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Audience at sold-out Historical Society event learns about local Native American sites

By Vera Kochan



James Benney discusses Native American sites located in the East Bay. Photo Vera Kochan

Many Lamorinda residents are aware that Saklan Indians once inhabited the region as part of a larger nation known as the Bay Miwok. However, few are aware as to the extent these tribes, and many others, lived in this area surrounding what we know today as Mount Diablo.

The Moraga Historical Society welcomed guest speaker James Benney, a member of the East Bay Hill People organization, to enlighten the sold-out crowd in the Casita, at the town's Hacienda de las Flores on Aug. 20, with a brief history of the Native Americans who once lived in the shadow of Mount Diablo.

Benney, a house painter by trade, acknowledged "not a drop of Native American blood in my veins," but that he was intrigued with the topic while a student at the University of California at Berkeley after taking a hike with a friend and discovering bedrock mortar (a circular depression in a rock outcrop historically used for grinding

food). During that time, he came across hundreds of bedrock mortars without even knowing what they were, but thought it was a shame that others didn't know of their existence.

Through his research, Benney has learned that there were eight Saklan villages along Mt. Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette: one at the intersection of Moraga's Canyon Road and Pinehurst, a larger tribe at the intersection of Canyon Road and Country Club Drive, one at Saint Mary's College, Lafayette Community Center, McDonnell Nursery in Orinda, the San Leandro Reservoir, Rossmoor, the Bentley School in Lafayette, Wagner Ranch, and a gated community in Lafayette at the end of Pleasant Hill Road along with the Orinda Country Club's 11th hole, which were the sites of sacred burial grounds.

Benney explained that Mount Diablo had been considered sacred to the Native Americans for 10,000 years. The Volvon tribe lived in that vicinity and were deemed the keepers of Tuyshtak (Dawn of Time). "Mount Diablo has been considered a sacred place by tribes from as far away as San Francisco and Nevada. In the Brushy Peak area [south of Mount Diablo] artifacts have been found that have come from tribes all over the United States - it was a major trading hub. Whatever made it sacred for 10,000 years - it still seems sacred."

Sadly, the eventual elimination of the Bay Miwok tribes can be attributed to European diseases, enslavement by the missions, and even manslaughter. Benney stated that many Native Americans were so afraid of being killed that they denied their heritage by claiming to be Mexican. Prior to that, they lived much like any modern community today, gathering around water and food sources, having children, defending their territory, and dealing with all types of extreme weather.

Benney has written a book titled, "Native American Indian Sites in the East Bay Hills: A Guidebook" which discloses hundreds of bedrock mortar locations in the hopes that it will encourage visitors to learn more about the peoples who were the caretakers of the land all those years ago and to visit the sites with respect and contemplation. However, he has met with resistance from several stakeholders such as Native American descendants and the East Bay Regional Park District who fear the possibility of vandalism or defacement. During the MHS event, a few attendees expressed their concerns to that effect, while others would love to visit the sites to soak up the atmosphere while imagining what it was like to live under the shadow of Tuyshtak.

Benney hopes that today's descendants will use the many sites for occasional ceremonies or as tribal gathering places, because he feels that it would be a shame if they were left to the elements and disappear forever, rather than teaching and reminding people of the ancient culture that once called all of those places home.

"The greatest threat I see," stated Benney, "is ignorance and bulldozers."

For more information visit: www.eastbayhillpeople.com.

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[back](#)

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