Miwok Sites in the Corte Madera Creek Watershed

Excerpts from Uncovering the Past at College of Marin, Published by Miwok Archeological Preserve of Marin and edited by Professor Betty Goerke, College of Marin Anthropology Department.
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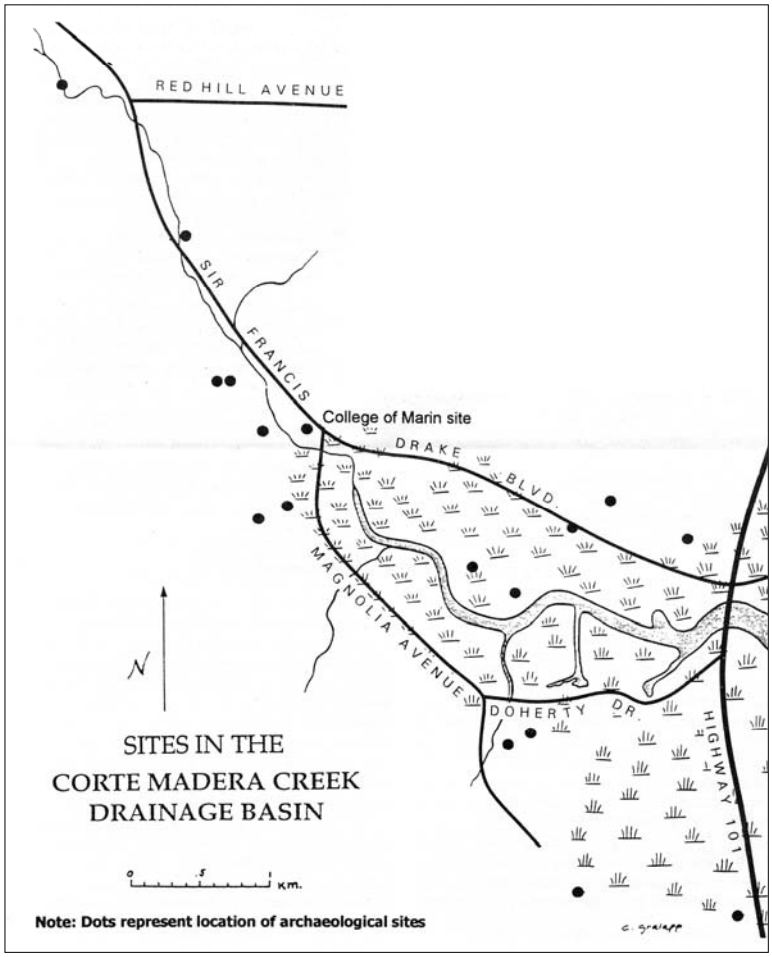
Have you ever wondered how the Corte Madera Creek area might have looked before the influx of Europeans? The watershed was occupied by Coast Miwok people during a period beginning at least 3,600 years ago; their predominance ended about 200 years ago with the arrival of the Spanish. What do we know about the seventeen archaeological sites that have been found within the watershed?

At the College of Marin in Kenfield, a substantial archaeological site was excavated in 1964 and 1971. Twenty years after the latter excavation, my students and I decided to collect and interpret the artifacts and skeletal material still held at the college, so that future students could know something about the first residents of our campus area. We approached our job with great respect for the Native American people who had preceded us.



While we were locating the artifacts that had been recovered from both excavations, an avocational group, Miwok Archaeolgicaly Preserve of Marin (MAPOM), was editing the valuable notes of anthropologist Isabel Kelly, who in the 1930's had interviewed two Coast Miwok people. Tom Smith, over 90, and Maria Copa, in her mid 60's shared what they could remember with Kelly, who was then a young graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. After Kelly's death in 1982, MAPOM received the permission to organize and publish her notes on the interviews and, with their publication in 1991, our understanding of the people who lived in this area has been greatly enriched.

The first archaeologist to take an interest in Marin County was Nels Nelson, a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1907 and 1908 on foot and on horseback, Nelson made a survey of shellmounds on or near the shores of San Francisco Bay. These archaeological sites, or middens, composed of dark rich soil containing shellfish remains, charcoal, house remains, and burials, had accumulated from centuries of human living. Even in the early 1900's many of these mounds were being rapidly destroyed, and the shell-laddent soil was removed by nineteenth and twentieth century residents for roads, driveways, gardens and tennis courts. Still Nelson was able to identify over 190 shellmounds in Marin, including almost all of the sites in the Corte Madera Creek drainage basin, with the important exception of the College of Marin site. Although most of the sites were

relatively easy to identify because of the color of the midden and plant growth, he may have visited this area during a season when such features were hidden. Since he also talked to the residents in the area as well, it is surprising that he missed the College site. He even excavated a few of the sites in the area. Perhaps the landscaped Butler property, subsequently the College of Marin, hid evidence of previous inhabitats. We do not know if the Butler family was aware of the midden at their doorstep.

The College of Marin site is on the northeast bank of Corte Madera Creek, about a quarter mile upstream from its confluence with the much smaller Tamalpais Creek. The site is based on an elevation of about 50'-100' above the flood plain of the creek which stretches to the east and southeast of the site.

That the College of Marin site was chosen for habitation was not happenstance. This area was particularly suitable for aquiring the rich food sources available in fresh water, salt water, marsh and the open bay. Corte Madera Creek at this locality, today and most likely in the past, is at the edge of the ebb and flow of the tide which sweeps through the marsh from San Francisco Bay to the estuary of the creek. The drainage basin of the creek is 27 square miles, made up of five branches: the Tamalpais, Ross San Anselmo, Fairfax and Sleepy Hollow Creeks.

Today, Corte Madera Creek at the Colleg site is brackish; however, there is a good sourfce of fresh water within ¼ of a mile in Tamalpais Creek, although at present this creek is dry in the summer. Artifacts havbe been found near the confluence of Tamalpais and Corte Madera Fcreeks as reported by local residents. A year-round supply of fresh water is also available upstream from the site, above the tidal flow in the main creek. It is probable that in prehistoric times, before the forests were extensively cleared and the creek silted, it was a typical, vigorous coastal stream with rampaging waters in the winter and quite pools in the summer, an incubator for spawning anadramous fish.

The Corte Madera marsh which abutted the College of Marin site is formed mainly by the discharge of Corte Madera Creek and nearby Larkspur Creek. In 1851 the marsh along Corte Madera Creek consisted of 1,986 acres, whereas by 1989 it had been reduced to just 520 acres. This represents a tremendous loss of wetlands to development and silting. The marsh itself was originally crisscrossed with many channels which filled and flushed with the flow of the tide. It was an ecosystem which supported a wide variety of fishes, birds and mammals, crustaceans and mollusks.

It is possible that all of the archaeological sites in the Corte Madera drainage area represent what has been described by A.L. Kroeber as a village community or as a tibelet. This homogeneous unit would have shared the same dialalect, an elected headman, and a central location for ceremonial life. The College of Marin site may well have been the central settlement or principal village for a cluster of subsidiary sites which included both temporary and permanent settlements. These would have constituted a tirbelet.

The sites in the spacious valley of Corte Madera Creek were not only intelligently placed from the standpoint of hunting and gathering, but all except two were so closely spaced within clusters as to suggest interdependence, assuming at least some were used contemporaneously. All of the necessities of life were readily at hand, save a few which could be obtained through trade. The settlements were well away from the natural boundaries of the ridge lines over which it was dangerous to cross without permission of the neighboring tribelet. By the size of the shellmounds, availability of water, and artifacts, we can speculate as to the relative importance of these sites and which ones were probably inhabited throughout the year.

The College of Marin site could have been the first major village in the area for a specified length of time, its status to be supplanted in time by another village. Because the sites in this drainage are so close together and the resources are so similar, it is unlikely that people actually moved their habitation from one location to another within the drainage to take advantage of seasonal foods. It is more likely that a fissioning process could have occurred in which relatives or children from a crowded village such as the College site could have settled nearby on the same or an adjacent drainage. We do not know the succession here, whether these villages were all occupied at the same time, or if there was a pattern of fissioning or replacement. We do not have the answer because we do not have the dates or the necessary controls. The sites have either been excavated or bulldozed and the information is lost, probably forever.

Since the time of that destruction of information, the field of archaeology has changed. It now emphasizes protection of known sites, pending possible development of improved scientific tools and less destructive methods, and recommends excavation only when sites are threatened with imminent destruction.

How can every citizen best preserve an archaeological site? First, by not digging in it. Second, by reporting any find of a site or an artifact to a local college or to an archaeologist who will do a survey on foot and register the site, thus taking the first step toward protecting it from vandals.

Website design by Karen Peterson, San Anselmo

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