

*Article for News from Native California*

*By Greg Sarris*

*December 7, 2006*

Iris

Spring.

Mabel McKay, renowned Pomo basket weaver and doctor, she told me about this, too. Spring. "Coming out time," she said. Which was how the season was described, quite literally, by many Native California cultures. New growth, blossoms, sedge sprouting on creek banks - - when, after winter, it is no longer safe to tell stories, not only because you must pay attention to where you are going, watchful for snakes and such, but because you too are coming out, becoming story. Living again; living new. Tribes had ceremonies to mark the season. Often every plant and tree was named, every creature even, lest the people forget it, and it, in turn, forgets the people. Mabel recalled the Sectu, or ceremonial leader, in Colusa standing atop the Roundhouse entrance at dawn one spring morning, facing east, announcing each part of Creation, as if in that faint light the world itself was emerging for the first time.

I remember Linda (not her real name). Spring, the miracle of continuation; yes, it's Linda I see. She had relatives on the Kashaya Pomo Reservation, and she took me there once to the Strawberry Festival, a ceremony to dedicate the new fruits. Which was where I first saw Essie Parrish, the great Kashaya Pomo prophet, a big woman in ceremonial dress, traditional long skirt and clamshell disc bead necklace - - praying in her language before a table crowded with food, least of which the tin pots and Indian baskets heaped full of bright red strawberries. "Something about spring, Indian things, "Linda attempted to translate, though she didn't know the language either. For the Kashaya Pomo, the wild strawberry was the first fruit of the New Year, and therefore became symbolic of spring. The ceremony - - the costumes, songs, four nights of dancing that preceded the feast - - came from Essie Parrish's Dream. Did Linda know that? I certainly didn't.

That was forty years ago, at least. I didn't know anything then. That I was Indian. That Linda was my cousin. I know about my Coast Miwok heritage now. It's been a long journey - - I'm Chairman of my tribe, The Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. We are Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo, descendants of a handful of survivors from Marin and southern Sonoma

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Counties. We struggle to start anew a spring tradition. We offer prayers in languages we are re-learning, listen to songs found on wax cylinders in museums and university libraries. I've learned some history. And always there's Mabel, deceased, whose advice I nonetheless never forget. Yet it's Linda I recall - - and not because she took me to the Strawberry Festival, my first so-called Indian ceremony. Frankly, I didn't think much about it. No, what comes out new, magic to the eye, is a story and it starts with Linda.

Simple enough - - I had a crush on her. I'd see her in first hall, not far from my locker, talking with her sister, friends. Heaps of black hair. Eyeliner and lipstick, a mole planted with a brow pencil above the corner of her mouth. She was a woman. She wore tight black skirts - - girls had to wear dresses to school in those days - - and colorful silky blouses. She offered her friends only a meager nod, a half-tilt of the chin, the tough girl greeting - - no phony smiles, no popular girl routine. I didn't have a chance. I wasn't a tough guy. Anyone remember them - - the guys in skin-tight 401's and white t-shirts, one sleeve rolled up holding a soft pack of Camels above a bulging and, if really a tough guy, tattooed bicep? I was a late bloomer: flat-limbed and soft-faced; fourteen and I looked like a twelve year old, or worse, a girl, sporting an oily pompadour. I lived in a middle class neighborhood. I was white - - everyone knew the toughest guys were Indian or Mexican. I got the nod one day, but what to say? Ask if she wanted a cigarette? Did I have any cigarettes?

Then some luck. Ritchie, the guy who sat in front of me in Math, was Linda's cousin. But it wasn't Ritchie who afforded me an introduction. It was Tommy Baca, the one-armed house painter who had given me, years before, the crossbreed steer I named Harry - - Tommy Baca was Ritchie's uncle, and Linda's, which I learned from Ritchie in an unrelated conversation.

I told her I know her cousin. She narrowed her eyes, sizing me up I figured. Had she really given me a no, or had I imagined as much? My stomach was in knots. What if one of her friends came along and caught her talking to this gangly kid? Would she say something to humiliate me?

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“Ritchie?” she finally said. Her mouth barely moved, as if even the name of her cousin she intended to keep to herself.

I told her no and mentioned Tommy’s son, which caught her off guard, then launched into a pathetic story about Harry, who ended up on dinner plates in the “Saddle and Sirloin”.

She offered the faintest smile. At lunch that day she handed me a note folded eight times into a hard square: “You are my friend. L.”

We walked the halls after that, sat together at lunch time. I learned who she liked and who she didn’t. Which girls she wanted to “kick their asses.” I met her sister, her friends. I met tough people, the really tough people. Everything changed. People looked at me differently. The hoods noticed me. Teachers glared with reproach, albeit some confusion. The most noticeable reactions came from kids in my neighborhood: my association with Linda violated social and racial codes. I had enemies. “Greaser,” “spic-lover,” this latter as if Linda was Mexican - - I heard those names. The week before Christmas vacation, a kid named Steve, whose father owned a plumbing company, knocked me to the ground. I fought back, despite the fact he was older and nearly twice my size. Black eye, sort of, definitely a split lip, visible the next day at school. Two of Linda’s friends, older, one a high school drop out, found Steve on his way home from school alone and, as Linda reported to me, “beat him until he was crying like a baby.”

Linda and I walked uptown, too. We spent hours after school and on Saturdays walking. We looked in storefront windows, made fun of the mannequins in Rosenberg’s Department Store, and of anyone on the street, particularly women affecting airs, aloof like the mannequins pointing in one direction with stiff plastic fingers while gazing to the heavens with glass eyes. We followed Fourth Street, Santa Rosa’s Main Street, from the old train station at one end, just past a string of pawn shops and The Silver Dollar, a corner dive with black-painted dollar signs embossed on the saloon-style swinging front doors, back up to Rosenberg’s and further on to the Flamingo Hotel, which marked the other end of Fourth Street with its revolving neon flamingo atop a freestanding sixty foot tower. We rested in Old courthouse Square, sat close together on a

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bench. Unsure of what to do - - I was unsure of what to do - - at this juncture, as if it was the next step in a ritual that had begun with the walking, we continued talking about people, passersby.

This one walked like a duck, that one's socks were different colors.

"I used to think they were married," Linda said one day after school, and then laughed at herself.

I hadn't been watching. When I looked, I saw two old Indians, sixty plus, him in a sport coat and Fedora hat, her in a house dress and scarf, making their way up the street. It was getting late, the street lights already on, and the two of them seemed to have appeared from the darkness behind them, coming slowly into the light of the square. They seemed unaware of one another, or of anyone else, gazing at everything and nothing at the same time, as if they were lost, two old people in a strange city, or children abandoned at a fair. They stopped at the corner, and after the light changed and they crossed the street, they were gone, into the darkness, just as they had come.

"Yeah, looks like it," I said, not sure about what else to say.

The woman was a friend's grandmother; the old man her brother. I'd met the friend while hanging out with Linda and often visited his house, a small place behind the fairgrounds, where the old man - - Uncle, they called him - - sat on the front porch dressed, even on hot Santa Rosa afternoons, in the same pleated sport coat and Fedora hat. He was a big man, heavy set and solid. He could do anything, the friend said - - Uncle was an Indian doctor. He pulled a bird's leg bone out of his sister's eye once. He could see the future by holding hot coals in his hands. Then, one day, when a bunch of us piled into a car with an older kid, after we left Uncle in his aluminum folding chair on the front porch, there he was minutes later two miles uptown on a bench in the square, waving to us as we stopped for a red light - - I saw that. "Uncle's got wings," someone whispered when the light changed.

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Mabel told me, many years later, that Uncle was the last of the old time doctors, trained here on the earth. They followed a strict regimen of abstinence from meat and sexual relations. "Lots of rules," Mabel said. And, yes, they could do stupendous things, like traveling as fast as a hummingbird. In fact, Uncle spooked Mabel once. She was with Essie Parrish, the two of them enjoying a soda at the counter in Thrifty's, when Uncle, sport coat and Fedora hat, appeared outside the window. Attempting to escape him, the two fearful ladies boarded a bus, only to find him at the other end of town, waiting for them when they got off the bus. "Playing with us," Mabel chuckled. When my friend told me the stories about Uncle, even after the incident I witnessed in the square, I said nothing. It felt like none of my business, and if I were to ask questions, it would only highlight the fact that I was an outsider. If Linda had heard similar things, still it was not my business to remark or ask questions - - she was an Indian. I kept thinking about Uncle and his sister, though. What of the manner the two of them appeared just then, out of nowhere, walking with the measured steps of old people yet effortlessly, gliding, or was I imagining as much because of what I had witnessed and the stories I had heard? Where were they off to on a cold winter's evening?

It seems funny now when I think of those junior high school days. Linda's father and my father were second cousins, something like that, both grandsons or great-grandsons of Tom Smith, the famous, sometimes infamous, Coast Miwok Indian doctor known as much for his supernatural feats, which include causing the 1906 earthquake, as for his many wives. Was he something of an "earth doctor" like Uncle? Seems he didn't abstain from sexual relations. He had over twenty children. One of his wives, Linda's great-grandmother, was Kashaya Pomo from the Haupt Ranch in northern Sonoma County; another, my great-great grandmother, was Coast Miwok from Tomales Bay in Marin County. The trick and circumstance of history: I had a crush on Linda. One generation and the connection was broken. We were complete strangers. I was white and lost in her world. I was adopted; rumor had it that my natural father might be Mexican, a mantra I repeated to Linda. Never mind - - blue eyes, fair skin, from a good part of town, I was white. Linda was Indian: her mother was Indian too, Coast Miwok, in fact the granddaughter of Maria Copa, who not only assisted Tom Smith doctoring the sick, but, with him, helped a U.C. Berkeley graduate student compile descriptions of Coast Miwok traditions and a vocabulary.

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Spring activities, spring traditions - - the history Linda and I share which I think of now also. Tom Smith, for instance. From pictures I have seen he was a stout man, broad-faced with heavy, you might say weary, eyes; in one picture, where he is standing, it looks as if his left leg is slightly bowed. I imagine him atop his Roundhouse on Jenner Point, above the wide mouth of the Russian River, facing east to the first light of day, visible above the jagged line of hills. Naming oaks, buckeyes, berries, clovers, willow, pepper grass, angelica; and animals, too, and birds. Maria Copa was there. She heard the names of things. She watched the river find itself in that light, twist and lengthen to the sea. Paths everywhere... There were lots of coming out ceremonies then, songs for after a girl's first menses, new woman songs, and the secret cults, the songs and arduous tasks, whereby a boy becomes a man.

I had to kiss Linda. It was expected. Enough walking, enough talking. I wanted to kiss her. I planned to make my move on a Saturday night. Did tough guys plan such things? Us kids hung out inside an abandoned garage at the end of Sixth Street, just below the newly constructed 101 Freeway. It was next to Randy's house; Randy, who was white but real tough. His sister knew Hell's Angels. His father tended bar at the Silver Dollar, two blocks away; and his mother, who drank at the bar, often grew impatient waiting for his father and wandered home, where she'd push up the kitchen window and holler hoarse-voiced for Randy to "come down outta there," meaning the second floor of the garage. Each time I heard her, I remembered the story of how she once struck one of Randy's friends with a hammer. We had a transistor radio up there, a table and chairs, and mattresses placed strategically in dark corners. I was even thinking about which mattress we'd end up on, which side of the room.

I went to her house first. As if, at fourteen, I had arrived to escort her to a formal dinner or something. We sat on the couch, a respectable distance apart. At one point, her mother came into the room, and then, without acknowledging me, without saying a word to either of us, returned to the kitchen, where she was playing cards with a couple of her sisters, Linda's aunts. Linda said her mother knew my father, my adopted father. I was excited: apparently, Linda had talked to her mother about me. I told Linda my parents were divorced now, my mother was working at JC Penney's to help support the family. I thought that the family hard luck would

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impress Linda. "My father, all he did was drink," I said. Then I overheard her mother in the kitchen say something about "big eyes." Did she mean me? Was I being nosey? - - Is that what her mother thought of me?

It was the end of February then, maybe the beginning of March. It was cold outside. We walked in the dark, under a canopy of bushy trees that lined the street. Upstairs, in Randy's garage, it wasn't any warmer; and the two candles, upright in coffee mugs, didn't give much light either. We sat at the table with the others - - Randy and his girlfriend; two Mexican guys and a Mexican girl - - and talked in hushed voices. A song played on the transistor. Randy smoked. He talked about the end of the world: A friend of his mother's read a prophecy in the Bible and had determined, from certain current events, that the world would end at twelve o'clock New Year's the following year. Randy talked a lot about the end of the world up there, and then we did too. I would be fifteen when the world ended. I heard voices in one corner, on a mattress, but didn't dare look to see, or ask, who it was - - I didn't want to be nosey. It was freezing. I was holding Linda's hand. Linda finished a cigarette, rubbing it out in the ash tray with her free hand, then said she was still cold, which I took as my cue: now we must head to a mattress. Which one? I couldn't stand up and have a discussion about it. I was supposed to know. I let go of her hand and took hold of her elbow, securing her arm, without knowing where I was going to lead her - - should I ask first if she wanted to go to a mattress? - - when, all at once, I heard Randy's mother. I was distracted, consumed with worry over my predicament with Linda, and it wasn't until I heard "shits" and "sons of bitches" and saw the swirl of commotion as everyone was fleeing the table, that I understood Randy's mother wasn't inside the house next door, but at the bottom of the stairs. Then I heard her on the stairs.

Linda was already gone. I was alone at the table. I turned, walked two steps to the window, and jumped. Not two floors down, but onto the freeway embankment - - the garage was that close. I'd seen other kids jump; still, I felt brave. I climbed onto the freeway, into the bright lights and whirl of traffic. It was what, ten o'clock, and the freeway, even in a then much quieter northern California, was busy. I flew to the center divider, then, when it was clear, tore the rest of the way across, and came back down the other side to the safer, better-lighted part of town.

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I debated whether or not to go back. Most everyone would be scattered. Truth was, I was afraid to encounter Randy's mother. I thought of Linda. She probably went home. I told myself I missed my chance. But I was confident I would have another opportunity. Didn't we both know that? I told myself that the next time things would go smoothly. I pictured us going to the mattress, my hand still clutching her elbow, but by then I was already heading over to Fourth Street, going home.

Saturday nights Fourth Street was crowded with flashy cars filled with teenagers who hurled insults as well as flirtations from open windows - - old style cruising. I found the wide street more congested than usual, however. Cars were stopped, moving only at a snail's pace when they did move. The sidewalks were bustling, not just with the usual Saturday night teenagers leaning against their parked cars, but with folks of all ages, families even, mothers and fathers with kids in hand. I had crossed town earlier following College Avenue, five blocks away, and totally missed the busy scene. Old Courthouse Square was jammed. There I saw folks collected before antique cars - - Model T's, Packard's - - that lined the square on both sides, and understood immediately the reason for the hubbub - - a car show on display the entire weekend, apparently. Never mind the cold weather and rambunctious teenagers, people wanted to see the cars.

I kept on my way, passing the square. I'd had enough for the night. I was in front of Rosenberg's when I heard the jeer. Something about "get you" from out of the racket of car radios and idling engines. I paid no attention. Then I saw a reflection in the store front window: a face framed, as if in a square box, coming out at me. When I turned, I saw it was Steve, the guy who beat me up, hanging out of a car window.

"You're dead, punk."

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I froze; in fact, the whole world froze, Steve, the car, everything as still as the mannequin in the window next to me. Only the din of engines and music above the line of cars, and perhaps it was that disembodied noise that brought me back to my senses: I thought to run.

There were other guys in the car with Steve. He could've gotten out of the car then - - he was in the front passenger seat and the car was stopped in traffic - - but for whatever reason he didn't. Which I realized when, a good ways down the block, I turned for the first time to look. No one was chasing me. But the car had its turn signal on. I figured Steve and his friends would come back around the block for me. The car was inching closer to the intersection. I scrambled onto a side street, around a corner, nearly careening into Uncle and his sister approaching Fourth Street. They were walking in the same aloof, haphazard manner as before, as I recall now. And Uncle was wearing his sport coat and Fedora hat; his sister bundled in a heavy overcoat, perhaps and extra layer of scarves - - I wasn't looking. I do know the old woman hissed with admonishment, as if I'd actually smashed into her, a reckless kid, and Uncle made grunting sounds, which I took, in the moment I heard him, as a sign of irritation also. They were in front of an alley. I cut down the dark path and dove behind a row of garbage cans.

I didn't look back or up. Tires screeched in the distance, horns. I crouched in the dirt, as comfortable as possible. Ten minutes later headlights shone at the start of the alley. The car rolled toward the garbage can and stopped. Was I magnet for my own doom? I didn't think Steve was able to see where I went; certainly he couldn't have seen me go into the alley once I was off of Fourth Street, much less hide behind these particular garbage cans. Stay or flee? All at once, clunk, a bottle landed squarely in the can next to me. A woman's voice escaped the still open window, "Not here, James," and the car rolled away.

The next morning, arising late, I found myself outside, alone in an astonishingly warm day. The sun was daffodil yellow. The night had rolled seamlessly into this moment, it seemed. My mother had left for work, my siblings off wherever. Sunday morning. I sat on the street curb

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and lit a cigarette. Across the street, in the neighbor's yard, an iris grew up, rich purple. Flag lilies, people used to call them. Indeed. I went over and smelled the deep inside of the flower, fecund; then sat back down, now facing my mother's house. Right then I was certain I was a tough guy. I could take care of myself. Iris.

The night before I'd kept hidden an hour, if that. Of course, I'd like to have thought Steve found me and that I cleverly got away, maybe even fist fought him and won, or at least rattled my bones in the cold until the first light of day. As far as I knew, Steve and his friends never came close to the alley, if they even bothered looking for me. I don't know; I never again encountered him. I walked home following empty streets.

Maybe it was a confluence of things that made me feel so confident that next morning - - the weather, a harbinger of spring, if not a proclamation of its arrival; the cigarette between my fingers; the iris. I ended up kissing Linda once, that is, before she took up with an older, much tougher guy than me. She's gone on with her life now. I'm sitting here remembering all of this. As it turned out, I would get to know Uncle and his sister better; certainly his sister, who in her latter years, before she died at the age of 101, I came to call Grandma. The family tells me that Uncle and Grandma used to feel sorry for me, that I was always one of their favorites. Hobo boy, they called me. That night, at the entrance to the alley, I didn't think to imagine they as much as recognized me even. But, if the family is right, might Uncle, in his sport coat and Fedora hat that night, not have been grunting in irritation, but instead singing a lost boy on his way?