

“The Last Woman from Petaluma”

By

Greg Sarris

The Last Woman from Petaluma

Her Indian name, or at least one of her Indian names, the only one any of us know, was Tsupu. She was my great-great-grandfather's mother, or my great-great-great grandmother, and, again as far as any of us know, the last native of Petaluma, not the city we know today, but the ancient Coast Miwok village of the same name. Certainly, she was the last to pass down any memory of the place. She was quite young, perhaps fourteen, when she left, beginning what would become a chaotic, wholly incredible journey to find and keep a home in and about Sonoma County. Though the village was abandoned once and for all after the 1838 smallpox epidemic claimed its remaining citizens and though American farmers demolished its large midden, using the centuries-old refuge of decomposed shells for fertilizer, eradicating any trace of the village, Tsupu never forgot it. The last time she visited she was completely blind, yet nodding with her chin to an empty hillside, she said "there," as if she could see Petaluma plain as day, tule huts and fire smoke.

The village was atop a low hill, east of the Petaluma River, located about three and a half miles northeast of the present city of Petaluma. Petaluma in Coast Miwok means "Sloping ridge," and, as was often the custom, was no doubt named after that distinct feature of the landscape associated with its location. C. Hart Merriam, a naturalist interested in the Indians of California, wrote in 1907 that "the name Petaluma appears to have come from the Kanamara Pomo (South Pomo) on the north," but, as linguist Catherine A. Callaghan points out, Petaluma is clearly a Coast Miwok word. *peta* · *luma*: slope ridge.

There was never a tribe or nation known as Coast Miwok; the aboriginal people of Petaluma never referred to themselves as such. Linguists and anthropologists, classifying California natives at the turn of the twentieth century by language families, identified the dozen or more distinct aboriginal nations ranging from the southern Santa Rosa plain to the northern tip of the San Francisco Bay as “Coast Miwok” speakers, as opposed to “Pomo” speakers to the north and “Wappo” speakers to the east. While variations in the languages of the Pomo-speaking nations were in some cases so great, different nations could not understand one another, such was not the case with Coast Miwok speakers, where variations consisted mostly in accent, as between British English and American English, and never more diverse than Old English and Modern English, allowing Coast Miwok nations to communicate freely with one another.

Petaluma, a thriving community of at least 500 individuals, was a major village of the *Lekatuit* Nation, whose territory included Petaluma Valley and extended north and west to *Potaawa · yowa*, or Chalk Ground, another large Lekatuit village, once located near the present town of Freestone. Lekatuit, which means “cross-ways willow” in Coast Miwok, was also the name of a village located just a half mile north of the present town of Petaluma, actually closer than the aboriginal village of the same name.

The Petaluma Valley region was prized for its enormous herds of deer and elk as well as for its productive groves of valley oak and black oak. Coast Miwok elder Maria Copa (from Nicasio) told anthropologist Isabel Kelly in 1932 that “deer and elk used to be plentiful in the valley this side of Petaluma [present city] -- just like cattle there [and that] Nicasio people got acorns from the Petaluma Valley.” Ducks and geese flew up from the Petaluma River and its tributaries so thick as to obliterate the sun for an hour at a time, and seasonal swarms of monarch butterflies passing through the Petaluma Valley a mile wide, several miles long, forced the Lekatuit there to take refuge for sometimes a full day. Petaluma, the ancient village, was situated along a major trade

route that stretched south and west through other Coast Miwok villages, and north into Pomo territory and east into Wappo and Wintun territories -- the region's abundant deer and elk and acorn supply positioned its people well to trade for what they needed from other places... And Petaluma was considered a sacred place: On a low hill opposite the hill on which the village was located, Coyote, that sometimes foolish Creator-figure for most California Indian tribes, had his conversation with Chicken Hawk about creating human beings. Again, Maria Copa said, "It was at *wotoke*, a place near Petaluma, that Coyote and *walinapi* [Chicken Hawk] talked first. Coyote was living on a rock on top of that hill."

Tom Smith, my great-great-grandfather, told Isabel Kelly that his mother "was half Petaluma, half Tomales, half Bodega." Despite Tom Smith's problematic math and the fact that no information can be found in mission or church records regarding Tsupu's parents, or, for that matter, for Tsupu, one can surmise that it was Tsupu's father who was from Petaluma, since the custom held that after marriage women joined the husband's family. Tsupu later settled in *Eye · kotca*, or Fruit House, a post-European contact makeshift village in Coleman Valley, in the heart of Bodega Miwok, or Olamentke, territory, where her mother, Tom Smith's grandmother, and his uncles had houses and where Tom Smith was born and grew up. Tsupu's mother more than likely came from Olamentke Nation then, though from which village remains unknown.

Tsupu is the Coast Miwok word for "wild cucumber." A poultice can be made from the plant's juices as an antidote for boils, and the word was sometimes used for "boils" then again for "a cure for boils." Coast Miwok people had many nicknames; whether or not Tsupu was a nickname or a proper name isn't clear. At some point, she was baptized Maria, and even later was referred to as Maria Chekka, or Cheka, suggesting Russian influence, and Maria Chica, suggesting Spanish or Mexican influence. She was also known both as Miss Comtechal and Miss Smith. Ultimately,

she had six children and scores of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and perhaps the many families had as many different names for her. In my family, she was called "Little Grandma." Perhaps she was quite small, shrunken in age, and remembered that way, or maybe she had always been a petite woman.

The relative who told me what little was left in the family about Tsupu, was my father's cousin and lived her entire life in East Los Angeles, specifically Boyle Heights, where both she and my father were born after their mothers escaped Sherman Indian School in the 1920's. "Grandma used to talk a little bit about 'Little Grandma,'" My father's cousin said, closing her eyes as if to drown out the noisy street beyond her front door and picture a woman she had never seen, her grandmother's grandmother. It was a hot, uncomfortable afternoon in 1987, twenty years ago, and I wanted to go as far back and learn as much about my family history as possible. "Grandma was young when she [Little Grandma] died," My father's cousin added. Then all at once she opened her eyes, looking about the room surprised, as if she had awakened suddenly and found herself back in the old days of Petaluma. She said that when Tsupu died she was wearing her finest clothes, a handmade late nineteenth century black dress with a bustle and fitted bodice, and a silk mantilla from the Mexican California period that covered her face and reached to the ground, as if she had dressed for her own funeral. Regardless of whether or not Tsupu was always a small woman, she must have been attractive, even beautiful. She would win the heart of Bodega Bay's most important citizen.

When Tsupu was born, by any estimate about 1820, the village of Petaluma was in crisis. At least a third of its citizens had died within the last ten years of European diseases -- smallpox, pneumonia, syphilis -- to which the natives had no resistance; and the great herds of deer and elk, frightened by blasts from Spanish muskets, were scattering, migrating north, replaced by mission livestock -- cattle, horses, sheep --

which spread foreign seed in dung, giving rise to oat grass, among other invasive species, which supplanted the native bunch grasses and sedges. The Lekatuit, like other California aboriginal nations, had had an intimate relationship with their environment, specifically a seasonal schedule of harvesting, pruning, controlled burning and the like, from which a particular and sustainable ecology had evolved over 5000 years or more. With fewer individuals to tend the landscape, or garden, as we liked to call it, and with a major disruption of native animal and plant habitats, the valley began to appear “wild.”

Coast Miwok show up on mission records as early as 1786, and in great numbers from 1795 to 1803, but these individuals were largely from southern nations -- Huimen, Gualen, and Aguasto. The Spanish made their first incursions into the Petaluma Valley, looking in earnest for Indian recruits for Mission Dolores, in 1814, the year “Petalumas” first appear on mission records. Yet, relatively few “Petalumas” were baptized in the mission; and, later, few “Petalumas” resided in Mission San Rafael established in 1817, after Spanish soldiers had pushed much further north into southern Pomo territory. The Lekatuit, like their southern Pomo neighbors, were known among the Spanish as “rebellious.” No doubt word of mouth from the southern Coast Miwok nations regarding the mistreatment of Indians in the missions impeded the soldiers’ attempts to coerce the Lekatuit and southern Pomo from their villages.

The Lekatuit villagers of Petaluma struggled to maintain traditional lifeways. Tsupu would be schooled by grandparents, as was the custom, specifically her grandmother, in this case her father’s mother, who was born and came of age in Petaluma before European contact, or at least before European contact created significant change and stress in the village. She learned basket weaving, when and where to gather sedge, bulrush, and willow for baskets; she learned when and where to gather acorns, various seeds for pinole, pinenuts, roots, clovers, over two hundred

herbs; she learned how to construct a tule *kotca*, or house; and how to make women's skirts from tule and sew rabbit skins for blankets. She listened to stories: She learned to read the landscape, know its songs, the powers associated with mountains, rocks, streams, an owl or raven's call, clouds and fog, angles of the sun and moon, and, in the nighttime sky, that shifting map of stars.

Petaluma, like most other Coast Miwok villages, was governed by a nonhereditary headman, known as the *hoipu*, and at least two female leaders, or headwomen, the most powerful known as the *maien*, who, as Tom Smith told Isabel Kelly, "bosses everyone, even hoipu." Anyone, but usually a father, could nominate a young man for the position of hoipu, but a committee of four older women not only chose the candidate but was responsible for training him in the art of leadership as well, further illustrating the primacy of women in Coast Miwok government. And because physical warfare was considered the lowest form of power, demonstrating only that an individual possessed no secret spiritual powers to draw upon and therefore could be assaulted without fear of spiritual retribution, referred to as "poisoning," and because women were considered to have an abundance of spiritual powers, usually more than men, rape was unheard of. And while men usually hunted important ceremonial birds -- woodpeckers, mallard ducks, ravens, condors -- it was the women who made the elaborately designed ceremonial capes, skirts, and headdresses with the feathers.

Petaluma had two primary subdivisions, or moieties, within the village, known as "Land" and "Water," which correlated with, and hence connected the villagers to, the same two moieties in other Lekatuit villages and Coast Miwok nations. The moieties helped maintain cohesion between nations and were important when selecting a marriage partner. After her first menses, when she would have been put in a bed of warm sand for five days, Tsupu was tattooed with slight, zigzagging lines extending from each corner of her mouth to below her chin, indicating not only her village and nation but

also her moiety. Tsupu, whether a proper name given 30 days after her birth or a nickname, is a Land name; after her first menses, she would have been given another Land name, albeit a secret name, perhaps selected and thus known only by members of a special women's society.

Empowered individuals, Petaluma women were clever and resourceful, and Tsupu must have watched as her grandmother artfully negotiated traditional culture and values amidst Spanish disruption. But neither would escape unscathed the next, and more violent, wave of immigrants.

Missions San Rafael and Solano (in Sonoma) were secularized by the Mexican government in 1834, and Mexican General Mariano Vallejo had already established a military base at Mission Solano a year earlier. Impressed by General Vallejo's military prowess, and anxious to limit Russian expansion from Fort Ross on the north coast, Governor José Figueroa of Monterey rewarded Vallejo title to a ten-league grant known as Rancho Petaluma, about 60,000 acres, stretching from Lekatuit territory in the west to Mission Solano in the east. General Vallejo built his Rancho headquarters, an adobe fort, on the grasslands in eastern Lekatuit territory.

The Mexicans established an elaborate slave trade, buying and selling Native men and boys on Ranchos, often as far away as Mexico. And Mexican soldiers weren't different from their Spanish predecessors, who, as historian Alan Rosenus notes in General Vallejo And The Advent Of The Americas, "assumed that the exploitation of Indian women was a right of conquest." Sometime in the first days of the Rancho, whether close to its adobe walls or closer to the village of Petaluma, a soldier, or soldiers, found a young girl about fourteen, not a neophyte from the missions in dirty clothing looking for food and work, but a native, bare breasted in a tule skirt, barefoot, and they hauled her into the fort. What happened there no one knows, nor how long -- days, weeks -- she stayed. She escaped, kept an eye open for the unlatched door or

sleeping guard, and began a fifty mile trek north to Fort Ross, perhaps seeing her village as she passed in the dark of night, her last memory of Petaluma then a place of shadows.

Tsupu's journey, whether alone or with other escapees, had to have been difficult. More than likely she traveled west from the Rancho fort to the coast, following a route she had used many times with other Petaluma villagers to trade with Olamentke villagers for Washington clam shells (used as currency when ground into dime-sized discs) and to fish and gather seaweed. And, again, Tsupu's mother had come from an Olamentke village, and Tsupu therefore must have had relatives within the coastal villages. But the land was rife with Mexican soldiers, besides those who may have pursued Tsupu, as well as with early Americans, who could surely take advantage of a fourteen year old Indian girl defenseless in the brush. Juana Bautista, Maria Copa's mother and the last mairen of the Nicasio village, told of being so frightened once at the sound of approaching horses that she lay face down in a dry creek bed and didn't look up, even as she was loaded onto a wagon bed, until she was back at Nicasio several hours later and realized it was her relatives who had picked her up.

After Tsupu forded the Russian River and found herself in Kashaya Pomo territory, following the coastline north toward Fort Ross, the landscape would become increasingly unfamiliar to her. If roving Mexican soldiers and a foreign landscape made the journey dangerous, then so too the animals, particularly grizzly bears, which like other powerful creatures on the land, no longer enjoyed age old agreements with humans regarding shared habitats, and, thus disrupted and hostile, posed a serious threat to unarmed passersby.

In 1834, Fort Ross was a well-established settlement, the Russian's southernmost outpost of a colonial empire that reached from the Siberian peninsula.

The colony's census indicates nearly a hundred Native women, mostly Kashaya Pomo and Coast Miwok (from Bodega and Jenner), and relatively few Native men, residing at the Fort then. Some of the Native men may have been on boats, scanning the coastline for sea otters with the Aleut hunters, who had accompanied the Russian hunters and soldiers to Fort Ross from Alaska. But, more than likely, the greater number of Native women at Fort Ross had to do with its economy. Native women tended the colony's wheat fields and orchards and served as domestics, cooking and washing clothes for its nearly all male foreign population. Kashaya Pomo and Coast Miwok women were often concubines, if not regular wives, even as they maintained relationships, sometimes tenuously, with their Native husbands, whose usefulness around the Fort was largely limited to seasonal hunting and fishing, and who, as a result, remained at their respective indigenous villages, quite often raising the mixed-blood children born at the colony.

Indians trapped on Mexican ranchos considered Fort Ross a sanctuary. The Russians, for political reasons armed the Natives against the Mexicans; and while the Russians expected the Natives to work long hours, they usually did not mistreat them as the Mexicans had, and the Russians, members of the Orthodox Church, weren't interested in converting the Natives, leaving them to their indigenous religious practices.

Because many Native women at Fort Ross were Olamentke, Tsupu no doubt found relatives when she arrived, certainly women who spoke her language. Apparently, she learned the ropes at the colony rather quickly. She not only assumed duties such as gardening, washing clothes, tanning hides, and making tallow for soap and candles, but also found a non-resident Native husband with whom she established, as it would turn out, a lasting relationship. His name was Comtechal, a Russian name, perhaps a Russian pronunciation of an Indian word or name. He was of mixed parentage: His mother was Olamentke, originally from *Tókau*, a village on the east side of the Bodega

peninsula, and his father was “Creole,” a Russian term for mixed-blood Natives, in this case a man whose mother was Kashaya Pomo and father half Russian, half Aleut. Even before the Russians abandoned the colony in 1842, Tsupu had left the Fort and settled with Comtechal at Eye · kotca, or Fruit House, the makeshift village north of Bodega Bay in Coleman Valley, where they lived with Comtechal’s mother and two brothers, and where the last of their three children, Tomas Comtechal, my great-great grandfather, was born in 1838, hardly four years after Tsupu had left Petaluma.

When the Russians abandoned Fort Ross, after depleting the sea otter population upon which the colony was dependent for pelt trade with China, the Natives were left prey to marauding bands of Mexicans and early American settlers looking for Indian slaves. This was a most horrific period; Indians unable to seek protection on Mexican ranches or as property of American squatters who “owned” the Indians in exchange for their labor, risked being captured and sold. Comtechal’s mother’s family had settled at Eye · kotca, probably because of its remote location tucked in the rugged coastal hills and surrounded by gigantic redwoods. But even Eye · kotca must have been threatened as more and more foreigners poured into the region.

Early in 1844, Stephen Smith, an American sea captain from Boston, arrived in Bodega Bay with a 35,787 acre land grant from the Mexican government. He also had with him his fifteen year old Peruvian wife, necessary as Mexican law stipulated an American must have “a Spanish spouse” in order to obtain a land grant. Already nearly sixty years old, Captain Smith wasted no time establishing a successful business, if not an empire. In 1846 he was appointed the “civil magistrate” for the region by the Mexican government; the same year he built in the town of Bodega a sawmill operated by the first steam-engine in California, and he survived the Bear Flag revolt a couple of years later, retaining ownership of his sawmill and a large portion of his vast acreage. At one point during the revolt, Americans reportedly took some of his horses (which they later

returned), and many Indians who had sought refuge under him fled. But not the young Indian woman from Petaluma, she didn't leave. The Americans wouldn't touch her. No sooner bother her than bother Captain Smith's wife, everyone knew that. Tsupu wasn't mere property, a concubine. She was the mother of his only children and he loved her.

How Tsupu and Captain Stephen Smith met no one knows. Captain Smith was rumored to be a good man, kind to the Indians; moreover, he employed them on his rancho and in his mill, thus affording them both a living and protection from slave traders. Perhaps Tsupu, after a trek from Eye - kotca, showed up outside his gate looking for work one morning, joining the line of Indians that showed up outside his gate looking for work every morning, and Captain Smith, needing a housekeeper, picked her out of the line, perhaps with a couple of other Indian women, and then he took notice of her skill with an iron and broom, which she had honed at Fort Ross, and seeing her thus, then saw her actual beauty, maybe heard the sound of her voice or discovered the way she moved, whatever might fancy a man, and then he couldn't help himself. Or maybe he saw her just once, passing on a road or trail, and that was it, his composure undermined then and there. Whatever the case, it wasn't long before she was a permanent resident on his rancho, not in any makeshift Indian village or work camp, but less than two hundred feet from his house in his three-story barn, wherein he had fashioned for her an eight room home, with a kitchen, bedrooms, formal dining room and parlor -- all on polished redwood slab floors. She continued to work, albeit as a supervisor of housekeepers and gardeners. Which may have been what prompted the other Indians to begin referring to her as maien. After she had children from him, three all together, he insisted she keep regular help in her home and a ninth room, a servant's quarters, was added in the barn.

The first piece of legislation that California enacted after it became a state in 1850 was the Act for Government and Protection of Indians, which stipulated that Indians became the rightful property of whose land they resided on, essentially legalizing Indian slavery (the law was eventually repealed in 1868).” Captain Smith’s Indians, most of whom were Olamentke and those like Tsupu who had fled north from other Coast Miwok nations, were safe, particularly under the watchful eye not of the Captain but of his mistress. Tsupu’s first three children remained at Eye · kotca with their father, Comtechal. Yet each of those children, no doubt for purposes of safety, adopted the name Smith, hence my great-great grandfather, Tomás Comtechal, became Thomas, or Tom, Smith. Local Indians, when approached by American settlers, learned to say “Smith,” guaranteeing their freedom.

By the time Stephen Smith died in 1855, Tsupu had secured such a position of influence throughout the region that Americans, seeing her approach in horse and buggy, tipped their hats in respect, often confusing her for his actual wife, who rarely left the house. And Tsupu’s power didn’t wane, partly because she had established a good relationship with Captain Smith’s widow, who obviously knew of her husband’s liaison, seeing the mixed-blood children about the place, and perhaps, rather than jealous, had been relieved by his affections for the Indian woman. Before she left the rancho about 1870, moving to San Francisco where she would spend the rest of her life, Captain Smith’s widow made provisions for Tsupu and her family to reside on her late husband’s property and deeded a two acre plot overlooking Bodega Bay to the “Smith Family” for a cemetery.

Did Tsupu love Captain Smith? The nature of their relationship is no more known than is the manner in which they came together in the first place. While Tsupu became acquainted with and probably wore Western clothing at Fort Ross, she learned elements of fashion when she became involved with Captain Smith, adept to the extent that in

hats and showy frocks she appeared equal to her status as mistress of the most influential man in Bodega. She became proficient in Spanish and English, and already she spoke Russian. But she never forgot her Coast Miwok ways. She wove baskets with designs distinctive of her Petaluma village and Lekatuit nation; in the hills and gullies, she cut willow branches, and, along the creeks, found sedge roots which she split with her teeth into long, fine strands, necessary for the watertight baskets that fewer and fewer Coast Miwok women could weave. She harvested acorns each fall from under the coastal tan oaks; even late in her life, she was seen often with a stone pestle pounding acorns into fine meal in a stone mortar or leaching the meal with water over a circular bed of coarse sand. And she never stopped returning to Eye · kotca, not only to see her children there, but also Comtechal. Eventually, the village of Eye · kotca was abandoned. Comtechal moved to *Tawak · puluk*, or Shoulder bone pond, the location of an ancient Olamentke summer village about three-quarters of a mile north of Bodega Bay. Not long after Captain Smith's widow moved to San Francisco, Tsupu joined Comtechal at Tawak · puluk, in a one room cabin, and she would remain there for almost thirty years, until he died, two weeks before she died.

Tom Smith became the last Coast Miwok medicine man, and he is reputed to have caused the 1906 earthquake in a contest of power with another medicine man, Big Jose, from the Kashaya Pomo Nation. William Smith, the youngest child of Tsupu and Captain Stephen Smith, built a large house at Bodega Bay, where his sons established and operated a lucrative fishing business for many years. Today over 500 individuals trace their ancestry to Tsupu, about the same number of Lekatuit living in the ancient village of Petaluma at the time of European contact. Another family cousin, Kathleen Smith, a talented artist and descendent of William Smith, demonstrates acorn preparation in Bay Area schools and parks, pounding and leaching acorns as her great-

great grandmother once had with her grandmother along the Petaluma River a hundred and seventy-five years ago.

Tsupu must've talked about the ancient village: She must've talked about the oak trees and the deer and elk there; maybe she talked about her family, people she knew; and maybe she told Coyote stories her grandmother told her. What people remember her saying, what she talked about for the longest time, was the condors, or rather the absence of them. She probably didn't return to the Petaluma Valley until the 1870's, long enough after the Act for Government and Protection of Indians was repealed and she could travel safely where she wasn't known, beyond the confines of Captain Smith's rancho. By then the Petaluma region had changed radically: The immense redwood forests on the western hills were gone (Captain Smith clear-cut hills throughout Bodega and as far south as Petaluma), most of the oak groves were gone, what few elk remained in Sonoma County now inhabited an area around the Laguna de Santa Rosa, startled waterfowl didn't obscure the sun, there were farms and a town. Condors, those remarkable creatures with wing spans of up to 14 feet, whose feathers the Lekatuit used for ceremonial capes and aprons, were last seen in Coast Miwok territory in 1847, when citizens of Fairfax observed "more than a dozen." In 1860, in nearby Contra Costa County, "a bird with a wing span of thirteen and a half feet was spotted." Certainly, Tsupu would have noticed the absence of condors before. But even as her wagon reached the western edge of Petaluma Valley, she mentioned the condors, as if she hadn't until then noticed the empty sky. "How are the people going to dance without feathers?" she asked.

Did she mention the condors on her last trip to Petaluma, when my great-grandmother sat next to her on the wagon? Could she tell as much even though she was blind? Even blind, she knew the route well; perhaps she had made several trips back to Petaluma by then. She died less than a year after that last trip. My father's

cousin who told me about Tsupu, told me that she was barefoot, sitting in a chair next to Comtechal's empty pallet, before she died. I see her like that, the last woman of Petaluma, barefoot, in a black dress, a floor-length mantilla already covering her face, sitting certain of the only thing besides her commitment to her children and Comtechal that she wouldn't have to second guess. But my father's cousin would tell me she was certain of something else. On that last trip, after she nodded with her chin to the location of her village, the family turned the wagon around and then stopped in the town, before heading west back to Bodega. "We're in Petaluma," someone informed her. She became indignant. "No," she corrected, "we left it back there."