

STORY

In California, Salinan Indians Are Trying to Reclaim Their Culture and Land

December 14, 2017 | *NPR* (<https://pulitzercenter.org/publications/npr>)

BY ALLISON HERRERA



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Allison Herrera is Salinan, a California tribe that's not recognized by the federal government and has no land or sovereignty. She explains how that lead her family to lose its ancestral home.

TRANSCRIPT

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST: The lives of Native Americans are still shaped by decisions made by the federal government in the 19th century. In California, the federal government never officially recognized around 40 tribes, a decision that left them without land or sovereignty.

Independent producer Allison Herrera is from one of those tribes, and shares what that's meant for her and for her family.

ALLISON HERRERA, BYLINE: I grew up in San Luis Obispo on the central coast of California. My grandmother, Anna Herrera, hardly talked about being a Salinan Indian. I wanted to find out why. What happened to our family? So one windy day in 1997, I asked my then-76-year-old grandmother to take me to where most of our family used to live, a place called Toro Creek.

ANNA HERRERA: All of them are buried out there nearby.

ALLISON HERRERA: We went through an old, rusty gate, past an old cabin to where coffee cans stuck out of the ground. They were tombstones here to mark the graves of more than 60 of my Salinan ancestors, including my great-great-great-grandmother.

ANNA HERRERA: The old lady - she was the boss.

ALLISON HERRERA: This land is prime California real estate, views stretching from the mountains to the sea. I asked her why the family left this place. She said it wasn't by choice.

ANNA HERRERA: There's thousands of acres back in there, though, the Indians thought they owned, but I guess not.

ALLISON HERRERA: My family lived here for generations. But unlike other tribes, the Salinan don't have land. One reason for that - the tribe lacks what's known as federal recognition. Because of many factors, including the tribe's forced relocation by Spanish missionaries, they never had the opportunity to come to an agreement with the federal government. My great-great-grandparents managed to keep their home at Toro Creek until 1934. Since they didn't have a lawful claim on the land, it was sold out from under them.

ANNA HERRERA: There was a man - a cattleman named Marre, and they stepped in there and said, hey, this is mine.

ALLISON HERRERA: My family took the Marre Land and Cattle Company to court. I eventually got a hold of the court documents and found out they were ordered to leave their home. My grandmother seemed resigned.

ANNA HERRERA: And there was nobody to contest it. Nobody had any money.

ALLISON HERRERA: The tribe is preparing to apply for federal recognition. It's an expensive and time-consuming process, but Salinans are split on whether or not it's worth it. Some think the tribe's energy is better spent on educating the next generation on Salinan language and culture.

MARY BISHOP: I was just going to walk down to the cemetery.

ALLISON HERRERA: Mary Bishop, a Salinan elder, wants to appeal for that federal recognition. We met at Mission San Antonio de Padua, an 18th century Spanish mission. The Spanish used the Salinan as free labor to build this adobe church and monastery on what was their ancestral territory.

BISHOP: These Indians lived in these mountains very, very happily, comfortable. When the Spaniards came, they gradually got the Indians to come in here to build all of what you see.

ALLISON HERRERA: Bishop wants to be able to claim this land as our own.

BISHOP: And if we become recognized, which is - I'm hoping that we do, we can at least apply for a piece of this ground where our people walked when they were free.

ALLISON HERRERA: Gregg Castro is the former vice chair of the Salinan tribe. He's worked on applying for federal recognition and thinks it's not worth the effort. He says we should recognize ourselves as Salinan first and foremost.

GREGG CASTRO: That's who you are. It's built into the fabric of your being. You can acknowledge it or not. That's a choice you can make, but it's there nonetheless.

ALLISON HERRERA: I recently visited Morro Rock on the coast of California. This sacred place is now a state park. When my grandmother was alive, we'd come here often. I find it ironic that we as Salinans have to ask the federal government for permission to be who we already are and to live on land that we have lived on for generations. I know who I am. I'm Salinan. For NPR News, I'm Allison Herrera.

SIEGEL: That story was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

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