

Published May 27th, 2020

## The Saclan Indians - Lamorinda's first residents

By Vera Kochan



Various Saclan artifacts on display at Historical Center Photo courtesy Moraga Historical Society

Over 200 years ago, the Saclan Indians thrived within the area now known as Lamorinda. With tribal borders as far north as Highway 24, south to the Alameda County line, east through Burton Valley and west to Canyon, the Saclans belonged to the East Bay Miwok tribes (a branch of the larger Miwoks).

There is documentation of the Miwok peoples dating back to 1579, by a priest who was on a ship commanded by explorer Sir Francis Drake. Specific references to the Bay Miwoks appear in California Mission records dating back to 1794.

The Saclans were believed to have been called "Sacalanes" by the Spaniards and have also gone by the spelling of "Saklans."

As noted in an article by Maria Forester, "Bay Miwok of Contra Costa County," several villages were scattered throughout the Lamorinda area with a population of 70-200 people in each. The villages were built next to streams or creeks for the fish and water supplies. Tribal dwellings consisted of dome-shaped structures called tule houses. Tules are large bulrushes that grow along shorelines of freshwater wetlands. Their seeds were edible and the reeds were used to make baskets, cord, clothing and sandals.

The Saclan men hunted for meat, fish and birds. Often the menu included such animals as ducks, deer, rabbits and even rodents, caught with hunting tools fashioned from bones or wood. These implements consisted of spears, arrows, knives, clubs and nets. The women gathered food from the earth, collecting and preparing herbs, nuts, and greens. Forester stated that acorns were an important and plentiful source of nourishment, adding that the tribe was grateful for anything that nature provided and believed that every living thing had a spiritual power. With this doctrine in mind, nothing was ever wasted, and the Saclans only took what they needed from the land.

While typically preferring to wear barely any clothing, animal skins and grasses provided some protection during the colder months of the year. According to Moraga Historical Society President Susan Sperry, "They also used to take mud and smear it on their bodies to protect against the cold." By contrast, jewelry was always worn and came in the form of shells, bones and wood. Tattoos were also a popular choice of adornment. Saclans typically wore their hair long and only cut it short as a sign of mourning. That being said, they were known to enjoy a good party and loved to dance, often incorporating it into their various ceremonies.

Forester explained that each village had its own leader who was a problem solver and tribal judge. The title was inherited and passed down from father to son. The offspring of Saclan tribal leaders were expected to marry members from another village. This philosophy was simple. With so many relatives in various tribes there was a good chance of keeping peace throughout the region. With this goodwill, came open trading of goods that extended to all of the Bay Miwok tribes beyond the Lamorinda area.

While it may seem that the Saclans lived a harmonious and bucolic lifestyle, when push came to shove, they were known to defend themselves against Spanish influence, often raiding local missions to "kidnap" fellow tribesmen who had voluntarily chosen to enter a Christian existence.

It is this contact with the Spaniards and the eventual exposure to foreign diseases that became the beginning of the end for the Saclan population. Many of today's descendants have intermarried with the larger Chochoyeno Ohlone community.

Saclan artifacts and burial sites have been discovered throughout the Lamorinda area. "We have several artifacts such as jewelry, arrowheads and sewing utensils at the Historical Center that have been authenticated by the Smithsonian Institute," said Sperry. "We invite people to visit us and see them." Skeletons, mortars, pestles and arrowheads have been found at Saint Mary's College. Also unearthed was a skeleton near Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Lafayette Circle; skeletons and artifacts at McDonnell Nursery on Moraga Way; mortars at the Moraga Adobe, San Leandro Creek in Canyon, Las Trampas Creek in Bollinger Canyon and Moraga Creek near the country club area. Arrowheads have been found in caves above Rheem Shopping Center. Spearheads, arrowheads and shell jewelry turned up near Redwood Inn in Canyon.

The Saclans may have disappeared from the area long ago, but they have inadvertently left behind the bits and pieces of a culture that lived off the land and revered it for all of its life-giving sustenance and joy -

treasures for Lamorindans to continue to discover and learn from for years to come.

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