

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT OF



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restore restory

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE CACHE CREEK NATURE PRESERVE

AUDIO TOUR INTERVIEW WITH
Marshall McKay

STOP 1:
The Overlook



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All right, so can you look around and describe what it is you see and hear and even feel at this spot?

When I look around at this spot, I am reminded by the mounds and the water and the small little islands and the steep banks that I see here, it reminds me of a time that was certainly long ago at this point from here. It reminds me of some of the old beaver dams and some of the old fishing areas that I went to when I was a youth along the Cache Creek shores and I'm pleased to kind of have that feeling again.

What would you say Cache Creek means to you?

Cache Creek means to me a way of life. It has held people in existence for many, many millennia and I appreciate the care and the ability to survive with the creek. In the last 50 years I think it's changed from its giving arms to a struggle to stay alive itself, and that's part of the reason this conservancy was put together, to keep the life in the creek too.

I should ask you a few particulars so that we have it, really basic stuff like can you tell me your name and your occupation and your tribal affiliation?

My name is Marshall McKay. I am Chairman of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation which is housed up in the Capay Valley on Highway 16 between Brooks and Esparto. We live now in a traditional village that was a spring home to the Wintun people and is so named – Yocha Dehe means “spring home” in our language and we reverted back to that traditional village name three years ago.

You just answered a couple of my other questions. Wonderful! Does your tribe have a creation story about how you came to live in this part of Northern California or how you came to be on this land that you could share?

The creation story that my people talk about when they talk about a creation story is a grand flood of water and there were no people, only the turtle and the turtle decided that he was tired of swimming and wanted someplace to rest so he dove to the bottom of the water and scooped up some dirt with his claws and then swam to the top and that's how the land was dispersed on the surface of the water and then when the water receded there were great mountains and plains left from that action.

What is the geographic area that your tribe inhabited before contact, before Europeans arrived?

It's actually – the area that my tribe inhabited before the Europeans arrived was basically this area from the Suisun Bay to the Trinity Alps and it's in a very narrow band between the Great Valley, Sacramento Valley and the coastal range through the Redwood Country.

That's a pretty big area actually.

It was, and thus it was divided into three sections; northern, central and southern Wintun because it was so vast with many resources and many different styles of living and we were fortunate I think to be in the southern part where we were close to the San Francisco Bay and close to the oceans and close to the Sacramento River, so it was very rich with commerce and rich with resources.

The Overlook, continued (p.2 of 4)

How many people do you believe may have been here in terms of the larger tribe, your tribe, before Europeans arrived?

There were some estimates that we've taken through talking to elders. The numbers of people that inhabited this valley was between I think 50,000 and 100,000 people because it's a trade route from Lake County to the river to the bay and back to the ocean. This was a very easily walked trail. The trail that comes down through Highway 16 where the highway is now, lent itself to easy traverse.

So was Highway 16 essentially the trade route?

It was. It was and then I think it also took on essentially I-505 and Interstate 80. So those were traditional routes on foot and of course on the water you can float from Redding to San Francisco and further.

Yeah, and from San Francisco up to Sacramento.

Yes.

About how many people do you estimate, how many of your tribe are here today?

In my tribe alone, there's only 65 members, but Wintun people, I would say it's in the thousands that are still left and that's going north from here, but I think we are an example of the most decimation because of our proximity to the gold.

We're going to talk about that a lot later. You mentioned before that Patwin is actually the name of the language. Am I right? Can you tell me the name of your language and describe what it feels like to you when you hear it or speak it?

The name of my language is Southern Wintun. We also have in our own dialect we call it Patwin, the language of the people and it was almost a dead language. We had two culture keepers that knew the language. One has since passed last year and we still have one and she is graciously helping us reclaim that language and it is a very powerful feeling when I hear that language being spoken because it symbolizes a different era and a different life. I think it was on the verge of extinction and now it's reclaiming its own renaissance, so the feeling is emotionally high for me knowing that during my generation the language was saved and that's very important for the culture in all aspects because of the necessity to sing our songs and speak our prayers and to talk to one another. That language is very important.

How does one go about saving a language?

We started to speak it and when the adults were excited about saving it and speaking it, we decided that perhaps the children might be as excited to learn the language and to my amazement, they were more than excited. They embraced the cultural aspect of having a language and I'm convinced at this point that the language is saved and it's not lost and that language will be spoken for many generations to come.

The Overlook, continued (p.3 of 4)

When I was growing up my grandparents who immigrated here from Northern Italy, whenever they wanted us kids not to quite know what they were saying or wanted to have an adult conversation, they would bust out into their language or if they were particularly proud of us, they would say something to us in Piedmontese and so you had this impression when you were a child that they had something special that you wanted to have, too. Did you have that experience? Was there some language being spoken in your house in bits and pieces?

Well, actually my mother was a fluent speaker so when she would speak to her sister or her aunt or her father or mother, they would speak very fluent Patwin, but when she passed away, that left the household and also left the tribe because there was no one else to speak to. I for one was learning other languages and not my own. It was a difficult time to see that kind of disappear because in my mind I thought it would always be there and it wasn't. So it was kind of terrifying to experience the decline of the language after I had been inundated with it during my youth, but it's also reassuring to see it come back before my demise.

It's kind of amazing that you've been able to live that cycle.

The cycle was very exciting that's why it was so precious to try to continue to regenerate the language again.

Do you recall any of the language such that you could share or if it's appropriate that you would share a few words? Can you point to anything and say what that is in your language so we can hear what it sounds like?

A greeting if I was to meet you here in this setting I would say, [*speaks Patwin*] which means how are you, to look out to the land. I would also say, I would reply to that or somebody else would reply to that as [*speaks Patwin*] which means I'm fine. So the conversations were very elaborate and very colorful I remember growing up. There are a lot – water [*speaks Patwin*] is the water. So just bringing back all of these names and symbols has been very emotional.

I bet. What do you think most people don't know about the preserve when it comes to Wintun history?

I think people don't realize that there are Wintun people here today. When I look around this preserve and I see a modern mechanized mining operation to the south of me and I see orchards and vineyards and horse ranches and other developments, I don't really – my conception of Wintun people disappears and I believe that's true with other folks. So the idea that there is a tribe located and thriving close by is probably not the foremost in people's minds.

So what I would like to do with the preserve is to recognize the people that were here before the mine and the farm and remind people that we're still here, we're not going anywhere and we welcome all types of visitors and input.

The Overlook, continued (p.4 of 4)

I just want to continue that a little bit. Why do you feel it's important for the residents in Yolo County to really understand that some of those residents are Wintun people?

I believe the importance of understanding that there are Wintun people living in Yolo County goes to the fact that there was a huge effort to eradicate Native peoples from native lands and you know, that's a stark statement, but it's very true and I think a lot of people still consider that to be a truth and so I'm delighted to say the Wintun people are here. We are a good neighbor.

We are a growing concern in the area as far as development, but we have a different take on development. We have a different philosophy when we develop that we're looking to save the land that we're on for further development and that's why we're not in the mining business, but we do have a great deal of respect for the other people in the community. We have a great deal of respect for people's need to be here and we just want to bring our awareness out a little bit more.

I've been wondering about this myself; do you think there are ways in which Wintun history is made less visible?

I believe Wintun history is meant to be less visible and I mean that in this regard; that when I was in fourth grade in school, many years ago, I was taught about the plains Indians. I was taught about the Southwestern tribes and Pueblos. I thought that was okay. I didn't know about that so much and it was interesting. But as I have grown up and my children and grandchildren and friends of mine's children have gone through school, that curriculum is still there. No one is talking about the people that lived in Yolo County or California or the Pacific Northwest and that strikes me a little bit odd because there is a story here and there is history that we need to tell.

And that's part of this project; to make sure that people understand that there are people here and there's a story that they need to hear and it is history and we understand that it's going to take a subtle but strong voice to make that history come alive.

Yeah. How would you describe this preserve to a friend today?

I would describe this preserve to my friends today as being a very wonderful spot. It's wonderful in the sense that it's a reclamation of what used to be, what could be here in the future and what should be here in the future. I would let them know that this was done with a very caring attitude and an authentic attitude and it was done with both sides of the story. You have the miners contributing revenue to develop this land and save this land, so in essence they're helping to do this too. This was not just something that they did out of the generosity of their hearts, but they are doing it and they are making a statement and helping other people understand that there was a different way and a different setting years ago before the aggregate was so valuable.