Remembrance and Renewal at Tuluwat: Restoring the Center of the World

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Abstract

In 2004, the City of Eureka, California, returned forty-acres of land on Indian Island in Humboldt Bay, site of a massacre in 1860 that brought the Wiyot to the brink of extinction. Ten years later, the City of Eureka initiated the extraordinary action of apologizing to the Wiyot for the massacre that occurred one hundred fifty-four years earlier. The official apology which had been released to the public was transformed into a statement of support after review by the City’s legal counsel. The historical significance of the attempted inhalation of the Wiyot and the actions of the City of Eureka in the proceeding century to deny and eventually to acknowledge that history is a case study in localized efforts to address historical atrocities by both the perpetrator’s beneficiaries and the descendants of the victims. Efforts of remembrance inspired a municipality to acknowledge and address an atrocity of the past to heal a rift between the Indians and non-Indians.

Introduction

Some stories become part of the local landscape. From these stories, local and regional history forms, incorporating the embellishments, omissions, and nuggets of facts that have taken on a life of their own. The oral literature of a community captures the achievements, backstories, and darker episodes of the people who built the community and the everyday places that are part of the landscape that fade into the ordinariness of familiarity. In Humboldt County, California, there is one story that everyone learns, whether it is at the local schools, from neighbors, or taking a tour of Humboldt Bay. While well known in the county, outside of it the literature about the massacre and preceding events of reconciliation is confined to brief mention in larger studies of indigenous genocide, master’s thesis, high school history papers, and the newspapers. The story defines not only the character of the region, but also frames the way in which two distinct communities have lived together for over a century. What follows is that story, based both in fact and conjecture, of an event and its aftermath that shaped the relationship between the non-Indian and Indian1 populations of the area.

In the heart of Humboldt Bay on the northwestern coast of California lays a flat, marshy, and unremarkable 275-acre Island. Indian Island, Duluwat, is home to the Wiyot villages Etipidolh and Tuluwat, the latter being the physical and spiritual center of the Wiyot world. Duluwat is where the Wiyot hold their annual World Renewal Ceremony to keep the world in balance for all living beings (“Wiyot Tribe,” 2017). For over a century and a half, the Island has been a daily reminder
of one of the greatest atrocities committed against the indigenous peoples of Northern California by Euroamerican settlers. In the last quarter of a century, it has become the focal point for remembering, mourning, healing, and reconciliation as the Wiyot have worked to return to the center of their world to finish the ceremony that was abruptly interrupted. Their actions of healing and reconciliation have been in the form of educating and bringing the community together each year to remember those lost, and to engage in open and honest discussion.

(Image of a locator map showing Wiyot ancestral territory in relation to California)

These actions did not occur without support from the non-Indian community. Through reconciliation, the Wiyot added to the story of that terrible night. This expanded story is one of the bold and unprecedented actions taken by municipal and civic leaders to engage in and further the healing and reconciliation process. Within this story can be found the precedent and inspiration for municipalities throughout the United States to take on significant roles in the efforts to bring past atrocities to the forefront of local discussion, identify ways in which to acknowledge those actions, and assist the communities in healing at a local level.

**Indian Affairs in Humboldt County in 1860**

After the massacre, Humboldt County Sherriff Barrant Van Nest framed the state of Indian and settler relations in the county in a statement to the *Daily Evening Bulletin* of San Francisco. Van Nest (1860) explained that many settlers were engaged in ranching, which required livestock to be grazed in portions of the county away from the main settlements. In the year before the massacre, he estimated that one-eighth of approximately 7,000 to 8,000 heads of livestock had been killed by Indians (p.5). During the same time, the settler James Elleson was mortally wounded while pursuing Indians who had been killing and driving off his livestock. To the dismay of the local community, the commander of Fort Humboldt took no action to stop the killing of livestock or the harassment of settlers traveling in the area by Indians. The settlers raised ad hoc militias to drive the Indians out of the grazing lands. These militias would enter the Indian villages looking for beef from stolen livestock. They took this as evidence of the village providing comfort to the Indians who had been run off or wounded during the forced vacating of grazing lands. While effective in reducing the Indian depredations, the militias were unsustainable and disbanded.
According to Sheriff Van Nest (1860, p. 5), “the Indians, encouraged with their good luck redouble[d] their efforts to drive off and kill stock” (p. 5).” The renewed attacks on livestock resulted in a call for volunteers to form a militia under regulations of the State of California. Upon formation and organization of the militia, its members waited for authorization from the State to carry out actions to stop the Indian attacks on livestock to no avail. These “heavy” taxpayers, having formed a militia to protect their economic livelihood and receiving no support from the State, fell into desperation leading to actions that would shock the local community, garner national attention, and nearly annihilate a people (Van Nest, 1860, p.5).

The Brink of Extinction at the Center of World

A state of war did not exist between the Wiyot and the Euroamerican settlers who had taken up occupancy around Humboldt Bay. In the early morning hours of February 26, 1860, vigilantes from the City of the Eureka and the surrounding area made their way across the narrow channel to Duluwat under cover of darkness. There has been speculation that some amongst the rogue gang of men were prominent citizens of the area, though no definitive proof has been found to support these claims (Crandell, 2005). The Wiyot, like their neighbors the Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, and Tolowa pray for the world and all living things during a seven to ten-day ceremony consisting of dancing, fasting, and offering of prayers. For the Wiyot this annual ceremony was held at Tuluwat. As the World Renewal Ceremony was nearing its final days, Wiyot men left the Island to replenish food stores and supplies. What occurred in their absence was a full-scale assault against women, children, and the elderly who had remained on the Island. The attack that morning caused outcries from the victims that could be heard across the narrow channel in the Eureka.

Robert Gunther, whose name the island would eventually be ascribed, had completed the purchase of eighty acres of land surrounding and including Tuluwat on February 22, 1860. On the night of February 25, he was staying at the Picayune Mill in Eureka across the channel from the Duluwat where a scream awoke him in the early morning hours of February 26. Later that morning, he was approached by Captain Moore, whom he had purchased the eighty acres from, and told that there was trouble on the Island. Gunther accompanied Moore to the Island where they found the corpses of women and children, most of whom had their skulls split by a hatchet (Gunther, 1982, p. 6). The bodies of thirty-six women and children of all ages from two or three years to the very
old, were found (Lord, 1860, p. 2). This act of extermination had been predicated on the loss of livestock by farmers and grazers as result of the perceived depredations of the Wiyots.

Local historian Jerry Rhode (2010) included in his article, *Genocide and Extortion: 150 years later, the hidden motive behind the Indian Island Massacre*, the unpublished statement of Jane Sam, a survivor of the massacre in which she detailed what she witnessed that morning:

That night after the dance all was asleep. There were four houses and one sweat house…. The door was blocked by white men as the people were asleep, not expecting anything to happen…When they found out what was up, they began to scatter and was struck down by clubs, knives, and axes, all met the same fate, children, women, and men. I got out and hid in a trash pile. That was how I was saved (para. 1).

Women and children were killed when they lay asleep, or they did not make any effort to escape, as they thought the white men would not molest them...At break of day, I saw two boat loads of white men going across to Eureka. These were the men that done the massacring (para. 3).

One living child was found in the arms of his dead mother, and today he is [still] living... It took all day to bury the dead. (para. 4)

Sam’s account of the massacre and the events afterward adds the Wiyot voice to what has long been a non-Indian narrative of the atrocity. The baby she mentions that was found, still alive at the time her statement was recorded, was Jerry James. His mother had died holding him in her arms, and that is how he was found. In adulthood, he became a prominent leader of the Wiyot and an inspiration for the healing and reconciliation efforts that were to come (Rhode, 2010). There were other survivors of the massacre each adding to the historical record over time, yet none encapsulated the experience of the attack and the sense of betrayal that the Wiyot experienced that night the way in which Nancy Spear did, “They came like weasels in the night, crawling on their bellies. We were without any men to protect us. We had never fought the white men and had thought they were our friends (Rhode, 2010).

Bret Harte (1860), a reporter for *The Northern Californian*, published an article documenting what he had seen as those that had survived the massacre transported the remains of the victims from the island through Union on their way to villages along the Mad River for burial. He (1860) wrote that,

“Neither age or sex had been spared. Little children and old women were mercilessly stabbed and their skulls crushed with axes. When the bodies were landed at Union, a more shocking and revolting spectacle never was exhibited to the eyes of a Christian and civilized people. Old women, wrinkled and decrepit, lay weltering in blood, their brains
dashed out and dabbled with their long gray hair. Infants scarce a span long, with their faces cloven with hatchets and their bodies ghastly with wounds. We gathered from the survivors that four or five white men attacked the ranches at about 4 o'clock in the morning, which statement is corroborated by people at Eureka who heard pistol shots at about that time, although no knowledge of the attack was public. (p. 2)"

As citizens of Union watched the remains of the victims being unloaded from the canoes, Harte (1860) recorded the following sentiment: “It is but justice to the community and simple humanity to say, that the general expression was one of deep sympathy with the miserable sufferers, and honest, deep and utter abhorrence of the act of wanton brutality, and its perpetrators” (p. 2). Shortly after printing a follow-up piece demanding that the perpetrators be brought to justice, Harte was forced to flee from Humboldt County for fear of his life, according to local lore.

Throughout the Humboldt Bay region, Wiyot villages were seen burning in the days and weeks after the massacre (“Unknown, 1860, p. 1). Additional attacks had been carried out on Wiyot villages in and around Humboldt Bay and the Eel River (Madley, 2016, p. 283). Just south of Eureka, in Bucksport all the residents of the Wiyot village there were murdered (Unknown, 1860, p. 1). The Wiyot had been considered as “peaceful and industrious” by many of the settlers and “seemed to have perfect faith in the good will of the whites,” a statement that seems to be counter to the actions of those settlers who carried out the premeditated murders that engulfed the Wiyot world (Lord, 1860, p.2). The Wiyot were not strangers to the settlers, they lived in and around the communities that had been built on their ancestral lands, yet not even the most familiar of Wiyot was spared the torment and despair of that night. The wife, mother, sister, two brothers and two children of “Bill” of Mad River, who by all accounts was well acquainted with and held in high regard by the settlers were butchered on the Island that night (Rossiter, 1860, p. 4).

In the days and weeks following the massacre, passengers on the steamer Columbia which sailed between Eureka and San Francisco provided accounts to the Daily Evening Bulletin. Upon his arrival in the city, J. A. Lord (1860) related that simultaneous attacks on Wiyot villages around Humboldt Bay occurred that night, with not less than two hundred killed in Eureka and forty to fifty killed in the south of the bay. Lord (1860) indicated that the attacks had possibly been coordinated and carried out by farmers and grazers from the Eel River Valley who suspected the
Wiyots of having been trading large amounts of beef with the mountain Indians in exchange for providing them with supplies and asylum (p. 2). The accounts of Lord were expanded upon a few weeks later by Rossiter (1860) who said that the attack was, “one of the cruelest and inhuman massacres that have ever occurred in this county – I may say, California” (p. 4). He attributed the attack on Duluwat to “white fiends” who had suspected the Wiyot of providing supplies of ammunition to the Indians in the Bald Hills (p. 4). Rossiter (1860) was clear that while these attacks had been carried out by citizens of the county, “Most of the people at Eureka and vicinity were bitter in their denunciation of the wholesale slaughter” (p. 4).

In the years after, Gunther would build a Victorian mansion on the island and continue to purchase tracts of land until he owned the entirety of the Island (Shaw, 1991). His early desire for justice was replaced by his own economic and social climbing interests. Even the desire of the community determination to identify the individuals responsible fell by the wayside as the grand jury that was empaneled to bring the perpetrators to justice end with no individual or group accountable for the actions of that night (Crandell, 2005). After Gunther’s death, the island held on to his name for several decades (Shaw, 1991).

The Island parcels went through several changes in ownership over the years. The parcel that included the village of Tuluwat became home to a ship repair facility that operated from approximately 1870 until sometime in the 1980s (Dorn, 2004). Except for fourteen privately held parcels, the City of Eureka gained possession of much of the Island in the years after Gunther’s death. The victimization of the Wiyot continued as pot hunters looted the Tuluwat for artifacts, some of which found their way into collections of the local Clarke Museum (Shaw, 1991). The City of Eureka restricted access to the Island through the issuing of permits, one which was held by the Museum for its staff and volunteers to come and go from the Island as needed (Unknown, 1970).

**Memorialization to Return**

It would be over a century before the massacre would receive an official acknowledgment from the community and national government. In 1964, Indian Island was designated as a National Historic Landmark. Because there is no public access to the island, without a permit, a plaque memorializing the tragedy was erected across the channel on Woodley Island. At the time, the
plaque was mounted on a wooden post at the far end of a parking lot. The wooden structure was replaced in May 1991 with a new plaque affixed to a boulder at the location (Shaw, 1991).

On February 24, 1970, at the request of Mr. and Mrs. Albert James, descendants of survivors of the massacre, the City of Eureka closed the Island to visitors. Mr. and Mrs. James, along with Dr. Tom Parsons (1970), Director of the Center for Community Development at Humboldt State University, presented the request to the City Council noting “that a considerable amount of artifacts had been dug from burial mounds on the Island” (Unknown, 1970, p. 13) by amateur archeologists and then sold. Among the items that had been dug up and removed from the Island were the human remains of those that had been killed in the 1860 massacre. The City acted to close the Island to the public immediately and revoked permits including the one held by the Clarke Museum.

In February 1992, descendants of the survivors of the massacre gathered at the far end of the parking lot on Woodley Island near the new plaque for the first of twenty-two annual candlelight vigils to mourn the victims and bring the community together to start the healing and reconciliation process. The goal was to bring the community together to start the process of facing the past and to move into the future (Tam, 2010). Regardless of the weather conditions, the candlelight vigil took place each year until February 2014 when the last vigil was held. In assessing the effectiveness of the vigil to promote healing, Marylee Rhode noted that “It’s been a disappointment to me that I haven’t seen more of the white population of Eureka interested in the vigil. But we have seen participation increase over the years from the Wiyots and other Native Americans. When I look back at the civil rights movement, I think maybe healing must happen with victims first, before the perpetrators can acknowledge their wounds” (Kowinski, 2004, para. 22).

In May 2001, the Arcata Baptist Church hosted an apology and reconciliation event, “Many Nations, One Voice” to apologize to the Wiyot for the massacre of 1860. Pastor Clay Ford was moved to act when he learned that there had been no apology to the Wiyot or validation of the atrocity. The Humboldt Evangelical Alliance, a coalition of fifteen Christian churches, joined Pastor Ford and the Arcata Baptist Church in their effort of reconciliation. The Arcata Baptist Church issued a formal apology to the Wiyot, reading it to those present, including a delegation of the Wiyot lead by Tribal Chairwoman Cheryl Seidner. The motivation for the apology came from the recognition by the Arcata Baptist Church and the Humboldt Evangelical Alliance that the
Wiyot were sharing historical and cultural knowledge with the non-Indian community to address the century-old wound that had been inflicted in those early morning hours of February 26, 1860. Efforts of reconciliation did not end at the close of the event; the Arcata Baptist Church donated more than $4,300 to the Wiyot Tribe in 2003 (Nelson, 2008). That donation was added to the Wiyot Sacred Site Fund that had been established to raise funds to purchase back parcels on the island, as well as other sites of cultural significance. In 2000, the Wiyot Tribe purchased the 1.5-acre Tuluwat village site for $106,000.00 with financial assistance from local and national contributors to the Fund (Donahue, 2013). This purchase marked the first time that Wiyot would hold title to their center of their world since 1860.

On June 25, 2004, Eureka City Mayor Peter La Vallee would make history by carrying out the unanimous decision by the Eureka City Council to return 40-acres of Indian Island to the Wiyot, by signing the deed to transfer the City-owned parcel to the Wiyot Tribe. The City became the first municipality in the United States to return ancestral lands to an indigenous nation (Dorn, 2004). The process for the transfer of the land that held the burial grounds and a shell midden had started two and a half years early. When asked what the historical significance of the transfer of the land back to the Wiyot was, Chairwoman Cheryl Seidner responded,

As I have been told, this has not happened in any city in the state of California, and I'm hearing that this might be something really new across the nation. I don't know. I can't tell you that for sure. Somebody asked me, ‘When did you start working toward getting the island back?’ I said, 'The day after the massacre: Feb. 27, 1860. That's when we started. (as cited in Dorn, 2004, para. 69)

When they made the motion, Chris Kerrigan, who is the youngest member of the City [Council] gave a very emotional speech. I did not know how emotional people were. I was really stunned. My sister [Leona Wilkenson] (sic) and I showed almost no emotion when it was all going on; we just sat there and listened. He made the motion; Mary Beth Wolford seconded the motion. Everyone was tight in the throat, on the verge of tears... (as cited in Dorn, 2004, para. 71)

There's a time for everything. It may not have been time 30 years ago nor 100 years ago. The time was right: May 18, 2004. That was our time, I believe. (as cited in Dorn, 2004, para. 73)

Having purchased and been deeded back the lands that had been lost on the Island, the Wiyot prepared to return to the village of Tuluwat. The shipyard that had been built over Tuluwat contaminated much of the ground, and the Tribe was unable to utilize the property immediately. The Tuluwat Project was initiated by the Wiyot Tribe’s Natural Resources Department and according to their website the purpose of the project is “to restore the cultural heritage and
ecological resources of the site and the surrounding salt marsh” ("Wiyot Tribe,” 2017). With the cooperation of federal and state agencies, the process of restoring and decontaminating the natural environment around the village site and adjacent shoreline began (Tam, 2010). Though the restoration process continued, partnering agencies determined that the land was safe for the Tribe to return and complete the World Renewal Ceremony. In preparation for their return to Tuluwat, the Wiyot brought the candlelight vigils to an end in February 2014, signifying the end of a century and a half of mourning and the start of the transition to a time of celebration and hope (Houston, 2014).

From Apology to Support

In the months preceding the Wiyot’s return to Tuluwat, the City of Eureka prepared to take an extraordinary step in reconciliation by issuing a formal apology to the Wiyot for the atrocity that had been committed in 1860 (Rodriguez, 2014). The City of Eureka as a governmental entity was neither an organizer, supporter or perpetrator of the massacre and there was no pressure from the citizens of Eureka or the state or national government to issue an apology (Nelson, 2008). On March 17, 2014, Mayor Frank Jäger drafted a letter of apology which was sent out to the local media with notification that it would be voted on at the City Council meeting the next day (Walters, 2014). In that letter, Mayor Jäger (2014) offered a formal apology for the events of February 26, 1860, and claimed:

As Mayor of Eureka, on behalf of the City Council and the people of Eureka, we would like to offer a formal apology to the Wiyot people for the actions of our people in 1860. Nothing we can say or do can make up for what occurred on that night of infamy. It will forever scar our history. We can, however, with our present and future actions of support for the Wiyot, work to remove the prejudice and bigotry that still exists in our society today (Jäger, 2014, para 3)

Local media covered the apology letter extensively not just as a human-interest story but as an event that had no precedent. Mayor Jäger (2014) captured the significance of the apology in his response to a journalist’s question,

it was appropriate that we formally apologize as a city to the Wiyot Tribe for what happened because I don't think anybody’s apologized to them... Over the years, people have expressed outrage and anger over what happened, but I don't think anyone apologized for what happened that day. (as cited in Rodriguez, 2014)
On Tuesday, March 18, a second draft of the letter was prepared by City staff, with input and review by the City Attorney, for consideration by the City Council that evening with significantly altered language. Absent from the new draft was the apology that had been initially proposed. The new language read,

As Mayor of Eureka, on behalf of the City Council and the people of Eureka, we offer our support to the Wiyot Tribe and re-affirm our commitment toward healing the Wiyot people’s wounds and continuing to work toward establishing better relationships rooted in reconciliation. The continuation of the Wiyot Renewal Ceremony is a step toward the healing of the wounds that have a scar on our community. (“City of Eureka,” 2014, para. 3)

As Mayor, I promise that I will provide the support that is needed to build a solid foundation for positive relations, now and in the future between the City of Eureka and the Wiyot Tribe. (“City of Eureka,” 2014, para. 4)

The second draft acknowledged the wrongs inflicted on both the Wiyot and non-native communities by the massacre yet fell short of the initial intentions. Fear of financial liability to the City drove the changes to the language. At the City Council meeting, both the first and second drafts of the letter were taken up and debated. The concern about the potential liability of the City by adopting the first draft of the letter was reflected in City Council Member Mike Newman’s request to City Attorney Cindy Day-Wilson to clarify the potential risk to the City that could arise out of a formal apology. The City Attorney responded, “There’s always potential when you put something in writing that someone’s going to take it and use it for purposes you did not intend…” (“Second Draft of Letter,” 2014, para. 9). The fear of liability was so potent that the City Attorney strongly discouraged even the labeling of the second draft as a “letter of apology” (Walters, 2014). In the second draft, the words “support” and “a commitment toward healing” replaced “formal apology,” leaving the intent of the March 17 draft to linger as a ghost (Burns 2014). When asked about the changes to the draft language of the letter Mayor Jäger (2014) responded, “in meeting with the city attorney [and] staff, they felt the language was a little strong and should be a little different” (Burns, 2014, para. 9).

This change in language provided the opportunity for the local online publication, The Lost Coast Outpost, to take the liberty to express its views on the impact of the letter. An article covering City Council’s decision to revise the letter included the following statement:

Yesterday it seemed the massacre was ‘a scar on our history’ that would last forever. Today, things are looking up. Our communal wounds are on the mend. Better yet,
there’s no sign of prejudice or bigotry in today’s society. (Burns, 2014, para. 8)

The Lost Coast Outpost sarcastic retort to the changes in the language to the letter captured a sentiment that was shared by many. The time had come to formally and officially acknowledge the actions of the settlers in the near annihilation of the Wiyot, not out of a legal obligation but because it was the right thing to do.

**Conclusion: Localized Healing and Reconciliation**

The massacre of the Wiyot in 1860 and the contemporary responses to it, present an opportunity to understand what occurred and how it impacted the native and non-native communities. It also presents an opportunity to understand how healing can be addressed at a local level. The non-native citizenry was not responsible for initiating the process of healing. Rather it was the descendants of the survivors of the attack that welcomed the entire community to join in remembrance of those who had lost their lives. Not placing blame or demanding reparations, the candlelight vigils each year where actions of reconciliation and hoped to return to Tuluwat to complete the unfinished ceremony of 1860.

While not achieving its initial intent to apologize, the City of Eureka did make a good faith attempt to acknowledge the atrocities of the past and to commit itself to supporting the efforts of the Wiyot in the future. As the City and the Wiyot move forward, it will be incumbent upon the City to make its actions live up to its words. The City has placed itself at the forefront of local municipal efforts in the reconciliation of historical trauma. To maintain this position, it will be incumbent on the City to maintain its pledge of support and the agreement on the potential land transfer to maintain this leadership role in local healing and reconciliation. Drawing on the City’s transfer of land back to the Wiyot and its attempt at apologizing, other municipalities can model upon these efforts as an example of what actions they may take to further efforts of healing and reconciliation at the local level. While not all efforts will be popular or successful, attempt should be made to further the cause of reconciliation between the native and non-native communities. Through these actions of reconciliation, a holistic local, regional and national history will emerge, and the demons of this nation's past will be laid to rest.

(Image of Indian Island)

Illustration 3: Aerial view of Indian Island and Humboldt Bay. Shuster Collection, Humboldt State University Library.
References


NOTES

1 A Note on Terminology: The term “Indian” is used in this work to refer all Indigenous people in the Humboldt Bay area; in the late 1800’s, the decision to use this term is based on its legal definition in the United States as defined in 25 U.S. Code § 2201. When referring to a specific tribe, the name of that tribe is used.