
A Tribal Homeland

Point Reyes, a stunning, weather-battered peninsula only an hour's drive from densely-populated San Francisco, is rich with compelling stories of its local tribes, tragic shipwrecks, wily lawyers, and dairying families who lived and loved there. The only National Seashore on the West Coast, it is also the site of the first English landing in North America. Bounded on its eastern edge by the towering Inverness Ridge, its far western tip, the Point Reyes Headland, rises 600 feet above the surf. Between the ridge and the point stretch miles of dense forests, lush wetlands, pristine beaches, and some of the richest grasslands in America.

This priceless cultural, scientific, and recreational area is a triangular peninsula that appears to be a temporarily attached appendage to the original coastline. And, that is exactly what it is. Once near Los Angeles, it has traveled north for millions of years. Between it and the rest of Marin County lies the invisible fissure in the earth well-known to us as the San Andreas Fault, a primary joint in the surface of the planet. Visible to the north as Tomales Bay and to the south as Bolinas Lagoon, this fault forms the eastern boundary of the Point Reyes Peninsula.

While most of California is on the North American Plate, Point Reyes rests on the Pacific Plate. These plates are mobile, with Point Reyes moving toward Canada at the geologically rapid pace of two inches per year. When stress caused by the interaction of these plates builds to a climax, California has another one of its earthquakes, and Point Reyes leaps northward. During the 1906 Earthquake, the entire peninsula sprang north 15 feet in 40 seconds.

Geologically unique, Point Reyes also differs from the rest of California in its weather, its stories, and its future. Known as the foggiest spot on the West Coast, it is the site of many of the nation's

most extraordinary shipwrecks, while its fog-fed grasslands have nourished some of its finest dairy cows. Unique in its settlement patterns, it was more populated before the Spanish arrived than in subsequent centuries. Known as the “Island in Time,” this magnificent peninsula—insulated, isolated, and protected—enjoys a history and a future far different from the densely-developed towns dominating much of coastal California.

Home of the Coast Miwoks

Point Reyes’ first inhabitants, the Coast Miwok, have left evidence of well over a hundred encampments on the peninsula. Seasonal hunters and gatherers rather than cultivators, they were nourished by the fish, clams, mussels, and crab from its bountiful waters, in addition to the deer, elk, bear, mud hen, geese, and small game they hunted with either spears or bows and arrows. Although they did not cultivate the land, they were able use the plentiful acorns as a staple part of their diet by removing the tannic acid and making a pulp that was stored in dry granaries. Their peaceable and spiritual existence, rich with abundant food, lasted for centuries. They greeted the first explorers to reach the peninsula with friendliness and generosity, unaware that the arrival of the Spanish would dramatically change their lives.

Although the exact location of **Sir Francis Drake’s** anchorage has provided four centuries of controversy, evidence has confirmed that he landed near some Coast Miwok settlements in 1579. Although his log has never been found, observations, presumably written by his chaplain, have provided valuable information. These observations described the genial welcome Drake and his men received. A chief and his retinue in ceremonial costumes, followed by unclothed men and women dressed in skins and bulrushes, exchanged gifts and greetings with Drake. Impressed by their hospitality, the chaplain observed:

... a people of a tractable, free, and loving nature, without guile or treachery. [The men were] strong of body. . .

exceeding swift in running [and] skilled spearing fish in shallow water [while the women were] very obedient to their husbands, and exceedingly ready in all services; yet of themselves offering to do nothing without the consents or being called of the men.

After Drake and his men sailed away, the Coast Miwok returned to their peaceful routine. It was not until the late 18th century that their lives changed when the Spanish began building missions. Padres from the nearby Mission San Rafael journeyed to the peninsula to convert the Coast Miwok. They found over 50 villages with a population now estimated to be nearly 3000. While attempting to convert them, these padres disrupted their traditional way of life in addition to inadvertently introducing diseases that brought untimely deaths, fewer births, and significantly increased infant mortality rates.

By the 1830s, the missions had been replaced by the Mexican ranchos (ranches). Some surviving Coast Miwok journeyed inland to escape the looming civilization, while others labored on ranchos and, later, dairy ranches. Today, many of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren remain in the area, enriching their modern lives with the traditions of their ancestors.

The Kelly Interviews

For over a century, anthropologists from University of California, Berkeley have been accumulating data concerning the Coast Miwok. Early in the 1930s, a graduate student, **Isabel Kelly**, was assigned to interview 90-year old Tomas Comtechal, a respected singer, dancer, leader, and doctor. Kelly settled nearby for five months and wrote notes of these interviews that filled eight books. From these interviews, she learned of singers who could entice salmon from their hiding places in streams and women of power and influence. After her interview with Comtechal, she began interviewing Maria Copa Frias, a Miwok born just after the Civil War, and in less than two weeks, she had recorded over 100 more pages of notes.

These interviews provided a detailed picture of the daily lives of the Coast Miwok. Kelly learned that they were capable hunters and gatherers. They lived peacefully with neighbors in a temperate climate that abounded with food, including fish, shellfish, game, seeds, and two kinds of edible kelp. Hunting with bows, they used obsidian-tipped arrows kept in quivers made of animal skins. They also used slings for duck hunting. Highly spiritual, they often practiced sexual abstinence before hunting and fishing trips and carried charms of polished stone or chipped obsidian for luck.

The Coast Miwoks built both thatched and earth-covered semi-subterranean huts. Beds were made of rushes. The larger villages also had a variety of ceremonial huts, including the sweathouse, a subterranean chamber four to five feet deep covered by earth; social and work centers; dance huts; and the special hut for the young girls celebrating their first menstrual cycle.

Most men were semi-naked wearing only a deerskin loincloth, while women generally wore aprons of grass or fringed deer hide and capes woven out of small skins. Some pierced their ears, as they believed it contributed to longevity, while a few of the elderly had tattoos on their chests, drawn with a sharp bone and poison oak. Neither men nor women wore shoes. Men had beards and long hair that they bundled up, while women wore their long hair either braided or bundled. Adult males and some women, mostly the elderly ones, smoked tobacco in a pipe. They also smoked the hallucinogenic jimson weed.

The women were skilled basket weavers who coiled or twined baskets for special functions. Some baskets were utilitarian and watertight, while others were decorative, often adorned with feathers and shell beads. Men crafted tule canoes, propelled by a double-bladed wooden paddle, that they used to journey offshore to fish. They had a well-developed monetary system based on clamshell beads, with varying currencies represented by thin, thick, and extra thick beads. They often wore these beads as necklaces or hung them on baskets and staffs to display their wealth. During times of leisure, women enjoyed a game resembling dice, while men played hockey. Children's toys included jacks, clay, stick dolls, and string figures.

Larger villages had a leader who usually gave advice and spoke for them. According to Kelly, "He 'took care' of the people, offered advice, and harangued them daily, addressing them personally, not through a crier or orator." When it was time for a new chief, the tribe's elderly women and the old chief instructed the new leader, clear evidence that women played a powerful role in Coast Miwok society. In cases in which the old chief did not then abdicate, he was poisoned. In her interviews, Kelly also discovered that some older men sought liaisons with younger women and that these older men occasionally poisoned younger men so that they would not interfere with these liaisons.

Spiritual and Ceremonial Life

In addition to the details about their daily habits, these interviews provided a treasure trove of information about Coast Miwok beliefs and ceremonies. They worshipped natural forces and believed that the world had been created by the coyote and fire brought by the hummingbird. Most ceremonies were conducted by secret societies comprised of both men and women or women only. They were held to cure, poison, lay the dead to rest, and mark passages to adulthood. Spiritual leaders, either curers or poisoners, led these ceremonies. Participants painted their bodies and wore feathers as belts, head-dresses, and garments. Occasionally they also wore pelican skins with abalone buttons and shell disk beads. Music accompanied the ceremonies and was provided by log drums, split sticks, rattles, bone whistles, and elderberry flutes.

Although the Coast Miwok cremated their dead, archeological burial sites have also been discovered. Whether cremated or buried, a mourning ceremony was performed, and the deceased's name was not spoken until the memory of the death had faded. To mark the one-year anniversary of the death, another ceremony was conducted in which mourners danced, lamented, and participated in a ritual washing. Personal property of the deceased was often destroyed, but was occasionally redistributed to other tribesmen.

The passage into adulthood for a young woman was ceremoniously observed at her first menstrual cycle. For four days, she was confined to a menstrual hut or isolated in her own hut. Her special deerskin bed was placed over a low fire, and she was not allowed to bathe. Her mother and grandmothers sang and danced while she used a scratching stick. After the four days, the young woman was freed from her confinement and could join feasting and dancing. During this dance and directly after it, she was sometimes tattooed and encouraged to have sexual relations.

The male initiation, called a ghost ceremony, prohibited women. For four days, boys were covered with black paint, held over the fire and occasionally tossed over it. They were only allowed to eat acorn soup and pinole and, like the young women, used sticks to scratch themselves. On the last night of the ceremony, the boys were thrown through the smoke hole in the roof.

Revival of Traditions

While information on most California tribes is limited to archeological discoveries, explorers' records, and mission documents, the work of University of California, Berkeley anthropologists and the in-depth interviews by Kelly have immeasurably enriched our understanding of the daily lives of the Coast Miwoks. These Berkeley scholars have spent a century providing a rich, multi-faceted glimpse of this fascinating group of Point Reyes inhabitants who flourished for centuries before the missionaries arrived.

In addition to this treasure trove of information, in 1992, Coast Miwok descendants established the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria and, by 2001, had 400 members who could prove their descent from local tribes. Today, they enjoy the rebirth of traditional customs and ceremonies, often held in the National Seashore's recreated Coast Miwok village. Despite the tragic loss of their peaceful, self-sufficient way of life, our abundant information allows us to envision the tribes who lived, loved, worshipped, and died on this magnificent peninsula.

Explorers and Missionaries

Although most historians cite **Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo's** journey as California's most important early exploration, it is the landing of the English explorer, Sir Francis Drake, at Point Reyes that dominates discussion of this era. Significant as the first European landing in Northern California and the first English landing in North America, the location Drake selected has sparked countless hours of spirited debate spanning four centuries. Although the controversy still rages, most agree the evidence points toward Point Reyes' Drakes Bay as his refuge.

Despite the importance of Drake's landing in California, he was not the first European to claim Point Reyes. The first to sail by northern California was the 1542 expedition that had been led by Cabrillo, a Portuguese sailing under the Spanish flag. Although he died before reaching Point Reyes, the voyage continued north to Oregon under new command before returning to Mexico, its commander having claimed all of California for Spain. In addition to Cabrillo's ships, early Spanish trading galleons journeying between the Philippines and Acapulco often followed the California coast and passed near Point Reyes.

It was not these Spanish explorers, but Drake, who first landed in the area. In 1579, Drake sighted Point Reyes while sailing along the California coast looking for a safe harbor to make much-needed repairs to his weather-beaten ship, the *Golden Hinde* (named for a type of deer), before crossing the Pacific to return to England. A successful English privateer, his ship was heavily laden with treasure he had taken from the Spanish, loot he felt that he had earned honorably by following the accepted rules of plunder.

The oldest of 12, Drake was sent to sea as a boy. By his 20s he was in command of an English ship, *Judith*, in a small fleet charged with the task of breaking the Spanish monopoly in the New World. In

September 1568, storm damage forced him to bring *Judith* into a Mexican port. In accordance with rules of the sea, Drake negotiated the promise of a safe exit from the Spanish-controlled harbor when repairs had been completed. A mere two days later, this agreement was broken, and *Judith* was attacked. After a fierce defense, Drake and his crew escaped, but Drake never forgot. He sought restitution for this breach of faith by focusing his energy on stealing Spanish treasure. This reaction was reasonable for the times, as it was a well-established principle that compensation could be taken by force from a country that acted dishonorably.

Before he struck, Drake took several voyages of reconnaissance. His planning paid off handsomely, for he captured a mule train crossing the Isthmus of Panama heavily laden with gold from Peruvian mines. He returned to England wealthy and acclaimed. Acting under the secret orders of Queen Elizabeth I, he was then given command of the *Golden Hinde* and four other ships, carrying 164 men. This fleet left Plymouth, England in November 1577, bound for Spain's great source of wealth, the Peruvian gold mines.

By the time this voyage was over three years later, Drake had logged the world's second circumnavigation and the first one finished by its commander, as Ferdinand Magellan had died before completing his voyage. He had lost four of his five ships and half his men had died. Despite his losses, the journey was considered a grand success, for he and his men had beaten the Spanish in raid after raid, amassing a shipload of Spanish treasure. Known as the "Master Thief of the Unknown World," historian Robert Greenhow wrote:

Drake did not hesitate to proceed to the parts of the coast occupied by the Spaniards, whom he found unprepared to resist him, either on land or on sea. He accordingly plundered their towns and ships with little difficulty; and so deep and lasting was the impression produced by his achievements that, for more than a century afterwards, his name was never mentioned in those countries without exciting feelings of horror and detestation. His acts probably contributed to the Spanish Armada's attempt to invade England in 1588.

By summer 1579, heavily laden with treasure and anxious to return to England as quickly as possible, Drake sailed north along the West Coast searching for the Northwest Passage that would allow him to sail across North America to the Atlantic. Needless to say, he did not find the legendary shortcut he called the Strait of Anian and was eventually forced south by adverse winds off the Oregon coast. He, instead, began to seek the safe harbor he needed to prepare his weathered and battle-scarred *Golden Hinde* for the long trip across the Pacific and home to England. On June 17, he found the harbor he needed.

On June 26, hundreds of Coast Miwoks gathered to ceremoniously welcome Drake and his men. Although it is likely they were making Drake an honorary chief, he chose a markedly English interpretation by reporting that they had crowned him as their leader and abdicated their power. Drake took possession of the land in the name of Queen Elizabeth I and nailed a brass plate on a post with an inscription claiming the land for England. He quickly finished repairs and left by July 23.

As the first Englishman to walk on the North American continent, this brief landing has been cited as the founding of the overseas British Empire, inspiration for their settlement of North America. With the unquestioned importance of Drake's visit to California, the exact location of this stay has become the source of intense analysis and passionate debate among experts and amateurs alike. Much of this debate stems from the mystery surrounding Drake's log. As soon as he handed his log and maps to Queen Elizabeth I on his triumphant return to England, they disappeared. Although most believe that they were not lost but were hidden by the Queen so that they would not fall into enemy hands, they have not surfaced in the intervening four centuries. Hopes for details of his journey withered when Drake died in 1596, without speaking or writing again of his momentous voyage.

Instead, we only have some books published well after Drake's return. One, *The World Encompassed by Sir Francis Drake*, published in 1628, contains observations of his chaplain, **Francis Fletcher**.

Although useful, none of these books contain the invaluable navigational information contained in a log. Despite this lack of data, most experts believe Drake landed at Drakes Bay, Bolinas Lagoon, or San Quentin Cove. This supposition is based, in part, on Fletcher's report that the name "New Albion" (Latin for New England), was chosen because its white banks reminded Drake of England's White Cliffs of Dover. Fletcher described "white bankes and cliffs, which lie toward the sea." Although white cliffs face the sea in all three of these anchorages, experts believe that Fletcher's remark that they "lie toward the sea" more aptly describes the relationship of cliffs to the harbor at Drakes Bay than the other two coves.

Fletcher's journal entries concerning vegetation, wildlife, and local tribes do little to solve the mystery, as all three possible landing sites share similar natural characteristics. His journal does reveal a disappointment with the weather:

. . . notwithstanding it was the height of Summer, and so near the Sun; yet were we continually visited with . . . nipping colds . . . neither could we at any time in the whole fourteen days together, find the air so clear as to be able to take the height of the Sun or star.

Although his complaints about the cold summer weather and the "thick mists and most stinking fogs" seem to point toward Drakes Bay more than Bolinas or San Quentin, they fall far short of providing conclusive evidence.

Mired in inconclusive evidence, many believed that the discovery by a picnicker in 1936 finally provided the solid evidence everyone wanted. This picnicker found what appeared to be Drake's brass plate near San Quentin Cove, spurring a flurry of excitement and debate. When initial metallurgical tests indicated its authenticity, some thought the centuries-old debate was about to be solved, and that San Quentin would be confirmed as Drake's port. Soon, though, the debate was re-ignited when another man came forward to say that he had found the same brass plate near Drakes Bay three years earlier and had carried it around in his car until finally throw-

ing it out near San Quentin. With the controversy raging, the brass plate was placed in the Bancroft Library at the University of California as one of its prized possessions, while noted historian, Samuel Eliot Morrison, branded the plate a fake and probably a prank. In 1977, an exhaustive analysis concluded that the plate was composed of modern metals that had been rolled and cut in a way that was unknown in Drake's time. In the light of this evidence, most now believe that Drake's brass plate still lies buried in the sand awaiting discovery and inspiring many to keep searching for this illusive proof.

As Drake's quadra-centennial approached, the debate heightened. Drake fans sailed from Plymouth, England across the Atlantic in a replica of the *Golden Hinde* and the *California Historical Society Quarterly* devoted an entire edition to the debate between the three most likely locations: Drakes Bay, Bolinas Lagoon, and San Quentin Cove. To officially mark the quadra-centennial, on June 15, 1979, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area dedicated a non-committal marker near San Quentin stating:

Historians have not yet agreed whether Drake's Marin County anchorage was in Drakes Estero, Bolinas Lagoon, or San Francisco Bay.

More willing to commit to Drakes Bay as the true port, the next day the Sir Francis Drake Quadra-Centennial Committee of the Chamber of Commerce dedicated a bronze plaque near the south edge of Drakes Beach parking lot that reads:

On June 17, 1579, Captain Francis Drake sailed his ship Golden Hinde into the Gulf of the Farallones and the Bay that now bears his name. He sighted these white cliffs and named the land Nova Albion.

Eventually, analysis turned to the Ming porcelain found in Drakes Bay middens. For years, it had been assumed that it had all been washed ashore in the cargo of the shipwrecked *San Agustin*. In the late 1970s, two separate studies of the 708 fragments from 235

different plates or bowls reached the surprising conclusion that the porcelain had come from two entirely different cargoes. One study focused on its wear and concluded that only some of the fragments had the waterwear identifying a shipwrecked cargo that had tumbled through the surf.

The other study, conducted by Clarence Shangraw, a curator of the East Asian Museum in San Francisco, focused on the evolution of Ming porcelain patterns. In the 16 years between Drake's visit and the wreck of the *San Agustin*, the quality and design of this porcelain changed dramatically. Based on these differences, the Shangraw study again identified two very different groups of Ming porcelain in the Drakes Bay middens. Armed with evidence that Drake left some Ming porcelain with the Coast Miwoks as gifts, many believe that this evidence of two different cargoes of porcelain at Drakes Bay provide the long-awaited proof of the location of Drake's landing.

This evidence was enough for the Marin County Supervisors. In 1994, they passed a resolution declaring Drakes Bay as the site of Drake's landing and formally requesting that the National Park Service to place a plaque there.

However adamantly one would like to believe that Drakes Bay is the site of this historic landing, one must continue to question confusing evidence and seek incontrovertible proof. According to prominent Drake scholar Robert Heizer:

... opinions have not and never will solve the question—only some kind of documentary or archeological evidence to be discovered can solve the problem.

Until then, the debate continues to enliven many long winter evenings while all await the discovery of the brass plate on a Marin County beach or Drake's log in some forgotten British archive.

Wreck of the *San Agustin*

Rumors of Drake's discovery of a safe harbor on the California coast intrigued the Spanish. Their trade between the Philippines and Mexico was booming, and they were constantly seeking safe harbors along the route. Many believe that Drake's success finding a harbor inspired the Spanish to order **Sebastian Rodriquez Cermeno**, a Portuguese captain trading for Spain, to survey the California coast on his journey to Mexico from the Philippines in 1595. Commanding the *San Agustin*, a Manila galleon laden with a luxury cargo of Chinese silks, spices, and Ming porcelain bound for Acapulco, Cermeno endured both the first of hundreds of documented shipwrecks at Point Reyes, as well as one of the most amazing journeys to safety.

Struggling with a decrepit, heavily-laden ship and a tired, rebellious crew that wanted to go home, Cermeno explored the California coast and eventually anchored the *San Agustin* near the inlet now called Drakes Estero. Within a few days, a November storm beached the ship where it listed and was relentlessly pounded by the furious surf. It soon broke apart, killing several men and dumping precious cargo, some of which was eventually collected by local tribes.

Cermeno salvaged a small, open launch, likened to a large canoe, fortuitously named *San Buenaventura*. Loaded with the 70 surviving crew and the ship's dog, they began the long journey home. After a grueling two-month voyage, remembered as a remarkable feat of seamanship, Cermeno and all crewmembers arrived safely in Acapulco in January 1596. Only the dog had died, eaten by the desperate crew. Despite his amazing voyage to safety, Cermeno received no celebratory welcome, for he had not only lost his ship and cargo, but had also failed to find the safe harbor he was ordered to locate.

In 1602, **Sebastian Vizcaino**, one of the survivors of the *San Agustin*, was commissioned to lead a fleet of three ships and 200 men on another exploratory expedition up the coast of California. Leaving in August, and plagued by illness, they voyaged north as quickly as possible, naming everything they saw. On January 6,

1603, the Day of the Three Kings, they sighted a peninsula and named it Punto de los Reyes. Though successfully documenting and naming much of the California coast, Vizcaino sailed by without discovering the nearby San Francisco Bay. According to historian John Robertson:

For one hundred and fifty years following the Vizcaino failure properly to locate the inner port of San Francisco there was a continuing belief among the Spaniards that somewhere near Point Reyes an inner harbor, great in extent, one suited to the necessities of their Philippine galleons, could be found.

It took another expedition a century and a half later before the Spanish finally found the huge bay they were seeking.

Portola's Inland Expedition

Despite reports of a lovely land populated by friendly tribes, Spain neglected California until the second half of the 18th century. By this time, trade had become an important source of income, and it was evident that the nation controlling California's harbors would reap incredible profits. When England, France, and Russia began to covet California's coastline, the King of Spain knew that it was time to assert his ownership by fortifying the coast. To identify sites for presidios and missions, an overland expedition of 67 men and 100 pack mules left San Diego in 1769. Led by **Gaspar de Portola**, Governor of Baja California, they began walking to the largest known harbor, Monterey Bay. Progress was slow as the expedition had to wait for scouts to identify passable routes before proceeding. Charged with gathering information, engineer Miguel Costanso and Father John Crespi wrote incredibly detailed descriptions of much of California.

Overshooting Monterey Bay, a party of scouts, lead by **Sergeant Jose Francisco Ortega**, and heading for Point Reyes, at last discovered the Bay of San Francisco on November 1, 1769. Although the

discovery of the bay was significant, the size of the bay made it impossible for these scouts to follow their orders to explore Point Reyes. Once Ortega's scouts returned, the entire Portola expedition walked along the bay, hoping to continue their journey north. Although they traveled for several days, they never found a place narrow enough to cross and soon turned south again, never reaching Point Reyes. Despite the fact that they never explored the peninsula, the information from the expedition spurred enormous changes.

Missions

Soon after Portola's return, Spain began establishing its presidios and missions. Four presidios were built, first in Monterey and San Diego, with San Francisco and Santa Barbara following. While they were being built, missions were dedicated to convert the tribes and cultivate the land. By 1817, Mission San Rafael was established, and padres began to journey to Point Reyes, intent on enticing the Coast Miwok to the mission. Although Mission San Rafael padres were successful coercing many Coast Miwoks to settle at the mission and begin a life of backbreaking labor, diseases soon began to weaken them. Initially, serious outbreaks of small pox and pneumonia killed many. Those who survived sickened from a wide variety of other diseases, such as colds and measles, while birthrates dropped and infant mortality rates increased at an alarming rate.

Padres at San Rafael, as at missions throughout California, were forced to face the fact that the Coast Miwok were not thriving in their new role as Christian farmers. Since missions were dependent on large numbers of healthy workers for their prosperity, these illnesses foretold their demise.

The deterioration of these missions accelerated when Mexico gained possession of California in 1821. Ownership by Mexico ended the era of Spanish domination that destroyed the self-sufficient, harmonious, centuries-old Coast Miwok way of life. Instead, mission land was granted as enormous, privately-owned ranchos, ushering in the short-lived period remembered as "Old California."



Late Afternoon on Peninsula Hilltop



Wetlands near Bolinas