

Published July 31st, 2013

Week-Long Camp Lets Kids Live the Life of the Miwok

By Sophie Braccini



Ranger Bruce Weidman (right) and Doc Hale build a Miwok dwelling at Sugarloaf Open Space. Photo John Eaton

The Lafayette Community Garden site has everything that's required to transport one back to the time when men and women lived in harmony with the land, taking only what they needed and feeling fulfilled in return. It lacks only the Lamorindans of 5,000 years ago: the Saclan tribe.

Peggy Maglien's ambition is to take a group of children ages 8-12 (and maybe a few adults) back in time Aug. 12-16 and let them experience what it was like to live connected with nature. The camp, "Meeting Nature Through Miwok Eyes," is offered through the Lafayette Parks and Recreation Department.

"When I was a school teacher, we had a unit on native culture and we used to become Indians for the duration of the unit," says Maglien. "First we got our Indian names, based on the first initial of our names, and then we would learn to make tools with what was available and get a feel for the life people were living thousands of years ago in California." The camp will offer a similar experience, immersed in nature, complete with the building of a dwelling, eating like the Miwok, and participating in Native American ceremonies that will take place in the Community Garden, across from the Lafayette Reservoir.

Maglien's love for native cultures led her to research the lives and traditions of the local Miwok. The Saclans were one of the tribettes that composed the Bay Miwok. A people of hunter-gatherers, they lived in villages, made extensive use of acorn (cakes, mill), and of all available vegetables and berries - including seeds and bulbs - and hunted for game and fish. Maglien believes that they lived a fulfilling life, respectful for the world around them, with appreciation for what they received, never overusing natural resources. She wants to transmit that essence during the camp through very practical activities.

"We worked with Ranger Bruce Weidman at Sugarloaf Open Space (Walnut Creek) who is building a Miwok dwelling with his wife, and with Krist Jensen, Dow Wetlands Preserve team leader (Pittsburg) to get all the natural material we need for our construction and our tools," says Maglien. "We want children to experience what it was like to live the life of a Miwok, using the same elements that were available to them to survive in their world."

The gender roles in the tribes were pre-set: women were the gatherers, doing basket weaving and cooking; and the men were the hunters. In the camp, Maglien does not plan to enforce this separation. "The children will learn why things were done the way they were, why [the Miwok] needed to collect and grind the seeds, and the campers will do it themselves," says Maglien. "They will learn how to preserve the food and they will taste it, too."

Children will also participate in hunting and fishing activities, safely practicing on targets. They will make bags out of suede using abalone needles, experience what it is like to be dressed in animal skin and fur, and participate in the building of the Miwok dwelling made of willow branches, covered in dry tule leaves and cattail mats.

"Dances and ceremonies were an important part of the life of the Miwok," says Maglien. "We will make feather head-bands and bamboo clappers and on the last day of the camp, we'll invite a traditional musician to come and celebrate with us. Parents will be invited to join in the latter part of the day." The Miwok dwelling will remain as a permanent feature of the garden.

To register for the camp visit Lafayette Parks and Recreation at www.lafayetterec.org.



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