

The Native Americans of the San Ramon Valley

FOCUS:

To understand the local Indian culture and the Indians' dependence on the environment of our valley.

MAIN IDEA:

Read to understand how our local Indians survived in our valley by using everything that grew here naturally.

VOCABULARY:

tribe
shelter
willow
tule
dome

acorn
mortar
pestle
leaching
spears



Student pages

A Morning Many, Many Years Ago

The young Tatcan boy forced himself awake. It was so warm and cozy lying under the animal skins. Even the tule mat he slept on was comfortable. He didn't want to leave his bed, but he had chores to do. He lifted the deerskin that covered the opening of his family's **domed** shelter and felt the rush of the chilly morning air. He peered outside.



Already his mother and sister were pounding dried **acorns**. The women sat on the large rock **mortar**. This would make the **acorn** into flour after his mother **leached** the flour with the fresh water from the creek near the camp. This cleaned, mushy flour would often be cooked as hot cereal. He was hungry and this would be breakfast.

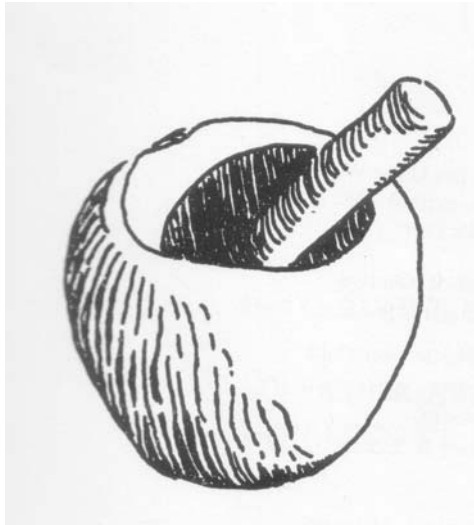
The boy could hear the thump, thump, thump of their rock **pestles** as they pounded the **acorns** into flour. He knew that his mother would **leach** the flour with fresh water from the nearby creek and then would cook the sweet flour in a special cooking basket. The thought of the warm **acorn** mush made the boy's mouth water. He was hungry.

The boy picked up the gathering basket his sister had woven from young willow branches. He walked to a patch of blackberry bushes at the far end of the village. As he picked berries for breakfast, he could see his father and other men from the tribe preparing for a deer hunt. The hunters gathered their handmade **spears**. They rubbed their bodies with bay leaves to rid themselves of human scent. Then, one, by one, they walked into the rolling hills to hunt. The boy dreamed of the day when he would be among the hunters. Someday soon...



The First People

Indians were the first people in our valley. No one knows exactly how they arrived here or where they came from, but they lived here as long as 5,000 years ago. Many different **tribes** lived in and around the San Ramon Valley. They depended on the plants and trees that grew here and the animals that roamed our hills and valley. Understanding the San Ramon Valley environment is important in understanding Indian life.



The Tatcan tribe (Bay Miwok speakers) lived on the valley floor where Danville and Alamo are now located. The Seunen tribe (Costanoan/Ohlone speakers) lived in San Ramon and Dublin. The names Tatcan and Seunen were given to the Indians by the Spanish. Each **tribe** had from 50 to 250 people. Even though they each spoke a different language, the Indians traded with one another for things that were needed for everyday life and visited each other for celebrations.

The Environment

The San Ramon Valley was rich in natural resources and the weather was mild. The Indians hunted, trapped, fished, and gathered the foods that grew here naturally. They burned fields to promote seed growth for young plants which deer and elk liked to eat. The Indians lived outdoors on the creek banks and near

springs. Water was needed, so they built their homes and shelters close to water supplies.

The women did most of the gathering, storing and preparation of the food. They gathered seeds and **acorns**, each in its own season. There were many oak trees that grew in the valley. The Indian used the **acorns** from these trees as an important source of food. They gathered the **acorns** in the fall and dried them during the winter.

After removing the shell, the women pounded the **acorns** on a large rock with a hole, called a **mortar**. They used a stone **pestle** to pound the nut into flour. **Acorns** have a bitter taste, so the women always **leached** the acorn flour with water. One way they washed away the bitter taste was to put the flour into a basket lined with leaves and pour water over the flour several times. This is called “**leaching**”.

After **leaching**, the flour tasted sweet. The wet flour was put into a closely woven basket with water. Hot stones were dropped into the basket to cook the **acorn** mush which could be eaten as hot cereal. Sometimes pancakes were made with the flour and fried on a hot stone from the campfire. Other times the women made bread by wrapping the **acorn** mush in leaves and baking it in the fire.

The Indians made baskets out of young branches or grasses which they gathered in certain seasons. Baskets had many purposes. They were used as bowls, cooking utensils, storage, seed-beaters and hats.

The Indians ate the meat of the many animals and fish found here in the valley. Deer and antelope were good to eat. Smaller animals such as rabbits, squirrels and other small creatures were also trapped for food. The men trapped birds or fish by weaving vines into nets or baskets.

The Indian men were responsible for hunting. One way they killed a deer was by forming a wide circle around it. They would make loud noises while walking closer to the deer in the center of the circle. Eventually the deer would be trapped with no way out of the circle and the men used their **spears** to kill it.



Sometimes the Indians would disguise themselves by wearing a deer head as a mask. They would prowl slowly into the middle of a herd of deer and then spear one. The human scent was disguised by rubbing bay leaves on their bodies. Boys first learned to hunt small animals.

The Indians used short **spears** or bow and arrows. The bows were made out of certain types of wood and tied with animal tendons. The arrows were made from straightened branches topped with a pointed arrowhead at the end. They often traded for volcanic rock (obsidian) from which they made the arrowheads. If obsidian was not available, they used chert, a softer rock, found on Mt. Diablo.

The Indian Culture

The Indians of our valley were strong people with dark hair. They wore their hair long, often dressing it with small shells, beads and strips of rawhide. They wore few clothes in good weather.



The women of the tribes worked very hard. They did the cooking, gathering, and basket-weaving and were in charge of raising the children. The men hunted and fished. The whole tribe worked together to gather **acorns** in the fall.

For shelters, the Indians selected and bent long **willow** branches to make a **dome-shaped** frame. They then tied bundles of grass or tule with snugly onto this frame. **Tule** is a strong plant with a straight stem that grows in creeks. An opening was left in the roof for smoke to escape and an opening was left in the front for a small door. The shelter was warm and dry inside.

The women made skirts or aprons from deerskins or from softened tree bark. They tied the skirts around their waists with a vine. During the cold weather, the people wore deer, rabbit or otter skins to keep themselves warm. They wove strips of rabbit skins together to make robes or blankets.

The Indians loved to sing songs, dance, and tell tribal stories or histories. These songs, dances, and stories were taught to the children of each generation. The Indians would decorate their bodies with feathers, paint or shells for special ceremonies, such as harvest or acorn celebrations. Tribes would gather at special times to trade, visit friends and relatives, dance, sing and share old and new stories. Different tribes would trade shells, salt, furs, baskets, special plants or acorns with each other.

Kathie Petrie, 2004

Teacher Pages

Student Activities

- **Critical Thinking**

Why do you think the Tatcan and Seunen Indians chose to live in our valley? Why were natural resources important to the Indians?

- **Show What You Know**

Art Activity

Draw a picture showing as many details as you can about the Tatcan or Seunen way of life. Share this with a partner explaining what you drew.

Art Activity

Select something that would be a symbol of the way our Indians lived. Draw a picture of it. Explain why this would be a symbol for the Tatcan or Seunen Indians.

Poster Activity

Create a poster that would teach another person about our valley Indians. Teach another third grader about the valley Indians.

Field Trips (See special section on field trips.)

- **Family field trips:** Oakland Museum, Coyote Hills Regional Park, Sunol Regional Preserve
- **Passport Opportunity:** Go to Hap Magee Ranch Park and visit the Tatcan Indian Commemorative Site just west of the dog park

History/Social Science Standards

- 3.a Develops and demonstrates respect for the uniqueness of individuals and their differences.
- 3.2 Describes the American Indian nations in their local region long ago and in the recent past.

Reading and Social Studies

Pasquala, the Story of a California Indian Girl, by Gail Faber and Michele Lasagna

Additional Resources

Maps

Essays

They Came First Information from the Museum of the SRV
First People of the East Bay by Beverly Ortiz
Mount Diablo and Native Peoples by Beverly Ortiz

Websites

- Bay Miwok Indians: cccoe.net/miwokproject (For third grades by Maria Forester)
- Ohlone Indians: wccusd.k12.ca.us/ohlone/village, coyote.press.org, native.cc.com
- californiahistory.net/span: California Indians
- www.valleysentinel.com/archives Sept., Oct. 2003
- www.nativeculture.com/lisamitten/indians.html - click on Information on Individual Native Nations
- www.ci.danville.ca.us/ - Town of Danville website – link to our community, about Danville, Indians of the San Ramon Valley
- www.ci.san-ramon.ca.us/srhistory/history.htm - City of San Ramon website – link

SUBJECT SEARCH TERMS FOR LIBRARY CATALOGUE:

Many items can be found simply by using the tribe as the search term (e.g. Ohlone)

- Indians of North America California
- Local history Contra Costa County

Books:

INDIANS OF THE SAN RAMON VALLEY AND HOW THEY LIVED

- 970.3 MARGOLIN - The Ohlone way: Indian life in the San Francisco-Monterey Bay area
- 970.49463 BOHAKEL – The Indians of Contra Costa County
- RJ973.0497 – U.X.L. encyclopedia of Native American Tribes
- J973.04974 COVERT - Coast Miwok
- 979.4 FAGAN- Before California – an archeologist looks at our earliest inhabitants
- J979.4004 – California Indian Flash Cards

- 979.46004 OHLONE - The Ohlone past and present
- RJ979.40049 BOULE – California Native American Tribes
- J979.40049 BOULE – Foothill Yukot Tribe
- J979.40049 BOULE - Ohlone tribe
- J979.40049 BOULE – Patwin Tribe
- J979.40049 BOULE – Valley Yukot Tribe
- J979.40049 GRAY-KANATIIOHSH - Miwok
- 979.40049 INDIANS - Indians of the San Ramon Valley
- J979.40049 INDIANS – Indians of the San Ramon Valley
- R979.40049 VANE – California Indians: Primary resources
- J979.40049 WILLIAMS-The Ohlone of California
- J979.46 MORROW (Ohlone) - Pre-Americans at play in Contra Costa County
- 979.463 FREED (Ohlone) - People at the edge of the world
- 979.461 EXPLORATION - An explanation of our history (East Contra Costa County) video links
- Randall Milliken, *A Time of Little Choice, The Disintegration of Tribal Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1769-1810* (Menlo Park: Ballena Press), 1995.
- Beverly W. Lane, ed., *The Bay Miwok, First People of Contra Costa County, READINGS* (Martinez: Contra Costa County Historical Society), 2003.

They Came First

The Indians of the San Ramon Valley

For untold centuries people have lived in the San Ramon Valley. They built their homes by the creeks, hunted in the valley and worshipped in sacred places and on the Mountain.

Living in village communities of 50 to 200 people, the rhythm of their lives was determined by the cadence of the seasons. The San Ramon Valley environment was rich with a variety of foods, including acorns, seeds, birds, deer and fish. Regular meetings with other tribes took place, including trading encounters, autumn festivals on Mount Diablo and perhaps travel to the Bay.

In 1772 westerners first came through the San Ramon Valley. Spanish missionary priests recorded the names by which the Indians were known to their neighbors: Tatcan and Seunen. The Tatcans were part of the Bay Miwok linguistic group, were closely related to the Saclans and probably lived in the Alamo-Danville area on San Ramon Creek. The Seunens were Costanoan (Ohlone) speakers who lived in the San Ramon-Dublin area around the South San Ramon and Alamo Creeks.

After 1794 the Indians began moving to the Spanish missions, first to San Francisco and then to San Jose. The foreign weapons and unusual gifts intrigued them and many chose to ally themselves with the powerful Europeans. Once baptized they could no longer leave the mission at will.

Ultimately the Spanish ideas, diseases and grazing animals destroyed the Valley Indians' way of life. Today the Tatcan and Seunen tribes of the San Ramon Valley are no more, although descendants of Bay Miwok and Ohlone tribes do live among us today. The artifacts unearthed next to springs and creeks and the bedrock mortar holes on Mount Diablo remind us that a culture of great antiquity existed in the San Ramon Valley just 250 years ago.

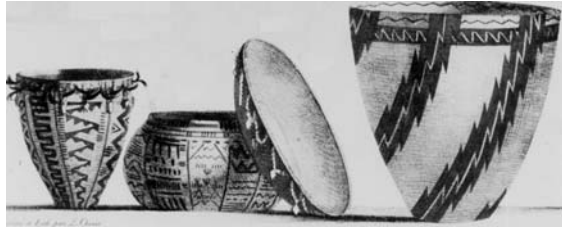
Information from an exhibit in the Museum of the San Ramon Valley

205 Railroad Ave. (in the restored Danville depot)
925-837-3750 ~~ museumsrv.org Open hours: 1-4 Tu-Fri, 10-1 Sat
Visit the museum to learn more about the valley's first residents.

Mount Diablo and Native Peoples

Mount Diablo had profound significance for many Native California groups within its expansive view. The Julpun of the area now known as Brentwood and Byron recognized the mountain as the birthplace of the world. Hundred of miles away in the Sierra, some Northern Miwok saw it as the place from which a supernatural being lit a previously dark landscape. Further south in the Sierra, the Central Miwok featured the mountain as part of one of their most sacred ceremonies. Wintun elder Frances McDaniel said that Wintun spiritual leaders prayed to the creator from the mountain's heights.

Chochenyo speakers from the Mission San Jose area called the mountain Tuyshtak, meaning "at the day." The Nisenan of the Sacramento Valley called it Sukkujaman, or, as Nisenan elder Dalbert Castro once explained, "the place where dogs came from in trade."



Most of Mount Diablo, including its peak, was within the homeland of the Volvon, a Bay Miwok speaking group, and as early as 1811 the mountain was called Cerro Alto de los Bolbones (High Point of the Volvon). Originally, Monte del Diablo (Devil's Thicket) was the name given to a willow thicket near present-day Concord where, in 1805, the Chupcan made a daring nighttime escape from a Spanish military expedition headed by Luis Arguello. Folklore relayed to the State Legislature by Mariano Vallejo in 1850 mistakenly located the incident at the mountain.

About 25 independent tribal groups with well-defined territories lived in the surrounding East Bay countryside. Their members spoke dialects of three distinct languages: Ohlone, Bay Miwok and Northern Valley Yokuts. Each tribe's leadership and culture varied and each had three or four village sites, with populations numbering about 40 to 200.

Today, the mountain remains an important and meaningful place for many Native peoples, including those who live locally. As Pomo elder and doctor Mabel McKay said in 1985, "I would listen as Jim [Cooper, an herb doctor who was born in the Diablo area] told my grandmother about how sacred Mount Diablo is. He said that as long as the mount stands it will be a sacred mountain."

Author Beverly R. Ortiz is writing a book about the significance of Mount Diablo to California Indians. Basket photo art by Louis Choris (c. 1816), courtesy Bancroft Library.

First People of the East Bay

By Beverly R. Ortiz

At the dawn of time, Ojompil.e (now called Mount Diablo) was the sacred birthplace of the world. Supernatural beings, the First People, the people before Indian people, lived here. The First People are often designated with the names of animals whose attributes are reflected in their personalities - Condor, Prairie Falcon, Eagle and Coyote. The First People made Indians, providing them with a bountiful, beautiful world, a world which only two centuries ago was much different from the world today. A world in which condors still flew, a reminder of the sacred time.

In the late 1700s, it's estimated that between 280,000 and 340,000 people lived in what is now California. They spoke about 100 distinct languages. Three such languages were spoken in the East Bay: Bay Miwok, Ohlone/Costanoan and Northern Valley Yokuts.

The people were organized into small, independent nations of from one to five towns (villages) including a capital. Six such nations spoke the Bay Miwok language - the Chupcan of present-day Concord, the Julpun of Oakley-Brentwood, the Ompin of Pittsburg, the Saclan of Lafayette, the Tatcan of Danville and the Volvon of upper Marsh Creek. Towns had anywhere from 40 to 160 people. They lived in houses constructed of willow frames, thatched with tule or native bunchgrasses.

Many items, such as tools, beads and baskets were an integral part of daily life, and these required precision, patience and technical ability to make. Specialists and professionals often served economic and ritual roles.

Hunting and gathering activities required in-depth knowledge of natural cycles. Plant resources were cultivated for optimum harvest with horticultural techniques, such as pruning and burning.

At various times, neighboring groups gathered for Big Times, events which featured ceremonial feasting and dancing of several days' duration. Social bonds were renewed and strengthened, news was shared and goods were traded. Some trade items went through several groups before arriving locally. Obsidian for arrow points came from Napa, while bows appear to have been imported from the Sierra.

Disputes were mediated by community leaders, spiritual leaders and family members. Spiritual balance was maintained through complex religious practices. Elegantly designed and carefully constructed featherwork was worn on ceremonial occasions. Dance served as a visible prayer. It was, and throughout California still is, performed to insure the health and well-being of the group.

The world changed dramatically after the Spanish began to encroach on the East Bay in 1772. The panic and startled shouting with which the Tatcan living in the San Ramon Valley greeted the Spanish signaled what was to come.

The Spanish invasion culminated in the establishment of a mission and presidio (fort) at San Francisco in 1776. While some East Bay people were attracted to the missions, once there they were not allowed to leave without permission of the priests. Many people resisted missionization. The Huchiun (Ohlone from present-day Richmond), Saclan, Volvon and Chupcan were among the groups whose members led the resistance. Their resistance efforts were partly responsible for the decision to locate Mission San Jose so near to Mission Santa Clara in 1797.

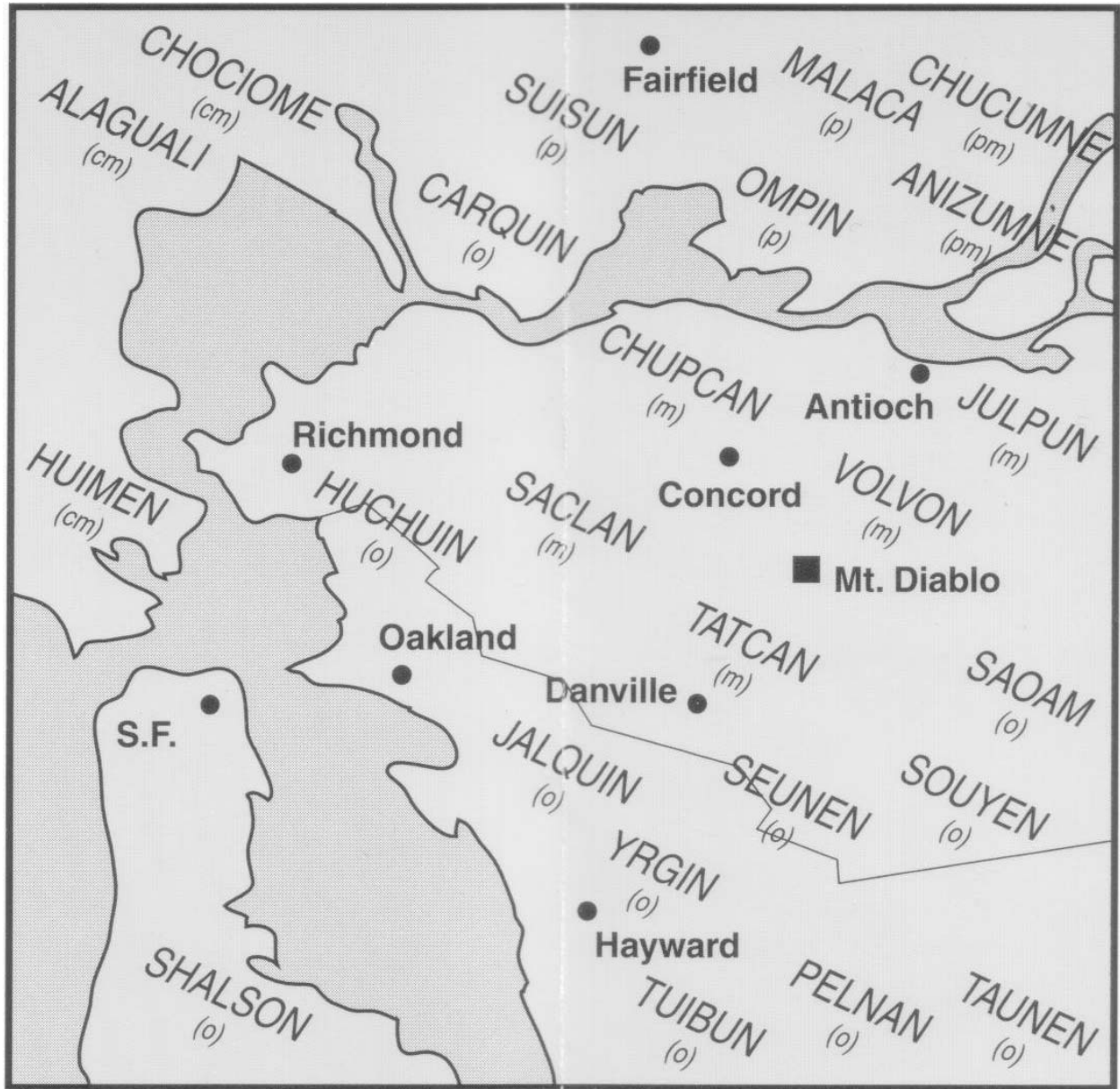
Diseases of European origin killed large numbers of people at the crowded, unsanitary missions. Spanish military expeditions killed others.

By the time the missions closed in 1836, the local Native peoples had been reduced to serfs on the land they loved and cared for all those thousands of years. These lands had become large Spanish and Mexican ranchos. The destruction of the old way of life was completed during the early years of American settlement. As Contra Costa County settler John Marsh wrote in 1846: "...without the (Indians) the business of the country could hardly be carried on." Indian kidnapping and slavery is part of the legacy of Euro-American settlement. A statement by John Monroe Walker, who owned a ranch on Mount Diablo, sums up the treatment of Indians during this time: "When one bought a ranch he bought the Indians that went with the property."

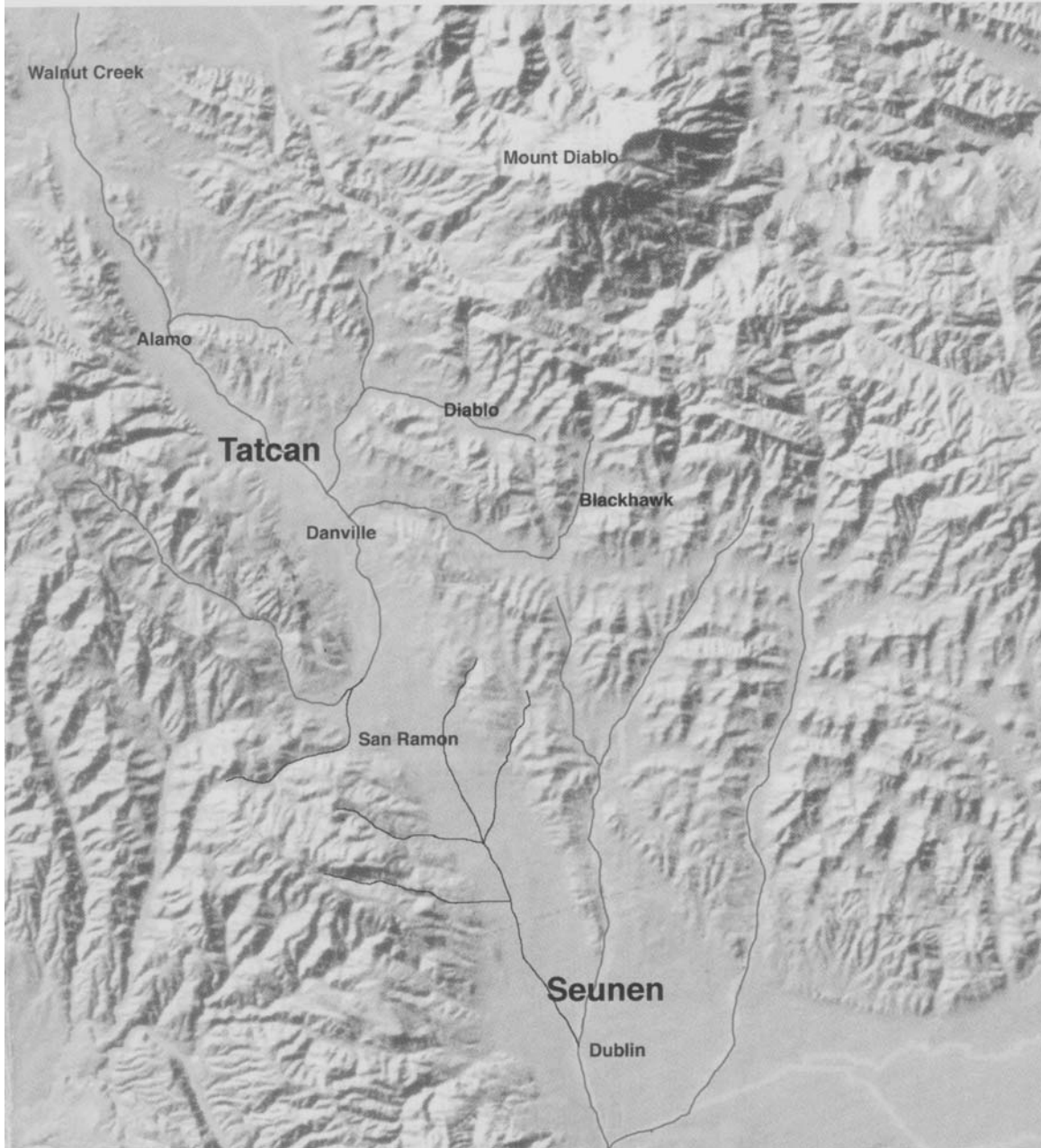
Despite the tremendous pressure against it, people continued their cultural traditions after missionization. A multi-ethnic community of former Mission San Jose residents and their descendants existed near Pleasanton into the 1930s. Composed primarily of Ohlone /Costanoan, Plains Miwok, Northern Valley Yokuts, Patwin and Coast Miwok peoples, Alisal (the Pleasanton rancheria) was a center of traditional religious practices.

Today, many California Indians have retained their cultural values, traditions and history, while living within the framework of contemporary society. Descendants of the Bay Area's first peoples are involved in protecting ancestral village and sacred sites, participating in Big Times, creating traditional objects, and interpreting their cultural history to the public.

Beverly Ortiz is a staff naturalist with the East Bay Regional Park District. This article originally appeared in *Parkland Discoveries*, 1990, a guide to the natural and cultural resources of East Bay Regional Park District. It was updated in 2003. For further information, call 510-635-0135.



A map of the tribal locations of Indians in the Bay Area. James Bennyhoff



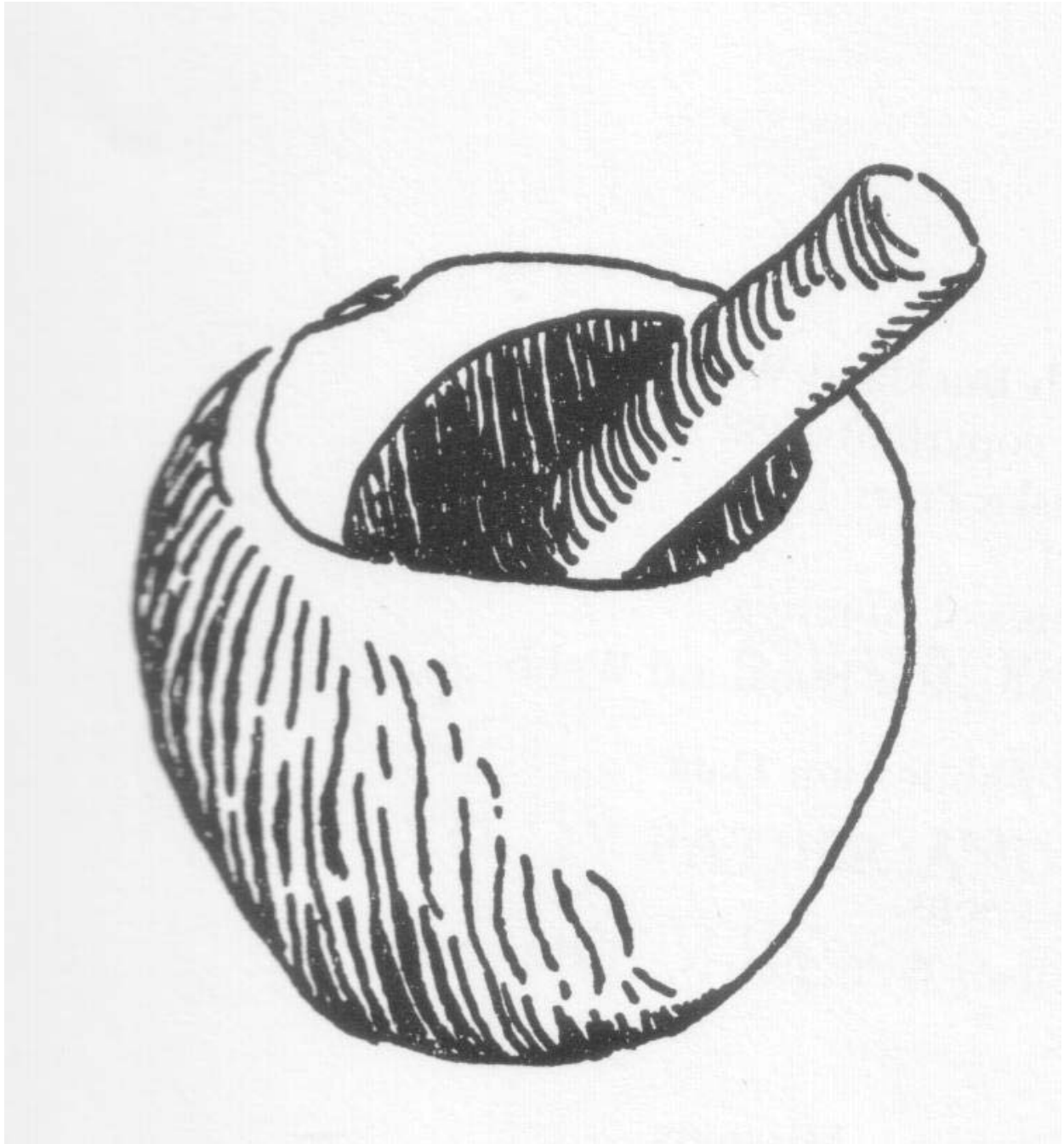




Photo art by Louis Choris (c. 1816), courtesy Bancroft Library.