

THE CHUMASH INDIAN COUNCIL Of San Luis Obispo County [Southern California]

Dr. John M. Anderson
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The Chumash Indians were the original inhabitants of most of the region now claimed by San Luis Obispo county. This county is located in the coastal area of southern California, north of Los Angeles.

The San Luis Obispo Chumash Council, formed in the summer of 1998, represents many descendants of the region's Chumash. Others belong to the Coastal Band, or are active in Chumash organizations in other towns where they have relocated.

The Chumash of this region call themselves the *Stishni*, and spoke a Chumashan language quite distinct from all the other Chumashan speakers who lived to the south and east. Many of their ancestors were registered in the San Luis Obispo (*Tixlini*) mission founded in 1772.

In the Spanish and Mexican eras, these northwestern Chumash remained relatively aloft from the politics of the south coast (Santa Barbara Channel) and were impacted more by events taking place in the nearby Cuyama and Tejon areas, as well as by border warfare involving their Salinan and Yokuts neighbors with whom some of the *Stishni* Chumash eventually intermarried.

R. Greenwood locates the northernmost *Stishni* Chumash influence as far up the coast as San Simeon ["as far north as San Carpojo creek near the Monterey county line"]. Here, material remains of Chumash design have been uncovered by archaeologists, including quartz crystals, line sinkers, painted rocks, burials, and petroglyph sites "attributed to the Chumash."

Goals of the SLO Chumash Council

The council's mission statement of goals focuses on the preservation of their Chumash heritage in SLO County and the sharing of information with the public. You can learn more about these goals by searching the web for the San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, December 25, 1998.¹

¹ Go to the 'back page' and click on the Chumash article about its goals.

How To Contact the Council

Contact Mark Vigil ... Arroyo Grande, Ca 93420. Also search the web for information on other Chumash bands and organizations, where descendants of *Stishni* Chumash are also active. For information about legal issues involving the efforts of the SLO Chumash to preserve their ancestral sites, contact Tarren Collins (lawyer)...

Neighboring Tribes

The SLO Chumash maintain relations with the Salinan people who are located to the north, and the Yokuts and Tejon peoples who are located to the north and east. For information on the Salinan Indians see: [Salinan-Today](#). For information on the San Miguel production center (mission, located in SLO County, and which registered not only Salinan but also Northwestern Chumash and neighboring Yokuts), see: [San-Miguel](#).

See [Other Chumash Groups](#) for information on the Chumash people located to the south and east of the Stishni (SLO) Chumash.

SLO Council Cooperates With County Planning Department

One of the primary goals of the SLO Chumash Council is to help local, state, and federal governments in their efforts to preserve historical sites for the study and appreciation of future generations. For more information on SLO county guidelines on archaeological and historical sites see: [Guidelines](#).

San Simeon Area

A series of articles appeared in 1997 and 1998 concerning proposed development in the San Simeon area by the Hearst Corporation. The Telegram-Tribune newspaper called it "the biggest development controversy since Diablo Canyon" (1/3/98). Development of a Pebble-Beach-style golf course on San Simeon Point was opposed by many public groups, including the local Chumash for whom the point was a sacred site. Pilulaw Khus, a Chumash elder, described San Simeon Point as a "song for all the people."

History: The Mexican government confiscated lands from the local native towns of Stejawayo, Tissimasu, and Zaho Saltanel to create the colonial land grant named San Simeon. For decades, American scholars classified this area of the California coast as belonging to the Salinan Indians, but Bob Gibson reclassified it as belonging to the the northwestern (Stishni) Chumash.

William Hearst, the San Francisco newspaperman, bought the San Simeon land grant for his personal estate. The Hearst San Simeon historical monument and the Hearst State Beach are located near San Simeon. One of Hearst's grandsons, George Hearst, is the current chairman of the board of the Hearst Corporation (which holds investments in the San Francisco Examiner, Avon books, Cosmopolitan magazine, etc). For more information see: [Hearst](#).

Pismo Beach

A major Chumash archaeological site was discovered during construction in Pismo Beach. The SLO Chumash council initially encountered some opposition from the developer, but protection of the site was eventually resolved through the city planning department. Bob Gibson was the archaeologist working with the Chumash, and he identified the site as one of the most important undisturbed finds in the region for two decades. Preliminary studies suggested that it was a seasonal fishing village. The SLO Chumash Council sought to have as much of the site left undisturbed as possible, during the complex 1998 negotiations.

History: Pismu was the largest Chumash town in the Pismu (Price) drainage during the historical era. It was located (by Gibson) a little inland from the coast. The meaning of *Pismu* is undetermined. *Pis* may be one root, meaning a concave shaped object; thus a plate shaped object, such as a clam shell.

(J. Anderson January, 1999)

Avila Beach

In May, 1997 an intact Chumash grave was discovered at a construction site at Avila Beach. Mark Vigil, the Chumash consultant for the construction project helped negotiate a settlement whereby the body was properly buried, with a Chumash internment ceremony.

The site was estimated to be more than 3,000 years old, and clay bowls, whistles, and smoking pipes had been previously found in and around the construction site which was once the location of numerous Chumash villages. According to Virgil, the area remains one of the richest archaeological sites on the Central Coast.²

History: The Chumash town of *Sepxatu* was the dominant historical town in the Avila Beach area. *Sepxatu* was located on the San Luis Obispo creek that drains into the Avila Bay. *Sepxatu* may mean the cave of the whale. The whale nomenclature may be related to the offshore rock, that to some observers looks like a whale swimming in the bay.

Cambria Area

San Luis Obispo County officials are cited by the Telegram-Tribune as wanting ongoing SLO Chumash involvement in archaeological site studies. The SLO Chumash Council worked closely with county agencies to help complete a review of a Cambria construction project located on an ancient Chumash burial site.

² For related information see the Telegram-Tribune, May 21, 1997.

Bob Gibson was the archaeologist working with the Chumash, and Tarren Collins was the tribal attorney. Collins reported that the tribal council wants "to protect (Chumash) burials and culture without stopping development." Steve McMasters, county environmental specialist, confirmed that if six or more burials are found at a site it is classified as a cemetery. "if you disturb a cemetery, it is a felony." "It would be better for everyone involved if the Chumash's concerns were raised earlier in the (planning) process rather than have them suddenly show up after a lot of work has been done," McMasters advised. Tarren Collins described the property owners as "very conscientious" and cordial, and praised the county for working hard to cooperate with the tribal council in preservation efforts.

History: The most important native town in the Cambria area is *Zaha*, which may have been located at Cambria in the historical era (see Gibson). The lands of the local Chumash towns, including *Zaha*, were confiscated by the Mexican government and renamed by its new colonial owner as the Santa Rosa ranch (land title).

Nipomo

The SLO Council worked with the Santa Ynez Reservation Chumash in 1998 to help the county on its preservation planning for a site near *Nipomo*.

History: The Chumash town of *Nipomo* is located on the Stishni (SLO) Chumash border with the *Kagismuwas* (Purisima) Chumash. *Nipomo* is located just north of the lower Cuyama (Santa Maria) river. The contemporary town of Santa Maria lies just to the south, in traditional Kagismuwas territory. The *Nipomo* lands were confiscated by the Mexican government and awarded to the son-in-law of the Mexican governor of California.

Other SLO Chumash Information

SLO Chumash names: *Stishni* is one self-name used by the northwestern Chumash. They were also called the *Tixlini*, referring to the SLO production enter which was built at the old Chumash town of *Tixlini*. Thus Bancroft lists *Tilgini* [a variant of *Tixlini*] as the name of the language spoken by the local Chumash. *Obispeno* is a Spanish nickname for the Chumash (and other native peoples) enslaved at the San Luis Obispo mission. *Luiseno* was another nickname also used by the Spanish.

Stishni Family Histories: A web page on Petra [Figueroa](#) describes the life of a Chumash woman whose mother lived among the Stishni Chumash in Arroyo Grande.

Cities in the SLO Chumash area: San Luis Obispo (county seat), Pismo Beach, Arroyo Grande, Santa Margarita, Los Osos, Morro Bay, Cayucos, Atascadero, Paso Robles, Cambria, San Simeon, San Miguel.

The Tixlini Production Center: The Spanish invaders of California first seized Chumash lands in San Luis Obispo county at the relatively obscure Chumash town called *Tixlini*. This small village was not a Chumash religious or political center in 1772. The Spanish pressed the local Chumash into building the fifth colonial production facility (a 'mission') at *Tixlini* and renamed it *San Luis Obispo de Tolosa*, after a European religious leader named Luis (Lewis). Thereafter, the Spanish and Mexicans called the *Stishni* Chumash by the colonial name *Obispeno*. For further information see [Mission](#)

Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant: This nuclear facility is located 12 miles southwest of the *Tixlini* Production Center (San Luis Obispo Mission). The access road leaves from Avila Beach, leading 8 miles along the coast to the nuclear facility. For a historical overview of the protest against this nuclear facility, including information on the Chumash burials in the area, see the web page written by a Cal Poly Professor: [Diablo Canyon](#).

Other Sites of Importance in the SLO Chumash area: Los Padres National Forest, Mission San Luis Obispo (Tixlini in Chumash), Cuyama River, Santa Margarita lake, Lopez lake, *Wasna* Mountain (sacred), Painted Rock (Carrizo Plains area; sacred), Camp Roberts Military Base, Lake Nacimiento, and San Miguel Mission. State Parks include: Los Osos, Montana de Oro, San Simeon. State beaches include: Pismo, Avila, Cayucos, Morro bay, Morro Strand, Atascadero, William Hearst.

Rock Art Sites: A large number of Chumash rock art sites are located in SLO County. Some of the most famous are located in the mountains overlooking the Cuyama river valley.

Tarren Collins: Lawyer For the Stishni Chumash

SLO County Wants Chumash Involvement In Protecting Archaeological Sites³

Years of hard work produced positive results in San Luis Obispo County, California, where the Chumash Indians whom she represented were formally invited to participate in the county planning process. See [County Planning](#) for related information.

Chumash Prevent Desecration of Chumash Graves In Santa Margarita

See [Margarita](#) for further information.

³ This webpage published in 2000.

Morro Bay Power Plant

Coastal Alliance, a non partisan and nonprofit citizen's group. See [Morro](#) for related discussion.

MCI/Worldcom: Fiber Optics Construction

In the early winter of '2000: As a result of a week of intense bargaining, and facing a deadline for the SLO Chumash to submit their legal appeal to what they perceived to be an irresponsible fiber optic construction plan by MCI/Worldcom, a last minute agreement was signed that provided much strengthened protections against desecration of Chumash sites in SLO County.

Background: Mark and Rhonda Vigil of the SLO Chumash Council and Tarren Collins traveled to Sacramento, to attend an important planning conference. The SLO Chumash opposed the expansion of the Duke energy plant located next to Morro Rock, at the mouth of Morro Bay. A video of Mark Vigil and Tarren Collins is available on a web site sponsored by the Heritage Commission meeting. They expressed their concerns about fiber optic cable construction coming through the state and desecrating Native Californian burials and cultural resources. They did not agree with the arrangements being made by the Heritage Commission, and therefore spoke with representatives of the California Public Utilities Commission and proposed that significant changes needed to be made in regulating the massive fiber optics construction proposals.

[Collin's email sent to J. Anderson, Feb 12, '2000]

For the homepage of the Worldcom Corporation see [foundation](#)

This web page represents the views of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Chumash Indians, either individually or in a group. The cases cited are only a selection of a wider legal field of study, Stishni law.

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