

The Ohlone—Our Ancient Neighbors



From *The Ohlone Way* by Malcolm Margolin, illustrated by Michael Harney.

Artist Michael Harney's interpretation of the Bay Area in the time of the Ohlone.

AS YOU STROLL ALONG the paths and hills around SLAC, you may very well be tracing the steps of an extinct California people. The accelerator is surrounded by archaeological sites that have revealed remnants of Ohlone villages. No finds have been made on SLAC property itself, because the accelerator runs along a ridge. Although the Ohlone certainly claimed the SLAC land as their territory, they preferred to build their villages further downhill, to be closer to water supplies such as the San Francisquito Creek.

For eleven years Stanford archaeologists have been working on digs along Jasper Ridge and the San Francisquito Creek, and immediately south of the accelerator. According to Barb Bocek, the campus archaeologist, all of Stanford's land has now been surveyed and all archaeological sites have been located. The digs around SLAC have uncovered Ohlone occupational sites, villages that were inhabited for many years and, if not for the entire year, at least for a good proportion of it. House floors and hearths and hundreds of tools have been excavated and, through

radiocarbon testing, have been shown to be 600–2000 years old.

At the time of the Ohlone the Bay Area constituted a completely different living environment. The first explorers to reach California were awed by the profusion as well as diversity of wildlife. "There is not any country in the world which more abounds in fish and game of every description," observed sea captain la Perouse. In addition, the vegetation provided plentiful, never-failing sources of food, in particular acorns, berries, and seeds. As hunters and gatherers, the Ohlone lead a life of simple technology; their tools consisted of stone, shell, or animal bone, but with the resources of a generous environment available to them, the Ohlone never knew starvation.

Before the Spaniards arrived, Central California was more densely populated by Native Americans than any other area north of Mexico. The Ohlone occupied the land between San Francisco and Big Sur and, while they were connected in a loose network of trading, intermarriage, and gift-giving, they were divided into fairly autonomous triblets of about

250 people. Each triblet not only had a major village but also various temporary camps they moved to through the year, as they followed ripening crops and wandering wildlife. A typical Ohlone village was composed of a circle of dome-shaped tule houses. Most of the village life took place out of doors and work was divided along clear gender lines. The women were in charge of gathering and food preparation, while the men hunted and prepared for their excursions by spending hours in a sauna-like sweathouse.

The life of the Ohlone was marked by a tremendous stability and continuity. It is safe to assume that their way of life remained virtually unchanged over hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

The first Ohlone probably came to the Bay area 4500 to 5000 years ago, living here in considerable peace and developing their technologies and customs very gradually. When the Spaniards and later other European settlers arrived, their environment and lifestyle drastically changed. In their effort to convert the Native Americans to Christianity, the missionaries destroyed the Ohlone customs and traditions, and the settlers later took over their land and considerably diminished its resources. Many Ohlone, forced to live in the missions for reeducation purposes, did not survive. Those who did remain on their land were eventually pushed from it by ranchers and left without rights.

With the Ohlone lifestyle and self-image linked so closely to the land they lived on, a divorce from their natural environment inevitably meant the end of their culture. Today archaeological sites, such as the ones in SLAC's vicinity, not only recall a past culture, but are also vital reminders of how much Central California has changed over the last 200 years.

—Annette Cords