



California State Parks

Video Transcript



The Olompali Historic Tour: A Trek Through Time

Hello, my name is Fred Lew. I'm a ranger at Olompali State Historic Park. I'd like to welcome you to Olompali. For those of you who are not familiar with this park, this park is located in northern Marin County, midway between Novato and Petaluma. We're approximately a half hour or 45 minutes north of San Francisco. The significance of Olompali is that this site has been used continuously by humans for 8,000-plus years. There have been several significant events that happened here, that not only affected local history, it's affected California history and U.S. history as well. It offers an interesting micro-profile of the history of California. What I'd like to do is I will give you a quick orientation of the park's history. This history is divided into three parts. The first chapter will deal with the Native American period, the second chapter will deal with the American ranch period, and then, finally, the third chapter will deal with the modern period.

Why don't we begin with the name—Olompali. Why is it pronounced Olompali? If you have trouble remembering the name, what I usually tell all the school groups that come in, if you can say Monopoly, you can say Olompali. It's a Coast Miwok word. It's not Spanish. It's not Hawaiian, which I hear periodically. The Coast Miwok word means, we're not exactly sure, but the first part of the word, the O-L-O-M means south. We're not sure what the second part means. Our best guess is it either means southern village or southern water.

The Coast Miwoks that lived in this area used this area for a long, long time. We learned about seven or eight years ago that people have been using this site for 8,000-plus years, and that's probably accurate to within 25 years. So what does 8,000 years mean? 8,000 years means that people were using this site about 1,000 years before the Great Wall of China was built. People were using this site about 1,500 years before the great pyramids of Egypt were built. So, this site is very old. The only other site that we know that comes close to it is up by Bodega Bay.

The Coast Miwok occupied an area, I guess what now would be defined as, roughly from Bodega Bay, east to Santa Rosa and south to the Golden Gate Bridge. During its heyday, it's estimated that there were as many as 3,000 Coast Miwoks living in the territory. The current Coast Miwoks, the descendants, will argue with that, they said there were at least 20,000 Miwoks in the area. Olompali was the largest village in the territory—they call them triblets. During its heyday, it's estimated that as many as 500 Miwoks lived at the site.

I'm standing here in front of a shelter that we built several years ago. It's in the shape of a roundhouse, but I must emphasize that this is not a ceremonial building. It is not a sacred building. It was only built for interpretive purposes. A traditional roundhouse is built subterranean-ly, meaning the walls would be underground. The only thing above ground

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would be the roof. Entrance would be into the ground, into the building. Also, traditionally, the entrance always faces the east. Right now, this opening faces south. So I need to make that clear. But it is in the shape of a roundhouse. As you walk inside, you'll be able to see what it looks like. We wanted people to be able to walk into this and show you what it looks like, but we also need to respect the Indians' viewpoints on this. So, when you walk into a roundhouse, the Miwoks believe that there are evil spirits always with you, coming after you or trying to take advantage of you. So when you go into one of these buildings, you are to walk around, pivot, 360 degrees to throw the evil spirits off guard, or off their path, before you can walk in the building. So, we walk in . . . pivot.

This is a much smaller version. This is only about 20 feet across. Traditionally, these things would be 40-50 feet tall. People come in, they'd sit on the perimeter and they would have ceremonies here—dancing, singing—that could last for days. If it's a traditional roundhouse, this would be the focal point of their spiritual living. The closest thing I can think of, it would be their church.

I'm standing in front of a Coast Miwok structure. It's probably their equivalent of a winter home. This is made out of redwood, and, yes, redwood was found in this area. Again, they made use of whatever they had available. These typically can sleep 10 to 12 people, and during the winter the ground would be covered with probably animal furs to keep warm. There was always a fire in the middle to keep the place warm, but they didn't do any cooking in it. Cooking was always done outside. The construction on this is remarkably simple—you just have redwood stakes, cross pieces, a brace, and the securing material is the inside of redwood bark. It's a tough string, but it'll last forever. It's very strong. And that's all it took to hold this thing together. Let's go take a look at the other structures that the Coast Miwoks lived in.

Well, we have another structure under construction. This is another "kotcha" or another home for the Coast Miwok. This might be described best as a summer home. It's a different construction. What needs to be done on this—we need to build cross members to give it rigidity, but the exterior is made of a reed called tule. We had one here previously. You can still see some of the remnants of it here. This is a summer home. Typically at the end of summer, after one season's use, they would tear it down and burn it.

I'm standing here at the dance arena, and I'd like to talk a little bit about the Coast Miwoks spiritual outlook on life. They had a very strong spiritual reference toward nature. They believed that all living things had spirits, be it other animals, forces of nature—all living things—and the Miwoks were part of that formula. Nature was the all mighty entity, and no one single entity was stronger than the other. The Coast Miwok were here to coexist with these other entities. When they had a successful hunt and they killed a deer, they would immediately make an offering to the deer thanking it for its sacrifice for food. During the course of the year, the Indians always made sure that nature comes first.

During the spring, they would have gatherings. It was not just gatherings of the Indians in the immediate areas, but gatherings of large areas. Various tribes, they'd come and celebrate spring. In other parts of the country, these were called pow wows. In California, for whatever reason, they didn't call them pow wows; they called them big time. The one in the spring was called a strawberry festival, and what it was was an offering to Mother Nature that this spring

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would be good, that there'd be plenty of food harvested and so on. They would sing and dance. These activities would last for days. They would dance in places like this - although traditionally, this would be packed dirt.

Living harmoniously with the environment, with other elements of nature, was very, very important to the Coast Miwok. They believed that if you do something to harm the other elements, bad things will happen to you. You know, it's almost a cliché to say "It's not nice to mess with Mother Nature"—take care of Mother Nature. If you don't take care of Mother Nature, all living things, not only you, but all living things will suffer. I think it's a lesson we could all learn from today.

I'm standing in front of the Burdell barns. Galen Burdell, he gave up his dental practice and became a gentleman rancher. He had these barns built. Whoever designed the place most likely came from the east coast somewhere, because all these buildings have a New England-styled architectural design. This barn, built in 1865, has a classic cupola, which you find all over the east coast. This bigger building is an add-on that was built in 1882. Galen Burdell became a prolific rancher. He tried to experiment and he grew all sorts of things, for example he happened to like wine. He planted 16 acres of vineyards, 10 acres of which was his favorite wine—zinfandel. So he had 10 acres of zinfandel. He planted pear trees, orange trees, quince. He even grew bananas here. He had a greenhouse built to do that. On the backside of the building, there's a walnut orchard. They're English walnuts. What is unusual about these English walnuts is these are ungrafted English walnut trees. Typically the root is very weak, and they have to graft an English walnut tree to a black walnut tree root in order for the tree to grow. These are ungrafted English walnut trees, and every fall around September/October we have the happiest squirrels in the county because these trees produce abundant walnuts. Let's move on.

We're here underneath the barn to show you how this barn was originally constructed. In those days you couldn't go out and buy nails. It was built with strictly mortise-and-tenon construction, which means no nails. The buildings, the structures, the beams were all fitted like Lincoln Log cabins. If you look at this, you can see the mortising where the beams would have fitted over. Considering this building is probably about 3,000 square feet, it's an amazing structure. This building dates back to approximately 1865.

Okay, we're standing here at the Burdells' outbuildings. If you look at this building right here in the middle, that was probably the first building built on the premises. That's the blacksmith's shop. He was your most important guy to have if you're going to start a ranch because he has the skills to make nails, to make any hardware equipment you need to build your ranch. Behind the blacksmith's shop, the house over there, that was probably the blacksmith's house. If you look at that house, it is your classic New England style home. It's got that long pitch roof—it's called a cat's paw. Some people refer to it as a saltbox house. So that was probably the blacksmith's house. The last house over here that you can see belonged to another worker on the ranch. The Burdells had an interesting way of naming things. That house was for the groundskeeper. The Burdells referred to it as their ranch superintendent's home. Mary Burdell had various homes built throughout the estate. There are a lot of deer here, and she was very protective of her deer, so she also had her own game warden. The house doesn't stand anymore, but there used to be a house for the game warden here on the ranch. Let's move on.

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Every building here has a story, and this building in particular has an interesting story. Charmain Burdell, the last descendant of the Burdells, is the source of this story. This is known as the frame house. Apparently it was used as temporary housing while the mansion was being built. The story behind this building is—you remember Mary Black married Galen Burdell. Galen Burdell had to work on his mother-in-law's teeth one day, Mrs. James Black. He fixed her teeth, but unfortunately in the process he learned the hard way that she was allergic to his anesthesia, and she died. She died in his dental office. James Black became less than happy. He began drinking a lot. One day he was rip-roaring drunk, fell off his horse and died. So they came to a reading of the will in his attorney's office in San Rafael. Mary Burdell and her husband were there, and Mary Burdell was very impatient because the will was very important—she couldn't survive without her father's money. The attorney had to leave for a moment. She ran up, scanned the will, realized that she had been disinherited. She tore off the signatures off the will and swallowed it, but, unfortunately for her, the attorney had a second copy of the will and so he produced it. Mary Burdell contested the will. She said that her father was not of sound body and mind and the will was no good.

So she had to go to court to break the will, and it went to public trial. This trial was like the O.J. Simpson trial of its time. Everybody wanted the dirt on the Burdells. You had to get tickets to get in to see the trial. Here you are, the most powerful, the wealthiest family in Marin County, and you're up for a public trial. They had three trials in Marin County. The first three ended up in hung juries. The fourth trial had to go to San Francisco because they ran out of qualified jurors there. During the fourth trial, James Black's niece testified. She came here from Scotland, and she was living with James Black to take care of him. She testified that her uncle was a drunk and couldn't care for himself. He was not of sound body and mind. Well that broke open the case. Mary Burdell inherited half her father's estate. The niece now doesn't have a place to stay, so Mary Burdell had this house built for her and her eight children, and that's how this frame house was built.

I'm standing here in the middle of the Burdell garden. This was the first and most formal Victorian garden in Marin County. There was your classic England-designed garden—everything had to be balanced. There used to be a central walkway that walked the length of the garden. I'm standing probably right on top of it. It had these circles at both ends of the walkways. Everything was balanced. Right now you can see a circle—there was a rock garden there. At the opposite end, to balance that, there was a large gazebo. The gazebo, of course, is long gone. The path was made out of crushed brick and lined on the edge with bricks. When the University of San Francisco was running out of money or wanted to sell this place, they took all the bricks out and sold them. So I'd like to walk over there and show you some of the elements of the garden that are interesting. There are certain elements of Victorian gardens. The elements are still here that were in all Victorian gardens. Over here we have a lily pond at the far side. And, according to somebody who is very familiar with Victorian gardens, they think this open space here was for a pavilion. So what is a pavilion? Remember when I said there was gazebo? A gazebo is a sunlight shelter. A pavilion is for a moonlight shelter. So the idea is they come out here, sit under the pavilion, and watch the evening moon rise.

This little cove area here was apparently what they called a contemplation area or a quiet zone. There was a bench sitting there—an escape place to sit and contemplate. Now you've

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got to remember the highway and the road wasn't here at that time. Of the original garden, we probably have less than five percent of the original trees left. Most have died. These we believe are originals. This tree is called a myrtle, and the women during the Victorian time period used to get these leaves and that was their perfume. If you look at the shape of these trees, there is a line of trees through here. Apparently the design was they formed a trellis, there is an S-curved walk. You were able to walk underneath this trellis through the garden, walking through here underneath this trellis of myrtle. Let's go and take a look at the water fountain.

This is the Burdell fountain. This is probably the centerpiece of the garden. There used to be a bronze crane on top. From what I understand, when the water came through, the bronze crane would rotate and spew water. As you can see, it still works. This used to be a moat, but there are cracks in it and it leaks so we can't use it anymore.

Mary Burdell planted her garden so that there was always something blooming year round. You can see these things, these typically bloom in late summer. Their common name is naked ladies, and these are amaryllis.

Okay, we're here at the Burdell garden. As I mentioned, Mary Burdell designed this place so that something was always blooming year round, regardless of weather. Today is the week before Christmas and something is still blooming. Right here, we have vinca, or periwinkle. These are daffodils. In another month, this whole area out here will be covered with daffodils and narcissuses. So it's a beautiful garden, it seems to have a life of its own and it's still thriving.

Let's talk about some of the trees that Mary Burdell brought back with her. Let's walk over there. After Mary Burdell broke her father's will and inherited her estate, Mary Burdell sailed to Japan and the Orient and started collecting plants for a Victorian garden. She came back in about 1874 with six Japanese gardeners and started planting the garden. Some of these trees are descendants from those trees she brought back from China and Japan. This, for example, is from Japan. It's called a mourning—not A.M. morning, but mourning as in death and mourning—a mourning cypress. These other trees, we have several Japanese maples. In between there we have a tree from China that's called a camphor tree. If you rub the leaves, you can really smell the camphor. We have a Chinese chestnut. It's still here. We also have—they call it a Japanese redwood, but there is no such tree as a Japanese redwood—it's actually a box cedar.

The Burdells were an interesting family. They seemed to be involved in a lot of lawsuits among themselves, such as the frame house. There was a lawsuit involved with this one too. The Burdells had a son and daughter. Mary Burdell died the same way her mother died—she was allergic to anesthesia and she died. But she kind of figured it, and she wrote her will before she died. The bottom line of the will was that the daughter would receive the estate here—the mansion, the pool, the garden, etc.—and the son would inherit the land—31,000 acres of it in Marin County. Well, the daughter was smart enough to realize that the real wealth was in the land, so there was another lawsuit, and she sued her own brother for her share of the estate. The brother, this time, instead of going to a trial, just bought her out, and he acquired this property.

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In 1911 he remodeled the original family home. He built this stucco building. In 1911 you could probably buy a nice house for \$1,000. This house took two years to build, and it cost \$15,000. This was a palatial estate—it was approximately 4,000 square feet. The original paint was salmon-colored with mica in it. The effect of mica—in the sunlight it would shimmer. This place was the showpiece home in Marin County. The Burdells lived here for approximately 80 years, and apparently they didn't survive the Depression very well. They had to sell off the property.

In 1943 they sold the property to a man named Court Harrington. Court Harrington used to earn his living dredging Pearl Harbor. But I guess in 1941 he got beat out by Japanese competition, and he sold his dredging equipment. The U.S. military needed it pretty desperately, and they paid him handsomely for it. So he sold his dredging equipment, moved out here, bought Rancho Olompali, and became a gentleman rancher. He was only here for four years.

He turned around and sold it in 1948 to the University of San Francisco who initially used it as a Jesuit retreat. After a while they found out that it was too expensive to maintain, and so they decided to rent it out. The rent then—and this was in the mid-'60s—included a formal Victorian garden, all these outlying buildings, a 4,000 square foot mansion, a swimming pool, country living. The rent was an outrageous \$250 a month, and they had trouble finding people to rent it. It was too much. In 1966 their most famous tenant moved in, a rock band moved in. The rock band had just changed their name. They were known as the Charlatans. By the time they got here, they became known as the Grateful Dead. Jerry Garcia came in, looked in the living room, he noticed where the walls met the ceilings were curved. He said, "That makes great acoustics. We can come out here, play music as loud as we want, and we won't bother anybody." So they moved in in the summer of '66.

The only problem was that while they were here, they attracted all the rock music icons from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. People like Grace Slick used to hang out here, Janis Joplin, Carlos Santana. There were a lot of musicians. A lot of people used to hang around here, as many as 500 people. It got to be a bit of a problem because too many people were coming here, and the highway was jammed, and the highway patrol didn't like cars blocking the highway, so eventually the Grateful Dead moved out.

In February of 1969, a fire broke out in the mansion, and the mansion eventually was gutted. The next event that happened here in Olompali was in 1972. A graduate student named Charlie Slaymaker came up to do an archaeological dig. They had known since 1907 that this potentially was a very significant archaeological site. So Slaymaker started doing a dig. He uncovered over 50,000 Miwok artifacts. This was a big name archaeological dig. Meanwhile, the University of San Francisco is trying to sell the property, and escrow is about to close. This site was about to become a 1,200-unit mobile home and condominium development. Charlie Slaymaker led the opposition against it. He said this place should be preserved as a park. This is a very sensitive and very valuable archaeological site.

So he led the opposition against it, and just before escrow closed, Charlie Slaymaker goes out one day to the dig site, bends over, picks up a coin. It's about the size of a nickel. It's an English sixpence. And what's the significance of an English sixpence? Well, Sir Francis Drake we know landed in Marin County. The Miwoks were the first Indians on the west coast

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to make contact with the Europeans. One of the holy grails of anthropology is to come up with some sort of documented evidence that shows the connection between the Europeans and the Miwoks. Guess what that sixpence represented? The discovery of that sixpence pretty much squashed the whole project to put in a condominium/mobile home park. In 1977 Marin Open Space, along with State Parks, acquired the property and made this Olompali State Historic Park.

So that, in a nutshell, is 8,000 years of history.

We're back where we started. I hope you learned something about Olompali State Historic Park. My name is Ranger Fred Lew, and I'd like to welcome you back and visit us.

Thank you.

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