

The Community VOICE



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Home	News	Sports	Lifestyle	Columns	Community	Classifieds	About Us
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The headwaters of the Laguna in 1823



By Arthur Dawson March 10, 2011 11:13 pm

On his quest to find a mission north of San Rafael, Father Jose Altimira wrote in his journal: "We followed the arroyo (creek) which, according to the Indians and our men who have seen it, carries the most water. But all we found was a small pond. Out on the plain, this arroyo dries up to nothing."

Tired and thirsty, the party continued south for several more hours, more or less following present-day Petaluma Hill Road. It was after dark before they reached a small spring near Petaluma with enough water to supply them and their horses. The arroyo, which dried "up to nothing," was probably Crane or Copeland Creek. It was July 2, 1823.

Had he ventured just two miles west, Altimira would have discovered a 20-acre lake a stone's throw from the Hub in modern Cotati. As the only summer water in the area, it likely resembled a waterhole in the Serengeti, drawing in lots of animals.

The largest would have been the grizzly bear, which stood 10 feet tall on its hind legs and could weigh over a thousand pounds. Tule elk would have congregated here too, in herds numbering into the hundreds. Adult males had huge antlers and weighed 600 pounds. Pronghorn were smaller, but also roamed in impressive herds. They escaped predators using speed and endurance, able to run 10 miles in 15 minutes.

In those days, the Laguna headwaters were a remarkably dynamic landscape. Season to season and year to year, dramatic changes were in motion. Had Altimira visited six months later, he might have complained about mud rather than thirst. Arroyos swollen with winter rains would have made travel difficult. On the flats, these creeks divided into a wandering network of swales and channels. A big storm or a fallen tree could easily change their course. Copeland Creek was especially unpredictable. Being right on the watershed boundary, it might flow into the Petaluma River one winter, and into the Russian River the next.

The water of many creeks never reached the sea. Instead, they filled vernal pools and lakes. All this standing water attracted egrets, herons, migratory and resident ducks, shorebirds, tiger salamanders, and invertebrates. Plants too responded to the moisture, sprouting and flowering.

As the season progressed and the rains tapered off, the lakes and ponds were no longer replenished with flowing water. Trout that had migrated upstream to spawn when flows were high, ended up caught in the hills until the rains returned.

By July, most of the wetlands had evaporated, leaving behind dried up plants and hard soil. Water was scarce. Even the Laguna's main channel ceased flowing. An early map shows the Laguna as a string of disconnected lakes, the one in Cotati at the southern end.

How did this landscape become the one we know today? Settlement brought with it the desire for better drainage. Ditches for roads and agriculture began stitching together formerly separate channels. Rather than flowing slowly downhill or pooling in shallow basins, storm waters were shunted away. The trajectory of ever-increasing drainage has continued, with bulldozers carving channels across the flats in the 1970s, storm drains installed in housing developments, and drainage tile placed under vineyards.

Even so, you can still catch glimpses of the landscape Altimira knew. Looking west from Crane Canyon Park after a spring storm, you'll see dozens of ponds glinting in the sun. Tiger salamanders occasionally show up in the middle of Cotati. Even the lake near the Hub has not completely disappeared, it's just well hidden among the fabrications of our modern world.

After two centuries of change, the land holds on to its habits, and many of the old patterns endure.

NOTE: Teasing out an historical picture of the Laguna de Santa Rosa's headwaters was the focus of a recent study by the Laguna Foundation and the Sonoma Ecology Center. Detective work in history, biology, geomorphology (study of landforms), and soils, allowed us to map the area as it appeared before modern changes began. This article is based on that research.

Arthur Dawson has worked over 10 years as historical ecologist at the Sonoma Ecology Center. He is also the author of a local bestseller, "The Stories Behind Sonoma Valley Place Names."

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