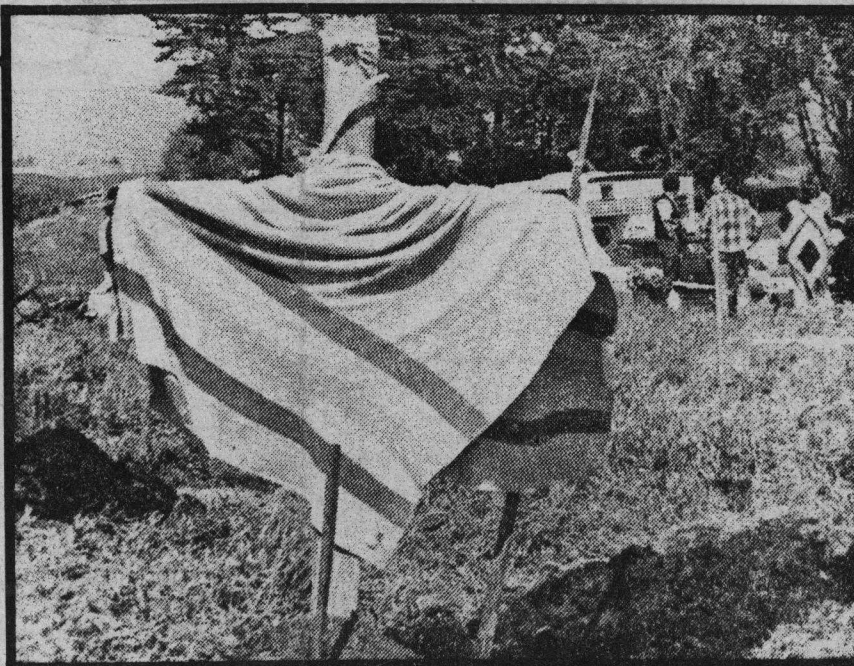
A while later they would ride into a desolate Ohlone Indian village. The Ohlone people, forewarned of the invasion, had packed up their belongings and, as was their custom, burned their own village to the ground and slipped away before the conquistadores could get to them.

One time, according to an Ohlone Indian legend, the people of the village left behind a stuffed eagle, supported by a stake. Embodied in the eagle was a curse: "Whatever the white man tries to do here will end in failure," the shaman decreed.

Later in the history of the Watsonville Ohlone tribe, "in the time of the Great Father," was a time of some territorial security. Via Spanish land grants the Ohlones were 'given' back their own land, which included acres of what is now the Calabassas area and the Pajaro Valley region. It was not long, however, before their villages were conquered again. This time the invasion was in the form of a simple slip of white paper with black marks informing the bewildered people of back taxes owed to the government. They could not pay and were evicted from their homes and 'rancherias.'

Two years ago, beginning Feb. 2, 1975, the Watsonville tribe of the Ohlone Indians occupied the site of their sacred burial grounds in the Pajaro Valley Delta in order to defend the spirits of their ancestors against the probing bulldozers, trench diggers and construction workers. For four days and four nights, 60 men, women and children of all ages and from 'many tribes and nations' camped on the site of the burial ground. They were trespassers in the eyes of the law on the graves of their own ancestors. While surrounded by the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Department, state police, FBI and the national guard, the Ohlones and their supporters never lost hope.

Ohlone tribesman Patrick Orozco told me of his experience while standing guard in a trench on one of those rainy nights: "A Hopi medicine woman had been called, and she told those of us gathered in the cemetery to not be afraid



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if we saw figures and spirits during the nights of vigil. 'They are your people.'

"About four o'clock that morning," Mr. Orozco continued, "I saw and felt an enormous shadow pass over the cross we had planted in our midst. The ground by the medicine woman's feet shook.

"'Keep up your hope,' she counceled us, 'and do not fight among yourselves. Things will happen that you'll never believe, and your people will suffer, but don't give up your hope.'"

Mr. Orozco feels that the drought we are experiencing is as much a part of the suffering prophesized as the agony of knowing that Theodora Gonzaga, his great great grandmother, has been exhumed, and her bones have been 'inspected' by a bone specialist.

"While the white man has always had laws to protect their ancestors, we have never had this kind of protection," he told me.

Mr. Orozco also spoke to me of a secret cave, known only by a few Ohlone people. Because they do not want it desecrated by the irreverent '20th century conquistadores' and souvenir hunters, they no longer feel free to use the ancient cave as a place for their rituals. Mr. Orozco reminisced about the paintings on the walls of the cave. "There was a turtle and birds . . . stick figure deer, and then baskets with feathers woven into them . . . and pottery. These were all used by our shaman who lived in the cave as long as the Ohlone people can remember."

"I have learned of many legends and customs of my people through my grandmother, Rose Marques Guzman.

My grandmother was the one to tell me of our belief in a far away place where the spirit will go at will after death, surrounded by all the beautiful things he dreams of and the things he sees in visions."

One vision the Ohlone people in Watsonville share today, in conjunction with the purchase of their own burial grounds from the white man, is for the grounds to stay in their natural state. "According to the ways of our people, the burial site is in an oval shape. The archeologists don't know that," he offered. "Our people were buried in a pre-natal position and they need to dream in peace."

They dream, perhaps, of the skills of 'poking and netting' o'possums; of the fish they caught in woven willow nets, and of the gophers they caught which were considered to be a delicacy.

Today, the elders are the happiest. Tia Teresa is 93 years old and has lived since 1901 eight miles from the burial site. "She is very happy about the new strength our people are feeling," Mr. Orozco said. "I saw her two months ago. Although she felt that the 'waking up' should have happened a long time ago, Tia Teresa said, 'Now when I die, I'll know all is not lost . . . our people will keep this hope.'"

Mr. Orozco gently touched the owl feathers he was wearing around his neck as we parted and said, first in his language, then in mine, "May the spirits of my people smile upon you."

Next Friday, Feb. 18, at 8 p.m. at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium NICPA will host a benefit to raise the \$17,500 necessary to purchase the Ohlone cemetery.