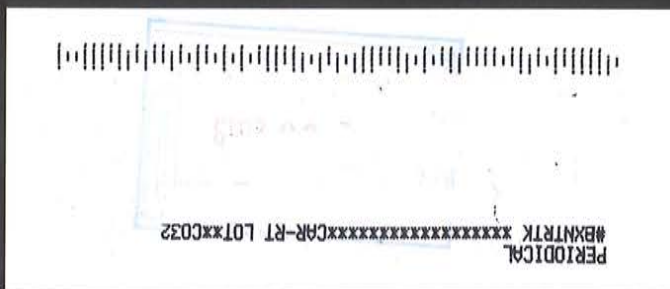


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“Patience, persistence and perspiration
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GREG SARRIS

An Inauspicious Beginning

Gregory Michael Sarris, member and current chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, was born in Santa Rosa on February 12, 1952, and adopted at birth by Mary and George Sarris, who lived in the Procter Terrace neighborhood.

His birth mother was 17-year-old Bunny Hartman, a lively girl of Irish and German-Jewish descent, who lived in Laguna Beach and whose father was a scion of the May Company. When Bunny turned up pregnant after a torrid teenage affair with a local high school football star, Emilio Hilario, her parents sent her away to give birth, as was the tradition in that era. Just days after delivering Greg, Bunny was accidentally given the wrong blood type in a transfusion and died after an excruciating ordeal with toxic uremia. Her parents, in an effort to keep their daughter's "transgressions" hidden, claimed she died from a fall off a horse. She's buried in Santa Rosa's Calvary Cemetery under a simple, upside-down horseshoe. Sarris visits her grave often.

Sarris' father is the source of his Native American heritage. Hilario's maternal great-grandparents were Tom and Emily Smith. Tom, a Kashaya Pomo and Miwok, was the last known Coast Miwok medicine man. Emilio, who was a football star at USC and one of the first Indian professional boxers, died six months before Greg finally located him after a frantic search for information about his birth parents.

Life in the Sarris household wasn't easy for young Greg. He was adopted because Mary and George thought they couldn't have children, only to find out Mary was already two months pregnant when they took baby Greg home. Over time, they'd have three children of their own and Greg, who wasn't fair-haired or fair-skinned like his siblings, became the target of an abusive father. At a young age, to keep him away from his adoptive father, he frequently lived with other families on farms and ranches throughout Sonoma County. As he got older, he drifted to street life, hanging out in poorer, rougher neighborhoods, like Santa Rosa's South Park.

"I got in trouble a lot," he says. "It was an inauspicious beginning."

While troubled, Sarris was also smart and talented, especially as a writer. He got an AA degree in English at Santa Rosa Junior College, then transferred to UCLA, where he earned a bachelor's degree in English. He then attended Stanford University, where he earned a master's in English and creative writing. A second round at Stanford led to a second master's and a Ph.D. in modern thought and literature.

In 1992, while an assistant English professor at UCLA, Sarris heard that a distant Pomo tribe had plans to open a casino resort at Tomales Bay, well out of its territory. He contacted and consulted with tribal elders of the Federated Coast Miwok, which included Southern Pomo, and organized a formal meeting—the first in generations—to stop the encroachment. As a result of his advocacy, Sarris was elected chairman and worked with Congress to restore tribal status to the band of Pomo and Miwok Indians, whose Graton Rancheria had been terminated in 1958. It was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on December 27, 2000.

In addition to being tribal chairman, Sarris is a professor at Sonoma State University, where he's held an endowed chair on Native American Studies since 2005. He's the author of six books, including *Grand Avenue*, based on memories of his time in the South Park neighborhood of Santa Rosa. The book was made into an award-winning HBO movie, which Sarris co-produced with Robert Redford in 1995.

By Jane Hodges Young

When the first jackpot hits at the new Graton Resort and Casino in Rohnert Park later this fall, there'll be more than just one winner.

Two thousand people will have new, full-time jobs, and another 200 to 400 will find part-time employment—at top wages. The city of Rohnert Park and Sonoma County will each find an additional \$12 million in their coffers. Property owners with parcels surrounding or even just near the casino will be worth thousands (if not millions) more, at least on paper. The North Bay will have a new crown jewel to attract tourists and visitors from all over the region. Parks and open space throughout the county will have a new benefactor. And Native Americans in Marin and Sonoma counties will have more economic power.

But the biggest winner of all might be the man most responsible for all of this: the enigmatic, controversial, hard-charging Greg Sarris, chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, who may finally be able to find some peace.

a college professor, author, Hollywood producer and screenwriter before returning home, was first heralded as a "local boy done good" (when he co-produced an award-winning HBO mini-series with Robert Redford) and eventually, in his own words, "a pariah" when he started work on a casino to help his tribe gain strong economic footing.

Commanding personality

Sarris rarely grants interviews and this writer knows why. Unlike other leaders and executives, who carefully couch their words in the presence of media, Sarris is out there. Big time. He's refreshingly candid, humorous, direct and blunt—and it's obvious he takes no prisoners. It's a leadership style that puts off many, but it gets the job done.

Sarris shares that a friend once described him as a "kitten that sits in your lap, purring. But stroke him the wrong way and he'll scratch your eyes out." And it's true that Sarris, the man, has been almost as controversial as the mega-project he's spearheaded since the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria was restored to tribal status. That would be the construction of the massive, \$800 million Graton Resort and

Greg Sarris

A wildcard can make all the difference.

Or, maybe not.

For more than 20 years, ever since he heard about a distant Pomo tribe that planned to build a casino resort at Tomales Bay—far outside its territorial boundaries—Sarris has led the charge to rebuild, legitimize and revitalize the tribal status of his band of Miwok and Pomo Indians whose Graton Rancheria was terminated by the federal government in 1958.

It's not something you'd readily expect from someone who survived a troubled youth in some of the roughest neighborhoods of Santa Rosa, only to go on to earn a top-flight education at some of the best schools in the nation. Sarris, who became

Casino on the west side of Highway 101, almost right in the middle of Rohnert Park.

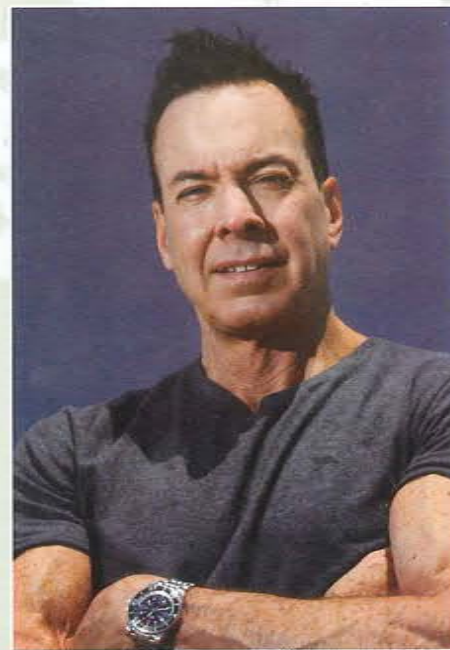
For several years now, to the amazement of anyone and everyone who's ever had to deal with environmental impact studies, land use and bureaucratic red tape, especially in urban areas, Sarris and his tribe have charged forward. And they've done it on their terms.

The "C" word

"Nobody knew about California Indians until we got casinos," Sarris says.

Initially, Sarris and his tribe didn't plan to get

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A Tribal Timeline

More than 600 village sites have been identified in the Coast Miwok territory, stretching from Bodega Bay to the north, eastward beyond the towns of Cotati and Sonoma, and along Point Reyes National Seashore and the shores of Tomales Bay. Here's a brief history of the tribe and its most recent activities:

- 1906-1910** A series of appropriations are passed federally to provide purchase funds for small tracts of land in Central and Northern California for landless Indians of those areas. The acquisitions result in what's now referred to as the Rancheria System in California. Native Americans are placed together based on geographic area as opposed to tribal affiliation.
- 1920** As part of the Rancheria System, property is purchased near Sebastopol and placed in federal trust as the Graton Rancheria for Federated Coast Miwok, which includes Native Americans from Bodega Bay, Tomales Bay, Sebastopol and the vicinities thereof, regardless of tribe. It's the earliest recorded designation for Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria (FIGR).
- 1936** The Indian Reorganization Act is established to begin restoring Native American tribes.
- 1958** The Federal Rancheria Act is passed by Congress, giving rancheria residents the right to vote to divide their lands among themselves as private property.
- 1960** Federal officials remove trust status from the Graton Rancheria property. A one-acre parcel remains in private ownership of a single former rancheria designee, but no trustland or reservation remains.
- 1966** Federated Coast Miwok's status as a recognized tribe is terminated under the California Rancheria Act of 1958.
- 1988** Congress passes the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA), which divides Indian gaming into three categories, from traditional and ceremonial games through to full-fledged gambling.
- 1992** Author and college professor Greg Sarris begins to organize what will become FIGR in reaction to a Pomo tribe seeking to build a casino in Sonoma or Marin County. Membership includes both Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo descendants of the original Graton Rancheria designees.
- 2000** FIGR is officially recognized by the U.S. government following passage of bills in both the House and Senate and signed into law by President Bill Clinton.
- 2003** FIGR announces plans to build and operate a casino in Sonoma County. In partnership with Las Vegas-based Station Casinos, property is purchased off Highway 37, but due to environmental concerns, the land is given to Sonoma Land Trust and a new property on the outskirts of the city of Rohnert Park is purchased instead.
- 2005** "The Rules of the Game" is released. The documentary film chronicles the clash between FIGR and Rohnert Park community members following the announcement of FIGR's intent to build a casino.
- 2012** Governor Jerry Brown signs a tribal-state gaming compact between the state of California and FIGR.
- 2012** FIGR breaks ground for its resort and casino project west of Rohnert Park.

Greg Sarris stands in front of the Graton Casino and Resort during construction in Rohnert Park. (Duncan Garrett Photography)

"Nobody knew about California Indians until we got casinos."

—Greg Sarris, Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria





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into the casino business, even though he started getting telephone calls from casino companies just three days after the tribe's status was restored. But because the federal government didn't originally give the tribe a line item in its budget (it has since), it's had to depend on grants to run its assistance programs; which help tribal members in myriad ways, from securing housing and completing high school GEDs to providing nutrition/health information and teaching such basics as household budgeting. Its success has been well documented. When tribal programs began in 2001, FIGR's youth ("not unlike other California Indian youth," says Sarris) had an 80 percent drop-out by the ninth grade. Today, the tribe's high school graduation rate is 90 percent.

"So the 'C' word came up: casino," Sarris says. "I'm a professor and nerd by trade, and casinos weren't my gig. But there's no way I could leave [my tribe]."

Finding himself at the center of the storm as tribal leader, Sarris entertained the bidders, instigating what he describes as a "cock fight." But he had his rules.

Sarris wanted total control of the development board, "which meant I could pick the color of the carpet," he laughs. He also wanted \$200 million up front "that I didn't have to give back even if the doors never opened." And most important, because of Sarris' personal experience with the poor, "it had to be built and run by union workers or at least pay a good living wage." In the end, Station Casinos of Las Vegas was the only suitor left standing.

The tribe, with Sarris at its helm, actually worked with Sonoma County to narrow down parcels of land where the casino could be built. The coast was out of the question, as were spots close to wetlands, many of which were encumbered under the Williamson Act. In 2005, the tribe and Station Casinos paid \$100 million for farmland located in Rohnert Park, just off Highway 101 near Scandia Family Fun Center and Home Depot.

"We overpaid," says Sarris, explaining the price of the land was increased from \$12 million to \$100 million after the tribe expressed an interest in it, "So \$100 million of my \$200 million up-front money was gone."

Once this was done, there was a long battle to get the land put into trust, which pitted Sarris against everyone from "an evangelical minister

"I said from day one that this isn't about a new color TV or a new car. It has to benefit both Indians and non-Indians. We have to get past 'us' to get to 'we.'" —Greg Sarris

who suddenly was an expert on traffic patterns" to Senator Diane Feinstein. "I had to work hard to get things done. It was a chess game, and I had to pay close attention in order to win."

After the land was secured and the trust established, Sarris began the extended process to secure the loans to actually build. Ground was broken last year and the casino portion of the project is due to open around Halloween.

Higher calling

Along the way, Sarris made many enemies, some of whom resorted to personal attacks, questioning his Native American heritage (Sarris was adopted at birth by a middle-class white family in Santa Rosa). He even received death threats.

But for Sarris, it was a higher calling that kept him going, even though at times he "felt very beat up." Ultimately, it was about being empowered and being engaged.

"It's the first time since Indians have had contact with Europeans that we have say and control," he explains. "I said from day one that this isn't about a new color TV or a new car. It has to benefit both Indians and non-Indians. We have to get past 'us' to get to 'we.'"

Much of Sarris' drive is related to his childhood. "I was adopted and illegitimate and had a very hard life as a youth. I was abused by my adopted father," he says. "When I was about six or seven, I started staying with other families on nearby ranches and farms. I've seen laborer pain. I also saw the goodness of poor people, and I want dignity for all people."

That's why he demanded union or "good living wages" from Station, which will have a payroll estimated at \$60 million. "Our card dealers will earn 6 to 8 percent more than comparable jobs" at other area casinos, even though those jobs are heavily tipped. "All other positions will earn 10 percent to 30 percent more than they would be paid elsewhere," he says, and there will be full benefit packages with medical, dental and 401k retirement programs. "We plan to raise the bar when it comes to salaries. We're going to be a game changer when it comes to ethical treatment."

There will also be a grievance process, whether or not an employee is in a union job. "If you're having supervisor problems, you'll get to be heard by a jury of your peers. I'm very concerned about protecting these people," Sarris adamantly states.

Those who know Sarris aren't surprised that fairness is one of his guiding doctrines. Since becoming chairman of the tribe, he's also instituted new rules governing tribal membership. Perhaps stemming from his own feelings of being an out-cast in his youth, Sarris has made it impossible for members of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria to be kicked out or "disenrolled," a practice that's been extremely controversial in other tribes.

"We are the first tribe to amend tribal law to forbid disenrollment," says Sarris. "You can be suspended for bad behavior, but you can never be disenrolled."

Stewards of the land

And while many decry the environmental impact of the new Graton Casino and Resort, pointing to water use and the potential of 15,000 cars per day pulling into its parking lot, the tribe has been careful to not stray far from the Native American tradition of treading softly on the land, preserving it for future generations.

When Sarris negotiated the tribe's state gambling compact with Governor Jerry Brown, "I suggested, 'Let's do something new.' The state can't give the county [Sonoma] and city [Rohnert Park] money, but we can. So we are. The minute the doors open, Rohnert Park and Sonoma County each get \$12 million. A large portion of the revenue share will be given back to the county. And we pay Rohnert Park to help mitigate the impact of increased traffic on the roads."

After four to five years, the time Sarris estimates it will take to pay off the loan on the casino, the county will get up to \$25 million each year for parks and open space, plus a new program to encourage the establishment of sustainable farms on flatlands in the parks, "which will pay fair wages to workers and then sell produce at cost" to consumers. The county will also get \$5 million per year for environmental projects. Non-gaming tribes in Cloverdale and Stewarts Point will each get \$3 million per year and an additional \$2 million per year



will go to the Sonoma County Indian Health Fund.

"After that's done, any money that's left over will go back to the state for the California Indian Fund," Sarris says. "In all, we should be giving back about \$45 million in revenue annually. Find me another business that does *that*."

The land is also not forgotten in the tribe's future plans. "We want to purchase land and open space and turn it into organic and sustainable farmland, which will let us grow food and feed ourselves and the larger community. It'll be like Thanksgiving all over again, except this time we get to keep the turkey," Sarris laughs.

Sarris says the tribe also is looking toward international investments, but shared no specifics.

The high road

"Money is power," he admits, "but that's not bad. It's what you do with the power. Our vision is to do what's good and right. If it's all about others, you're unstoppable. It's like putting a laser beam on greed—it just melts away. And it's greed that will kill us."

Sarris knows he's been a lightning rod, yet in victory, "all's well that ends well. I have no animosity," he says. "I've always personally believed in taking the high road, and if there's one good thing I've done, it's that I've convinced almost 1,300 people [all tribal members] to take the high road, too."

In closing our interview, Sarris tells the story of an Indian friend of his, who once grumbled to him that, "We don't owe the white man anything."

Sarris disagreed. "Yes, we do," I said. "We owe the white man a good example." ♦



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