A History of San Jose

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Introduction

San Jose, California, evokes images of gleaming office towers, bustling research parks, and cosmopolitan neighborhoods at the heart of Silicon Valley. Yet, beyond its modern reputation as a global center of technological innovation, San Jose's roots lie deep within the soil of the Santa Clara Valley—a place shaped over thousands of years by geography, community, and the relentless tide of change. This book aims to provide a comprehensive, nuanced history of San Jose, tracing its evolution from ancient times to its vibrant present.

Long before the arrival of European explorers, the land that would become San Jose was home to thriving indigenous communities, especially the Tamien group of the Ohlone people. For centuries, these native inhabitants stewarded the valley's resources, maintaining rich ecological systems and sophisticated social structures. Their connection to the land was spiritual and practical, a relationship that endured even as waves of outside influence began to alter their world.

The late eighteenth century marked a dramatic turning point. With Spanish colonization came missions, pueblos, and a new chapter in the valley's story. El Pueblo de San José de Guadalupe, established in 1777 as California's first civilian settlement, reflected both the promise and the perils of colonization. While it introduced agricultural innovations that shaped the landscape, it also brought hardship and upheaval to the region's original peoples.

As Mexican rule replaced Spanish authority in the early nineteenth century, the area witnessed further transformation. The rise of ranchos redefined land ownership, and an increasingly diverse population called San Jose home. Then, in rapid succession, the Mexican-American War, the Gold Rush, and California statehood propelled San Jose onto the national stage—momentarily as state capital, and permanently as a nexus of commerce, agriculture, and migration.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore how economic booms and natural disasters, immigration and industrialization, technological revolutions and persistent social challenges have all woven together the unique and complex tapestry of San Jose's past and present. From the "Valley of Heart's Delight," renowned for its orchards and canneries, to the dynamic urban landscape of Silicon Valley, San Jose has proven remarkably capable of reinventing itself, often at a breathtaking pace.

Today, as San Jose faces twenty-first century challenges and opportunities, its history offers critical insights. By understanding the city's journey—the milestones and missteps, the moments of triumph and tragedy—we gain not only knowledge of a

remarkable place but also a deeper appreciation for the forces that continue to shape the lives of its people. This book invites you to join in retracing that journey: to discover, remember, and imagine the many stories that make up the history of San Jose.

CHAPTER ONE: The Lands Before San Jose: The Ohlone and Tamien Peoples

Long before Spanish padres and soldiers marched into the Santa Clara Valley, before missions rose and pueblos were planned, this fertile expanse was a land shaped by the rhythms of nature and the lives of its original inhabitants. For thousands of years, indigenous peoples thrived in this abundant environment, their history woven into the very fabric of the landscape. Among these groups, the Ohlone people, and specifically the Tamien nation within the broader Ohlone linguistic family, held deep ties to the area that would eventually become San Jose.

The term "Ohlone" is a linguistic grouping, encompassing various distinct but related tribal groups who spoke dialects of the Ohlonean languages and inhabited the coastal areas of central California from the San Francisco Bay to Monterey Bay. The Tamien (also spelled Tamyen) people were one of the most prominent of these groups in the Santa Clara Valley, their territory roughly corresponding to the area around the future site of San Jose. Understanding the Tamien and other Ohlone groups requires looking beyond the later Spanish records, which often provided a skewed and incomplete picture, and instead piecing together information from archaeology, linguistic studies, and the oral traditions of their descendants.

Life for the Ohlone and Tamien was intricately connected to the cycles of the seasons and the bounty of the land. They were sophisticated hunter-gatherers, a term that sometimes misleadingly suggests a simple existence. In reality, they possessed a profound understanding of their ecosystem and employed complex techniques to manage and utilize its resources. Their knowledge of plants, animals, and the environment was encyclopedic, passed down through generations via oral history, stories, and practical instruction.

The Santa Clara Valley, with its network of creeks and rivers flowing from the surrounding hills into the San Francisco Bay, provided an ideal habitat. The landscape was a mosaic of different environments: riparian woodlands along the waterways, oak savannas on the valley floor, marshlands near the bay, and chaparral-covered hillsides. Each of these zones offered different resources at different times of the year, and the Ohlone peoples moved seasonally within their territories to take advantage of this natural larder.

A cornerstone of the Ohlone diet, and indeed their culture, was the acorn. Various species of oak trees were plentiful in the valley and surrounding hills. While not immediately edible due to bitter tannins, acorns were a storable and reliable food

source when properly processed. Ohlone women were masters of this process, leaching the tannins from crushed acorns using water, often heated with hot stones. The resulting acorn meal could then be cooked into a nutritious porridge or baked into bread. This labor-intensive process was central to their subsistence and social life, often carried out communally.

Beyond acorns, the Ohlone harvested a vast array of plant foods. Seeds from grasses and flowering plants were collected, ground, and used in various dishes. Edible roots, bulbs, and tubers were dug from the earth. Berries and nuts were gathered in season. They used plants for much more than just food; fibers from plants were used for making baskets, cordage, and clothing. Medicinal plants were crucial for treating illness and injury, a testament to their deep botanical knowledge.

Hunting and fishing supplemented their plant-based diet. The valley and nearby hills teemed with game. Deer were a significant source of protein and hides, hunted using bows and arrows. Smaller game like rabbits, squirrels, and various birds were also taken. The waterways and the southern reaches of the San Francisco Bay provided fish and shellfish. Techniques for fishing varied depending on the species and location, including netting, trapping, and using spears. Coastal groups also hunted marine mammals, but the Tamien, being more inland, focused on the valley's resources.

The Ohlone lived in villages, the size and location of which might vary depending on the season and the availability of resources. Village structures were typically dome-shaped houses made from willow poles covered with tule reeds or brush, providing adequate shelter from the elements. Larger structures might serve as sweathouses or communal gathering places. Villages were often situated near reliable water sources and areas rich in food resources.

Each village or small cluster of villages was often an independent political unit, with its own headman or leader. Leadership was often based on a combination of heredity and demonstrated ability, particularly in managing resources and resolving disputes. While independent, these groups were not isolated. They interacted with neighboring Ohlone groups and distant tribes through trade networks, intermarriage, and participation in shared ceremonies and social events. Goods traded included obsidian for tools, shells for ornaments and currency, and specialized local products.

The Tamien people, specifically in the San Jose area, were known to have several villages. Their territory was bounded roughly by the Santa Cruz Mountains to the west, the Diablo Range to the east, and extending north towards the bay and south within the valley. The Guadalupe River and Coyote Creek were vital waterways within their lands, providing water and supporting crucial plant and animal life.

Their spiritual beliefs were deeply animistic, recognizing the sacredness of the natural world. The land, the animals, the plants, the rivers, and the sky were imbued with

spirit and power. Shamans or spiritual leaders played important roles in healing, guiding ceremonies, and interpreting the spiritual realm. Creation stories, myths, and legends explained their origins and their relationship with the world around them. These stories were passed down orally, connecting generations to their ancestors and their land.

Ceremonies and rituals were integral to Ohlone life, marking significant events such as births, deaths, puberty, and the changing seasons. These gatherings reinforced social bonds, celebrated successful harvests or hunts, and maintained balance with the spiritual world. Singing, dancing, and storytelling were central components of these ceremonies, expressing their cultural identity and worldview.

Basketry was a highly developed art form among the Ohlone. Utilizing plant materials like willow shoots, sedge roots, and other fibers, they created baskets for a multitude of purposes: gathering food, storing supplies, cooking (using the hot stone method), and ceremonial use. These baskets were not only functional but also beautifully crafted, often incorporating intricate patterns and designs that held cultural significance.

Tools and implements were fashioned from materials readily available in their environment. Stone was used for making projectile points (arrowheads and spearheads), knives, scrapers, and grinding tools like mortars and pestles for processing acorns and seeds. Bone was used for awls, needles, and fishing hooks. Wood was used for bows, arrows, digging sticks, and structures. Their technology was sophisticated and perfectly adapted to their lifestyle and environment.

The Ohlone practiced a form of environmental management that actively shaped the landscape, rather than simply living within it passively. A key technique was the use of controlled burns. They would intentionally set small fires in grasslands and woodlands at specific times of the year. This practice cleared out underbrush, promoted the growth of desirable plants by releasing nutrients into the soil, reduced the risk of larger, uncontrolled wildfires, and improved hunting grounds by making game easier to spot and by encouraging the growth of plants that animals favored. This demonstrates a deep, interactive relationship with their environment, one based on sustainable practices developed over millennia.

Children learned the skills and knowledge necessary for survival and cultural continuity through observation, imitation, and direct instruction from elders. Boys would learn to hunt and fish, track animals, and make tools. Girls would learn plant identification, gathering techniques, acorn processing, basketry, and childcare. Storytelling played a crucial role in education, imparting moral lessons, historical knowledge, and cultural values. Play was also important, allowing children to practice skills and socialize.

Social organization extended beyond the village level through kinship ties and alliances. While politically independent, villages were often linked through marriage and shared ancestry, creating a network of relationships that facilitated trade, mutual support, and shared cultural practices. Conflicts between groups did occur, often related to resource access or territorial boundaries, but there is also evidence of peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

The health of the Ohlone peoples was generally good, supported by a diverse diet and active lifestyle. Their knowledge of medicinal plants helped them treat common ailments. However, they were vulnerable to diseases, particularly those they had not been previously exposed to. This vulnerability would become tragically apparent with the arrival of Europeans.

Their impact on the landscape, while significant through practices like controlled burning, was fundamentally different from the transformative impact of European agriculture and development. The Ohlone way of life was based on living in harmony with the natural cycles, ensuring the long-term health and productivity of the ecosystem that sustained them. Their population size, while debated by historians, was likely in the low thousands for the Santa Clara Valley region, allowing for their sustainable practices.

The Tamien and other Ohlone groups had a rich oral tradition, preserving their history, laws, and cultural knowledge. While much of this was lost due to the devastating impact of colonization, fragments survive through the memories of descendants and the efforts of ethnographers and linguists who recorded what they could. These stories provide invaluable insights into their worldview, social structures, and history before the dramatic changes that were about to unfold.

This was the world of the Santa Clara Valley for thousands of years: a land of abundance, managed and deeply understood by its indigenous inhabitants. The Ohlone, including the Tamien, had established a way of life intricately adapted to their environment, built on a foundation of extensive knowledge, sophisticated social structures, and a profound spiritual connection to the land. This long era, shaped by the natural world and human ingenuity in balance with it, formed the foundational layer of history for the place that would later be known as San Jose. The arrival of outsiders would fundamentally alter this ancient landscape and the lives of its people, ushering in a new and often challenging era.

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