CHAPTER 9

THE COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

Humans generally form groups larger than the family, but still too small to answer all their needs. Whether the group is informal, like the upper Dry Creek ranchers, or highly structured, like the Mihilakawna Pomo, it rarely stands alone. Instead, as anthropologist Robert Redfield expressed it, “the little community...is a community within communities, a whole within other wholes” (1).

Over the 5000 years of occupation of the Lake Sonoma Area, interactions were often cooperative, involving alliances between groups which allowed not only trade but shared celebrations and recreation. Groups formed by the new settlers worked together to promote community values: fairs brought the virtues of the area to the public’s attention; schools transmitted social ideals as well as knowledge to the next generation; while national holidays and political events reminded communities of the larger world they were a part of. On the other hand, there has been conflict—from outright warfare to long-term animosity, rivalry, and racism.

Human alliances change constantly, and there must have been many hundreds of social and political networks that formed and dissolved over the years. This chapter looks at just some of the ways that groups outside the family interacted in the Lake Sonoma Area.

THE NATIVE AMERICAN BIG TIME

Each language in central California had its own name for the important ceremonial gatherings held before the time of Euroamerican contact. Today they are remembered by most people as “Big Times” — assemblies that brought well being to the participants, affirmed alliances, satisfied curiosity about the outside world, and offered four days of drama, dance, feasting, and gambling. The celebration of the Kuksu, a widespread religion practiced in most of central California for perhaps a thousand years or more, was a major reason for such gatherings. There were two main components of the Kuksu religion. One was the Kuksu Society itself, in which only special men with sacred knowledge were allowed to impersonate gods, wearing elaborate costumes and performing precise, spiritually potent, dances. The other component was the Ghost Society, open to all male members of the group, whose impersonations of the dead and of the inhabitants or the underworld were watched with amusement, and sometimes terror, by the whole assembly. The ceremonies “recreated sacred time and in one way or another restored [the] people to the unsullied state that had prevailed at the time of creation” (2).

A stipulation of the Kuksu was that more than one tribelet should participate. The ceremonies were to be practiced once every year, but only once every seven years at any one village. This requirement led to the creation of a ceremonial network over the broader region. Both Kuksu societies stressed the initiation of young boys. By the time the ceremony had made its circuit through the other tribelets, a new group of boys had reached initiation age in the home village.

From extensive field work in Central Pomo territory near Ukiah, Bert and Ethel Aginsky wrote a lively account of the Kuksu ceremonies once held there (3). According to the authors, ceremonies were often scheduled at a time when intercommunity relations were strained: two weeks of preparation— involving constructing a new dancehouse, preparing food, and replenishing old costumes and ornaments—brought the host community closer together. Much of the excitement of these gatherings came from observing outside groups at close hand, noting each other’s wealth, strength, and correctness of behavior. Members of the host community, in addition, were given the chance to display their hospitality and wealth. These gatherings were among the few occasions when whole families traveled outside their territory, allowing women and children to learn about other places and customs. Since intermarriage was common among ceremonial groups, the feasts served to keep relatives in contact, and no doubt new marriage alliances were also made at these events.

Big Times were a source of pleasure and excitement and a means of cementing relations
between the groups. Gambling, primarily among men, was one of the major activities. Pomoans were avid gamblers, and a single game, accompanied by singing and drumming, might last throughout the night. On his 1830s journey through the Russian River Valley, Baron von Wrangell described some Southern Pomo men at “their favorite activity”:

Two players sit across from each other, and on both sides of the players singers post themselves, whose melodic song is interrupted only by the sudden, loud outcries of the guessing players. The opponent tries to hide the number of small sticks which he holds in his hand behind his back, while he makes quick, diverse movements with his arms, and with his other free hand beats time to the music on his chest. The game always lasts until one of the players has lost all his belongings. This occupied [them] all night long till the light hours of the day (4).

Gambling was entertainment, but it was also a way of attaining prestige among other groups, since a man who did well at gambling was considered particularly powerful. Casual trading among individuals from different groups also took place during these assemblies. All together, a Big Time provided the setting for a flow of goods, wealth, and information across tribelet boundaries.

**Mexican Period Social Networks**

The Californios of the northern frontier formed a broad social network cemented by marriage. Mariano Vallejo, the most influential man of the region; J.B.R. Cooper, grantee of the El Molino Rancho; Doña Maria Carillo of the Cabeza de Santa Rosa; Joaquin Carillo of Llano de Santa Rosa; Jacob Leese of the Huichica Rancho; Henry Delano Fitch, Peña’s neighbor; and John Wilson of the Rancho Los Guílicos were all related by marriage. Although widely dispersed, the ranchos of the northern frontier could be thought of as comprising one community.

José German Peña was one of the exceptions. Peña died a single man, something of an anomaly at the time. We do not know whether this was simply his preference or his fate as a man of little influence; in either case, his position outside the marriage network may have excluded him from some social and economic agreements. Although Peña’s will tells much about his economic activities, we have only a few hints as to his social connections. From the
several paragraphs of protestations of faith included in his will, as well as his request to be “enshrouded in the habit of our Father San Francisco” and buried at Sonoma Mission, we can see that he was linked to the Catholic Church, a common characteristic in Mexican California (5).

Whether Peña himself was given to the open hospitality and lively socializing that typified the early California lifestyle we do not know, but there is an account of a mid-1850s “fandango” held near the confluence of Warm Springs and Dry creeks a few years after his death. This would have been a rodeo, held by Peña’s brothers primarily to round up cattle from the open range, separate them, and brand them. Rodeos were often accompanied by feasting and by the bull and bear fights and horse racing which typified rancho social gatherings. The grandfather of a 1970s Dry Creek Valley resident recalled attending this last rodeo when he was a child. One of a large crowd of onlookers, he remembered “the caballeros dressed in their velvet suits and large sombreros, riding horses whose saddles were adorned with silver trappings” (6). The Peñas’ immediate neighbors would have participated by necessity, in order to gather their herds; the new American settlers, we see from the above account, were also drawn to this event.

As the valley filled up with American squatters and lands were subdivided, the basis of the rancho system—the huge cattle herds—was undermined. The system was maintained for a while on smaller properties, and Mexican social networks continued alongside those of the new settlers. Indian vaqueros still lived on the Peña ranch, and horse races and no doubt other social gatherings were still held. Some rancheros, like Mariano Vallejo, went on to attain prominent positions in the new settler community; others, like the Peñas, left only a sparse record of their adjustment to the new society (see Chapter 7).

**Early American Social Contacts**

**Neighbors**

Due to the remoteness of the Lake Sonoma Area, settlers were dependent on one another, and even the usual definition of a neighbor was adjusted. Upper Dry Creek rancher Orville Baldwin claimed that

“Native Californian at full speed taking the buried rooster by the head.” Rodeo sports often had their inhumane aspects (from R. R. Olmsted’s *Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity from Hutchings’ California Magazine, 1856-1861, 1962*)
“anyone within forty miles by road or twenty by trail was a neighbor” (7). A neighbor was of vital importance—someone who lightened everyday tasks and aided in emergencies. Neighbors shared in building houses, raising barns, driving picket fences, and in the virtually unceasing winter repair of roads and shoring up of creek banks. In the bottomlands at the head of the valley, neighbors helped in bringing in the crops; in the uplands they joined in marking, shearing, and dipping sheep. Also in the uplands, where large herds were present, neighbors banded together to hunt bears, mountain lions, coyotes, and other livestock predators. Upland neighbors also helped each other by serving as witnesses in legal cases, and they testified—at times, illegally, as Chapter 5 demonstrates—for each other regarding homestead claims. Usually these two lifestyles, ranching in the uplands and farming on the valley floor, led to separate social networks. There are stories, however, of these groups getting together for mutual benefit. Especially during times when sheep ranching paid poorly, farmers would provide ranchers with valley crops in exchange for hunting rights in the uplands.

By the turn of the century, a generation of ranchers and farmers had grown up together as neighbors. Particularly at the head of the valley, where smaller farms made closer neighbors, the social bonds were tight. The young Hallegrens, Prichtets, Boards, Richards, and Van Alens all shared two generations of mutual experiences, which included work, play, and family problems. Young neighbors often married, further binding people and property. Men shared projects at their homes, and when one neighbor was picked as foreman for government or utilities projects, he hired the others to fill out his crew. Road tending, surveying, and eventually telephone line work were all shared in this way. Women visited with one another to bridge the loneliness of ranch and farm life and no doubt shared in the rural chores of baking, sewing, and canning.

Even among these hard-working people, for whom a day off was a luxury, neighbors joined together for pure enjoyment. Near the confluence of Warm Springs and Dry creeks, barn dances were often held among the valley farmers; children roughhoused in one room, while the adults danced until the midnight potluck supper. Dances included the Virginia Reel, with second-generation settler Will Richards, Jr. serving as a caller, while other neighbors provided accordion music. In the uplands, where distances between homesteads were greater, social events were usually simpler. Orville Baldwin tells of get-togethers between his and his ranch hand’s families. Music-making, even by the unMusical, was the highlight of these evenings, and both children and parents danced for hours (8).

**Schools**

Schools were high on the first settlers’ list of priorities. During the 1850s there were few schools in Sonoma County, and hundreds of children were said to be growing up ignorant. With the establishment of a school, members of a community gained a feeling of permanence and respectability; they demonstrated their intention to stay, to improve the next generation, and to continue the values of the society. The local school often became the center of a rural community. It provided the arena not only for the education of the young, but also for local politics, social functions, feuds, and gossip (9).

These schools were run by a locally elected board of trustees, which was responsible for the hiring and firing of the teacher, the purchase and maintenance of school property, the timing of the school year and, to some degree, for setting the curriculum. Within each school district, an annual meeting was held during June to elect one trustee for a term of three years. On some occasions, these elections were hotly contested races between opposing factions. In 1878, one such meeting nearly ended in a brawl. The Hamilton District clerk recorded that considerable excitement prevailed during the voting in consequence of the Blazer party endeavoring to get up a row but as they lacked the pluck to begin it they did not succeed (10).

The teacher was sometimes an issue in these election campaigns. The first act of the new board was often to fire the teacher in midterm. Thus, Mrs. Conlon, who “kept a first class school” in May 1879, “did not give satisfaction” in July and was dismissed (11).

Broader political concerns also surfaced at the local school. In describing Hamilton School’s students in 1879, the teacher, Mr. Kraft, revealed his political bias:

The pupils possess over the common run of intelligence. There is a certain class here, as well as in other school districts, who attend school in a sort of come-and-go-when-you-
Hamilton School, circa 1910; several third-generation project area residents are shown in this picture (photo courtesy of Edwin Langhart Museum, Healdsburg)

please manner, who grow up idle and listless, and who will vote the Kearney ticket and cry for a division of property (12).

Dennis Kearny, leader of the radical Workingman’s Party, advocated what were at the time revolutionary changes in labor and taxation. The movement, at its peak in 1879, may have fired controversy in the Lake Sonoma Area, if Mr. Kraft’s views were at all representative. His statement also reveals that a class distinction was felt in this small community, perhaps made between landowners and their employees, or between prosperous and less successful landowners.

School was less demanding of a child’s time in the early years, no doubt partly because children were needed at home as well. California law mandated trustees to keep school open for at least three months of the year, but it appears to have been the trustees’ choice which months to remain open. In the 1870s, Hamilton School usually started its term sometime in March or April; these terms lasted four or five months. By the 1880s, the school year was divided into two terms, a spring term from around April 1 to mid-June and a fall term from mid-July to November 1. The school was closed over the wet winter months, when many roads and trails would have been impassable. The Mendocino School carried on this schedule through at least 1912, but with a longer school year; there was apparently no June break, and children usually attended classes until Thanksgiving. By the mid-1920s, this school was on the now-familiar September to June schedule (13).

In contrast to Mr. Kraft’s apparently stern approach to his pupils, Farley Auble of the Mendocino School in upper Dry Creek was a more agreeable teacher. He walked through the woods to and from school with his students, “making the forest ring with his songs as he strolled along the trail” (14). Mr. Auble faced a class diverse in age—from 6 to 14—and in socioeconomic background, with the children of a gentleman rancher and of a poor immigrant family.

Mr. Kraft and Mr. Auble were in a minority, as school teachers were more commonly women. Most districts hired only single women, and some had very strict codes of dress and behavior. As housing near the school was often scarce, many teachers boarded with one of their pupils’ families. The Abshire, Tom Scott, Richards, and Smalley families each boarded a teacher at one time. Although some teachers became life-long friends of the family, relations were not always amicable. Teachers were sometimes manipulated to take over the housework and care of
the children during their off-duty hours. One teacher at Mendocino School complained that,

From the time I got up in the morning until school was out in the afternoon I worked steady, teaching, washing dishes, and sweeping. . . . It was constant work, staying steadily at the place, not even a horse back ride or a ride to town. Never in my life have I worked so hard and steady. . . . Not even a thanks or a good-bye did I receive. . . . though I was a teacher and a servant too (15).

A study of such arrangements undertaken by the United States Department of Education concluded that teachers should have dwelling quarters in the schoolhouse in order to avoid these problems. In 1926 George Matthews built a cabin for the teacher at the Mendocino School.

With the closing of local schools in the 20th century, Lake Sonoma Area children became more integrated into town life. During the school year, the women and children of some sheep-ranching families lived in town during the week, leaving the men to run the ranch. Other children were driven by school bus or parents to class in the nearest town. The time spent in commuting shortened the time that could be spent at home, and the town became increasingly the focus of social life and recreation.

Some of the second generation of settlers went further out into the community to attend college. Education was highly prized, even if the graduate were to return to the ranch and continue his father’s role. As one Lake Sonoma Area mother advised her college-student son, “you say your study is harder than labour but your labour would be all most a wast of time unless you had a little education” (16).

**Town Events**

With the chores at home and the long distances to town, outside social events were rarely sought. A few activities were of sufficient magnitude, however, that they could draw even the most sober families. Religious revival meetings, held on Dutch Creek Road off Dry Creek Valley, drew some people from the farms and ranches. Political rallies, usually occasions for large gatherings and orations, also brought some families from the hills. Holidays were occasions for large picnics. Fourth of July celebrations began with a reading of the Declaration of Independence and patriotic speeches, followed by
huge barbecues, fireworks displays, band music, and
dancing from evening until dawn. Food was provided
to the public, though an announcement of a local
Fourth of July fish-fry advised that “those who can
make it convenient would do well to bring a loaf of
bread” (17). An elaborate May Day celebration in
1901 was described by the teenaged granddaughter of
an early settler: following a picnic at a nearby grove,
she was anticipating a big dance at a cannery “about
six miles from here.” One room was to be reserved
for dancing, one for a gentlemen’s smoking room, one
for gentlemen’s card playing, one for ladies’ card
playing, one for social gathering, one room to seat
100 guests, a table to play all kinds of games, and a
large dining room with food ready to eat from eight
clock in the evening until morning. Whether or not
the event lived up to all her expectations, it was
clearly a celebration on a grand scale (18).

Of all these events, the county fair may have had
the most universal appeal—anticipated for several
months and remembered long afterward. The fairs
began as promotional activities of the State
Agricultural Society, an organization established to
instill pride in California agriculture, disseminate
agricultural information, and encourage farmers and
their children to stay with the soil rather than flock to
the cities. The annual addresses given on these
occasions were inspirational messages, imbued with
all the idealism of a sermon. Every citizen ought to
attend these exhibitions, the audience was told, “not
simply to gratify idle curiosity, but for the purpose of
coming into contact with earnest men, and to derive
new inspiration for the labors of every day life” (19).
While such high ideals may have motivated some of
the fair’s visitors, many more no doubt came purely
through “idle curiosity.” For them, the fair served as
a peak social activity at a time when the slightest
diversion, such as the arrival of the stage coach and,
later, the train, was cause for a crowd.

The fair had much to offer: in addition to
speeches and displays of agricultural products, the
weeklong event in 1860 featured a band, a trial of fire
engines, and daily horse racing. For some the fair was
a time to tout one’s product—be it livestock, jam, or
needlework—and perhaps gain recognition and
business for the effort. Sylvester Scott entered his
bulls, cows, and “jacks” in the state district fair’s
livestock competition in 1885, returning home with
$78.50 for seven entries—the equivalent of about two
months’ pay for a skilled laborer at that time. Fair
awards could also serve as precious memories. In her sparse autobiography, in which only life’s major events are singled out, Mrs. Gregson of Green Valley, about 20 miles south of Lake Sonoma, placed the following in a separate paragraph: “At healdsburg the first county fair we received a silver butter knife for the best butter” (20).

Lake Sonoma Area Resorts

Quite a different kind of interaction came from use of the area as a resort; the direction of flow was turned, and the outside world entered the Lake Sonoma Area. When Alexander Skaggs first established his small hot springs resort sometime in the late 1850s, it must have been a simple affair: tents were the only available accommodations, and Skaggs was taxed by the Internal Revenue Service in 1863 for an eighth-class hotel. The hills were crowded in that year with mining prospectors and investors, and these men may have been the guests Skaggs was originally catering to. Despite the crude facilities, 20 people were said to be registered each day of the season. In response to his success, Skaggs built a redwood hotel in 1864, and more facilities were added the following year. Soon there were sufficient accommodations for 300 people. While considered “first class” a few decades after its inception, the resort intentionally retained a rustic flavor; because it catered to a city clientele, it was important to maximize the contrast between home and the country springs. Most of the guests at Skaggs were San Francisco Bay Area families, with occasional visitors from other areas. The majority were members of the upper middle class: successful businessmen or professionals, along with occasional celebrities, such as a fighter in training and, later, a movie actor.

In the 19th century, concern for health was a principal preoccupation. Those who could afford it were constantly traveling for their health, sometimes taking far more rigorous journeys and undergoing more stringent regimes than the healthy would consider today. Among the most popular cures were retreats to mineral springs, where bathing in and drinking the spring waters was believed to attack a variety of morbid conditions, while sustaining the good health of the few who could list no complaints. In the late 19th century, health resorts developed around almost every large thermal spring in California, with half a dozen important spas within 30 miles of the Warm Springs Creek area. Over the years, Skaggs Hot Springs became one of the best.

With heavy infusions of sulphur, borax, magnesium, iron, and soda, the spring water was repellent to some guests, and the hot water could make bathing painful. The fact that one might have to recuperate after such health visits was humorously detailed by S.P. Mead, a California correspondent to an Indiana newspaper:

I managed here for my health. I am boiled morning and evening in the hot spring water and roasted in the sun between times. . . . I shall not attempt to give the chemical ingredients which an analysis of the water discloses, but the plain English is that without soap it will take the dirt off a few layers deeper than any repARATION I have seen. . . . I shall have to play that I am cured in order to escape from here (21).

Other writers lauded the pools; one claimed that the waters, of “any temperature from scalding to tepid [were] of the most delightful nature . . . with just enough soda to make your skin feel like ivory” (22).

Originally the waters were believed to have general curative powers, working especially well for rheumatism and gout, but capable of curing all “unwholesome” conditions. An 1876 advertisement for the springs claimed that “either bathing or drinking cures cases when doctors fail.” Later, as competition among resorts increased and a scientific basis for the medicinal value of mineral spring water was established, remedies for organ-specific and bacterial-specific diseases were claimed. Healthful benefits accrued not only from the mineral waters, but from the effects of fresh air, exercise, and relaxation. To take full advantage of the setting, guests often stayed through the summer. Usually the wife and children were permanent guests for the season, while the husband commuted to the city for the work week.

Rates at Skaggs Springs included meals, which were considered excellent. Evidence of these sumptuous meals was discovered in the 1970s, when archaeologists excavated trash pits at the resort site. Leg of mutton, ham, and the finest beef roasts comprised most of the fare, in contrast to local homesteaders’ meals of rabbit, chicken, and venison (23). Guests also had a dining option after the turn of the century: the home of Annie Bourdens, just outside the project area about two miles southeast of Skaggs, where “French chicken dinners,” featuring home-
raised poultry and vegetables, were offered. A single-wire telephone line connecting Skaggs with the Bourdens was used to inform the little restaurant how many guests to expect. A wagonload of diners would leave in the afternoon by the dirt road south of the resort, returning home through the woods in the evening. Such rustic outings had great appeal to the primarily urban clientele.

The following idyllic report appeared in a local paper in 1874, ostensibly describing a typical day at the resort:

On the piazzas of the cottages parties of ladies are congregated with their books or work in view of the children who are swinging and running and playing at housekeeping with good, happy innocence. While the nurses stroll the babies in their carriages over the lawn or collect in merry groups in the shade, in the yard of the hotel where the grass is short a gay party are playing croquet while down the creek a few rods away some sturdy boys are paddling a boat loaded with girls in perfect safety as the waters are only a foot deep. This is indeed a paradise for children and birds, and they seem equally happy. In fact it seems adapted to create enjoyment for everybody. The ladies freed from the trammels of fashion wear their neat calicos all day, walking, riding, washing, sewing, or chatting, occasionally joining a fishing party or taking a ride to Healdsburg or Geyserville to do a little shopping for the children. The gentlemen take longer excursions, sometimes going out with McMuray, the keen-eyed hunter of the establishment, bringing in deer, grouse, and quail in which the neighboring hills abound or riding lengths of six or eight miles to a famous trout stream to return in triumph with several pounds of scaley beauties to be prepared by the excellent cook for a late epicurean dinner (24).

Contrast this picture with what must have been a typical day on the farms and ranches surrounding Skaggs Springs: the men at work at their 12-hour days of physical labor; the women engaged in the endless
cooking, cleaning, sewing, and gardening tasks; and the children, after a hot summer day in the classroom, milking cows and slopping hogs. How did these two lifestyles—side by side throughout the summer—affect one another? Although some local residents occasionally took advantage of the resort to eat out at the restaurant and join in special parties, the gulf between the two ways of life was probably great enough to limit most interaction (25).

Other local landowners took advantage of the recreational value of the land and California’s fondness for “rusticating.” The railroad annually issued a publication entitled Vacation, which furnishes information so that you can arrange to stop at a hotel or private home in some town, at a mineral spring resort, rusticate on some farm, or enjoy the camp life so dear to the Californian (26).

One of the notices in the railroad’s publication advertised “Samuels’ Ranch,” a landholding in the Dry Creek uplands just west of the Lake Sonoma Area:

Good country home; splendid deer hunting and trout fishing. Open for guests from July 15 till September 15. Can accommodate 4. Adults $7, children under 10 half price. Address: R. Nobles.

Vacations like these probably appealed to more outdoors-oriented families, less interested in social activities than in spending a few days in the rugged country away from crowds.

Some campers chose still more informal, roving vacations. Old timers from Healdsburg and Geyserville recalled horseback rides up Skaggs Springs Road to the coast, taking several days to a week and camping out at night. The more adventurous hunted for their meals, while others hired a cook complete with a grub wagon to accompany them. In the remote hill land, an overnight stay in a meadow no doubt went unnoticed by landowners. Down in the Dry Creek bottomlands, the impact of vacationers was more apparent. In the summer of 1900, a teenaged girl living near the present damsite wrote a friend: “Do you have many campers out your way? The roads are lined out this way. So many stop here to buy hay, eggs, and to camp on the creek” (27). Having outsiders on the land may have presented some inconveniences, but catering to their needs must have provided a welcome side income. And to the young people, such as the letter writer, urban campers on the farm might have been an exciting diversion.

The informal camp run by George Matthews for his large number of Marin County relatives is described elsewhere in this volume (Chapter 8). Another service that Matthews and other local landowners provided family and friends was a retreat from the city for reasons of health, either due to illness or, in several cases, alcoholism. One friend wrote Matthews regarding a young man whose doctor had advised that he must “positively cut out alcohol.”

I am asking you to take the boy under your care while up that way and see that he follows the Doctor’s orders. . . . The Doctor says the water in your sulphur spring will be fine for him, and I am in hopes that a week or so of your delightful mountain air, with the water and exercise; will send him back feeling all right again. Make him get out and catch his own trout, and make him milk, and feed the calves and the pigs, and put him in bed every night so tired out that he can’t hold his head up. It’s just what he needs (28).

Matthews was well aware of the value of his sulphur springs and of the resort potential of his property. In a letter to a prospective buyer of the ranch, he claimed:

The ranch could be made a very profitable enterprise if sufficient capital is used to start a watering resort on part of the land, which contains a number of valuable mineral springs, water all year round in abundance. . . . The sale of water and a good Hotel alone could be the means of earning between $20,000 and $30,000 per year if correctly handled and pushed by the right parties (29).

Interest in the area’s resort potential was still present 30 years later. When the Rockpile Ranch was first developed, among the listed purposes of the corporation was to “maintain clubs, hotels, and resorts” (30). And, of course, with the creation of Lake Sonoma, recreation continues to be important to the area.

Hunting Clubs

The superior hunting in the area attracted outsiders early. Sylvester Scott, the man who claimed that he killed a bear and a panther for every day of the
Elk Range Gun Club members, circa 1909 (from GM collection)

year, may have started the area’s first hunting club in the 1870s. An article in the local newspaper upon Scott’s death was entitled “Death of a Famous Hunter.” Scott’s fame as a bear hunter, the newspaper claimed, was worldwide: “Perhaps no man in the country in those days enjoyed the visits of so many prominent people. . . . Dukes, princes, and other titled people” were drawn to his reputation (31). Scott apparently saved the pelts as trophies, rather than selling them at market; the paper reported that at the time of his move to Idaho, he had a collection of 300 bear skins from the hills surrounding upper Dry Creek.

Later, recreation was combined with business and politics in the hunting clubs of the Lake Sonoma Area. George C. Matthews, the son of an early subsistence rancher, paid his way through St. Mary’s College with cash earned by his prowess as a deer hunter. It was apparently at St. Mary’s that he made friends with a number of young men who were to become prominent San Francisco businessmen. After Matthews returned to his father’s Dry Creek ranch in 1887, these men began to make regular visits to the area. Soon Matthews established the Elk Range Gun Club, with his influential friends as members. From club correspondence, we learn that annual dues in 1903 were $20 per person (12 members), a sizable sum at the time. The club met in Santa Rosa to vote on rules and new members, which were subject to Matthews’ approval by letter. Among the members in 1905 were a judge, a district attorney, an attorney, and the county assessor. Matthews did more than simply allow the members access to the land; he participated in the hunting and social activities; favors passed back and forth through the mails; and members were willing to speak for Matthews on matters of roads and land claims.

Hunting clubs became increasingly popular through the years. The 15 investors in the Rockpile Ranch, incorporated in 1911, initially amassed their
huge acreage to form a hunting club. Sheep ranchers began leasing exclusive rights on their lands; in these transactions, they negotiated the number of men per club on the basis of how many deer the rancher wanted taken (restricted by law after 1907 to two per hunter per season). Unlike the Elk Range Gun Club and Rockpile Ranch, most clubs were not formally organized but were simply groups of men who enjoyed hunting together.

Hunting rights could be sold or exchanged both formally and informally between landowners and hunters, and they became an actively negotiated item in the terms of any sale or lease of property. Later, in the late 1970s, landowners just outside the project area received an average annual income of $1.00 per acre for leasing hunting rights. With some ranches including more than 10,000 acres, hunting was an important source of income. Hunting clubs had several benefits to the landowner. As we saw in the case of Matthews, they could be an important source of social and business connections. By curtailing the deer and feral pig populations in the uplands, hunting clubs also helped ranchers maintain the range for livestock, as well as providing welcome income (32).

**INTERGROUP CONFLICTS**

Most of the interactions described above were characterized by cooperation between groups. But conflict often arises between groups if they each seek the same limited resources or their lifeways are so different that cooperation appears untenable.

**Intertribelet Conflicts**

Among the Southern Pomo, intertribelet conflict was not unusual. Revenge after a supernatural poisoning has been identified as the major impetus for warfare, while disputes over boundaries and fishing rights may have been the second greatest cause. Usually poachers were given a warning; force was brought to bear only in cases of persistent disregard of another group’s property rights. Battles were also fought to avenge the abduction of Makahmo women and children by other groups. With revenge as a frequent cause of these skirmishes, it is not surprising to learn that the same groups fought recurrently, with one dispute giving rise to another. Most of these conflicts were waged against close neighbors. The Cloverdale Makahmo fought most frequently with the Geyserville Wappo, the Yobakeya Pomo of Pieta Creek, and the Coko Pomo of Hopland. Occasionally battles were fought with nonlocal groups: an Upper Lake Pomo man reported that his people often battled with the Cloverdale Pomo when they passed through Makahmo territory on their way to the coast (33).

Warfare was often a highly formalized affair, presided over by a specialized war leader who established the battle plan, selected the place of battle, and set the time for the pre-war dance and dinner. Retribution was equally formal. War leaders from both sides met at the “winner’s” village to arrange for an agreeable settlement. The losers were required to give the victors payment of shell or magnesite bead money, animal skins, and blankets. Surprise attacks, according to one Makahmo elder, were also common:

Scouts, who were sent to watch the enemy village to determine its vulnerability, used ‘hoot-owl calls’ to signal to one another. The consultant said that people in the village were taught to listen carefully when they heard an owl call: ‘If it comes from high up, it’s a bird; if it’s low, it’s a man’ (34).

While such attacks, as well as those of more formal warfare, could often be brutal, relatively few deaths occurred compared with national warfare in historic times, with the first death often signaling the end of fighting. Occasionally no one was killed, and the conflict was ended simply because one side gave up and went home. At other times, there were several deaths before the fight was conceded.

Alliances were sometimes established between groups—frequently the same groups with whom trade, intermarriage, and ceremonial relations had been cemented. Such “confederations” were reportedly common in the upper Russian River drainage, but their presence among the Southern Pomo has not been recorded. Certainly some help from friendly groups would have been expected when a tribelet was being threatened from outside. Once Euroamericans entered the area, Indians had a more urgent reason for banding together, and warning systems, such as that which alerted other groups to approaching Mexican slave raiders, were established. By the time of Vallejo’s military attacks on the northern frontier, a man named Daniel was said to have been the “chief of the Cainamero” (Southern Pomo), implying far broader political alliances than had occurred before contact.

**Conflicts with New Settlers**

During the Spanish and early Mexican periods, military attacks in the North Bay were focused on
finding and retrieving escaped Indians from the missions. As the mission system declined, the nature of the military campaigns against the North Bay Indians changed. The horse- and cattle-stealing activities of the interior and North Bay Indians were the cause of continuous fighting. Instead of organized punitive retaliation, military encounters degenerated into small skirmishes, often turning into slave-hunting raids.

The life of a captured Indian on the ranchos ranged from dull forced work to demeaning enslavement. At Sutter’s Fort, for example, 600 to 800 Indians were said to have been fed together at wooden troughs in the broiling sun, while at Vallejo’s Petaluma Rancho, one observer noted that the Indians “vegetate rather than live” (35). On some land grants, such as the Peñas’ Rancho Tzabaco, Indians and rancheros came together for mutual benefit: the rancheros needed the labor and, in isolated areas, perhaps the company as well, while Indians needed a home and protection from the military. In retrospect, some ranchos gave Indian people an opportunity to learn ranching and farming skills they would need for survival in the more densely populated California of the mid-1800s.

After tribelet life was disrupted in the mid-19th century, the Big Times that had been vital to group interaction were held with less frequency. The
population had been so reduced that not enough local people could be gathered to perform some dances, and ceremonies—when they were held—drew participants from a wider region. Then, in the spring of 1872, a message of hope for Indian people was transmitted throughout northern California. The new religion that resulted, called the Earth Lodge Cult by anthropologists, prophesied the end of the world with all its misery and suffering and a return to the former way of life. Clear Lake became the center of this new religion for Pomoans. There, semisubterranean houses were built to shelter Indian people from the ensuing cataclysm, and people went to Clear Lake from throughout the Russian River Valley and the Dry Creek area in what was described as “an almost continual procession” (36).

Indians working for settlers obtained two- to three-week leaves of absence (required by law), but the ceremonies at Clear Lake continued without interruption for months, angering ranchers and farmers. Many settlers were frightened by the large gatherings; unaware of the ceremonial significance of the assemblies, they often assumed that the Indians had convened to plot against them. Whites banded together to put an end to all such gatherings and return Indians to their work.

Once sent back home, many local groups again convened to continue their ceremonies. In the 1870s, people from Ukiah, Hopland, and Lake County gathered with the Dry Creek Pomo near the Warm Springs/Dry Creek confluence. A group of worried settlers met at the schoolhouse, organized men into an armed posse, and sent it to investigate. The settlers were assured of the peaceful intent of the gathering, and the Big Time continued (37). In other areas, Whites were far less tolerant; dances were frequently broken up by armed settlers, and in some cases, dancehouses were burned. Occasionally it was the military, not the settlers, who disrupted gatherings, and some Indian groups were even forcibly driven by soldiers to reservations.

Thereafter, each local group held its own ceremonies, inviting only close neighbors. This localizing of ceremonies, with each tribelet having its own dreamer or prophet, resulted in each group...
developing its own particular version of the new religion, while providing a focus about which each group could rally and organize itself. Many Indian communities of the 1980s continue to hold traditional dances, with people convening from throughout northern California for the celebrations.

The forced removal of California Indians from their own land is perhaps the best known of the hardships suffered by Native Americans (see Chapter 7). Less well known are the continued injustices which occurred for many decades after Indians lost their land. Although slavery was outlawed, the theft of Indian children and their sale to rancheros was a regular occurrence during the Mexican period, while new American settlers continued the practice for several years. In 1850 a form of slavery was legalized—indenture. The Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, as its title implies, was written to improve conditions for California Indians, protecting them from inhumane treatment by Whites. In reality, however, the act gave free labor to settler families, effectively requiring Indian children to remain in service until 25 to 30 years of age. Although the act was repealed in 1863, indentured children and young adults were bound to serve out their terms—until the 1880s in some cases.

For decades, Indians could not vote or hold office, nor could they testify in court against a White. Until 1921 most Indian children could not attend local schools. Instead they were separated from their families and sent to schools at the Round Valley Reservation or at the Sherman Institute in southern California, where education was often minimal and treatment usually ranged from negligent to severe. A Makahmo elder described her unhappy experience when, at age 11, she was sent 80 miles from home to the Indian school at Covel in Round Valley:

At that time I could not yet speak English and soon found myself unable to follow simple dressing and eating chores of the daily existence because we children were not supposed to speak Indian, a rule of most government Indian schools at that time. . . . They tried to keep me busy giving me cards that had holes in them through which I was supposed to twist some yarn. It seemed so useless (38).

Well into this century, Indians were not permitted in White churches, they could not enter beauty parlors or restaurants, and they were segregated in theatres. In stores they were required to wait to the side until the last White customer was served; at some places, they were not served at all (39). At best, Indians were subjects of curiosity, more often of ridicule. Reading the newspapers of the late 19th century, one is struck by the overt racism that was casually handed to the public. A lead newspaper story in 1871 referred to a Sebastopol political rally/picnic, to which “Men, women, boys, girls, babies and Digger Indians flocked.” Before describing the Indians’ “nasty squalidness,” the writer contrasted the crowd: “Digger Indians, sit on the ground a little apart from the tide of civilization, which surged here and there in beautiful, intelligent Saxon purity” (40). At the time, this attitude was expected by the readers, many of whom were still seeking to justify their usurpation of Indian lands.

As Californios became a minority during the early years of settlement, many of them also became the butt of racial jokes and discrimination. Called simply “Spaniards” in newspaper accounts, Mexican Californians were often characterized by the same disparaging stereotypes used to describe Indians. José Jesus Peña, brother of rancher José German and executor of his estate, met a violent end in what may have been a racial brawl:

A Cold Blooded Murder. — Jesus Peña was murdered by William Eller, in the upper part of this county. . . . An eye-witness states that Eller and a Spaniard were in a quarrel about a horse race; that some one struck the Spaniard on the head with a tumbler, when Peña interfered to settle the difficulty, and some one sprung out to Eller to shoot him, whereupon he drew his revolver and fired, the ball entering Peña’s head, who died in a few minutes. The murderer then jumped upon a horse and made good his escape. No arrests have yet been made (41).

Some of this hostility toward Mexican Californians was formalized in a number of legislative acts which outlawed traditional Californio entertainments, while an antivagrancy bill, officially known as the “Greaser Act” and specifically aimed at Mexicans and Indians, was passed in 1855 (42).

Conflicts among Settlers

Major conflicts also occurred among the new settlers. The Squatters’ Wars of the 1850s and 1860s
are described in Chapter 5. These stubborn contests between large landowners and the families who eyed their holdings ranged from name-calling and animosity, to murders and the burning of homes and property.

Local political disagreements over the Civil War were as emotionally violent as the Squatters’ Wars, although not as destructive of life and property. Sonoma County was bitterly divided over the issue. North of the Petaluma-Russian River divide, the population was primarily Southern Democrat, while most Petalumans were Yankees and staunch Republicans. For several years a verbal battle was fought between the Santa Rosa Sonoma Democrat and the Petaluma Journal & Argus, with each issue slinging insults at the opposition. The Democratic faction was particularly strong in Healdsburg, where it was reportedly asserted that “no recruits to join the Federal army would ever live to cross the Russian River.” Colonel Norton, a colorful and influential Sonoma County resident, claims to have been among the few to defy the Healdsburg Democrats:

When it was said that no Union flag should ever float in Healdsburg, he went immediately to Petaluma, purchased one, placed it on the top of his carriage, carried it through the country to Healdsburg, and nailed it to his balcony, where it continued to wave (43).

Local Healdsburg historian William Shipley described Sonoma County residents as “Tire-eating, blood-spilling roistering Southern Democrats who had a chill, frothed at the mouth and gnashed their teeth every time they saw a Lincoln Republican” (44). Given the majority sentiment, according to Shipley, “all Union sympathizers kept their mouths shut.” It is interesting to speculate how two farmers on Dry Creek in 1860—Andrew Miles from Indiana and Sanford Bennett from New York—fared living next to the Bishops from Tennessee.

The Democratic Party sentiment became so strong in northern Sonoma County that celebrations were held in the Santa Rosa square after each Confederate victory, and Sonoma was the only county in the state to return a vote in favor of General McClellan in the 1864 election, considered primarily a vote against Lincoln and the Union. Lincoln’s assassination subdued the political fervor. By the late 1860s, the Sonoma Democrat was no longer filled with political commentary, although anti-Union statements continued to be published for at least a decade.

Over the next century, the nature of conflicts between the people of the Lake Sonoma Area changed. Previously, group interest had been a unifying force, uniting squatters against land-grant holders and settlers against Native Americans. As land title became more firmly established, the basis for much of this discord was undermined, and the scale of disputes was reduced to the individual or family level. Few details of these squabbles have come down through the years, although some were undoubtedly over land boundaries and the exact placement of fencelines. It seems likely that such issues were the cause of the long-standing feud between the Hallengren and Pritchett families, who owned contiguous tracts in the upper Dry Creek Valley. Other disputes, such as that between the Woods and the Pattons, had more immediate causes: in this case, a brawl following a local dance ended in Patton being shot by Wood. In the late 19th century, the Hamilton School District Board was the only public forum wherein local factions could vie for dominance. At least in the early days, successive boards seem to have been concerned almost as much with local politics as with matters of education.

In more recent years, the area once again became deeply divided, this time over an issue that would affect both it and the county as a whole: the Warm Springs Dam-Lake Sonoma Project. The dispute waged for several years, with many county residents in the early 1970s actively taking sides. Landowners within the area viewed the development differently: some considered sale of their holdings to the government to be an economic windfall, while others were frustrated and saddened by the forced sale of generations-old homesteads. Nearby farmers could not agree on the benefits of flood control versus annual, nutrient-rich flooding of the fields; townspeople were divided over the virtues of the potential economic stimulus of increased tourism versus home-town values; and environmentalists and sport enthusiasts disagreed on the appropriate use of the land. Like most disputes during the area’s history, time has softened this conflict, and by the mid-1980s, most residents no longer found the building of Warm Springs Dam an important issue for debate.
Makahmo foot drum (drawing by Rusty Rossman)
The Southern Pomo and their neighbors (map by David Bieling)