



Lost land: A group of local Indians visits the site of Batikletawi, one of the largest and most important Pomo villages, at the edge of the Laguna in Sebastopol.

THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE

Nearly wiped out a century ago, the Sebastopol Pomos have survived the horrors of slavery, smallpox, and starvation. Now they face bureaucratic hurdles in their bid for tribal recognition. **By Jeff Elliott**

The small band of Pomos had gathered at the edge of the Laguna to visit the site of an

ancient village. Simply walking on this land had released a flood of memories for some of the older people, who found themselves remembering stories of this place told by grandparents and cousins and distant uncles long buried.

Their reverie was interrupted when a white car whipped into the parking lot. "You're trespassing on my land," property owner and prospective developer George Young snapped. "You should have called to ask permission first."

The scene grew ugly as Young argued with 88-year-old Grant Smith, towering over the Pomo elder by a foot. "Would you like to buy this land?" Young asked. "We had to pay for it," his wife added.

"You had the money," Smith answered with quiet dignity. Young was unfazed, telling the group to "just get off my land."

It was an unsettling end to a week filled with great hopes. Only a few days before, the group had decided to make a step toward reclaiming their heritage as a unique people: the Sebastopol Pomos.

The decision, made last month over a family dinner in Santa Rosa, is the first step taken by the group toward emerging from the long shadows of American culture. For some, it means coming to terms with an identity that the larger society has taught them to shame. "Now I can finally say, 'I am an Indian,'" one woman at the Laguna gathering said with deep emotion.

While this informal declaration carries no legal weight—although the group intends to seek Federal recognition as a tribe—it is an important spiritual decision not made lightly. "We need to know where we came from; we want to be recognized as being from this place," explains Indian child-welfare activist Marcelena Becerra. "Even among Indians we are second-class citizens because we don't have a tribe."

Some in the group also call themselves "Walker Ranch" Pomos, after the white settler who owned this land behind present-day Palm Drive Hospital, which borders the Laguna near downtown Sebastopol. Many times in the last decade the name of this place has changed as a parade of speculators has sought to build a profitable little subdivision. It has been called The Palms, Laguna Vista Gardens, and most recently Palm Terrace, the name used by its current owners, the Ghilotti family and pipeline contractor George Young.

The oldest name for Mr. Young's property—and all of Sebastopol—is Batikletawi, which roughly means "The Village Where Elderberries Grow." The blood ties of the Sebastopol Pomos to this place are deep, hallowed by the graves of their dead. Last spring, when

the Sebastopol City Council again denied the landowners permission to build an upscale subdivision on the site, Grant Smith spoke at the public hearing. "This whole Laguna was the Indians'; our babies died here," he told the hushed council and audience. "Their bodies are buried on the shore of this Laguna. What will they find when they build this? They will find the bodies of our children."

At issue in Sebastopol is a Pomo identity with homeland, a place to show their children where ancestors lived and died. Becerra is clear that taking this step has nothing to do with building casinos, what has recently become the most contentious issue with Indians in Sonoma County and elsewhere. "Gaming is an economic development, and that is completely different from the spiritual sense of connecting with the land," she says.