

## Oral History: Abby Abinanti

Interviewed by Mary Louise Frampton  
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### Part 3 The Yurok Tribe

**Mary Louise Frampton:** So thinking about the Yurok tribe, and I'm looking at a map that has Yurok villages here, talk about the history of the tribe.

**Abby Abinanti:** Well, I think, just historically, we've always been in this area, which is Northern California; our Aboriginal territory is much wider than what we have now. We basically have one mile on each side of the river, 44 miles up and we're buying as constantly as we can additional property to add to it but it's nowhere near what we had before and what we were responsible to and for. But it's beautiful. And like I said, we're the largest surviving tribe, we're 6,000-plus at this point. And we live all up and down the river. People come home, who have left to go work. We'll come home in the summer to fish and to go to dance so people come and go a lot.

**Frampton:** You spent many years in San Francisco. But you were always coming back and forth.

**Abinanti:** I always went back and forth. And that's where they often fly people to go to the hospital, so people would come there and stay there for various reasons, for a few months, at different times when they were getting treatment at the hospitals, and stuff, and I would always come home for dance and for holidays and whatever, so I was back and forth pretty constantly.

**Frampton:** And I think about the beautiful administration building that you have now and the Justice Center, and how there's been a sense of more people coming back in the last, say, 20 years, is that...

**Abinanti:** I think that's true. And I think the tribe is benefited from that. We have a long way to go. A lot of this country has a long way to go and our institutions need to be established and re-established, and we need to get our people centered and focused on how to move forward in the world in a good way.

**Frampton:** Talk a little bit about this tension between making sure that your institutions reflect the values of the tribe and the temptation, I think, for legitimacy in the larger society.

**Abinanti:** Well, partly we rely a tremendous amount on funding from the federal

government, so you have to satisfy them, in terms of getting the money from them and that's not unreasonable. I just think what's not to their best interest or to ours, if they're not able to encompass other belief systems in their own, very well. And they have an institutionalized arrogance in their bureaucracies and in their decision making so that they have a set way of doing things, and they think that is the only and/or best way of doing it and they... To the contrary, if you look at a situation like what we have here, it isn't the best way of doing it here. Locking up people or taking them out of community has not served them or us. And if you look at their own communities, they have allowed that system to run amok and it's now pretty demonstrably not working and wreaking havoc on people who don't deserve it and that's going to fall on the people who should have been being responsible and who aren't. You can go through your life and say, "Well, oh, it wasn't my fault." Or you can be a Congressman and go, "Oh, I didn't know." Well, it was your job to know and you didn't know and you did nothing and that's not OK.

**Frampton:** And you talk about this funding from the federal government, and this is because of the trust responsibility.

**Abinanti:** Well, I mean, if you take a whole country, they've created a sort of a balm to their own conscience, sort of a relationship with us, that they consider us, that they have a guardianship relationship with us and they need to be somewhat kind. It's a very uneven relationship and they don't truly meet their trust responsibility because they don't accept their responsibility. And if you don't accept responsibility, then you can't make it up, because you don't see what you're supposed to be making up. It in part works and in part doesn't work and it's really on us to hit our stride and to create a culture inside this country, and with our neighbors, to partner with our neighbors, and in this community and to do right by our neighbors who are now our neighbors. And it becomes an issue for everybody how do you justify, "OK, well now I have this beautiful place here. Oh, I guess I stole it from your family. I didn't steal it, but my grandparents did."

And how do you make that right? And not much thought has been given to that and I think people need to start thinking about it because, until you make something right, it's not right. People talk about truth and reconciliation and I'm more inclined to talk about truth and healing, because some things you can't make... You can't reconcile. It was just wrong. Sometimes I've done things in my life and you can go... You can say you're sorry, you can do whatever, but the truth of the matter is, it was just dead wrong and nothing is going to make it right.

**Frampton:** In 2002, the Bureau of Reclamation diverted so much water out of the Klamath River for the farmers that there was what's known as the Klamath Fish Kill. Tell me what you remember about that.

**Abinanti:** Well, I remember getting phone calls saying, with people crying on the other end, and I'm talking to my niece and I thought somebody had died and I'm like, "Stop, stop, I can't understand you," and then she's telling me and I'm like, "Oh my God, what happened? Did somebody... Like dynamite something or what happened that killed all these fish." And then she was talking more, and I said, "OK, kid, I'll come home, I'll be

home." It was terrible. It was awful.

**Frampton:** Do people still talk about the Fish Kill today?

**Abinanti:** Oh yeah. I mean, if you walk in the tribal building, the main building there's pictures of it; it's seared in everybody's memory. I don't think anybody will forget that.

**Frampton:** Thinking about the importance of salmon to the Yurok people, talk about that.

**Abinanti:** They're like a member of the family, I'm a member of their family, they're a member of my family and you have reciprocal responsibilities, and if you don't meet them, then they can't meet theirs, they can't come and give themselves to you for food, they can't because you've killed them all, you let them die or they died or whatever. And that's the responsibility. Now, you have to... You can't just use up, use up, use up, all the time. You have to take care of what you've been given.

**Frampton:** So as a result of the tribe reaching out to neighbors and neighbors that they had litigated against for years, and years, and years, and said, "We need to work together." It looks as if the dams are going to come out now.

**Abinanti:** I hope so. It's the kind of thing you just wait and wait and wait, and the day they come out, then I'll truly believe they're coming out.

**Frampton:** When you see it?

**Abinanti:** Yeah.

**Frampton:** I noticed that the Crescent City Council, voted yesterday to support the removal. So I think that's pretty significant.

**Abinanti:** No, I think it is, and like I said, we have to make new friends and new allies and because it's for all of us, too. They're here now, and we have to make peace with that.

**Frampton:** But to be the ones to initiate that after the attempted annihilation...

**Abinanti:** But it's still our home, it's our responsibility. And you have the leadership responsibility and the responsibility of being a human being to talk to other human beings. That's on us, too. Not just on them.

**Frampton:** So are there other events in the tribe's history that have that same impact that people still think about, talk about, are seared in memory?

**Abinanti:** I mean, I think there's a lot of very negative things and there's a lot of very positive things, that have happened, seeing the boats on the river again, seeing people make the canoes, the dances coming back that weren't being danced for a long time.

Those things are the good memories. So there's those kinds of things and then there's the stuff that the governments do and cause, or the arguments that we have, all of that stuff happens, but mostly you just hold on to what's here and to what's always been here and that's the memory that you carry with you pretty much on a daily basis. You'll remember some of the bad things and you go, "Please never again," but that's... You just have to go, you have to keep going.

**Frampton:** So talk about why is dance is so significant?

**Abinanti:** Well, dance is, and dance families organize the dances and you go to dance and we're a world renewal people. We dance for the world, to renew the world, to give back to the world, to give thanks. And it is how we are reminding ourselves and doing, meeting our responsibilities to do things in community and it's a time when families come together and do something that is beyond themselves, beyond just their self-interest of the day and dance is the single most important thing that we do as a people to remind ourselves of what our responsibilities are. And they're physically demanding, and they're expensive, they take up a lot of time and they're very rigorous and it's a major commitment. The flower dances are coming back, which are the coming-of-age dances for girls, and they've started to come back and I think that's really important.

**Frampton:** And for young people growing up, this is a reminder to them of their responsibility, both to one another and to earth.

**1:23:08 AA:** They're involved in it. They're participants. You have responsibilities -- that's basically what it's saying.

**Frampton:** And you've created this wonderful bookstore.

**Abinanti:** Well, I owe thanks to Yurok Economic Development, which gives me the space at a very reduced price. I gathered books from all over the place and people send me books. And we did it because they had... I looked at the survey and that showed that there were in many Native American homes, there's no books, and you can't expect kids to stay in school and to learn to read if there's no books in their homes. So I thought, "OK, well let's just open up a book store," so we put it in and there's... It's all used books. The new books are primarily Native American because nobody gives those away, so we have to actually pay for those and we get those. And at first we were selling books to the kids, but then we decided to just give them away, so we let them have them. If they have the money, they can pay for it, but if they don't, they can just take them and we help them pick them out. And then Alice, my sister and my niece are down there and they do jewelry in the first part of it and my niece does coffee shop.

**Frampton:** Which is beautiful.

**Abinanti:** This here, Alice made this for my birthday. And I think it's been pretty successful and we've done readings and my favorite... Well we had some poets come; that was a really good reading, we've had... Then Lyn Risling came with her book and it's a

children's book and we bought enough so that she could sign them, for all the kids that came and so they each got to take a book home, that was nice. And we've just raised enough money and have Shaunna McCovey's book re-issued, so I'm really pleased with that. Smokehouse Boys, which is a book of poetry and she added new poems to it, and we actually put them in the bookstore yesterday. That's my big thing. So it's nice and people come there and they like it and so hopefully more and more people will use it.

**Frampton:** My students always buy lots when they come.

**Abinanti:** Yeah. We appreciate that, 'cause we don't really sell a lot. We do sometimes in the summer we sell but a lot of times people just don't have money for books, and I don't like to... If they don't have it, I don't like to not have them have the book so we just let them have the books.

**Frampton:** So you have the Margaret Keating Elementary School here in Klamath and that's where most of the children go, the Yurok children go?

**Abinanti:** They are on this end of the reservation on the other end they go to the elementary school up there, and yeah, I went and spoke to the third and fourth grade class two weeks ago. I actually owe them some pencils. So I need to go take them pencils. That reminds me, I'll try to do that tomorrow. We have new little pencils that are shaped in the form of a gavel so they have... The end is a two-headed like a gavel pencil with erasers on the end and has Yurok tribal cord on it. So I owe them that.

**Frampton:** So does that school... Do you think reflect the traditions and the values and the culture?

**Abinanti:** I think that the school districts are making a huge effort to try to change from what they were when I was young, and going to school. And it's a process and I think they're engaged in a process with us and we're trying to engage with them and I appreciate that they're willing to do it.

**Frampton:** And they're listening.

**Abinanti:** Yeah. It's like anything else, if anybody knew the exact right answer, it's not like he would keep it a secret, but it doesn't happen by flipping a switch.

**Frampton:** And then once they finish elementary school then they need to go into Crescent City for high school.

**Abinanti:** Right.

**Frampton:** And what's the experience there? Do you have a sense?

**Abinanti:** Well a lot of our kids don't make it past junior high, they just don't go anymore, and that's where we have a lot of drop-outs, and that's what's driving my current

whatever, to get some help, to get case managers for our education, and to work with our education department and to work with getting lawyers in for IEPs and for suspension hearings, and for all this kind of thing, and also to get our parents to go. Part of the problem is, like when I was younger, and I would be abused at school, my mom didn't know how to deal with it, so she let me stay home so that I wouldn't get my feelings hurt. But you have to go in there and advocate for your kids, and having a confrontation is not something that we're really geared up to do a lot. It's not a skill set that people are happy with, so we just have to teach people how to do that in a positive way.

**Frampton:** So thinking about the court, you mentioned that the tribe has a lot of the extended families. How does that sort of impact your work in the court?

**Abinanti:** Well, I think you'll say to them, "Why didn't you ask your sister for help? Why didn't you whatever?" Was that OK?" Of course, it's okay. "Go and see if she'll help you do this," or, "It's dance time, now catch a ride to go to the dance and I'll give you permission to not come to court if you're at dance 'cause I'll be there sooner or later that day anyway, and I'll see you, so we'll just talk there." So different things like that. And you can say, or if you see that person on the road you can say, "OK well, I'm going to go back to the office, I'm going to call somebody in their family and say, "This needs to be dealt with or this elder was being bothered last night because one of her sons came home drunk. And I need you to take care of that," and you can do that. You can call somebody in their family and say, or we had an elder in Crescent City who has since died, and somebody was taking horrible advantage of her, so we tracked down her relatives, who did not know that was happening and who when they did know came roaring up here and ended it in a heartbeat. So that's the kind of thing you can do.