

Tribe hopes to build casino north of Galt - Our Region

Written by Administrator

Saturday, 23 March 2013 08:01 -

Anita Franklin long ago forgave her son, Andrew, for his inability to dance. He was a shy child and, besides, he preferred playing baseball to prancing shirtless in Miwok dances celebrating the blessings of the Earth.

His mother worked exhaustively to re-establish an Indian band that once subsisted on a rancheria amid the walnut groves of Wilton in south Sacramento County. She also celebrated her son's non-tribal pursuits as he graduated from UC Berkeley and built a career as a mechanical engineer.

Andrew Franklin, 35, is now chairman of the Wilton Rancheria, a 674-member tribe restored by the federal government in 2009. It has boldly announced aspirations to build a major casino resort in a cow pasture just west of Highway 99 and north of Galt.

The Miwok son has put aside his engineering career to embrace a lost tribe and its economic aspirations — even though his mother tried to talk him out of the job.

For his mother, who works as a school cafeteria manager in Sacramento, the tribe was *her* cause — long before Nevada casino investors were looking for a tribal partner, she says.

For two decades, "through a lot of wear and tear and lot of stress," she fought to restore the tribe she argued was wrongfully terminated by the government in 1959, when fewer than a dozen families lived on the 40-acre Wilton Rancheria near Elk Grove.

"We wanted our children to have educational funding and our families to get health care," she said, referring to assistance that could come with federal recognition.

Now the tribe's development plans are stirring debate over its bid to secure a prime piece of freeway property and over the Sacramento region's capacity for yet another gambling destination.

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Officials in Galt wonder whether to embrace the prospect of 2,000 casino jobs or fight to retain the character of the community of 22,000 people.

And, as excited as she is over her tribe's revival and the potential economic benefits of a casino, Anita Franklin has been perhaps the most conflicted of all.

She liked having a UC Berkeley- educated engineer as a son. Andrew grew up in a world away from the old rancheria, and she was troubled when he was recruited to lead the tribe into its future.

"I didn't want him to be the tribal chair," she said. "I was kind of leery. I asked him, 'Are you willing to give up your career? You went to *Berkeley*.' He said he was willing to do this for his people. I said, 'Is this really what you want to do?' "

Embracing the extended family

Recently, a dozen tribal members gathered at the former rancheria. On the deck of the trailer home of his Wilton Miwok grandmother, Dorothy Andrews, 82, Andrew affirmed that his answer was "yes."

"Growing up, I was always aware that I was part of an extended Indian family," he said. He told of his "regret in life" that, in youthful embarrassment, he shunned Miwok dance lessons offered by his grandfather, Bill Franklin, a member of the Lone Band of Miwok Indians.

Now he flies to Washington, D.C., for U.S. Department of Interior seminars in tribal economic development. He meets with representatives of Boyd Gaming, operator of 22 casinos in eight states, including The Orleans and Sam's Town resorts in Las Vegas.

"So much has happened, it's all so surreal," he said. "But we've got a path, and we're sticking to it. We want to be self-reliant."

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His mother says she "gave him up for the tribe" and has come around on the idea that her son "will move us forward."

Boyd Gaming is backing the tribe's bid to acquire 160 acres and seek federal approval to designate the property as tribal land for casino development.

"We look forward to working with them to develop an exciting gaming complex," Boyd Gaming President Keith Smith said in a statement last summer.

The development bid, which the tribe says could span seven years before fruition, would create the first tribal casino in Sacramento County.

The region already is home to the Thunder Valley casino in Lincoln, Red Hawk in Shingle Springs, Cache Creek in Yolo County and the Jackson Rancheria in Amador County.

Two other tribes are bidding to build casinos in Amador, including the Lone Band of Miwok Indians, a tribe that includes relatives of Wilton Rancheria members.

"We're headed toward saturation," said Cheryl Schmit, who runs Stand Up For California, a watchdog on gambling expansion.

"I don't think the public ever thought this would happen — this creating of new tribes for gambling," Schmit said. "Are they (Wilton Rancheria) sovereign? Do they have sovereignty over that land? People like me might raise those questions."

In 2009, the city of Elk Grove and Sacramento County contested a federal lawsuit by the Wilton Rancheria that led to restoration of its tribal status. The city and county charged that the federal government improperly agreed to let the tribe take land into trust near the Wilton Rancheria for a casino.

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The tribe later reached a settlement with Elk Grove and the county, promising it would negotiate to pay to offset environmental impacts, such as increased traffic and law enforcement costs, from a casino development.

Galt welcomes growth potential

Given Elk Grove's concern about a casino near its borders, the tribe set its sights on an alternative site near Galt. It focused on agricultural property bordering Highway 99, on the opposite side of the freeway from Hicksville Cemetery, where many tribal ancestors are buried.

After being sued elsewhere, the tribe has received a warmer reception from officials in Galt.

While Mayor Marylou Powers is concerned about traffic, air pollution and congestion from a casino, she said, "My hope would be for jobs and economic growth and that people going to the casino would also be checking out Galt."

Powers said she is impressed by the tribe's stated willingness to work with the community.

"The word on the street is that people are interested in seeing how it will come to fruition," she said, "rather than screaming, 'Don't have it.' "

Andrew Franklin said the tribe hopes a casino, and perhaps a hotel and other amenities, will generate revenue to build tribal offices, a health clinic and housing, and fund educational opportunities.

His uncle David Andrews, an Elk Grove resident and supervisor for a firm that builds prefabricated homes, said the tribal members were looking to create jobs, adding: "It's not about Indian people getting rich."

"What? I'm going home!" retorted tribal member Ronald "Gray Bear" Hatch, 66, roaring with laughter as he feigned falling out of his chair on the deck of Dorothy Andrews' trailer.

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Hatch recalled attending "the college of hard knocks" among local Miwoks living in tents by the Cosumnes River. He told of a toddler brother who died of pneumonia, of a sister killed by a falling tree branch, of a father killed in a street fight in Sacramento.

Hatch went on to found Eagle Dancer Youth and Family Services, a Utah and Arizona organization offering residential drug counseling and other programs for troubled American Indian youths.

He said he views the Wilton Rancheria's casino ambition "as a tremendous opportunity for our people, for our elders and children. This is a way to lift our nation □ and we are a nation □ to a better life."

Dorothy Andrews is the last surviving tribal member who lived on the rancheria when the tribe was terminated and 11 parcels were distributed to members.

Her trailer home rests about 50 feet from where she raised her children in a two-bedroom clapboard house. Her husband worked as a mechanic at McClellan Air Force Base.

These days, a big outing for her is going with Anita Franklin, her daughter, to play the penny and nickel slots at the Jackson Rancheria. She doesn't figure she'll live long enough to see the Wilton Rancheria casino. She suggests the tribe get a jump on things by building a laundromat near the rancheria that she can use.

"We're hoping to get her a washing machine," interjected grandson Andrew. "We're working on it."

Call The Bee's Peter Hecht, (916) 326-5539.

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