

## **UC Davis**

### **Recent Work**

#### **Title**

SBOH-1, Diana Almanderez

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1987x9k4>

#### **Author**

Oral History Project, Sutter Buttes

#### **Publication Date**

2006-05-17

SBOH-1, Diana Almanderez  
Interviewer: Cynthia Guerrero  
May 17, 2006

May 17, 2006 at 1:30 in the afternoon interviewing Diana Almanderez

***-Ok Diana can you tell me a little about your background with the Sutter Buttes?***

With the Sutter Buttes? As a kid going back and forth from Sacramento to Marysville we would go by the Sutter Buttes, and every time we would go by my grandmother would never fail to say, "Do you see the lady laying down?" and so I would kind of look, as a child I would look at the road too, (chuckle), to see if there was a lady laying at the side of the road. But what she was referring to was the Buttes, the Sutter Buttes. It was a lady lying down, that's what she was, and she would always say, "Do you see the lady?" There's been many times go by and I would stare at it looking for the lady. It was just very interesting for her to say that kind of thing. A lot of times I would just pretend and say ya I see it and grandma would say "ya". She would get all happy with me and it made her pleased. But there have been times when it's really stood out and I have seen it and I'm like amazed by it.

***-What does the lady laying down mean?***

It belongs to a story, storytelling. Something that she had heard about a long time ago about a women who would not follow the rules of the village and what I mean by that is, her period. When you have your period you are not suppose to touch anything. You go to the menstrual hut and you sit there and you are into deep prayer and you don't touch your body. People would bring you food, people bring you water, you get fed. And if you were married and you had a husband he didn't do anything either, while your body was cleansing itself. And so you need to let it cleanse it's self, so this woman didn't let it

cleanse itself. And she ended up being told to leave her village. And making a long story short she laid down there in the center of the valley and died. Probably of loneliness, broken heart, and her creator immortalized her and turned her to the beautiful mountain range, and you can still see her lying there.

***-Going back to your background, what is your association with the Sutter Buttes? You said you were driving through.***

What I meant by that, that is how I first seen it, heard it. This story is a cultural lesson from my grandmother Bertha Norton, who was one of the last full-blooded Californian Indians. And I need to be more specific she was full-blooded Sacramento Valley. Since we have the Sacramento River running through the valley it splits the valley in half one side is Wintu and one side is Maidu, Nishinan. And that is what she was half Nishinan and half Wintu, so she was full-blooded Sacramento Valley Indian. And both those cultures held high esteem for the Sutter Buttes. Everything always went back to the Sutter Buttes.

***-And what is your association with the Sutter Buttes other than your grandmother?***

Other than my grandmother I do tours right now, currently leading guided tours up there I have done them before. Middle Mountain Foundation ran this program under different leadership probably about twenty years ago. This Ira Heimlich was there and I worked with him. He was the first one that brought me on it. In the old days women didn't go up to the Sutter Buttes, not to the mountains, they didn't go up there. That was an off limits place for women, because you were not supposed to go up there on your period, and it was too dangerous, very dangerous. So I was told not to go up there and then what happened is my grandmother has a bunch of girls, she didn't have a boy, she had three girls. And then all the grandkids were born, then she always waited to hear of someone

going up there, one of the boys or something, nobody did. Ira contacted me saying “we need cultural interpretation, you would be great, come up here, come up here”. I kind of knew it was off limits so I wouldn’t do it for a long time. I would say no, I can’t do it. I ended up confiding into my grandmother and some of my aunts about it. Being asked to go up there I’m like I not suppose to go up there huh? “They’re like no”, then finally grandma stopped and looked at me with a clear view to my eyes and said, “Diana the Buttes are calling you, then you need to go. For god sake the men in our family aren’t going so I think you need to go. If they are calling you then you go, you don’t deny them” and so it kind of like end up like a vision quest, you know what I mean, I was being sent there. My grandmother “tells to me to tell her what happens when you are up there”. I went there kind of wondering what was going to happen.

***-Who’s belief was it that women should not have gone up there?***

It was cultural, women don’t go up there, you don’t go up to the Buttes tops, to the mountains it visioning place for the men to go and probably do sweats and stuff. There is no water up there it is a very dry place, a dangerous place. That is one reason why and the rattlesnakes and everything. You didn’t want to put women in harms way. So if anyone was to go up there it was going to be men. And that is pretty much the rules that I have always heard that woman don’t go up there. To this day there are a lot of native people that believe that and will not go up there but then again my grandmother, I did not want to go up there at first but my grandmother was telling me that “they are calling you, you have to go. There is something going on there is a change, things are different”. She like “men don’t follow the rules anymore (hearty laughing). Someone has to do it. It has to be you so go”. So I started going up there learning all kinds of cool things. Seeing things and it was great.

***-Can you tell me some of the things you learned up there?***

Well just it is just a different world a different your up in the clouds. It is very awesome to be I can to understand the magical ness. You're on the valley floor and then when you go into the mountains, the clouds come down and the mountains disappear and you can be like hidden in this place. In this capsule of time, it is a different place to be. And I can see the magical ness in it and why it was held in that regard with the native people, because things like that can happen, where the mountains all of a sudden disappear. So I learned these things.

***-What native people are you talking about? Is there a certain tribe?***

The Nishinan, Maidu what my great grandfather was because my grandmother was half Wintu and half Nishinan so her dad was Maidu, Nishinan you know the ones affected by the gold rush. Her mother was Wintu, which is on the other side. The Wintu people they called the Sutter Buttes "Oniulay" which means Middle Mountain. And the Madiu called the Sutter Buttes "Nusooiana" which means Spirit Mountain. You see they both had important purposes in their title. Middle Mountain of the World and "Nusooiana" Spirit Mountain very, very important names. Can you ask the question one more time I'm trying to give you so much information to back up everything I kind of lost it.

***-I was trying to ask what tribes were associated with the Sutter Buttes.***

Other tribes weren't as near but they used the Buttes like a landscape mark. You know as you travel back and forth. It was an important landscape mark but they also knew traveling to it, because it had that magical quality.

***-I also understand that you are a storyteller?***

Uh huh

***-How did you become a storyteller?***

Just by my grandmother telling me things, saying when I graduated high school she told me now it is time to learn, your real education begins. I didn't know what she meant by that now I do because she was going to start teaching me about the culture. And the way you teach about culture is stories, just like I told about when we would go by the mountains. And she would say well nay di nay duh and tell me about the history of the mountain about the lady lying there. Then different part of the county that we would drive through she would start telling me that over there is this and that over there is this there were always stories associated with it. We started going to ceremonies and when we started going to the ceremonies she would start telling me the story that created the ceremony. Everything turned into storytelling. When she was telling me about a useful plant you could consider that storytelling this is the use of the plant. In that since what I am saying is that storytelling is not as light as it sounds. This is actually lessons, storytelling were lessons you see. She would give me these lessons they were told sometimes as the coyote saying it or the condor saying it, so it kind of added a cartoon to it like storytelling it would become like a lesson. Like you get in class your professor telling you something, it became more of a cartoon because the coyote was teaching you something or the bear was teaching you something it was more like storytelling. Those were lessons.

***-How long have you been a storyteller?***

About twenty years (laugh) because you know it started learning about the culture when I was seventeen but I really didn't get into it teaching and doing things until I was about 25 when I started feeling more comfortable with doing these things. So when I was around 25, I started really getting into a little bit of everything and storytelling was always a big part of it.

*-Could you tell me a story?*

(Laughter) Actually no, and the reason why is because in order for me to tell a story for myself I have to get into the spirit of the story, that is the only way I can do it. To be able to kinda focus on it and get quite and then go into the story, it is like painting a picture. It is like including everybody in on it and painting the picture for it. Like painters have their own story in their head. That way we are all in the same place. If I can't that with the people I am talking to I will get interruptions. I will get things that will break the story which then cause stress (laughter). So it is not good to call upon a spirit and then not take it back where it needs to go. It get all convoluted in calling a spirit it dwells, confused the spirit and make my story weaker as time goes on because I am putting holes in it. In the old days in June coming up, we are in May this is all storytelling season, as soon as June hits in other words when the rattlesnakes come out you don't tell stories at all period. Rattlesnakes are out right now and the reason why is because rattlesnakes have this habit of when you are telling stories especially in the daytime they will steal them and take them down into the earth. And when they do that you lose it again, then you have to relearn it. Its like they capture it a take it down. In other words don't go out there (laughing) don't go messing around with rattlesnakes (more laughter). Storytelling should be done at night. There are rules you do it in the evening, you do it when you can get everyone to listen, it is a really important time to everyone to focus. That is why I wouldn't just tell a story. I kind of told you about a story when I told you about the lady. I didn't get into the story I kind of just talked about it, what it's about basically. I really didn't get into the spirit of the story it's not really a good thing to do on a recorder. Like the snake (laughter), it is a living experience for storytelling.

*-Since I am doing this for the Sutter Buttes can you tell me some history of the Sutter Buttes that may be part of a story but something that you can tell?*

My grandmother father George Ni, he was a scout he would go around and trade items. He would go to all the tribes and make deals and trade items; things that were in one area and not in another, like maybe salmon. Living in the Sacramento Valley catches lots of salmon and jerkum out. It is easier for you because you have the sun here to go up and trade jerked salmon rather than the people on the hill wouldn't have that ability to always jerk out all their meat. Things like that he would organize trades and know what were tradable items. He was, I hate the use of Medicine Man, Shaman, everyone is always saying my so and so was a Shaman, or my so and so was a Medicine Man. To me that is, telling me you don't know much about your (laughter) culture. I don't even like to say it because it is such a vague term. I hope you understand that it is a vague, vague term. My Great grandfather was a Medicine Man in terms of many things and one of them was a doctor of the weather he was a weatherman. One way he controlled the weather was the Buttes. I am not sure how he did it, but he called the Buttes his weatherman.

*-That is interesting.*

Yah, ?? the Buttes to know the weather systems. Maybe he was the original Doppler radar (laughter) I do know, but he called the Buttes his weatherman. And a lot of times I believe it was going up there, doing prayer and songs to do the weather. I know one thing my Aunt would tell me in something she learned from him. "Whenever you are cold or on a hot day go stand by a tree and talk to it, whistle to it and it will bring a breeze on. You could create a breeze if you could communicate with the tree. It would cool you off". This I know is true I just did it this weekend. I was out hiking and my daughter said she was "hot", oh, oh here we go I can teach you this. This is what Great grandpa taught



my grandma he taught her his daughter and so we started standing by the tree and talking to it and going (making the sound of blowing wind). Like that this breeze just started swirling around us and my daughter lit up, she is like “whoa”. These people knew how to do that. I sure there were other people around the world, I think I heard that sailor can whistling winds on the oceans. That you can do this kind of thing uncommon knowledge for people to know the Buttes were this weatherman. So, like I said a lot of times Medicine Men didn't tell what they did or the doctor never told how they did things. It was their personal knowledge. If my Grandma had, had a boy or if she was a boy he might have taught her those things. But I think a lot of times he would stop and tell her “I can't tell you that you're a girl”. So there were a lot of cultural restrictions as well. But she learned a lot.

***-The Sutter Buttes seemed to be a symbol for the Native American can you go a little more in that?***

Yah, I was talking about the idea that a woman that broke tradition, laid down there and died and the creator immortalized her and made her the Sutter Buttes. Froze her in time like a rock, and that is her. After so many years she is kind of broken down you can still see her image there. That's what she ended up being was this symbol that you could look over there and be reminded of what happens to you when you don't follow tradition and taboos. Taboos being, you are given a set of rules and you break them its taboo and it's not good. She kind of became like a symbol of that don't break tradition don't break taboos. So someday you can look up at it and see that. Also it was a symbol in a way too because it was also the place of, the spot of creation where the first man went up and disappeared, went up and left earth. The first man that was put here Ku'ksuu that was here, he had a wife with him things got so bad here that he went up to the spirit world.

That he went to the Buttes and went up. There was a rope there. Again a magical place, a rope falls out of the sky over the Buttes and he climbs up it. So again it is another symbol of taboo because he reached a point where he doesn't want to be on this earth any more. So he goes up there and climbs up this rope back to the spirit world. And everybody else was here and they managed to pull together and survive through it again by following traditions. It has always been this place of relevance to look up towards, kind of like Mount Siam, when you think about it. You look up at the Buttes that's where creation happened, that's where Ku'ksuu left, that where the woman that broke tradition lays. This capsule of important points of history of California Indian Central Valley, Maidu and Wintu culture.