

The Indigenous History of Our Theatres

The land on which the Forest Meadows Amphitheatre and 514 Fourth Street sit is the traditional home of the Coast Miwok. The Coast Miwok village at the present day City of San Rafael was called Awani-wi.

History of the Coast Miwok

Archeological evidence shows native inhabitation of what is now California dating back at least 19,000 years to 17,000 B.C.E. Around 9,000 B.C.E. native hunter gatherers became seed collectors as well. Due to an abundance of food, native people did not develop agriculture, but they did practice sophisticated forest management to protect food sources and medicinal plants. They practiced controlled burns that prevented larger wild fires and encouraged revitalization of the land.

This area was abundant with food sources – large and small animals, huge flocks of seasonal birds, fish and shellfish, acorns, and many other plants. Tule reeds were important for basketmaking and boats. The climate was temperate, and the landscape, as we know, is beautiful.

The earliest written record of the Coast Miwok is from 1579 in the diary of Chaplain Fletcher, who sailed with Sir Francis Drake's ship which landed in what is now Marin County. It is estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 people lived in this area at that time, mostly in villages of 50 to 500 people. Later Russian and Spanish sources attest to the continued occupancy by Coast Miwok.

European colonization began in the 18th Century. During the Mission period, 1769 – 1834, Mission Dolores was established in San Francisco in 1776, and Mission San Rafael Archangel in 1817 as a sub-mission to Mission Dolores, a "medical asistencia" or hospital that treated native people. Both missions used Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo as their source of labor. Records from these missions document native culture and genealogy.

After the mission period ended, there was Mexican occupation, and native peoples were kept in servitude. During this time, land grants were obtained by Camilo Ynitia, a Coast Miwok, for Olompali in present-day Novato, and by San Rafael Christianized natives for 80,000 acres in Nicasio, where approximately 500 people settled. Olompali, which has been a native site for centuries, remains a historic site today.

After the discovery of gold in California, the settler period began. In the few decades after 1849, at least 80% of California's indigenous people were killed due to starvation, disease, massacres, killings, and the practice of bounties during the settlers' campaign of extermination.

Dean Hoaglin, a Coast Miwok descendant, characterized colonialization as "enslavement...oppression...loss of life, and taking our sacred land."¹

By 1950, much of Coast Miwok land had been confiscated, reducing native holdings to 4,000 acres.

In 1861 the United States Congress extinguished native title to almost all land in California. In 1920, the Bureau of Indian Affairs bought 15.45 acres of land in Graton, CA which was put into federal trust. Several traditional groups were consolidated into one federally recognized tribe of American Indians, called the Graton Rancheria. In 1958, without native consent, congress passed the California Rancheria Act which terminated 41 California Rancherias. The 15.45 acres were distributed to three residents as private property. In the early 1990's, led by Chairman Greg Sarris, 152 tribal members fought for the restoration of federal status. In 2000, President Clinton signed legislation restoring federal recognition of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria.

Since then, the tribe has formed a group to preserve the Coast Miwok language and published a Coast Miwok Dictionary. In 2005, they purchased 254 acres of land outside of Rohnert Park, where they opened the Graton Resort and Casino in 2013. They have created a TANF program for low-income Native American families in Sonoma and Marin counties that give employment assistance, job training, and child care assistance.

You can learn more about the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria on their website at <https://gratonrancheria.com>

The Museum of the American Indian in Novato has additional information about Coast Miwok and other native culture, and is the repository for archeological materials found in Marin and Sonoma Counties. You can see exhibits and learn more at the Museum of the American Indian at their website at <https://www.marinindian.com>

History of Coast Miwok at Forest Meadows

The Forest Meadows site is named MRN-254 by the United States Geological Survey. There have been several archeological studies at Forest Meadows.

A study was undertaken in the late 1950's by Adan Treganza, who was looking for evidence of where Sir Francis Drake landed in Marin. This study described the site as "a low, oval mound with dimensions around 400x500' with a depth of over 10' at center." The study recovered artifacts that include large lanceolate projectile points, steatite pipes, different types of pendants and ornaments, a mortar and pestles, bone awls, cut antler, burned whale bone, and large quantities of obsidian and chert flake tools.

In 1971-72, Charles Slaymaker and his Dominican College archeological field methods class conducted excavations at MRN-254. No formal report was ever published, but the Marin Independent Journal reported that the group found what was presumed to be the floor of a large house pit estimated to be dated around 1300 A.D.

When Dominican College (now Dominican University of California), was preparing to build the Conlan Recreation Center, they commissioned a multi-phase field inspection conducted by Holman & Associates from 1994 - 1996. A study published in 2016 documented the findings. These explorations found evidence of Native American habitation over the past 1,800 years. The study focused on mussel shells, which contain a wealth of paleoenvironmental information that shows how the climate changed over the past 1,800 years in this area.

Coast Miwok subsisted on seasonally available acorns, seeds, nuts, salmon and migratory birds as well as year-round deer, rabbit and other small game, crabs, fish, and shellfish. It is estimated that the bay wetlands were previously far more extensive than they are today, so shellfish would have been readily accessible at Forest Meadows. Archeological evidence suggests that Forest Meadows was a place of sustained occupation, with semi-permanent dwellings, cooking activities, and a diversity of cultural activities.

This series of archeological excavations found three indigenous graves and probable cremations, as well as house floors, shellfish roasting pits, and many artifacts. Artifacts included bone and antler tools, stone tools, glass and steatite beads, and abalone ornaments. There were also many vegetal and faunal remains.

“The Federated Coast Miwok Tribal Council considers CA-MRN-254 to be a former major village community and, as such, a major cultural and historical occupation site of their people. Because construction was planned at the site, the Council directed that it be protected. Human remains were to be immediately reburied at a place designated by the Native American observers on site and cultural artifacts turned over to the Federated Coast Miwok for archiving.”²

Today, you can see this archeological site in the middle of the parking lot for the Conlan Recreation Center. Indigenous people would have lived in and around the Forest Meadows Amphitheatre – maybe even telling their own stories with dramatic flair on what is today the Forest Meadows stage.

¹ *Marin Independent Journal*, August 26, 2020

² Use of Mussel Casts from Archaeological Sites as Paleoecological Indicators: An Example from CA- MRN-254, Marin County, Alta California, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/302504854_Use_of_Mussel_Casts_from_Archaeological_Sites_as_Paleoecological_Indicators_An_Example_from_CA_MRN-254_Marin_County_Alta_California

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