



SOCIAL STUDIES FACT CARDS CALIFORNIA INDIANS

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NISENAN

Location: East central California (Sutter, Yuba, Nevada, Placer, El Dorado Counties and parts of Sierra & Sacramento Counties)

Language: Penutian family

Population:

1770 estimate: not known

1910 Census: not known

The Nisenan are part of the Maidu group, closely related in language to the Maidu and Konkow, who lived to the north of them. Sometimes the Nisenan are called the Southern Maidu.



SETTLEMENTS

Nisenan territory reached from the Sierra Nevada mountains on the east to the Sacramento River on the west. Most of the villages were along the rivers that run west out of the mountains: the Yuba River, the Bear River, the American River, and the lower part of the Feather River. The people chose high areas or ridges along the streams for the location of their villages.

Some communities had only 15 to 25 people living in a single village; others had as many as 500 people living in a central village and a number of smaller settlements around that central village. The larger villages had 40 to 50 houses. Villages in the hill areas were usually smaller than those in the valleys.

Each community had a headman, who usually inherited his position from his father. If the people did not think the headman was doing a good job, he could be replaced by someone else that they chose. If there was no man in the village who could be a good leader, a woman might be chosen. Each family had a leader who met with the headman to make decisions. During times of crisis, the headmen of one village would take

leadership over a larger territory. A village headman was a wealthy person. He was given food by the members of his village.

The name *Nisenan* was used by the people to refer to themselves. It means *from among us* or *of our side*. In addition to calling themselves Nisenan, the people named themselves for the valley or hill area in which they lived.

HOUSES

Houses in the valley areas were round, about 10 to 15 feet across. They were made with a framework of poles and covered with bundles of grass or mats made of tule reeds, and then with a layer of earth. The most important villages had dance houses, which were the largest buildings in the village. The dance house floor was dug down three or four feet below ground level. The roof was supported by several heavy beams and posts. The walls and roof were covered with tule mats and earth, like the family houses. The door to the dance house was on the east side of the house.

The Nisenan who lived in the hill villages made houses that were more cone shaped, with poles lashed together at the top. Pieces of bark and skins were used to cover the frame. Both hill and valley people built temporary shelters in summer, when they moved from their main villages to hunt for food. The temporary shelters were made of poles with roofs of brush, but no side walls.

Most villages had a sweathouse. It was made like the dance house, but much smaller, just large enough for four or five men.

FOOD

In Nisenan territory, food could be gathered throughout the year. The Nisenan had a great variety of foods for their meals. The early fall was acorn gathering time. Often an entire village would work together gathering acorns. The acorn supply for the village was stored in a special building called the granary. The Nisenan also gathered buckeye nuts, digger and sugar pine nuts, and hazelnuts.

Many other plants provided food for the people. Seeds were used to make a type of mush. Roots were dug from the ground in the spring and summer. They were eaten raw or steamed, or they were dried and pounded into a flour that was made into cakes. The cakes could be stored for eating in the winter. Roots that were favorites were wild onion, wild sweet potato, and a root known as *Indian potato*. Berries, plums, grapes, and other fruits grew naturally in Nisenan territory.

The men worked together to hunt deer, antelope, elk, and black bears. Wildcats and mountain lions were also used as food. Many small animals such as rabbits were caught with traps and snares. The rivers provided clams, mussels, and eels in addition to fish such as salmon, sturgeon, whitefish, and trout. Birds and insects added to the food supply. Large numbers of grasshoppers were caught by setting fire to a meadow and driving the grasshoppers into a pit. The insects were soaked in water and then baked in an earth oven. The wings and legs were removed by crushing them with a stone. They were then eaten whole, or ground into a flour and made into mush.

CLOTHING

Nisenan women wore short apron-like skirts made from tule reeds, or from shredded bark. Men often went without any clothing, or wore a piece of deerskin around their hips. When the weather was cold, both men and women wore a blanket or robe over their shoulders. People who lived in the hills usually made blankets from animal skins. In the valleys, blankets were more often made from bird feathers. Feathers were wrapped with cord to make long strips, and then the strips were woven together to make a blanket or robe.

The Nisenan did not usually wear anything on their feet nor head. Both men and women kept their hair long. The men sometimes wore a net cap over their hair, or a headband. Women often had three lines tattooed on their chins. They wore ornaments of shells or bone in their ears and noses.

TOOLS

The Nisenan made coiled baskets, with three rods tied together forming the basic basket material. The rods were branches of hazel, willow, or redbud. String and cord for nets was made from milkweed and hemp fibers. Tule rushes were woven into mats. Bundles of tules were tied to one or two logs to make a simple canoe, pushed with a long pole or a single paddle.

Stone was shaped into knives, spear points and arrow heads, and scrapers. Bows and arrows, used in hunting and in warfare, were made of wood. The bows were two or three feet long, and backed with sinew (animal tendons). Arrows were made with hawk feathers on them.

TRADE

The Nisenan who lived in the valleys traded fish, roots, shells, beads, salt, and feathers to those who lived in the hills. From the hill people they got black oak acorns, pine nuts, manzanita berries, animal skins,

and wood for making bows. The Nisenan also traded with groups farther away for shells, magnesite (a rock that turns reddish when heated), and obsidian (volcanic glass).

Clamshell beads were used as money, and were a sign of wealth. The pieces of clamshell, which came from the coast around Bodega Bay, were shaped into disks. The disks were polished, holes punched in the middle, and then strung on strings.

CEREMONIES

The village dance house was used for community gatherings and celebrations. The Nisenan held many dances. The Kamin Dance welcomed the arrival of spring. The Weda or Flower Dance was done in April. Harvest was celebrated with the Lole Dance. Other special occasions were the Dape or Coyote Dance, the Omwulu or Rabbit Dance, and the Numusla or Big Time dance. Flutes, clappers, and rattles were used along with singing at the dances. Each dance house also had a plank drum.

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