



Presidio Originals

The Muwekma Ohlone tribe pushes for a voice in Presidio planning -- and, perhaps, a piece of a national park

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published: May 13, 1998

Long before it was home to baseball stadiums and Spanish missions, the peninsula of San Francisco was ruled by the Muwekma Ohlone. An estimated 10,000 members of this stable, peaceful tribe lived in 40 groups of 50 to 500 members, setting up encampments from Crissy Field to Big Sur. Then, during the late 1700s, they were rounded up into missions built by Spanish settlers. Some were enslaved. Many died of disease. For years, U.S. government officials believed that they had become so diminished and assimilated as to be extinct. In 1927, the tribe was dropped from the federal government's registry of formally recognized Indian nations. "We were disregarded," says Rosemary Cambra, chairperson of the Muwekma Ohlone Indian Tribe, a group of 350 Muwekma Ohlone descendants scattered throughout the Bay Area. "It was a form of American apartheid."



Now, tribal leaders say, they are still being ignored as the National Park Service prepares to turn a former airfield at the Presidio into a flagship recreation site. The park plans to construct a 20-acre marsh, a vast meadow, sand dunes, a new beach, picnic areas, and a boardwalk on Crissy Field without, Muwekma representatives complain, sufficiently consulting tribal leaders about Indian remains that may lie buried in the area.

"We know there are graves there," says Espinola Jackson, Bay Area spokeswoman and liaison for the tribe. "We know that the entire area has burial sites, as well as sacred sites there. We're asking that they do not disturb the sites at all."

After years of lobbying by Muwekma Ohlone descendants, the Branch of Acknowledgement and Research of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is poised to reinstate their status as a federally recognized tribe. Cambra says this status, if granted, will give the tribe greater legal standing to oppose Crissy Field development, and, if necessary, file suit against the Park Service. Cambra would not rule out the possibility during an interview that once the Muwekma have recognition in hand, they could renew their demand that 400 acres of the new Presidio National Park be set aside for the Muwekma, in accordance with laws saying that excess federal lands should be turned over to the natives who originally occupied them.

The Presidio, a former Army base, is slated to become a national park, run by a nonprofit trust that is required by Congress to pay its own way.

Park Service officials acknowledge that the agency has had a "bad relationship" with the Muwekma Ohlone ever since the announcement that the Presidio military base would be decommissioned. The Presidio Trust is trying to make sure no sacred sites are improperly disturbed during the Crissy Field

development. And it is just now beginning an effort to improve relations with San Francisco's native tribe.

"We have thought about the concerns raised by the Muwekma, and we have done that by reopening the consultation process," says Leo Barker, historical archaeologist for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. "What we are trying to do is do everything we can to clarify that we are not going to impact Native American heritage sites."

The two Muwekma Ohlone archaeological sites known to exist in the Crissy Field area -- a possible cemetery site topped by discarded shells discovered in 1912, and 1,300-year-old human remains discovered in 1972 -- lie to the east of the area that will actually be disturbed by the restoration project, Barker says. And before the Park Service breaks ground for any of the restoration projects in the area, it plans to drill core samples to look for evidence of ancient human habitation.

"If a single human remain is found or a burial is discovered, we intend to, and by law are required to, begin a consultation process with native people who have an affiliation with park lands. The project would have to be stopped and redesigned."

Park Service officials from Washington met with Muwekma Ohlone leaders last week in what was to be the first in a series of "consultations" with the tribe. The meeting consisted mostly of "venting" by Ohlone members, and assurances by park officials that they had the Ohlone's interests at heart, Cambra says.

The current unpleasantness stems from the Muwekma Ohlone's request six years ago that some land at the Presidio be set aside in a Muwekma-Ohlone-owned trust under federal laws that recommend excess federal lands be returned to their original native inhabitants.

The Army decided the law did not apply in the Presidio's case, and disregarded the Ohlone appeal. Ohlone representatives were subsequently left out of meetings where officials drafted plans to turn the Presidio into a national park, Cambra complains.

"There was a hiatus of discussion between the two groups," Barker acknowledges. "Until a few years ago, there weren't people here that were devoted to that issue, because of the planning that was going on with the Presidio."

Now, though, the park has entered a new era of sensitivity, he says. Barker currently dedicates much of his time to the Muwekma's concerns, and says he hopes Tuesday's discussion will lead toward giving Native Americans a significant role in Presidio planning.

Tuesday's meeting wasn't the first time the Muwekma Ohlone have met with government officials. Tribe representatives were present at some planning meetings in 1991, and they have spoken with Bureau of Indian Affairs officials during their struggle to achieve federal recognition.

The May 5 meeting was historic nonetheless, Barker says, because it is the first time federal officials have held such a formal meeting with members of the tribe since the Presidio was declared a national park.

And that, the Muwekma Ohlone say, is precisely why they are so angry.

"We didn't migrate to California, we originated in the area. Our emotional, cultural ties are very strong, very high. We connect to our people, because they're still here," Cambra says. "There is a form of life energy between the past and the present, and they dismissed this."