So... what happened to the Natives here?

Preface

This question is often asked by visitors to the area. This article attempts to answer it. The space here could well be left a big blank white page, to reflect how little we know of the people who inhabited the Mattole Valley for millennia, and to graphically display the intentions of the conquerors during the time of westward expansion. Make no mistake; a complete erasure of Native cultures, their languages, and when necessary or convenient, the people themselves, was the oft-stated goal of U.S. policy, both governmental and in the public mind.

(It would be extremely small-minded to interpret this statement as an attack on the morality of anyone or any group here today, based on the actions of their ancestors. They were everyone's ancestors, the forebears of everyone partaking of today's civilization; and while personal responsibility is always the final factor in moral decisions, the strength of cultural directive cannot be overestimated.)

In fact, it might be just as insulting to the memory of the Mattoles to try to fill in the blanks with a paltry few pages of speculation based on what can be salvaged after a century and a half, as it would be to leave the pages blank. But we do what we can, and with some uncertainty I will try to outline what survives of Native Mattole history.

There are generally three sources of information on the Mattole: first, the minuscule amount recorded by anthropologists who visited the Valley about a century ago and interviewed survivors of the so-called Indian Wars; second, the memories and tales of the descendants (all mixed-blood) of the Mattole today; and third, the records of nearby tribes, the Sinkyone to the south and Bear River to the north, from which we take the liberty of extrapolating to make assumptions about the Mattole. As far as I know, no white arriving before the complete subjugation of the Native Mattoles bothered to make an account of their habits and lifestyles.

By far the most information is gained from the third source, which is scattered and often speculative. Luckily, James (Jamie) Roscoe put together a comprehensive account of the Mattoles as his HSU thesis in 1985, drawing on personal interviews with a few local old-timers, government and personal correspondence from the first contact era, and any and all anthropological works on Native Northwest Californians that he could find. Jamie's book condensed most of the available information into one source. Reading his essay as an overview, then going to the Bear River and Sinkyone reports by Gladys Ayer Nomland from the 1930s for more detail, is probably the best you can do today to learn about the Native Mattole.

In the Beginning

There have been people living here in the Valley for at least 6,000 years, perhaps 9,000, according to radiocarbon dating of artifacts found in the upper Mattole watershed. We don't know how far back they go before that; the further you go, the more is lost to the sands of time--and that metaphor is quite literal in this geologically unstable area. The culture we call the Mattole, that is, those inhabiting the Valley when first encountered by the whites, was linguistically linked to the Hupa. The Hupa and Mattole tongues are so closely related (being both Athapaskan-group languages) as to suggest a fairly recent separation, about a millennia ago. So while the people we call "Mattole" may have been here only centuries, Native people undoubtedly inhabited the place for many thousands of years prior.

We needn't imagine a conquest of the Mattole Valley by outsiders when the Athapaskan speakers arrived. They may have gradually settled hereabouts, marrying in with the locals, until their language and habits took precedence. The Mattoles, by the way, were variously called Betol and Petol, so if you try putting a little more push of air into that first consonant you can get a truer

idea of the word. (You might even try saying "Petolia"!) What some anthropologists have seen as separate groups, the Cooskie and Bear River tribes or tribelets, Roscoe has defined as one with the Mattole, since they all spoke the same language. The Bear Rivers, or Nek-kan-ni, lived in the valley just north of here and down to Davis Creek; the Mattoles lived along the lower stretches of their river and the coast near its mouth; and the Cooskies lived upriver of Shenanigan Ridge and on the coast south of about the Punta Gorda lighthouse area.

The Mattole people had permanent villages on the river, the major tributaries, and along the coast. By permanent I mean occupied through the winter, while much hunting and gathering back in the hills went on during the rest of the year. Of course, there were permanent villages upstream that emptied out while their people vacationed at the coast in the summertime, as well. And just about everyone went to the tanoak groves for the autumn acorn harvest, then to the mouth of the river for the annual salmon run. People were pretty mobile in those days; temporary settlements followed the food cycles and the weather, the short distance from one microclimate or biosystem to another being easily travelled in these valleys. An excellent system of foot trails, used by the Natives for time unknown, greeted the first whites here; our present roads are essentially built upon them.

I quote from Jamie Roscoe: "The simple family was by far the single most important social unit in Mattole society with villages consisting of several loosely bound family groups sharing a winter site. The village was not a land-owning entity. Very limited areas such as house sites and specific resource localities (e.g. acorn groves aned good fishing spots) were the only kinds of real estate which were normally owned. These were claimed by individual families...

"Although political leaders existed among the Mattole, these headmen (often called chiefs by Whites) were not necessarily hereditary. They were chosen for their wealth and ability in solving disputes. They did not rule per se but made suggestions which were followed or not followed depending on their popularity and the consensus of opinion among the group...

"After the villagers spent a winter living primarily on stored provisions [augmented by steelhead and hunting], the spring ripening of assorted greens signaled the breaking up of the village into primary family units. These small bands went into the surrounding hills and camped in favored locations next to water. In contrast to the substantial plank dwelling houses and sweat houses built over excavated pits in the permanent winter villages, the shelters built during these sojourns in the hills were of brush and not excavated... Clover and grass seeds were especially abundant in Mattole territory and formed a staple, along with game meat, during portions of the summer. Also during the summer these bands would move to the coast to gather ocean resources such as shellfish, seaweed, seals, and sea lions."

Rather than continuing quotations from Roscoe's book, I recommend that you read it yourself. Copies of the typewritten manuscript, spiral bound, will be for sale at the Mattole History Fair for the cost of production.

A Bloody Decade

Here is a bare-bones outline of the clashes that led to the virtual disappearance of the Mattole people. I will not take space with specific references but credit the archive of The Humboldt Times available on microfilm at the HSU Library and the Eureka branch of the Humboldt County Library; Owen C. Coy's Humboldt Bay Region, 1850-1875; William W. Roscoe's 1940 History of the Mattole Valley; and James Roscoe's Ethnohistory of the Mattole.

1851: Redick McKee Expedition. Indian agent McKee proposes a reservation south of the Eel River's mouth 13 miles toward Cape Mendocino, and inland six miles.

1854: September: Mr. Hill of Fort Humboldt explores Mattole Valley with Wiyot guides; friendly contact with Natives.

1856: Superintendent T.J. Henley establishes Mendocino Reservation from Mendocino County as far north as Bear River.

1857: First year of substantial handful of white settlers in Mattole. Gardens planted, fences erected. Settlers protest that reservation has no business as far north as Bear River, or even Cape Mendocino. However, a reservation on the lower Mattole River is established.

1858: June: Mr. Thornton ambushed and murdered on trail between Upper Mattole and Lower (Petrolia). In following weeks, dozens of Mattoles killed in retaliation.

August: Committee of white men declare that all white men living with squaws in lower valley must drive them out. Apparently Honeydew area was not regulated by this edict.

September: Meeting in downtown Mattole draws up resolutions governing conduct of white-Native relations. A treaty of sorts, it keeps relative peace for a couple of years. (The 4th term of the Resolution effectively outlawed Native culture: Natives must not set fire to the grass on the hills; must not drive away, molest, or kill our cattle, horses, mules, or hogs; must not enter our enclosures; must not steal from us; and must not reside on our claims without our consent.) Pioneers still uneasy about Mendocino Reservation.

1859, May: Government agent J. Ross Browne declares Reservation illegal and instructs settlers to regard it as extinct.

December: Last claims to land in Mattole Township by U.S. government abandoned. Reservation boundaries are redrawn to a line south of Shelter Cove.

1861, August: Mr. Wise killed by Mattoles. Humboldt Home Guards established with three divisions, one in the Mattole Valley headed by Lt. James Brown.

December: Two sleeping white men, friends of John Briceland, killed by young Indian boys. Ten-year-old hung from tree as punishment.

1862, September: Prison camp on South Spit, Humboldt Bay, holds eight or nine hundred Natives, some of them Mattole. 100 Mattole, Bear River, and Cooskie Natives are sent by steamer north to Smith River Reservation. Joe Duncan, born about 1844, among them. (In 1920s, he is main information source for anthropologists seeking knowledge of Mattole culture.) He and others return to mouth of Mattole River after being released from Smith River due to lack of food there.

1863, September: Mr. McNutt killed by Natives, mistaken for notorious Indian killer Theodore Aldrich.

Garrison called Camp Olney set up at Upper Mattole, with 12 officers, under the command of Lt. Frazier, later Lt. Hubbard.

1863, November: Home of McGinnis burned by Natives.

1864, February: Lt. Frazier kills or captures 21 Natives in surprise attack near Whitethorn.

Thomas Lambert killed near Cooskie, ostensibly by Indians, while doing ranch work with P. Mackey. Later writers believe Indians were framed.

1863-64: Squaw Creek massacre. After either Lambert's or McNutt's murder (the papers did not report this one), Aldrich and Roberts attacked a Native camp about two miles up Squaw Creek,

killing many women and children, including two twins in a cradle. Warriors had been drawn off to battle nearby. Feared Mattole warrior Snaggletooth killed by Aldrich, some say Roberts.

1864, August: 30 Mattoles, from Camp Olney area, brought to Fort Humboldt, later dispersed to Round Valley and other reservations. They included the women captured from the last band of about ten Cooskies otherwise killed by Capt. K. Geer.

This was effectively the end of "Indian troubles" in the Mattole. Only Natives left were domestic servants (many indentured), a few wives, adopted children, and a group remaining at the mouth of the Mattole--or upstream a couple of miles--who were known to be peaceful. In 1868, a measles epidemic wiped out nearly all those Natives living in that small community. Almost every person of mixed-Mattole descent at the reservation of the Bear River tribe (formerly known as Bear River-Mattole-Wiyot) today is a descendant of the few survivors, mostly through Johnny Jack or the Denmans.

--- Laura Cooskey