



CULTURAL HISTORY MOUNT DIABLO STATE PARK

HOW DID MOUNT DIABLO GET ITS NAME?

What's In a Name?

Like many other isolated peaks, Mt. Diablo is steeped in lore—much of it involving the mountain's name. The reference to "diablo" or "devil", can be traced back to 1804 or 1805, when a Spanish military expedition visited the area in search of runaway mission Indians. At a willow thicket near present-day Buchanan Field, the soldiers encountered a Village of Chupcan people and surrounded it. But night came, and evidently all the Indians escaped, unseen. Angry and confused, the Spanish called the site "Monte del Diablo", or "Thicket of the Devil". Later, English-speaking newcomers mistakenly assumed the word "monte" to mean "mountain", and applied the title to this prominent east bay peak. A linguistic accident thus gave California its Devil Mountain.

Two Devilish Tales

Vallejo's account...

As years went by, the willow thicket story passed into folklore, and with each retelling the details changed. In an 1850 version, General Mariano Vallejo placed the incident at the foot of Mount Diablo, claiming that the Spanish were routed when an "unknown personage" or "evil spirit" appeared. In 1914, Vallejo's son Platon made his father the hero who lassoed this "agent of his master, the devil".

... and the Bret Harte Legend

Of the many creative explanations for Mount Diablo's name, perhaps the most famous is a Bret Harte short story that was published in 1863. In this fictional tale, the devil appeared to an eighteenth century priest atop the mountain. There, the padre was shown a vision of the future—the passing of Spanish California into American hands—but the devil promised to detain the Yankee hordes if the good father would renounce his calling. The offer was rejected and a fight ensued. Afterward, the priest awoke, as from a dream.

One Mountain, Many Names

Although we know this place as Mount Diablo today, the mountain has had many Indian names. They include: Tuyshtak (Ohlone/Costanoan), 'Oj-ompil-e (Northern Miwok), Supemenenu (Southern Miwok), Sukku Jaman (Nisenan), and Kawukum (group of unknown origin).

An early Spanish name for the peak was "Cerro Alto de los Bolbones", or "High Point of the Volvon Indians". At one time, most of the mountain lay within the homeland of the Volvon, a Bay Miwok group.

Also see article on [name change request and denial](#)—October, 2005