

Columbus Meets Saint Patrick

A Vignette of American History

by Raymond B. Cook, SR/WA

She was a sixty-five-year-old woman who would qualify statistically as “low income,” and she rented a small, dilapidated old house in a sparsely developed rural neighborhood at the end of a long dirt lane. It was on a grassy knoll studded with a few trees and, here and there, a small orchard or vineyard, less than a two-hour drive from San Francisco, near a small town. She had been born less than 15 miles away and had spent her entire life within a modest radius of that distance.



Lillian Jack, 1989

The woman fell behind in the rent, and I evicted her in the name of the people of the state of California. She left on July 4, 1976, our nation's bicentennial.

The state had bought the land and the house upon it for one of those "Your Tax Dollars at Work" projects to be constructed some time in the future. The land was the land of her ancestors; that was common knowledge. But it is shown in deed in the public records as "a portion of the Rancho Musulacon," a reference which puzzles

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rather than explains. But there is an unsuspected historic relationship to be discovered, if we turn our attention briefly away from the eviction and digress for a few paragraphs.

Exactly 130 years earlier, in 1846, the Mexican government had given the land to a stalwart gentleman as his very own rancho, the "Rincon de Musulacon." Mexico, which had acquired the land through revolution against Spain, lost it in war to the United States in 1848. Spain had claimed title to it by right of discovery and conquest. Columbus, Cortez, Juarez, Fremont, and Polk are names familiarly associated with those events.

History and scholarship record that the woman's ancestors were already there as witnesses to the evolution of this abstract of land title, that claimed and transferred ownership of land through discovery, conquest, revolution, and war—polite names for theft and violence.

The California State Archives reveal, first in Spanish and then in English translation, under Expediente number 510, that in 1846 the Mexican Governor, Pio Pico, granted two square leagues, more or less, of land known as the "Rincon de Musulacon" to citizen Francisco Berryessa for the purpose of establishing himself and his stock in the jurisdiction of Sonoma, which land was, according to citizen Berryessa's petition, "vacant and does not pertain to any individual." ("Musulacon" has come to be spelled "Musalacon" in some modern records.)

The land was located in what was to become Sonoma County, California. The hand drawn map accompanying Berryessa's petition shows some terrain and two streams, which are now known as the Russian River and Big Sulphur Creek. The U.S. Surveyor General, on a map drawn in 1857, calculated the two square leagues at 8,866.88 acres. The map shows the outline of the land grant curiously like the outline of the state of California, generally on a north-south axis, with a dogleg to the east. It is roughly eight-and-a-half miles from north to south and one mile from east to west. In

today's language it might be put on the market as "prime river frontage—tremendous development potential."

It is often said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and, at this point, the acknowledgment is freely made that the research for this article is nothing more than layman's research, and no representation is made that the conclusions which issue from it are irrefutable, or for that matter, even correct. However, an invitation is warmly made to follow this layman's research and thought processes and to draw one's own conclusions.

Several cultural and historical studies, published in 1984 and 1985, were sponsored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for construction of the Warm Springs Dam/Lake Sonoma Project, Sonoma County, California. These studies bear directly on the area wherein the "Rincon de Musulacon" is located and are regarded for this essay as authoritative, owing to the authors' recognized expertise in the field of cultural resources.

These studies establish the confluence of the Russian River and Big Sulphur Creek as the site of "Makahmo," an important Pomo village. "Musulacon" was the name of one of its important chiefs about the time Francisco Berryessa entered the area.

Altogether nearly 50 dwelling and utility sites are identified within the boundary of the "Rincon de Musulacon." The location of the village of Makahmo on Berryessa's map is identified as "Rincon de Musulacon," which translates roughly as "Musulacon's Corners;" yet Berryessa represented in his petition to Governor Pico that it was "vacant and does not pertain to any individual."

A fantasy unfolds in this writer's mind: On a sunny day in 1846, just about noon, Francisco Berryessa scurries out of Governor Pico's office with his newly signed land grant, leaps onto his big sorrel stallion, and gallops into Makahmo—perhaps with several other mounted men. Dust and twigs fly as he whirls to a halt, reins taut in his left hand, waves a piece of paper above his head, and announces

in Spanish to Chief Musulacon and the startled villagers, in a bold baritone voice—that he is the new landlord!

But Berryessa apparently didn't own the land for long. About the time he received his title to it in 1846, the Bear Flag Revolt occurred in the mission town of Sonoma some 50 miles to the southeast. Mexico and the United States went to war; Mexico lost, and California and other territory was ceded to the United States in 1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

That treaty also established the rights of Mexican landowners in the territories conquered by the United States, presumably including Francisco Berryessa's rights to the "Rincon de Musulacon." However, the United States, through a specially appointed commission, acted to confirm and settle all claims of ownership to land in the newly conquered territories—a confusing and expensive process—and in 1866 issued a patent for the "Rincon de Musulacon," not to Francisco Berryessa but to Johnson Horrell, et al. Berryessa seems to have sold out, or lost out in the competition.

The years following the assimilation of California by the United States in 1848 saw California become a state in 1850 and bore witness to the frantic migration of gold miners and settlers and to the devastation of the indigenous cultures through actions that are well understood by this audience and need no elaboration here.

The "Rincon de Musulacon" has been subdivided many times over. Makahmo and the other villages and sites have been superseded by towns, industries, rural homesites, and vineyards. As for the landless Pomo on the "Rincon de Musulacon," one has to wonder how or whether they kept up with the rent. Perhaps it was to avoid this controversy that the institution of reservations was devised.

Which returns us to the woman whose rent was overdue for that dilapidated old house on the "Rincon de Musulacon."

I approached the old house the first time with orders to "kick her out," but with intentions of cajoling her to pay.

I knocked at the weathered front door, which was already open, and she appeared at once as though she had been expecting me, as probably she had. I commenced with the usual babble, introducing myself and making small talk and finally coming to the point about the rent. She allowed as how yes, it was delinquent but she didn't have any money and if I came back on the first of the month she'd have some for me. I agreed to come back on the first, calculating in my head that I could stall my boss that long and probably soon enough, turn this account around. An eviction is never a desired assignment although, admittedly, in some cases the rough edge isn't there. This case, however, certainly wasn't one of those exceptions.

Our meeting that morning was an occasion through which providence chose to express itself. An "affinity of somethings" was at work, where something about the woman and something about the place touched

Rancheria had been acknowledged by the government of the United States in documents at the county recorder.

I believe she lived alone in the house, but she seemed to occupy some matriarchal status in the local Indian community. She sometimes had other Indian visitors who seemed pleasantly occupied just being with one another and with her. There was a certain gentleness that seemed to reside in each of them, and I came to love them all, in a general sort of way.

I met with the woman a few times, perhaps four or five, over what was probably several months. My hope to salvage this account was, in the beginning, high, and my efforts were correspondingly enthusiastic, but toward the end I found myself swept along and finally swept aside by "the system." However indelicate my instructions, I was expected to do my job, and I eventually carried out her eviction.

She had managed to get some of the current rent together but never could make any payment on the back rent,



Lillian Jack's home, 1976

something in my soul. I have never been the same.

She had brown skin and was rather short and robust, and she looked like an Indian. She was, as she soon revealed, a Pomo.

Her ancestors had inhabited the area for thousands of years, and her personal bond with the terminated

and the delinquency remained on the books. She left on July 4, 1976, owing the state a little less than two hundred dollars.

In the office a few weeks before she moved, there had been a drama of the kind where passions of one sort provoke passions of another. The issue was a relocation payment for her.

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When the curtain fell, she was declared not eligible for relocation assistance, although the state and federal administrative procedures would have permitted it. She received nothing to defray her relocation costs.

After she left, I asked the county public health authorities to inspect the dilapidated old house, and they judged it to be substandard, a nuisance, and unfit for human habitation owing to lack of proper maintenance by the landlord, which in this case was the state. After the state weighed the cost of rehabilitating the house against the rent it could produce in the future, rehabilitation was deemed to be uneconomical and it was demolished. The land was left vacant, and the Indian community, which was deprived of the presence of one of its aging and venerable members, had received yet another lesson in civic responsibility.

I retired from state service in 1991, never having come to understand why it is better to receive no rent from vacant land than to receive a little rent from an Indian woman.

That eviction left me depressed and obstreperous, which must have frequently strained the temperaments of those around me, but it also lit a spark of inspiration that smoldered for years and finally burst into flame on Friday, March 17, 1989. It was Saint Patrick's Day.

With a telephone number and address for her I had found in the County directory, I set out to find the Indian woman for some purpose that had not yet been completely revealed to me.

I stopped first in San Francisco at the home of Dolan Eargle, author of *The Earth Is Our Mother, A Guide To The Indians Of California*, to introduce myself and to tell him of the inspira-

tion and strength his book had given me. He received me graciously and we chatted for awhile outside on the rear deck of his house, under wisps of white morning fog drifting gently overhead. I left reassured that I had chosen the correct path.

As I drove north an unpleasant drizzle laid claim to the day, and a minor odyssey led not to the Indian woman herself but to a daughter on a reservation about halfway across the county, who invited me to call on her thereafter listening on the telephone to a rather awkward explanation of my purpose. Her mother was staying with family elsewhere, and the daughter agreed to accept a small bouquet I had bought for her mother at a roadside stand in uneasy anticipation of a face-to-face meeting and its unknown consequences.

The daughter was a woman of mature but indiscernible years, with straight black hair pulled tight against her head, a strong physique, natural grace, pleasant manners and utterly



Mary Santiago, 1989

without airs. She had every reason to regard me with deep suspicion, but, to my great surprise and relief, her reception was hospitable and kind. After hearing me out, she responded with disarming candor and discussed with a natural and unrehearsed ease the prejudices that often attend encounters between Indians and white people. I was astonished, and I immediately liked her.

Our visit was brief. I told her I had evicted her mother on the July 4, 1976, our nation's bicentennial—and that I had always regretted it. I asked her to tell that to her mother. She said the flowers would be dead by the time she would see her mother again, but she promised to tell her. I also left her mother a Saint Patrick's Day card with a pleasant greeting. It seemed appro-

priate to the occasion.

We chatted a short while longer. Then I politely took leave, zipped my jacket, and sprinted head down in the rain across the muddy driveway for my car.

My mind seemed not entirely satisfied by this adventure as I drove carefully down the winding road to the highway, the windshield wipers sweeping softly in dutiful rhythm. There seemed to be a dimension that was incomplete or unfulfilled.

A strange uneasiness now became my restless traveling companion, and, in the hour and a half or so that saw me safely home, I was moved to a decision: I would tattle on myself.

Over the weekend I drafted a letter, first person singular, in the voice of an Indian woman. It was addressed to an important government official. I soon made an opportunity to show it to the daughter, who studied it and, after seeking the counsel of a trusted friend, transcribed the letter into her own hand and mailed it.

The letter began, "Dear Sir: I am writing this letter for my mother, Lillian Jack, who is old and ill and can no longer write herself. We are Pomo Indians. We used to live on Indian lands ... which the state of California acquired about fifteen years ago ... " The letter continued with a few paragraphs describing the events and circumstances of her mother's eviction and concluded, "If this letter touches you, sir, I would be grateful for any consideration you might be moved to undertake. Respectfully, Mary Santiago."

The case of Lillian Jack was reopened by the federal government who, for funding reasons had jurisdiction, and she received a cash payment of a respectable amount, including considerable interest, for relocation costs—13 years, one month, and 15 days after I evicted her from her ancestral lands in the name of the people of the state of California, and 143 years after Francisco Berryessa declared that the land he desired was vacant and did not pertain to any individual.

In the spring of 1991 the state began construction of this project, and the first bulldozers plunged their blades

into the earth on the "Rincon de Musulacon," not far from the ancient village of Makahmo, and only a few yards from where Lillian Jack's house had stood. The present and the past were never joined in a more intimate encounter.

EPILOGUE

Lillian Jack is now eighty-six and lives in a nursing home in Sonoma county. □

NOTES

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The trusted friend whose counsel Mary Santiago sought about the letter was George Somersall, who is the subject of an article entitled, "A Freeway, A Roundhouse and George Somersall," in the Spring, 1990 (Volume 4, Number 3) issue of *News From Native California*.

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