

North Coast Archaeological/Anthropological Tour

September 29 –October 2, 2011

A small group of seven members of the Society were well educated on the history and Native American culture of the inhabitants of the North Coast of California during the tour on September 29 through October 2. History of the area was first introduced on Thursday at dinner at the historic Samoa Cookhouse. The walls of the pseudo museum are donned with pictures from the lumbering and ship building era. Pictures of the massive redwood stumps covered with many people were amazing. Family style serving of simple fare brought back the ambience of the times.

On Friday Pam Service, director/curator/archaeologist set the groundwork for our visit to the area in a two hour tour of Clarke Museum. For centuries before settlers and gold seekers arrived the boundaries of future Humboldt and Del Norte Counties contained portions of the home territory of several tribes, notably the Wiyot, Yurok, Hupa, Karuk and Tolowa. The people were hunter/gathers who lived in permanent villages. Their partially subterranean houses were made from redwood planks that were stripped from not one, but several different trees to preserve the resource. A scale model of the house and sweat lodge were on display at the museum. Later on Sunday a full size model of each were viewed at Sumeg village in Patrick's Point State Park. A dugout canoe was displayed in the museum. It was made by burning and hollowing a large redwood tree trunk to its heart wood. Typically these were stored on top of a sweat lodge when not in use.



Sumeg Village Sweat House



Sumeg Village Plank House



Sumeg Village Dance Pit

The highlight of the museum tour was the Native American Collection from Northwest California tribes. It is no wonder that the Smithsonian is covetous. The Native American basket collection is extensive. Baskets were essential to the everyday life of the Native Americans. Pottery was not in use. Baskets were used for a variety of purposes: cooking, carrying, storage, winnowing, hopper for grinding, hats, eel traps, etc. Cooking baskets were very tightly woven using materials such as willow that swells to hold water. The outside of the baskets were decorated in tribal designs using collected materials. Other available materials were used for daily use. Mussel shells were used by woman as spoons; men's spoons were carved from wood. Dentalia shells from British Columbia were trade currency. Tools were made from stone such as chert, sourced in Oregon and obsidian probably sourced from Mount Lassen.

Clarke Museum also features historical items from the period after the founding of Eureka in 1850. Early Spanish explorers and Russian fur hunters had touched Humboldt's coastline. Rancher Pierson Reading's discovered gold in the remote Trinity Mountains in 1848. Josiah Gregg led a months-long trek to find a route from the Trinity gold fields to the coast. As they navigated the last river arriving, near present town, Arcata, originally called Union, they were in discord. The river was aptly named Mad River. Soon fortune seekers flocked to the area by ship and over the mountains. Still, Humboldt County was not a major resource for gold. Timber, Humboldt's "red gold" became its valuable resource. The technology for this industry was innovative. At Fort Humboldt various lumber equipment such as the Washington Slackline Yarder were displayed. Along Humboldt Bay the remnants of a flourishing lumber industry was seen on the Madaket cruise.



Madaket

Washington Slackline Yarder at Fort Humboldt

Mercer-Fraser Co Pulp Mill

Miners and early settlers usurped or destroyed the resources on which the native populations depended. Conflict led to massacres, the establishment of Fort Humboldt and forced resettlement. In 1853 Yontocket, a site of the center of the Tolowa's world dating back to the pre-contact era, located near the Smith River was attacked because town folk in Crescent City believed that a white woman had been attacked by natives. All were slaughtered. Suntayea Steinruck, the current Tribal Heritage Preservation Officer led us to this place. She was the daughter of a person who escaped death by breathing through a reed under water below the village. Not only did she tell this story she relayed countless stories about the past and present day culture of the Tolowa. We were touched by her singing of a song that her brother had created. The many Native American tribes in this area spoke different languages. Some were derived from Algonquin and others from Navajo.



Yontocket Trail

Slough below Yontocket

Yontocket

In 1853 Fort Humboldt was established to mediate between settlers and Native Americans to resolve conflicts. When the federal troops departed for the Civil War, the fort was manned by local recruits, and then prominent local citizens formed a self-proclaimed militia. This militia took justice into their own hands. On February 26, 1860 another massacre of over 100 unarmed natives occurred. One of the five massacre sites was located on Indian Island in Humboldt Bay. Pam and the guide on the Madaket relayed the story. Again town folk attacked during a festival killing all. The centuries old site which we viewed from the Madaket tour has been given back to the Wiyot nation for restoration.



Fort Humboldt



Fort Humboldt - Ulysses S. Grant Sign



Indian Island