

Reaping, sowing: Garden honoring Native Americans dedicated Saturday

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Ines Hernandez-Avila from the Native American studies faculty at UC Davis, speaks to a crowd gathered at Native American Contemplative Garden at UC Davis between King Hall and the Mondavi Center on Nov. 5. The garden was dedicated Saturday. Sue Cockrell/Enterprise photo

Stand on the banks of Putah Creek - under the leaves and branches of centuries-old oak trees - look across the UC Davis campus as classrooms, coffee houses, libraries all crumble silently, melting into earth.

Chiseled words on basalt are hard, gray...

'Try to imagine this place with no buildings, no sidewalks, no roads.'

Then more words in rock...

'See only oaks and thick vines lining the creek. There is a light breeze that carries the smell of campfire smoke.'

Trees spring from underneath, throbbing from sapling to thick, old oaks. Vines

shoot up and curl around them.

Gone is the 100-year-old university, its 31,000 students, its 1,000 buildings spread out over 5,000 acres. And gone is its crown jewel - the Mondavi Center - a \$61 million, 1,800-seat performing arts beacon. Gone, too, are remains of the 13 Patwin Indians that earthmovers dug up when they tore into the soil to build the 104,000-square-foot giant.

A decade later, local Patwins, Native American Studies professors and university officials dedicated a Native American Contemplative Garden on Saturday.

The garden sits along the creek between Mondavi and King Hall, offering passersby a quiet place to reflect and think. A rock path guides people off a bike path and down to native plants that clothed and fed Patwin Indians. Basalt columns tell them - in Patwin and English - to imagine UC Davis before it was UC Davis.

'Patwin,' a column says, 'means people.'

The ground moves. Soil bubbles from the earth into a formless blob. The red earth defines itself: a trunk, then arms and legs, then feet and hands. A face.

He is Hualachicaa. The year is 1832, and the 10-year-old Patwin Indian is from the tribe Puttoy, the people who lived along ancient creek which still flows through what - for now - is known as Davis, UC Davis and Yolo County.

'The air is thick with smoke from dozens of cooking fires, as the women of the nearby village prepare a meal for the children and the elders.'

Hualachicaa is learning to be a young man in this Puttoy village of 100 people. He grips his spear, the head made from obsidian and heads off to hunt, or maybe he uses a primitive net

to catch salmon out of the Sacramento River.

'Most of the men,' another rock says, 'are hunting elk in the tules or fishing in the broad river to the east.'

But even as Hualachicaa fished the river, explorer John Work led an expedition out of Oregon to explore Northern California. Work, with 'scores of trappers, their wives, and their children,' entered the Sacramento Valley in 1832, according to a history compiled by Davis ethnogeographer Randall Milliken.

Most of the explorers were sick with 'ague' (malaria) in April 1833 when they explored Hualachicaa's home along Putah Creek, and then Cache Creek, before heading on to what is now Knights Landing.

Work, however, reported no illness among the Indians until his expedition was returning to Oregon in August. Near where the Sacramento and Feather rivers meet, Work noted 'a great many of the Indians are sick, some of them with the fever.'

A few days later, after checking out nearby settlements, he reported 'The villages which were so populous and swarming with inhabitants when we passed that way in Jany or Febry last seem now almost deserted & have a desolate appearance. The few wretched Indians who remain seem wretched, they are lying apparently scarcely able to move.'

Everyone in Work's party recovered from the 'ague,' but the illness laid waste to the Central Valley's Indian population. Another explorer, J.J. Warner, had traveled the Sacramento River in 1832 before Work's expedition. It's banks, Warner wrote, 'were studded with Indian villages.'

He returned in late summer 1833 after Work headed north.

He found a wasteland.

'We found the valleys depopulated, Warner writes. 'From the head of the Sacramento to the great bend and slough of the San Joaquin, we did not see more than six or eight Indians; while large numbers of their skulls and dead bodies were to be seen under almost every shade-tree near water, where the uninhabited and deserted villages had been converted into graveyards.'

Milliken thinks the Central Valley malaria epidemic of 1833 all but wiped out Hualachicaa's Puttoy village. Survivors like Hualachicaa - now 11 - headed to Mission Solano in what is now Sonoma County.

'They'd lost their parents; their village had collapsed, and they're going to join the mission,' Milliken said. Under normal circumstances, Indians of all ages would flow to the missions for baptism, Milliken said. The malaria epidemic, however, killed off elders and adults, leaving the children.

The 11 Indians baptized at Mission Solano from March through June of 1834 ranged in age from 2 to 11 years old, according to Milliken's 30-year-old database containing records for nearly 100,000 Indians from up and down California.

Hualachicaa was baptized 'Benito.' Like the 10 other Puttoy, the priest noted Hualachicaa came from 'gentiles difuntos' - the unbaptized dead.

Other Puttoy might have fled the fertile valleys coveted by white settlers to seek shelter with Patwin tribes in the hills,' said Pat Wright, whose husband, Bill Wright is a member of the

Kletwin, or Cortina tribe. 'It's very likely all these bloodlines are inter-mixed,' she said, 'And it's possible some of that Davis blood could be in families here.'

Bill Wright blessed the Mondavi Center when it was finished.

'I know that the spirits from this land hear me,' he said, 'They have a right to be angry for what was done to them. But we will give them our respect, and they will respect us, as earthly people. Mistakes were made, but they will respect us, as earthly people. Mistakes were made, but they will forgive us.'

Wright could have given the same speech Saturday: 'Bless the grounds that this building stands on. Those that are gone - the spirits from this land - help those who come through here,' he said to bless Mondavi. 'Maybe one day, they will understand about the other world, your world. As the students come through here, Grandfather, give them the understanding and knowledge that they search for, and help them grow.'

The Wrights feel a tie, a kinship to the names on the stone. 'Those could be relatives,' Pat Wright said. 'Those spirits are still there,' she added. 'There's nobody to speak for those people, and somebody needs to.'

'Saltu-tu-di mohm 'ho win-ma,' the basalt says in Patwin. 'Spirit wind: Tell the people.'

She imagines future Patwin students in the garden or at one of the other nine reflection sites that are planned. There they'll sit, reading and thinking.

They could learn about tlaw tok, the valley oak, and how Patwin women ground acorns into meal and used it to cook soup - or they combined it with red clay and baked the mixture into bread.

A garden plaque will tell them about po koom, the willow, and how the Patwin use the shoots to make baskets to carry babies, to bury with the dead and to decorate.

The young Patwin may not have the strongest tie to his ancestral heritage, Pat Wright said. But he will stand in the garden and 'read bati, bati, bati - come and eat - and say, 'Hey, I heard that at the dinners when I was young.'

'Yeh 'teh-wah,' the basalt says. 'Dream.'

The student leaves the garden - the huts, the old trees, the vines - they turn to dust, and that dust swirls and solidifies into Shields, Mondavi and Mrak. Dams and gravel mining slow Putah Creek nearly to a standstill, and the biggest river rushes in the distance - Interstate 80 - flowing with cars and trucks and SUVs.

Change, whether it was white Europeans settlers or something else, was inevitable, Pat Wright said. And the Patwin did, and will continue to do what they've always done: adapt.

'We've survived a lot,' Pat Wright said, 'and we're still here, and we intend to remain here.'

The basalt rock at the center of the garden shows 51 names - the 51 Puttoy recorded in mission records. Hualachicaa is there. The rock echoes Wright, carrying her thought through centuries:

'Then, now, and always - a part of this land.'

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