

A Supersonic Tour of Glen Ellen's Most Ancient History¹

E. Breck Parkman
Senior State Archaeologist
California State Parks
August 28, 2010

Scientists say that we are all composed of stardust. I prefer starlight myself. I'll tell you why, but first, let's begin this supersonic tour of Glen Ellen's most ancient history.

150 million years ago: To have been in Glen Ellen 150 million years ago was to have been deep beneath the ocean. To the west was Cascadia, a large island now long gone. But if you look hard enough, I think you can almost see it. Sediments are washing off the eastern coast of Cascadia, settling to the bottom of the ocean, and becoming the sedimentary rocks that we know today. They are our oldest rocks, the foundation of Sonoma County. Franciscan sandstone, graywacke, and chert, among others. And while these rocks were being created beneath the sea, the coast of what was becoming North America lay just east of the present-day Sierra Nevada. The continent beyond was inhabited by wonderfully-strange dinosaurs, including the big meat-eater, *Allosaurus fragilis*, of "Jurassic Park" fame. But in the waters above what is now Glen Ellen swam creatures like the *Ichthyosauri*, resembling the Loch Ness Monster of modern lore.

30 million years ago: Millions and millions of years have passed. The seabed has uplifted and Cascadia has dissolved into nothingness. The dinosaurs are long extinct, having been replaced by the mammals. Little horses and large mastodons roam the local plains and valleys. Glen Ellen is part of a moist tropical world.

7 million years ago: Millions of years pass. The local forests now consist of redwoods and oaks, but there are punctuated by palm and avocado trees as well. The valley is home to rhinos. From the valley, we see the sudden appearance of volcanoes. They begin to the south and quickly work their way north, rising up along the way. The volcanoes create ash, basalt, and obsidian. These are the rocks we know as the Sonoma Volcanics. Just seven million years old or so, they are the young rocks of Sonoma County.

2.3 million years ago: The Ice Age is about to begin. Imagine herds of mammoth and mastodon, camel, and horse. The modern forest has essentially developed to what we see today. The palm trees and avocado trees are gone. As we watch from Glen Ellen, the Coast Ranges and the Mayacamas are born of uplift and thrust. At Olduvai Gorge in East Africa, *Homo habilis*, our early ancestors, are making the very first stone tools. These are primitive stone choppers that will later be termed "Olduwan choppers." You might remember seeing photos of these artifacts in old issues of *National Geographic*

¹ This paper is a revised version of a speech that I presented at the Earth Day event held on the Sonoma Plaza on May 14, 2005. In 2007, it was published in a special local history edition of *The Kenwood Press*.

Magazine. While *Homo habilis* fashions his choppers, the light from the Andromeda Galaxy begins its journey to Planet Earth. It is 2.3 million years ago, and the light has just begun its interstellar voyage.

50 thousand years ago: By now, modern humans have departed Africa and begun to colonize much of the world.

18 thousand years ago: The Ice Age is at its last glacial maximum. The ocean is 400 feet lower than it is today. You can walk from downtown San Francisco to the Farallon Islands and barely get your feet wet. Imagine a big grassy plain covered with wild animals, herds of grazing horses, camels, bison, and mammoths, and ferocious predators such as the saber-tooth cat, California lion, and American short-face bear. That bear weighed two thousand pounds or more and could run at speeds of 50 mph. Looking south down the valley, we can practically see all the way to San Jose. We behold a sea of grass covered with animals. It is a mini-Serengeti Plain teeming with wildlife.

12 thousand years ago: Humans have arrived in the San Francisco Bay area. There are only a few of them at first, but their numbers increase. They are hunters and gatherers and perhaps some of the smartest people California will ever see. They have to be smart. It is the Ice Age and their world is inhabited by ferocious predators like that monstrous bear. The humans endure.

10 thousand years ago: The Ice Age has ended. The weather is warmer now, and the megafauna have become extinct. The bison are gone, and so are the camels and horses and mammoths. There are no saber-tooth cats left, no California lions, and not even the monstrous short-face bears. Why are they extinct? No one knows for sure. Maybe their demise was due to the change in environmental conditions. Or maybe it was overhunting by those human newcomers. And maybe it was disease, perhaps something as simple as a virulent strain carried by fleas on a Paleoindian's hunting dog. We may never know for sure. All we know is that it is 10 thousand years ago, and most of the big animals are gone. They will not return.

8 thousand years ago: By now, humans have established fixed tribal territories within our area. Prior to this time, people were probably much more nomadic.

4 thousand years ago: We witness the arrival of the acorn technology and native populations increase accordingly. We also witness the arrival of the Coast Miwok. Their neighbors, the Pomo, live just north of Glen Ellen and the Wappo are located to the east. Life is sedentary now and people live in permanent villages.

5 hundred years ago: We witness the invention of clamshell disk bead money. The Coast Miwok and some of their Pomo neighbors are the inventors of bead money. With the appearance of money, we watch as banking systems begin to develop and cultures flourish. Soon, however, Sir Francis Drake will make his legendary landfall somewhere on the local coast. It will mark the beginning of almost 500 years of European contact and conquest.

And then comes night...

Tonight: The light that departed Andromeda 2.3 million years ago will arrive on Earth tonight. You can see it with your naked eyes if you look low on the northern horizon. Just imagine, if you do, this is an event you will share with our earliest human ancestors, *Homo habiles*. They were the ones who knelt down on the plains of East Africa to create those first stone tools some two million years ago. The light of Andromeda, the light of their time was just then departing. It is our time now, and the ancient light is just now arriving. That light has been 2.3 million years in the making, just as we humans have been 2.3 million years in the making. Perhaps we are one and the same, stardust and starlight.