

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Bears, Birds & Bobcats

by Betty Goerke - 2006

Those at the speaker event of August 21 which featured cultural anthropologist Betty Goerke, professor emeritus of the College of Marin, got a taste of what it was like to live in an environment where man-made noise was absent and sounds of nature abundant. Betty Goerke, born in 1931, Betty grew up in Illinois. Betty attended college at Radcliffe, where she studied classical archaeology and music. She received a master's in history from Northwestern and later studied anthropology at San Francisco State University. Betty and her husband, Jon settled down in Mill Valley in 1962 with their three children. In 1971 she began teaching anthropology at College of Marin and started studying the Native American history of Marin County.



It meant a deeper understanding of other life in nature. This was during the time of the Coast Miwok and Pomo and in the quiet of the room Professor Goerke let us listens to what various birds sound like and what this meant to Native Americans from a time when not only birds, but also bobcat, bear and elk were plentiful. In her talk, entitled "Bears, Birds & Bobcats, Professor Goerke explained the use of fur and feathers in ceremonial clothing. Many examples of the ceremonial regalia ended up in European museums, and she showed slides of those on display. "They lived in an environment where they could pay attention to all of nature's sounds and that gave meaning.



For instance, the Meadow Lark was thought of as a naughty bird and a gossip. The spotted owl was thought to foretell death. Birds would be caught (and subsequently released) for the plucking of just one feather, resulting in some exquisite patterns in clothing and basketry."

Professor Goerke showed slides of elaborate costuming using condor skin cloak for high-ranking Indians wore as ceremonial dress. Contrary to popular belief, Professor Goerke said the Native Americans were not egalitarian; they knew territory, trees, and stones and whom these belonged to. To take, one had to get permission or pay, with clam shells beads or perhaps a song. She said that position of respect is still honored among tribes today.

