

# On Sacred Places

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Tom Smith. A simple name. Not so the man. My great-great-grand-father. Father and grandfather and great-grandfather to many Coast Miwok and Pomo people. I've told stories about him, stories I have heard, stories others tell: how he performed miracles healing the sick and built the last traditional Coast Miwok roundhouse on the point at Jenner, above the mouth of the Russian River, and orchestrated time immemorial Coast Miwok ceremonies there; how he charmed women with songs gathered like abalone from special rocks under the waters of Bodega Bay; how in a contest of power with the powerful Kashaya Pomo doctor Big Jose, he caused the 1906 earthquake, winning—as if that's what we could call winning—the contest once and for all. Trickster. And, yes, holy man.

Two stories exist regarding the whereabouts of his grave. Some people say he was buried on the eastern side of Highway One, just below a slight slope facing Bodega Bay. That place, which has been pointed out to me, puts him under the parking lot of a gas station. An elder in our tribe says he is quite certain that he attended Grandpa Tom's funeral in 1934 and that Grandpa Tom wasn't buried at said aforementioned place, but in the small "Indian" cemetery on the west side of the highway. If this is accurate, then Grandpa Tom, like many of our people buried there, lies in an unmarked grave. Wherever he is buried, the place is sacred. Most everyone would agree.

But the uncertainty regarding the exact place of Tom Smith's grave raises a question beyond itself, about the very notion of what we call a sacred place and how we

think about it. First off, let me ask the question: If indeed we could determine for certain that Grandpa Tom is buried in the old Indian cemetery, and we could ascertain the exact location of the grave, would we then render the place under the gas station not sacred? One might argue that only the place where the holy man's bones lie is sacred; therefore, the earth below the gas station is not sacred, or at least not as sacred, not requiring the same kind of noted regard. We could then set out to mark several places associated with Tom Smith—and the Coast Miwok people—as sacred. Certainly the knoll overlooking the mouth of the Russian River where our last traditional roundhouse stood would be one such place. And we can't forget the two hills above the bay where Grandpa Tom prayed and received several songs and visions. And, if we're concerned with marking his grave, then we must go to Coleman Valley and determine the place of his birth there and mark it, too. And his questionable acts, if deemed noteworthy, must be remembered also: where, under the bay's waters, he collected his love songs; the spot near the town of Bodega where he demonstrated his authority to Big Jose. Before long, we could have a map of sacred places, or holy spots, not unlike the ones you can buy in Jerusalem for the Holy Land.

But, really, where do we stop? What is the last place in the territory that we mark? What about the trail above Tomales Bay where Grandpa Tom first sang his songs to Emily Stewart, my great-great-grandmother? Or the Haupt Ranch north of Fort Ross where he sang to Rosie Jarvis, the Kashaya matriarch? Or the canyons along the Russian River where he gathered herbs? Or the beach below Stewart's Point where he spoke to his son Robert about becoming a leader among his mother's (Rosie's) people? Or the field just east of Healdsburg where he raised a dying man to his feet? Or the rancheria in

Middletown where one hot summer night he carried the fog with him from the coast?  
What about the herbs and the trees and the birds with their songs, songs Grandpa Tom  
knew? Bodega Bay with its power and secrets and tides?

Eventually a line on a map noting all these places—indeed, the life of Tom  
Smith—would touch upon that place under the Bodega gas station, whether Tom Smith is  
buried there or not. There would be so many places and connecting lines, in fact, that the  
map would finally look like a tightly woven, intricately designed Miwok basket. The  
patterns would circle around, endless, beautiful, so that the map would, in the end,  
designate the territory in its entirety as sacred. Each place, each person, you and me, the  
earth, water, and sky, inseparable, fully connected. We would begin to see what the old-  
timers called the everlasting: our unwavering connection to all things, and, hence, to God.  
We'd also be able to see where there are breaks in the pattern, illnesses; or, at least, the  
potential for illness and disease.

Of course, most of us don't see much anymore, not in the old-timer's sense of  
connectedness, anyway. We mark a sacred spot here, a sacred spot there. But let's  
remember why we mark a place as sacred to begin with. Isn't it because we want to  
remember something profound, something significant with regard to an understanding of  
our world? Imagine the waters of Bodega Bay concealing a place of powerful love  
medicine. Imagine a route from the bay over the steep hills to Lake County as the "road"  
for a person carrying fog on his or her shoulders. For the Coast Miwok people, all  
features of the landscape—rocks, bays, a gully—served as mnemonic pegs on which  
hung stories teaching and reminding us how to live with respect for the earth and waters.

Much of our landscape and seascape has now been demolished. Our Bible, if you will, has been destroyed, only a page remaining here, a page remaining there. If, as it turns out, Tom Smith is buried under the parking lot of a gas station, what can we do? The damage has been done. Yet, we can still remember that place, and we can begin to mark other places not yet destroyed. These places can still teach us, remind us that as we live in the Bay Area each one of us has an opportunity to learn about and remember the places, and the power to affect their well-being. (The less we drive—and hopefully we drive small cars—the fewer gas stations, for instance.)

But, at the same time, we must not forget the larger power of these places and what they can afford us. If we want to identify and mark a place as sacred, say if we really could determine the exact location of Grandpa Tom Smith's grave, we must also see that place as only the beginning, the knot a basket weaver ties to start her basket, from which a sacred world rolls out and coils around us in every direction. It is the place we start our journey, looking around and listening to stories associated with that place, stories that might help us understand how we have been separated from the sacred and how we might once again be connected. It's a place that can remind us of what the Coast Miwok people always believed: The sacred is everywhere, in everything, and in us. In the old roundhouse above the Russian River, Grandpa Tom often spoke of this all-encompassing notion of sacredness and place. Gesturing with his hand to the earth and heavens, he admonished us: Remember.