

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 4:

*Oak Savannah*





## Stop 4: Oak Savannah

**Can you describe a little bit about where we are and what you've been seeing around you?**

We appear to be in an oak meadow or an oak plateau. It looks like a convergence of two little streams here; one coming into the major creek, but it's also home for these beautiful birds. I've seen hummingbirds and hawks and various other types of small birds all getting ready to roost for the night I think. For some of the birds of prey they're probably still eating. But it's a beautiful afternoon. The sun is setting and the sky is still blue with little whiffs of clouds in them and just a nice compliment to the shrubbery and the grasses here on this plateau.

**What are you enjoying right now by just sitting here and looking around?**

Well I'm enjoying the peacefulness of the afternoon and my company, but the air is cool, there's plenty of noise in this ambient air; birds, other forms of insects chirping. I can almost hear the river flowing to the south of us, but I'm experiencing a very calm feeling and I think it's the setting that really inspires that.

**I understand that this was or probably would have been an area for a Wintun village. I wonder if you think that is accurate and if so, why would they have chosen this area?**

This place is ideal for a camp or village because it is protected. It's a little higher off the flood plain from the creek. There's another natural source of fresh water and it's just on the tail end of the slope that's to the north of us, that would make it a natural path for game and whatnot coming to the creek, coming to the fresh water to be a food source. It's also very pleasantly shaded. The trees form a natural wind barrier and the winds do get a little strong out here on the plain. So it's an ideal spot for a camp due to these physical conditions.

**What kinds of foods and materials would have been gathered here?**

Well, the foods that would have been gathered at this particular site I can see are the valley acorns and those are valuable for protein. Those are one of the leanest protein materials that people could have eaten and at this point there's – I'm going to estimate that there were wild berries. I would estimate there were probably some wild vegetables in this area because of the loamy soils and because of the bird traffic. A lot of things get transplanted into these kinds of soils and they become very rich in diverse types of food sources.

**Can you walk me through how you make a meal from an acorn? I hear this all the time; we gathered acorns. I've seen the grinding rocks. I've seen all this stuff and I imagine flour and I've heard about mush, so can you just tell me how would people harvest and actually make a meal from acorns?**

The way you make a meal out of acorns is you harvest them off the ground once they fall and that usually happens this time of year. You crack those shells open and you find a nut meat that's similar to a walnut. It's brown in color. You take that nut and you grind it up with a mortar and pestle into a very fine flour-like powder.

*Oak Savannah, continued (p.2 of 4)*

You take that powder to the creek which means you have to have a clean water source close by or you can't do this. You make a hole in the sand. You make an indentation in the sand much like a bowl shape and you put this mixture of flour into the bowl shape and pat it down and then you pour water through it and that leaches the toxic tannin out of the acorn because if you eat the acorn raw or even cooked, it's very bitter and it's not very appetizing at all and it's because of the tannin in the acorn. So one leaches the tannin out of the acorn by the creek with the flushing of fresh water until that flour is sweet enough to eat.

Then you take that flour out of the sand bowl and you take it to your cook site and you put it in your cook basket and you put water in the cook basket and warm stones in the basket and you create a warm meal or you can take the wet mush or the wet (what would you call it?) the wet –

**I think mush sounds good.**

Okay, well you take the wet mush and you can form it into a loaf and put it around hot stones and bake it so it's more like a bread, but those are the ways that you prepare the acorn meal for consumption and it's very bland. It really has no taste so eat it with very rich meat. So you're having it with a deer steak or a pheasant or something that it will take on the identity of that very rich food.

**So I'm wondering, when we were at the wetlands, you kind of painted this beautiful portrait of village life; what it might have been like and who would have been there and what you would have heard. So I'm wondering if you could also do that for this site. If you were to imagine a village in this area, say pre-contact or early on, could you talk about what you imagine you would see? What kinds of activities would people be doing and what would you hear and smell?**

I think at a site like this, the setting would lend itself to maybe a more busy atmosphere, one where you would see many families together in traditional bark homes or lean-to's. You'd see a lot of fires burning. You'd see a lot of cooking going on. There would be a lot of children playing because it's them time of year where things aren't so stressed. We know winter's coming, but right now we're collecting the bounties of the harvest and we're preparing for the winter but it's not quite here yet. So you see a lot of, probably happy attitudes. You see hunters returning with game. You see people preparing hides for the winter. It's a very excited village. It's a very excited time.

**And how do you imagine looking out at what's here today, this area is used or could be used by local tribal people?**

As I look around now, I think this is an excellent source for current tribal people to use this land for reflection, for perhaps some self identification. It would be nice to see some basket weavers out here in the nice warm fall daylight. It would be interesting to hear stories this time of year out here because it lends itself to the peacefulness of sitting and gathering and hearing tales about the past and what the future might hold.

*Oak Savannah, continued (p.3 of 4)*

**You mentioned this before; you talked about oaks mostly in terms of the acorns. I'm wondering – although I'm going to wait until the plane passes. What role did oak trees play thinking back in Wintun life and culture?**

In Wintun life and culture, the oak tree is very symbolic and it's also a very prominent tree in this area. It was symbolic because of their age. They're very old. Oak trees are typically 200 to 300 years old or older and in our customs that age lends to seniority. It lends to knowledge and strength and the endurance of the years, but it also has a practical side to it. The acorn is very healthy for human beings, but it's also very sought after by deer and where the oak trees are, typically you'll find the deer grazing on the acorns which make them vulnerable to being caught. So they were also a way to collect game without roaming the range looking for it. We would find a very secure and sheltered oak grove and it would become a good hunting ground. So they have a practical value and they have a symbolic value that is very noted by the Wintun people.

**Are there any particular stewardship practices that you can talk about that Wintun people have over time used to keep land like this healthy? How they may have kept it healthy then and I imagine they're doing the same to keep it healthy now.**

The Wintun people have a very courageous stewardship program now and in the past. We utilized fire to maintain a healthy balance and a seed germination program. We also would conserve plants that were non-invasive native species, but we would also encourage some non-native species that were brought by the migration of birds and other animals to bring new foods into the area too, but we would have to watch those very closely that they didn't overrule the native species and become a nuisance and it's similar to what we do today.

We take the creek, for instance, we will remove the invasive tamarisk that was an import. It's very hard to eradicate, but we're doing it. It's good for the environment because it keeps the creek flowing. It doesn't create a blockade in the middle of the stream and/or use up a lot of water that the farmers and that we use to irrigate our fields too.

So the stewardship program is one that's very natural, but it also is very observed by the conservators and we learn quite a bit about how nature works by watching it happen and remembering how it happens. So those are all lessons that we've learned over the years. And I think one of the biggest factions though is fire. Fire definitely helps maintain a good balance.

**Can you give me an example of how fire would be used like where and what they do and what the result would be?**

Well let's take for example this oak flat here. If in fact this plateau that we're on became overrun with shrubs and wild grasses, those would be purposefully set on fire to remove them so that the bigger trees and the land could then rejuvenate itself and you could also have a smoother more comfortable living area rather than having to live with all of these around the trees and shrubs and bushes because there's a lot of – you know, there would be poison oak and poison ivy and berry bushes and thistles and things that aren't conducive to human flesh. We'd want to make sure that those are gone and fire is one of the best ways to take care of those species. It kills the root and the entire plant so they don't reoccur every year.

*Oak Savannah, continued (p.4 of 4)*

**Does it actually regenerate particular species and particular plants?**

There are species that seeds will only germinate after being burned, so those are sought after too and they're made sure that there's enough germination throughout the years that those plants aren't lost.

**Could just describe what you hear around you right now?**

What I'm hearing around me right now this time of the evening are wonderful bird noises and I can't identify the species, but I can hear them chirping and hollering in the trees. There's insects chirping. There's also automobiles in the distance on the roads and I would assume those are commuters going home this time of night, but it's a very distinctive tire on pavement sounds, but it is one of the things we hear these days out here.