

**June 23, 2006**

**A place to learn about the land and the water**

**By Patricia M. Roth, Sonoma West Times and News**



*Stone Farm house on a stormy day. - Photo by Gail Sands*

A quarter moon floats in a morning sky of blue above the old white farmhouse, which from Occidental Road appears achingly lonesome. But close up, the abandoned two-story house with a high pitch roof has loads of personality. Three stately palm trees and myriad birds keep one of the oldest surviving farmhouses in Sonoma County.

Over the years its owners were hay, grain, potato, hops and dairy farmers on ranches that took their names: Valentine, Miller and Stone. Now, however, the house and the other historic structures on the property are about to get a new life as a learning center for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

With the pending creation of the Laguna Learning Center, the foundation takes on one of the most significant environmental and education projects in the county's history. "We view it as the centerpiece of what we are trying to do and what we are working towards § the vision of a restored Laguna within a footprint of 30,000 acres, with a large part of it permanently protected through different means," said Dan Schurman, executive director of the foundation.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa and its 14-mile channel include most of the land between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol and between Cotati and Forestville. It is the largest freshwater wetlands complex on the North Coast and an important stopover for thousands of birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway.

As described on the foundation's website, the Laguna is a unique ecological system and comprised of a mosaic of creeks, open water, perennial marshes, seasonal wetlands, riparian forests, oak woodlands and grasslands. It is home to more than 200 species of birds, rare and endangered salmon, steelhead, salamanders, plants, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, mink, badger and river otter. It's the largest tributary of the Russian River.

A \$5-million fund-raising campaign is under way to restore the mid-19th century house and barns and build a new interpretive center on the property, leased to the foundation by the current owners, the City of Santa Rosa. The interpretive center will include an exhibit hall, a classroom and offices. There will be a pond with native vegetation and a garden and an orchard reminiscent of a 19th century family farm. Miles of trails, many open to the public for the first time, will link the learning center to the Laguna.



*The great egret, a common site in the Laguna. - Photo by Don Jackson (www.DonJackson.com).*

“It will be a place for people to come and learn about all the things that make the Laguna special and important to the community --- its Native American, agricultural and natural history, the environmental aspects of the Laguna and the ecosystems that make it so important,” said Schurman.



*Dan Schurman, executive director of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation and Greg Sarris, tribal chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, inside the hops barn. - Photo by Gail Sands*

“There's so much to learn about the Laguna. It can be kind of complex and daunting,” he added. “A lot of people don't understand why the Laguna is so important and why they should take care of it.”

The new center will bring it all together in exciting, creative ways.

To ensure that it provides a complete understanding of the area's history, the foundation collaborated early on with leaders of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria as well as leaders of agriculture to shape the programs at the learning center.

### **Sacred Site**

“The Laguna was always a very sacred site,” said Greg Sarris, tribal chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, which is comprised of Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo.

It connected everything and everyone. Literally bonded by water, the Native Americans who lived along the Laguna during the summer months were joined by other tribal members from the coast and mountains. They were multi-cultural, multi-lingual and peaceful. And the environment was abundant: salmon and steelhead, grizzlies, mountain lions and waterfowl so plentiful that, when they flew, Sarris said the sound of their wings sounded like “claps of thunders, their countless numbers forming a blanket that obscured the sun, rendering the earth lightless.”

The tribes saw themselves as a part of the Laguna, and they took care of it. They understood, said Sarris, that the health of the Laguna reflected the health of the people.

Archeologists claim indigenous people have been in Sonoma County along the Laguna of present day Sebastopol upwards of 11,000 years, said Sarris. “Remember, there were more villages along the Laguna than anywhere else. This area, along with the shores of Clear Lake, was the most densely populated area north of Mexico, so most of us are descendents in some way or another of the group.”

Now the 1,088 members of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, the documented offspring of 14 survivors of the original 30,000-member tribal members estimated to be in existence at the time of European contact, are making a comeback. Part of their goal is to support environmental restoration, teaching and collaboration with organizations like the Laguna Foundation - not only financially but also by actively participating in planning.

“It's an incredible opportunity for both of us,” said Sarris.

In terms of restoration, the Laguna - like the earth - is “at the tipping point. We either tip completely over or we tip completely in the other direction, which is toward restoration,” he said.

“What happens to the Laguna's landscape and the degree to which it survived is sort of the degree to which we survived, because we are now coming together as a group to try to establish our role again as keepers of the land,” he said.

Plans are being developed to incorporate interpretive components of Native American history, historical and contemporary, into the new learning center. “This could include restoration of plants indigenous to the Laguna, including some that are used in cultural artistry, such as basketry. We want to show the relationship between humans, plants and animals,” said Lorelle Ross, vice chair of the tribe and a member of the Stone Farm planning committee.

Ross said the tribe's partnership regarding the restoration of Stone Farm is “one of the first projects, in my opinion, to include local native people from the start. We are glad to be working with the Laguna Foundation.”

## **The Interpretive Center**

The interpretive center will be situated between the farmhouse and hops barn, offering a panoramic view of the Laguna with the watershed as a backdrop. It will enable the foundation to expand its flagship program, Learning Laguna, which uses docents to teach hundreds of school children about the wonders of the water system.

“We'll be able to serve a lot more kids,” said Education Coordinator Mary Abbott. “The younger kids will be able to come onsite, rather than us bringing the program to them. We will also expand the program into the middle school, which will involve a lot more hard science.

“There's so much to learn that hasn't been documented, from species accounts to water quality testing and experiments with plant life, that we think the middle school kids will love to be part of that real exploration of the Laguna,” said Abbott.

The foundation also hopes to start an internship program and develop a junior docent program. “We're going to be able to go off in so many directions,” she said.

Foundation Director Schurman envisions a world-famous research center in the future, with a research station where visiting researchers could come to do their work. A new research director has recently joined the foundation's staff, enabling it to further scientific understanding of the Laguna.

“We can't answer the questions about restoration without asking the scientific questions. We can guide the research so it not only has a practical application and informs our work in the Laguna, but those lessons learned can be extended to other parts of the country.

“That's the big dream. The beauty of the Laguna is so unique and complex it offers the potential to learn and teach valuable lessons,” he said.

Some of those will include the role of agriculture, starting in the hops barn.

## **Into the Barn**

During mid-day at Stone Farm, a breeze rustles knee-high weeds and wildflowers and rattles pieces of roof tin on top of the barns. There's a lot of interesting metal here - from a milk can buried in the ground near the Stone's former milking barn to the antique farm implements stored in the hops barn.

The 3,000-square-foot barn stays cool and smells of hay. Sunlight shines through cracks, knotholes and where boards have fallen out. Birds have made homes here: a snow-white owl peers down from between rafters; pigeons fly out of the cupola. Feathers and broken eggshells carpet some of the barn's dirt floor.

When the barn is restored, it will reflect its origins as a working barn. Denise Cadman, a member of the foundation's board of directors who is the natural resources specialist for the City of Santa Rosa, will be involved in that work.

“We've been brainstorming with a spectrum of agricultural producers about important elements of county agriculture and getting lots of contributions,” she said. “There will be multiple ways to showcase the history of agriculture in Sonoma County.”

Cadman lives on the Stone Farm site with her husband, who has a large collection of farm equipment and a team of draft horses. She'll be leading a “grain to bread” program covering growing grain to producing flour and incorporating the use of the restored farm equipment.

Children will also be able to participate in hands-on elements of the program, from planting of the grain to the baking and eating of the bread.

Hops as well as heirloom varieties of vegetables will be displayed in the barn “so people can taste the difference between tomatoes that you've been saving seeds for hundreds of years and the few varieties sold in the store,” said Cadman. “Testing of those delicious foods will be encouraged.”

The Laguna Learning Center will be “one of the jewels of Sonoma County,” she said. “It will add depth to all of our lives and draw attention and consciousness to the Laguna and the Laguna will continue to become better and better.”

### **How you can help**

The Laguna Foundation has reached 25 percent of its \$5-million fund-raising goal for the Laguna Learning Center. Financial and in-kind donations of construction materials and labor are welcome. Call 707-527-9277 or visit [www.lagunafoundation.org](http://www.lagunafoundation.org). Offices are located at 50 Old Courthouse Square, Suite 609, Santa Rosa, CA 95404.

In addition, the foundation's annual Art and Garden Gala will be held Sept. 10 at Vine Hill House in Sebastopol. Sponsors are needed. Contact Mark Green at [mark@lagunafoundation.org](mailto:mark@lagunafoundation.org) or 707-527-9277 ext. 103.