

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

This article was originally presented to the Ninth California Indian Conference, October 14-17, 1993 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Santa Barbara, Calif.

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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