

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WaterTreks - Suki Waters

by Andrea Granahan, West County Correspondent for the Press Democrat - 2015

Suki Waters, 52, has an appropriate name. Suki means Little Deer in Pomo. She was raised by her Pomo grandmother and now runs a kayaking outfit called WaterTrek in Jenner, earning her living from the waters where she grew up. Her grandmother, born Josefa Navidad Santos in the village that used to be on Goat Rock Beach, rescued her granddaughter from an abusive father. She taught Waters skills the young woman later took for granted, because she thought everyone had been raised the same way. Her grandma was a descendant of one of the “Three Sisters,” the Pomo women who ruled the matriarchal tribe before European contact. “My great grandmother was Cosiesoniamen,” said Waters. “The Europeans renamed her Mary Pete.”

“(In college,) I wrote a paper about my childhood for a professor, and when I read it aloud in class, my classmates were astonished,” she said. Waters described her grandmother rousing her at 4 a.m. The two of them went to a steep cliff above a sea cove and clambered down, hauling buckets and fishing gear. Waters remembers lying down on rocks and reaching out to rock-pick abalone, using a coffee can as a shovel to dig clams and when the tide came in, using stone sinkers tied to cotton string to fish. She and her grandmother then took their prizes home to clean, cut and pound and make dinner. “Then I could take a shower, eat and get some sleep,” Waters said.

“We would listen to the sound of wind and sea at night. If it was quiet, like a sleeping breath in and out, we would know that we’d be going to the beach the next morning. If it was loud and pounding or the wind was wild, we’d go inland.” Inland, Waters grandmother taught her the art of “tickling huckleberries,” a way of harvesting that does not injure the plant. She also learned to track, noticing what nature was doing around her. “I teach people how to track at Goat Rock where the prints are good,” she said. “Inland tracks are harder, so we look for scats or for signs on trees, like where a mountain lion has been sharpening its claws.”



A promotional banner for WaterTreks EcoTours. The banner has a blue background with white and yellow text. On the left, there is a small image of wind turbines and the text "Wind Powered Server". In the center, there is a small image of two people kayaking on a river. On the right, there is a small image of a cow and the text "Sustainable Tourism Supports Rural Economies, Education & Research". The main text reads "WATERTREKS EcoTours" in large, bold letters, followed by "Explore / Learn / Volunteer / Contribute" in smaller text. Below that, it says "Russian River & Sonoma Coast State Park Activities Throughout The Year" and "707-865-2249".

SUKI WATERS

The Santos family owned Santos Island at the mouth of the river in Jenner, what is now called Penny Island. Her aunts and uncles farmed and had animals, providing milk, eggs and produce for Jenner until 1956. “It was my European uncles who wanted money and came up with the idea of tearing up the island for gravel,” she said. “Grandma and my aunts, except for my Aunt Marie, were against it. It was the sea, though, that won that battle. It took away my uncles equipment. To recoup some of their losses, they sold the island to State Parks. The family lost the island, but I still steward it.”

Waters runs environmental projects that include Living Classroom, a youth program for school children and Native American groups. She also is part of a group the tracks blooms of harmful algae, like the one that killed abalone last year. Waters has done shows for KQED public television and the History Channel, and she has worked with the Center for Sacred Studies and Noetic Institute. To fund her environmental work she started WaterTrek, a kayaking company in Jenner. She trains Sierra Club guides and teaches certificate classes in white water kayaking. Although she uses Internet sources to track wind and weather patterns and checks Coyote Dam releases before she lets any clients on the river, she relies on her basic skills of listening and watching the river, going out to the point each day. “Out on the water, I show people how to move with the flow,” Waters said. “You can’t force the river.”

Editor’s Note: Excerpts from an article, “Russian River Reflections”, published in Sonoma Magazine on July 22, 2014 and written by John Beck: “The Island was our family playground,” Waters says. (She is referring to Santos Island, now called Penny Island.) As a kid, she would row to the island and explore its every cove and trail, retracing the ruins of the old farm that once thrived there. “You knew summer was coming when the little Dungeness crabs would start showing up in April and they started their molt,” Waters remembers. “Then the shad would come in and you’d see them popping in the water and scaring other little fish. Harbor seals have had their babies by then and the males start coming in just as summer starts for the mating season. Back then, respect for the river was just ingrained in us,” Waters says.

