

The Smith River

Community and Rancheria

A Basic Study Guide

Prepared by the Sierra Service Project

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Introduction

This summer, volunteers from the Sierra Service Project will be living and serving in the small rural community of Smith River. This community is located in Del Norte County, on the extreme northwestern corner of California just south of the Oregon border. It is remote, beautiful and, because of the cold Pacific Ocean, often cold, damp and foggy.

SSP will be serving people from all parts of the local community. This study guide is designed to help you better understand the community that you will be visiting and serving this summer.

Smith River Community Today

The current population of Smith River is about 900 persons. The Smith River Rancheria is a federally recognized tribe of Tolowa Indians. The tribe currently has 1,400 enrolled members, although most members do not live in Smith River. The Rancheria consists of 186 acres of land located between Smith River and the Oregon border. We will be doing some of our work this summer with the tribe and its residents.

About a third of area residents are Hispanic, many of whom are recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America. These people have moved to the area to work in several very large farms that produce Easter lily bulbs and other flowering plants. Smith River is known as the “Easter Lily Bulb Capital of the United States.” Smith River produces over \$7 million in bulbs each year.

The per capita income in Del Norte County is \$18,974, well below the California average of \$29,188. Del Norte is ranked 53rd out of 58 counties in terms of income. Its unemployment rate currently is 9.3 percent, compared to the state average of 6.3 percent.

The economy of Smith River and Del Norte County in the past depended heavily on timber. California’s timber industry has undergone a tremendous decline in the past 30 years, creating a loss of jobs, population and economic hardship in numerous rural communities. At its peak in the 1980’s, there were 130 timber mills in California, mostly in the northern part of the state. Today, there are only 25. In Del Norte County, there were 17 mills; now there is one. The decline of the timber industry was caused by many factors: restrictions on clear-cutting, rules to preserve old-growth and native species, the decline in the housing market, and the availability of cheaper timber imports from Washington, Oregon and Canada.

As its timber industry collapsed, some rural communities worked to have new prisons built as a source of economic growth. During this same period, California’s prison population grew rapidly (the number inmates increased 5-fold between 1982 and the year 2000). The reasons for this growth were increases in minimum sentencing, California’s “three strikes” law, which requires life prison terms for anyone convicted of three crimes, even minor ones, and an increase in people being sent to prisoners for drug use.

California responded by building 23 new prisons, each costing about \$300 million. Many rural communities eagerly sought to have these prisons located in their communities. One of these prisons was located in north of Crescent City (south of Smith River). This is the maximum-security Pelican Bay State Prison, where about 3,000 inmates live. About half of these prisons are kept in solitary confinement within the prison’s Special Housing Unit.

Statewide, prisons in California employ 68,000 workers, which makes prisons the largest state agency or activity. On average, these workers earn about \$70,000 a year, which makes these jobs very well paid by the standards of Del Norte County.

It is generally believed that new prisons have not brought many of the promised economic benefits to communities like Del Norte County. Much of the new employment has gone to new residents and has not improved the unemployment rate. At the same time, demand for county services has grown.

About the Rancheria and the Tolowa Indians

The indigenous residents of this part of the California coast belonged to the Tolowa Dee-ni' nation. It is thought that the population of this group was at one time about 10,000 people and was spread throughout the watershed of the Smith River and north into present-day southern Oregon. The Dee-ni' were Athabaskan people who spoke a language related to Navajo.

This description of Tolowa life prior to contact was written by a local tribal member and expert named Loren Me'-lash-ne Bommelyn:

By the use of the rivers, sea and the land the Tr'vm-dan' (Early) Dee-ni' produced a rich and highly developed culture. Salmon, whale, seal, clams, deer, elk, eggs and duck provided a diet rich in protein. Acorns, berries, seaweed and vegetables supplied them with carbohydrates. Their traditional mvn' (homes) were rectangular single ridge gable roofed structures built into the ground from redwood, cedar and pine timbers and planks. Mvn' unearthed by archeologist at Xaa-yuu-chit (Hiouchi) California, in 2003 have been carbon dated conservatively at six-thousand (6,000) B.C.E., eight-thousand (8,000) years before now. The Tr'vm-dan' Dee-ni' traveled by foot and in canoes carved and seared from k'vsh-chu on streams, lagoons, bays and at sea. Some of their sea-going canoes measured up to forty-two (42) feet long and eight (8) feet wide that transported five (5) tons of cargo.

European-American contact occurred in 1928 with a visit by explorer Jedediah Smith (who took the liberty of naming the local river after himself). Contact accelerated with the discovery of gold in California in 1848 and in the county in 1853. The Smith River area became an agricultural community supplying food to Crescent City and the gold fields.

As in other California communities, European contact quickly led to the decimation of the local people. Throughout California, the indigenous population dropped from 150,000 to less than 30,000 in the 12 years following the European-American invasion. The hoards of miners and farmers resulted in the destruction of traditional Tolowa life. This occurred in several ways:

Through trespass and flooding. Miners arrived via ship and rushed up the rivers and creeks in search of gold. The Tolowa, like their neighbors, lived in small villages - collections of redwood huts - in the flats and meadows along these waterways. These settlements were literally "in the way" of these miners and were indiscriminately destroyed. Indians who resisted and tried to protect their homes were often murdered. Hydraulic mining, which involves massive destruction of hillsides in search of gold, quickly replaced panning. Hydraulic mining brought with it flooding that destroyed more villages.

Through ethnic cleansing and murder. The history of indiscriminate and savage killing of native men, women and children in California is well documented, although it isn't well known. First, you have to consider the people that the gold rush brought to California. According to "Understanding Tolowa Histories" by James Collins, "Following unspecified Indian-white conflicts during 1851-1852, Del Norte settlers attacked and burned the northernmost village of Howonquet in 1853. About seventy people were killed. A well-remembered massacre occurred in the late fall of that year, at the village of Yontocket on Lake Earl, north of Crescent City. During a winter dance, probably a ten-day World Renewal Dance, an armed contingent of Crescent City settlers attacked, killing a large number of dance participants, and burning the village to the ground."

This item appeared in the Marysville [California] Weekly Express on April 16, 1859: "A new plan has been adopted by our neighbors opposite this place to chastise the Indians...Some men are hired to hunt them, who are recompensed by receiving so much for each scalp, or some other satisfactory evidence that they have been killed. The money has been made up by subscription."

The U.S. Army took an active role in this process. In 1864, the Yreka Semi-Weekly Union ran this matter-of-fact report: "The new military commandant of the district, Col. Black, is doing good service in Indian hunting. He keeps his troops in the mountains most of the time scouting, and has introduced a new method of treating hostile Indian prisoners - hangs them all. That style of dealing with a murdering Digger [a derogatory term for coastal Indians] is very effective, and meets with universal approval by the citizen inhabitants of the hostile region. It seems to be a general sentiment here that a mean 'Digger' only becomes a 'good Indian' when he is dangling from the end of a rope, or has an ounce of lead in him."

Post Order No. 24, issued by Fort Gaston [present day Orleans, California] on June 26, 1863, read: "All Indians found south of the trail usually traveled by mules from Martins Ferry on the Klamath River ... will be shot on sight. "

Not everyone was silent about these outrages. On May 31, 1856, The Sacramento Union newspaper wrote that, "the accounts of Indian hostilities...are almost invariably exaggerated. A small affair is soon magnified into a battle, and the origin is not infrequently attributed to Indian Outrages, while the account should read 'White man's oppression.' The Indian war is defunct. The whole matter has been a cowardly farce, the threatening legions of Indians turning out to be but about 100, seeking refuge in a brush from the rowdies, who, on the least occasion, delight in the sport of shooting them. As in all cases of this kind, the fault has been with the whites."

The San Francisco Bulletin ran an article on June 1, 1860 which stated that "society is completely demoralized on Eel River; and the thugs are largely in the majority, led on by Wiley of the Humboldt Times and by Van Nest the sheriff. Young men talk and think of nothing else but hanging and killing young Diggers and their mothers. The pulpit is silent, and the preachers say not a word."

Enslavement. The Indian population was also decimated by the practice of slavery, which was legalized by an 1850 California law and continued well after slavery was abolished in the rest of the United States. According to accounts at the time, young boys sold for \$60, while a young girl could sell for as much as \$200. It is estimated that 4,000 children were bought and sold in this manner.

The Reservation Period

In 1862, a 17,000 acre reservation in Smith River was established by a treaty between the US Government and the Tolowa Dee-ni'. However, the government abrogated the treaty in 1868 under pressure from local white settlers. The Indians were forcibly removed to the Hoopa Valley. Under California's Homeless Indian Act, a 160-acre Rancheria was established in Smith River in 1906 at its present location.

In 1960, the Federal government "terminated" the Smith River and numerous other Rancherias throughout California. In 1983, the Tillie Hardwick Case reversed Federal Termination and restored the Tolowa Dee-ni' and Federal Government relationship under the Tribal Government of the Smith River Rancheria.

The Rancheria currently has about 1,400 members. The tribe has developed several local businesses, including a small casino, a market and gas station and a restaurant.

More history on the tribe can be found at <http://www.tolowa-nsn.gov/who-we-are> .