DECOLONIZING SUTTER COUNTY:

REINTERPRETING NISENAN CULTURE IN A LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUM

A Project

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by

Jessalyn Marie Eernisse

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by

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Department of History

Abstract

of

DECOLONIZING SUTTER COUNTY:

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by

Jessalyn Marie Eernisse

This thesis discusses the process of planning, designing, developing, and installing an exhibit for the Sutter County Museum. The final exhibit, entitled *The Nisenan: A History of the Sacramento Valley*, is now on permanent display at the museum. It discusses the Indigenous history of the Yuba-Sutter region through a lens of shared authority and decolonization. This thesis examines and reviews the often fraught relationships between Native American groups and museums and museum best practices for working with underrepresented peoples and cultures. In order to complete this exhibit, I facilitated conversations with tribal partners, conducted both primary and secondary source research, created interpretive panels and object labels, obtained images, created a layout and floorplan for the exhibit, and installed all components.

_______________________________, Committee Chair
Khal Schneider, Ph.D.

____
Date

PREFACE

During my time in Sacramento State's Public History program, my coursework repeatedly led me towards Native American history. I completed papers on the Native American Occupation of Alcatraz, a historiography of California's Native American genocide, and the erasure of Native peoples from popular memories of the California Gold Rush. It was not until I began my final graduate internship at the Maidu Museum and Historic Site, however, that I first learned about the Nisenan people. Although I grew up in the Sacramento area, my primary school education on Native Californians was minimal. I knew that Native Californians ate acorns and salmon, I knew that many of them worked in Spanish missions, and I knew that one of Davis' elementary schools was named after the local Patwin tribe. Despite my lifelong love of history, I had never sought out this information nor explored it on my own. I believe this lack of interest stemmed from a lack of exposure to the topic—I was not asked by my teachers to reflect on who lived in my hometown before Europeans arrived or what had happened to them.

Learning about Nisenan history, and Native California generally, has been both intellectually fulfilling and infuriating. Native peoples are not only neglected in the historical record, as my own education reflects, but fundamentally mistreated and misrepresented by museums and history-sharing institutions. Museums and textbooks avoid mentioning the state's genocidal actions and shy away from accurate interpretations of the racism and violence faced by Native Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Facilities across California continue to venerate those who

murdered and abused Native peoples, like John Sutter, Serranus C. Hastings, and John C. Fremont, despite their troubling and problematic legacies. These omissions are a detriment to a proper understanding of California's history as they continue to erase Native Californians from both the historical record and the present day.

My intention upon entering the Public History program was to find a career in museum curation or historic site interpretation. Although I remain interested in these fields, learning about the ways in which museums have historically disrespected and erased Native American cultures fundamentally altered my impression of the industry. I firmly believe it is my duty as a public historian to bring underrepresented voices to the public's attention. My time at the Maidu Museum gave me a practical and valuable look at how museum professionals can advocate for and work alongside marginalized communities to improve the interpretation of their history. This project allowed me to practice the methodologies I learned at the Maidu Museum by curating a socially relevant exhibit.

DEDICATION

For my grandmother, Dinah Jordan—a fierce advocate for my education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am remarkably grateful for the support system I found both at Sacramento State and in my personal life as I worked towards completing my thesis. Many people helped me during my time in the Public History program and all of them contributed, in some way, to this project.

Thank you to Dr. Lindsay, both for your help in finding internships and for your assurance that a good thesis project would come my way if I was patient. Thank you to Dr. Schneider for reading and editing my writing and helping me create deadlines.

Thank you to Sigrid Benson for teaching me how to practice shared authority and collaborate with artists and Indigenous communities.

Thank you to Jessica Hougen and Sharyl Simmons, the wonderful team at the Sutter County Museum, for taking me on and letting me try everything. Cold calling the museum to ask for an internship turned out to be the best decision I made while in the Public History program. Sharyl, your historical knowledge of Sutter County, your humor, and your editing advice are always appreciated. Jessica, you have placed so much trust in me, both as your intern and by allowing me to curate this exhibit for the museum. I cannot believe how lucky I am to have you as a resource and mentor.

And finally, thank you to my parents, my grandparents, and Nik for your love, encouragement, and patience. I am very excited for us to take a day trip to Yuba City so you can see the exhibit in person.

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CHAPTER 1

THE SUTTER COUNTY MUSEUM

This chapter provides a brief history of Sutter County and the Sutter County Museum. It also explores the museum's long-term goals and its plans to modernize in the coming decade. Finally, it discusses the museum's need for a new interpretation of indigenous history.

I. History of the Sutter County Museum

Sutter County is a rural county located in California's Sacramento Valley. It is one of the state's original twenty-seven counties. Its first inhabitants were Nisenan people (sometimes referred to as Maidu or Southern Maidu peoples). The county seat is Yuba City, which is one of two incorporated towns in the county. Sutter County became home to numerous ranches and farms in the decade following the California Gold Rush and it continues to be a mostly agricultural county. Approximately eighty-eight percent of the county is made up of farmland and grazing land; major crops include rice, walnuts peaches, and plums. It is financially, culturally, and historically linked with the city of Marysville and neighboring Yuba County, across the Feather River to the east. Given their small populations and shared history, many cultural and social organizations in Yuba and Sutter Counties are combined to serve both counties. The two counties are jointly referred to as the Yuba-Sutter Region.[1]

[1] Julie Stark, Sharyl Simons, David M. Rubiales, and Carol Withington, *Yuba City: Our Home Town* (Virginia Beach: The Donning Company Publishers, 2008), 18, 21,23-28, 66.

The Sutter County Museum, formerly known as the Community Memorial Museum of Sutter County, is a small, public museum located in Yuba City.[2] It is the only museum in Sutter County. The museum opened to the public on August 5, 1975. Prior to the building's construction, the Sutter County Historical society had created small museum exhibits in a few temporary locations across Yuba City. Long-time Sutter County residents Howard and Norma Harter donated the land museum sits on and the funded the building's construction. It is operated and funded by Sutter County and receives additional financial support from the non-profit Sutter County Museum Association. It has two full time employees, a director/curator and an assistant curator. Jessica Hougen, the current director/curator, has been with the museum since 2015. Its front desk and events are staffed by a network of volunteers and Museum Association members. Its stated mission is to share "local stories to strengthen community bonds, to inspire celebration of […] diverse cultural heritage, and to demonstrate how understanding the past prepares [the community] for the future."[3]

The museum's exhibits focus on the history of Sutter County and western Yuba County, from the pre-contact indigenous period through the early twenty-first century. It hosts several temporary exhibits each year. The exhibits emphasize the Yuba/Sutter region's agricultural and immigration history. It also features exhibits on John Sutter, transportation and bridges in Sutter County, and childhood at the turn of the twentieth century. Director Hougen is seeking new and more diverse community involvement and,

[2] The museum officially changed its name to the Sutter County Museum in June 2019.

[3] Stark, Simons, Rubiales, and Withington, *Yuba City*, 150-151; Sutter County Museum, "Mission & History," accessed October 13, 2019.

as a result, is working on modernizing the entire museum. This includes changes to both the exhibits and the interior aesthetics. The museum has a few, large displays of Victorian Era artifacts that rely heavily on the physical items and lack textual interpretation. Director Hougen intends to completely revamp or remove these exhibits and replace them with more socially relevant material. As part of the museum's plans to modernize, it underwent a major remodel from January to June of 2019. This included new paint and flooring and the installation of compact shelving in its collections room. It also updated its logo and officially changed its name as part of the renovation.

II. Interpretation of Nisenan Culture at the Sutter County Museum

The Sutter County Museum has always had an exhibit on the region's indigenous people, although it has taken different shapes over the years. The museum's first assistant curator was of Maidu descent and affiliated with the Berry Creek Rancheria of Maidu People. She used her family history and stories to help curate the initial Maidu exhibit. She gave guided tours of the museum to local schools and included many Maidu stories. She made recordings of her children's tours to help train future employees. Unfortunately, there are no existing images of this first exhibit. None of the museum's former employees remember exactly what this exhibit covered.[4]

A second Maidu exhibit was up by 1984. This exhibit remained on display until January 2019. The exhibit used the term "Maidu" to broadly discuss the people of the Yuba/Sutter Region, although it specifically focused on the Nisenan Maidu people. It

[4] Sharyl Simmons, e-mail message with author, April 24, 2019; Julie Stark, e-mail message with author, April 25, 2019.

had relatively little text and mostly focused on images and artifacts. Situated in the past tense, it exclusively discussed pre-contact indigenous life. It did not discuss anything beyond the 1840s, nor did it discuss the Nisenan or general indigenous experience during the white settlement period. It shared very little information on basic aspects of Nisenan life, such as diet, social structures, and basket weaving, and instead focused on the spiritual world of the Nisenan. It relied heavily on quotes from Richard Simpson's *Ooti: A Maidu Legacy*, a biography of Nisenan elder Lizzie Enos. No Nisenan or Indigenous people helped curate the exhibit. The museum permanently removed the second Nisenan exhibit as part of the 2019 remodel. This exhibit was in dire need of both a content and aesthetic update. The panels and color scheme looked dated, faded, and amateur. The surface level narrative left out the majority of the Nisenan experience and did not provide any historical context. Perspectives on interpretation have changed greatly since the early 1980s and, as it stood, the exhibit was not in line with Director Hougen's long term goals for the museum.[5]

Director Hougen offered me the opportunity to curate an exhibit at the Sutter County Museum as my Master's thesis project. I worked with Director Hougen as her intern during the spring semester of 2017 and remained in contact with her after I finished my internship. She presented me with several potential exhibit curation projects—among them was the opportunity to curate a new exhibit on the region's Nisenan people. I chose the Nisenan project because of my personal interest in Native American and California history and because of my prior internship experience at the

[5] Ibid.

Maidu Museum and Historic Site in Roseville, California. As a result of my time at the Maidu Museum I wanted to create an exhibit using shared authority and I knew that Director Hougen would want this type of exhibit for the Sutter County Museum. For my thesis project I also wanted the opportunity to curate something that would fill a community need and promote broader engagement with the museum. I felt that the Nisenan exhibit was the most important and most urgent exhibit renovation option in the museum.

CHAPTER 2

WHO ARE THE NISENAN?

The Nisenan are indigenous Californians from the southeastern Sacramento Valley and western Sierra Nevada Foothills.[6] Historically, anthropologists and historians have also referred to them as the Maidu, the Nisenan Maidu, and the Southern Maidu. This chapter presents an overview of their history and culture, from the pre-contact period to the twenty-first century. It is divided into six, chronological sections: traditional life and culture, the Spanish and Mexican period, the New Helvetia period, the post-Gold population collapse, relocation and rancherias, and present-day Nisenan life.

I. Traditional Life and Culture

Nisenan people believe that their ancestors have lived in California since time immemorial. Conventional scientific theories propose that the ancestors of modern Native Americans migrated to North America via a land bridge across the Bering Strait about 20,000 years ago. Indigenous scholars reject the Bering Strait Crossing theory as it contradicts the oral histories of many tribes; in their traditions Native Americans have always lived in North America. Archaeologists believe that California has been populated for at least 10,000 years. The tribal groups of Central California are collectively recognized as the largest non-agrarian society in North America before Columbus. They

[6] I use the terms "indigenous," "Native Americans," and "Native Californians" interchangeably to refer collectively to the original inhabitants of the United States and California. "American Indians" and "Indians" are only used when it is in the given name of a group or organization. Our focus groups at the museum found that "Indians" is the group's least favorite nomenclature.

are also believed to be one of the longest surviving cultures in what is now the United States.[7]

Traditional Nisenan lands extend from the west bank of the Sacramento River, south to the Cosumnes River, east to the crest of the Sierra Nevada, and north to the North Fork of the Yuba River. This encompasses most of Sacramento, Placer, El Dorado, Nevada, Sutter, and Yuba Counties and parts of Yolo and Butte Counties. Today their region includes the cities of Auburn, Nevada City, Marysville, Yuba City, Roseville, and Sacramento. They lived on these lands year-round. Neighboring peoples included the Yamonee (Mountain) Maidu, the Konkow, the Patwin, the Miwok, and the Washo.[8]

The Nisenan language is part of the Penutian language group and the Maidu language subgroup. Other speakers of Maiduan languages include the Konkow and Yamonee (Mountain) Maidu. Despite linguistic and cultural similarities between these groups, there is no single "Maidu" tribe.[9] Anthropologists believe that a distinct Nisenan language and culture emerged about 3,000 years ago. *Nisenan* means "from among us" or "of our side." Nisenan people use *Nisenan* to refer to people of their own culture and to distinguish themselves from other tribes. It is a self-given name. There are minor cultural

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[7] Vine Deloria Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (New York: Scribner, 1995) 97-98; David M. Rubiales, *First People* (Marysville, CA: Saddleback Ranch), i; California Indian Museum and Cultural Center, "7 Essential Understandings for California Indian History and Culture," presented at the 2019 California Association of Museums Conference.

[8] Richard B. Johnson, *History of Us: Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria* (Santa Rosa, CA: Comstock Bonanza Press, 2018), 1-7; David M. Rubiales, *First People* (Marysville, CA: Saddleback Ranch), i.

[9] Some Nisenan people do not want to be called Maidu; they feel that it is a name that was placed upon them, rather than a name they gave themselves. Others do not mind and use it to refer to themselves.

and linguistic differences between Valley Nisenan peoples and Foothill Nisenan peoples but they still recognize each other as Nisenan.[10]

Contrary to early reports from European and American settlers, California was not an untamed wilderness before the advent of mining and western farming. Nisenan peoples saw themselves as stewards of their land. They carefully and dutifully cared for it through pruning, plant tending, seed sowing, and controlled burns. Controlled burns encouraged growth for plants, created better grazing for game, and cleared underbrush. They also prevented larger, untamed wildfires. These traditional land management practices allowed Native peoples to live comfortably in the Sacramento Valley. They did not live a "hand-to-mouth" hunter-gatherer existence. The variety of game animals, fish, and edible plants in the valley provided a solid food safety net. They were able to store food for years at a time and expertly alternated harvests to encourage plant growth and avoid shortages. If one plant had a poor harvest there were plenty of other edible plants to eat instead. Agricultural settlements did exist along the Colorado River in Southern California but the Native people of the Sacramento Valley did not farm. Some anthropologists believe that Nisenan people were aware of farming practices to the south, but chose not to use them due to the high labor demands associated with this lifestyle.[11]

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[10] Johnson, *History of Us*, 1-7; Rubiales, *First People*, i, 19; Hans Jørgen Uldall and William Shipley, *Nisenan Texts and Dictionary* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966), 222.

[11] M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Manaagement of California's Natural Resources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 30-33, 248; Johnson, *History of Us*, 79; A. L. Krober, "The Valley Nisenan," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 24, no. 4 (1929), 261-262; Marie Potts, *The Northern Maidu* (Happy Camp, CA: Naturegraph Publishers, Inc., 1977), 13; Rubiales, *First People*, 9.

Acorns and salmon formed the basic Nisenan diet. Acorns are highly nutritious and stay edible for many years. Communities worked together to gather acorns, typically gathering enough to last each household two or three years. Acorns cannot be eaten right off the tree as they contain bitter tannins. About 5,000 years ago Native Californians developed a process to remove the tannins—acorns were dried, ground, and then leached with water. After leaching Nisenan women used the flour to make bread, stews, and porridge.[12]

Hunting and gathering were gendered responsibilities. Nisenan men were responsible for hunting and fishing. Women gathered plants, roots, and berries and prepared food.[13] Men used fish traps, nets, and spears to catch fish. They also put toxic plants in the water to paralyze the fish, allowing them to grab them by hand. Other protein sources included grasshoppers, deer, elk, rabbits, black bears, quail, and waterfowl. Nisenan people did not eat beavers, grizzly bears, buzzards, or owls. Like acorns, fish and meat were typically dried and saved for later.[14]

Traditionally, Nisenan people used baskets for everything—from gathering and storing food to carrying water. Baskets also served as plates, cups, bowls, and cooking vessels. Nisenan women placed hot stones in baskets to heat food and boil water. Nisenan people, like other Native Californians, continue to create intricate, multi-use

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[12] Johnson, *History of Us*, 79-81, 92-93; Potts, *The Northern Maidu*, 14-15; Rubiales, *First People*, 13-15.

[13] Early American visitors to the Sacramento Valley saw Nisenan and Patwin peoples digging for roots and plants believed this exemplified their "simplicity" and primitivity. They pejoratively called them, "digger Indians," a slur that persisted well into the twentieth century.

[14] Johnson, *History of Us*, 79-92; Krober, "The Valley Nisenan," 262; Potts, *The Northern Maidu*, 11-13; Rubiales, *First People*, 15-17.

baskets. Nisenan weavers typically make their baskets out of willow and redbud. They can be made in all sizes and shapes and are woven loosely or tightly depending on their purpose. Weavers can create watertight baskets for storage or cooking by using tight weaves and sealing them with pine pitch. Open weave baskets are used as traps for fish and grasshoppers. Today, they serve many of the same purposes, or are used for decoration.[15]

Traditional Nisenan homes were called *hu*. They were semi-subterranean, typically dug about four feet into the earth, and dome shaped. In the foothills, *hu* were about 15-30 feet in diameter and covered in earth. They were supported by posts around the diameter of the *hu* and several large beams, typically made from oak and cedar, and then insulated with cedar bark slabs. In the valley the *hu* was slightly smaller and usually made of willow branches and bark. They were insulated with both tule and earth to keep out the intense valley heat. Tule is a tall grass that grows in marshes and along rivers in California's Central Valley. Native Californians used tule to make clothing, canoes, and mats.[16]

Each family had their own *hu*. Families usually included a married couple, their children, and the husband's parents. Women moved away from their own families after marriage. Most villages had a *k'um*, a community building and dance house used for ceremonies and celebrations. In the winter they met there for storytelling, singing, and dancing. Villages also had a sweathouse, which men visited daily to clean themselves

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[15] Johnson, *History of Us*, 63-68; Potts, *The Northern Maidu*, 34-38; Rubiales, *First People*, 29-30.

[16] Johnson, *History of Us*, 24-30; Rubiales, *First People*, 20.

and socialize. Women were not allowed in the sweathouse but they still bathed themselves and their children daily. On the opposite end of the village from the *k'um* was the *denim-di*, or menstrual hut. Women isolated and ritually cleansed themselves during their menstrual period as they were believed to be both unclean and filled with dangerous magical powers.[17]

Villages had a leader, or headman. The headman was not a chief, rather he acted as a representative to other villages and mediated disputes within his home village. At least 75,000 Native Americans lived in the Sacramento Valley before white settlement. As many as 1,000 people could live in a single village. The largest may have had up to 2,000 inhabitants. Major villages included Momol and Pusune, at the confluence of the American and Sacramento Rivers near present-day Sacramento, Hok, along the Feather River just south of Yuba City, Wokodot, north of Nevada City, Pichiku near Roseville, and Yolimhu near present-day Folsom.[18]

II. The First Invasion

Spanish militias, missionaries, and ranchers began colonizing what is now California in 1769 with the founding of Mission San Diego de Alcalá in present-day San Diego. Over the next 54 years they established missions, presidios, and towns along the coast, eventually settling as far north as Marin County. This period was traumatic and destructive for indigenous ways of life. The Spanish forcefully exerted their religious

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[17] Johnson, *History of Us*, 24-31, 58; Krober, "The Valley Nisenan," 259-260; Rubiales, *First People*, 20-23.

[18] Johnson, *History of Us*, 8-9, 24-30; Rubiales, *First People*, 20; Norman L. Wilson and Arlean H. Towne, "Nisenan," in *Handbook of North American Indians Volume 8*, edited by Robert F. Heizer (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute, 1978), 388.

and social values on Native peoples, abused indigenous workers, and (unintentionally) spread European diseases. Indigenous Californians had no natural immunity to these diseases and died in large numbers. An estimated 300,000 indigenous people lived in California at the beginning of the Spanish colonial period. By the beginning of the Mexican era in 1821, that number had dropped to 200,000.[19]

The Nisenan remained fully independent from Spanish colonial authority. A few European and American explorers ventured into Northern California's interior during first decades of the nineteenth century but they did not establish any permanent settlements in the region. Fur trappers, primarily from the Hudson's Bay Company, began moving through the area with some frequency in the 1820s and 1830s. As travel through central California became more common, the Sacramento Valley's population became vulnerable to the same diseases that ravaged their coastal neighbors.[20]

In 1833 fur trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company brought malaria with them into the Sacramento Valley. Infected trappers carried the disease along their trade routes from Hawaii, to Oregon, and then south into California. Malaria did not exist in California before this; the already infected trappers passed the disease to the valley's mosquitos. The wetlands of the valley proved to be the perfect environment for malaria,

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[19] Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 1; Hurtado, *John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier* (Norman, OK: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 2006),4; Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 128.

[20] Sherburne F. Cook "The Epidemic of 1830-1833 in California and Oregon," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 43, no.3 (May 1955), 310-311; Hurtado *Indian Survival*, 41; Hurtado, *John Sutter*, 4.

causing it to spread quickly and aggressively. The disease decimated the indigenous population; historians estimate that at least two-thirds of the valley's population died.[21]

The ferocity of the disease shocked trappers and travelers who came through the valley during and immediately after the outbreak. John Work, the Hudson's Bay Company's chief trader and expedition leader for the region, passed through the lower Feather River in August of 1833. He noted that:

> Some sickness prevails among the Indians on [F]eather [R]iver. The villages which were so populous and swarming with inhabitants when we passed that way in Jany or Febry [sic] last now seem almost deserted and have a desolate appearance […] I am afraid to stop lest we die like the Indians.[22]

Hall J. Kelley, a writer and explorer, passed through the valley in 1834, after the worst of the epidemic. Although he had not visited the Sacramento Valley before, he was astonished by how few people he encountered in what had once, to his eyes, been a very populous region:

> Most of the native Indians have perished… Many tribes are utterly extinct; in places where I was told that, in 1832, there was a population of a thousand or fifteen hundred souls I found sometimes but one hundred, sometimes not more than fifty and sometimes none… But along the Sacrament [sic] and elsewhere there is aboundant [sic] evidence that, in former times, a teeming and crowded population was spread over that now desolate region.[23]

With their population severely diminished, the surviving Nisenan struggled to recover. They continued to suffer from relapses of malaria and other outbreaks followed the first. With fewer people able to hunt and work, gathering and preparing food became

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[21] Peter Ahrens, "John Work, J.J. Warner, and the Native American Catastrophe of 1833," *Southern California Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 2; Hurtado *Indian Survival*, 46; George Harwood Phillips, *Indians and Intruders in Central California, 1769-1849* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1993), 94.

[22] Peter Ahrens, "John Work, J.J. Warner, and the Native American Catastrophe of 1833," 28-30.

[23] Sherburne F. Cook "The Epidemic of 1830-1833 in California and Oregon," 317.

more difficult. More frequent trapping expeditions further disrupted Nisenan food systems. Trappers used guns to hunt, allowing them to kill animals more efficiently than the weakened Native peoples. Some Nisenan peoples struck up trade relationships with Hudson's Bay men. Others fled to Nisenan communities in the foothills. Malaria-carrying mosquitos do not live at California's higher elevations and trappers did not hunt that far east.[24]

III. New Helvetia

Life in the Sacramento Valley changed permanently in 1839. John Sutter, a Swiss immigrant, received a land grant from the Mexican government which encompassed much of the southern Sacramento Valley. Sutter established New Helvetia (New Switzerland), a fort and trading outpost, in what is now the city of Sacramento. Sutter imagined himself as the ruler of a self-sustaining inland colony. He needed to gain the trust of local indigenous peoples both to ensure the safety of his fort and to build up a workforce. He won the loyalty of some Miwok peoples south of Sacramento but local Nisenan people initially fled from him. Upon his arrival, he intimidated them and asserted his physical might by firing his cannons. Following this display of might, Sutter slowly gained their confidence with gifts of beads, blankets, sugar, and liquor. Eventually Sutter enticed them to his fort with the promise of trade. Sutter's version of trade was not equitable. Native peoples were only allowed to buy things from his store in exchange for their labor. They were then forced to stay at the fort because of these debts. The malaria epidemic had killed so many people that the Nisenan could not organize a large-scale

[24] Hurtado, *John Sutter*, 70-71.

resistance to Sutter. He took advantage of this and used his militia to force Nisenan people in the surrounding area to work at his fort. He sent armed troops to convince headmen to send workers to him. If they refused his militias attacked.[25]

Sutter also established a ranch along the Feather River. He purposely located it next to Hok, a major Nisenan village, so that he would have an easy supply of workers. At Hock Farm he continued to force local Nisenan people to work for him. To keep them from running away, they were locked into their sleeping quarters overnight. Both Nisenan histories and white observers tell of workers being forced to eat out of troughs like livestock. If they disobeyed or refused to work for him they were whipped, jailed, or killed. Nisenan oral histories, shared with linguist Hans Jørgen Uldall in the 1930s, corroborate these stories:[26]

> Sutter gathered the chiefs of the whole country. He took (them) to Sacramento. He made them officers. They gathered the Indians. They took (them) to Sacramento. They made (them) work on the wheat. If (they) left a little bit, they whipped (them) with a big whip made of cowhide. In this way they made (them) work. The workers ate boiled beef mixed with wheat; (they) poured that meat and wheat into (something) like a hog's feeding trough. Those Indian snatched (it) from each other there, like hogs. […] In this way Sutter fed (them).[27]

<u>IV. Land Theft, Servitude, and Genocide</u>

Following the discovery of gold at Sutter's sawmill in Coloma in 1848, thousands of people from all over the world rushed into Nisenan lands. Foothill Nisenan communities, who had remained relatively isolated from the white settlers who arrived in the state in the 1830s and 1840s, faced the brunt of the Gold Rush invasion. Initially

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[25] Hurtado *Indian Survival*, 48-50.

[26] Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 60.

[27] Hans Jørgen Uldall and William Shipley, *Nisenan Texts and Dictionary*, 67.

many Nisenan people worked for or alongside white miners. As more white prospectors arrived they began to force the Nisenan miners out of the mines, either by giving them the worst jobs or through violence. Mexican and American miners who lived in California prior to the Gold Rush were used to working with or around Native peoples. New arrivals were not used to this dynamic. Racist propaganda, violent experiences with Native peoples in other parts of the United States, and exaggerated stories of Native American savagery made them fear and despise the Native Californians. Miners destroyed Nisenan villages in the gold fields and rapidly drove people off of their ancestral lands. Archaeological evidence suggests that as many as 150 Nisenan and Mountain Maidu villages in the Mother Lode region were destroyed during this period.[28]

In the Sacramento Valley, Nisenan people found themselves inundated by travelers and settlers. Ranching and farming drove the valley's people off their traditional lands. Wise to the unethical practices Sutter had used on them a decade earlier, Nisenan people in Sacramento and the Yuba/Sutter region began to demand cash payment for their work and arable land for themselves. Some also asked for higher wages than other non-white workers. In 1856 Sutter complained that the Nisenan people at Hock Farm "refused to work for less than one dollar a day."[29] John Bidwell, founder of Chico, made a similar complaint in 1869, when he reported that the Konkow people in the area wanted $1.50 per day through the harvest. As a result of these demands, many white ranchers and farmers eventually refused to hire them. More Chinese and European immigrants arrived

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[28] Hurtado *Indian Survival*, 100-103, 107-111; Johnson, *History of Us*, 133-138; Madley, *American Genocide*, 68-71, 87.

[29] Michael F Magliari, "Free State Slavery: Bound Indian Labor and Slave Trafficking in California's Sacramento Valley, 1850-1864," *Pacific Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (2012), 165.

in the 1860s and they were able to employ other workers instead. White land owners banned Nisenan people from hunting on the traditional lands now in their possession. Without steady food sources and unable make a living wage, the valley's surviving Nisenan people left for more isolated parts of the state. The 1860 census counted only 1,334 Native Californians living in the Sacramento Valley. In 1852 over 500 Nisenan people lived in Sutter County; in 1860 officials counted only ten.[30]

Following their admission to the Union in 1850, the new state of California quickly passed laws that denied basic rights to Native Americans. The 1850 Act for the Government and Protection of Indians created a legal avenue for discrimination and racial violence. Native Americans were not granted citizenship and could not vote in the new state. They could not give evidence against a white person in court, even when they had been the victim of or witness to a crime perpetrated by a white person. Any white Californian could legally force Native Californians off land owned by white people, regardless of who the land traditionally belonged to. The law prohibited the traditional practice of controlled burns and threatened fines or criminal punishment for those caught starting fires. It gave judges the power to punish Native American communities and villages for refusing to comply California's new laws, regardless of whether the laws violated traditional beliefs and practices.[31]

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[30] Hurtado *Indian Survival*, 161, 165, 180, 195-196; Michael F Magliari, "Free State Slavery," 157-158, 165-166, 191-192.

[31] Kimberly Johnston-Dodds, "Early California Law and Policies Related to California Indians," *California State Library: California Research Bureau* 2, no. 14 (2002), 1175-1180; Magliari, "Free State Slavery," 156-157.

The Act for the Government and Protection of Indians also allowed indentured servitude for Native Americans, creating a system of legal slavery. As a condition of admission to the Union, California prohibited chattel slavery but continued to allow the legal enslavement of Native Americans. Euphemistically called "apprenticing," both children and adults were bound into servitude against their will. California's white female population remained small in the first decade of statehood but the demand for cooks and domestic servants was high. Indentured Native Americans were typically women and children employed as farmhands and household servants. Children were indentured until the age of majority, initially defined as eighteen for men and fifteen for women. In 1860 the legislature amended the law and allowed for much longer terms of indentureship. Boys could be indentured until twenty-five and girls until twenty-one, young adults until thirty and twenty-four, respectively, and adults for ten years. Employers were required to feed, clothe, and house their "apprentices" but were not required to give any kind of financial compensation.[32]

The law required the consent of a parent or adult friend for a child to enter an "apprenticeship" but courts loosely enforced this provision. Raiders would attack native villages, kill the adults, and then proclaim themselves to be the children's legal guardians. In 1861, the *Marysville Appeal* condemned the practice, writing:

> … it is enough to chill the heart of man to know that these vile kidnappers in human flesh are making a regular business of killing the Indians in the mountains, or running them off, and kidnapping their children, packing them about the country, like so many sheep or

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[32] Johnston-Dodds, "Early California Law and Policies Related to California Indians," 1175, 1180-1181; Lindsay, *Murder State*, 257-258; Magliari, "Free State Slavery," 156-157, 160, 168-169.

swine to sell, at retail or wholesale.[33]

Children were typically taken far from their home villages before they were sold to prevent them from running away. Although a ranch or farm might be home to several indentured children, they were not necessarily from the same tribe or region of California. This system ripped a generation of children from their families, language, and culture and led to a collapse of traditional knowledge.[34]

Indigenous adults were also taken captive and sold into servitude as "prisoners of war" during raids on villages. Following the 1860 amendment to the law, Native Californians could be indentured for being "vagrant." Native Americans who were jobless, begging, drinking alcohol, or living an "immoral" life were all considered vagrant. Immorality was loosely defined and included prostitutes, gamblers, and those who did not adhere to European standards of living. White Californians believed these laws would "civilize" Native peoples.[35]

In the wake of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the state legislature officially abolished the indentureship system. Despite the ban, Native American slave trafficking quietly continued. The demand for workers remained high and trafficking was a lucrative business. The practice finally died out in the early 1870s. More European and Chinese immigrants arrived in the state's agricultural regions and

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[33] Lindsay, *Murder State*, 256.

[34] Johnston-Dodds, "Early California Law and Policies Related to California Indians," 1177; Lindsay, *Murder State*, 255-259; Magliari, "Free State Slavery," 172.

[35] Johnson, *History of Us,* 168;Johnston-Dodds, "Early California Law and Policies Related to California Indians," 1175-1179; Lindsay, *Murder State*, 259-261; Magliari, "Free State Slavery," 157, 180.

supplemented the workforce while the Native American population simultaneously plummeted.[36]

Although disease and starvation certainly contributed to the decline in California's indigenous population in the mid nineteenth country, state-sanctioned violence accelerated this decline to the point of near extinction by 1900. California's native population decreased by ninety percent between the 1840s and the turn of the twentieth century. There was violence between Spanish forces and the state's native peoples during the Spanish Colonial period but they generally wanted to convert the native tribes to Catholicism and use them as labor. They did not want to exterminate them. In the post Gold Rush period, however, American settlers had an insatiable desire for land and were willing to take the most extreme measures to get it. Conventional American attitudes towards indigenous peoples held that they were savage, violent, and racially inferior, making them easy targets of systematic violence. White Californians believed that the state's Native peoples should be forcibly subjugated and assimilated, or killed. In 1852 former California governor Peter H. Burnett argued that extermination was necessary, telling the state legislature: "that a war of extinction will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct, must be expected."[37] The *Marysville Daily Herald* echoed this sentiment in an 1853 editorial, writing:[38]

"Now that general Indian hostilities have commenced, we hope that the Government will render such aid as will enable the citizens of the North to carry on a war of extermination until the last red skin of these tribes has been killed. Then, and not until then, are our lives and property safe. Extermination is no longer even a question of time—the time has

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[36] Lindsay, *Murder State*, 261; Magliari 190-191.
[37] Lindsay, *Murder State*, 128.
[38] Lindsay, *Murder State*, 318-319.

already arrived, the work has been commenced, and let the first white man who says treaty or peace be regarded as a traitor and coward."[39]

The state government paid militias to violently drive Native people off their land and attack those who resisted or fought back. Native Californians were often killed to "protect" settlers and as retribution for native-on-white crimes. These crimes were usually minor offenses, such as livestock theft, that were met with much more force than the offense warranted. Mass killings occurred as "peace-keeping" measures across the state's northwest when native peoples became too bold or attacked white settlers. By refusing to prosecute white men who committed crimes against Native peoples, including rape and murder, the government sanctioned their actions. Today, most historians agree that the mass violence against Native peoples in California constitutes a state-sanctioned genocide.[40]

V. Rancherias, Reservations, and Relocation

As settlers forced Native Californians from their ancestral homes, many Native people across the state—including Nisenan people in both the valley and foothills, became homeless. Between 1851 and 1852, Native Californians and U.S. land commissioners negotiated eighteen treaties which would have created reservations in the state. The United States Senate disputed the tribes' rights to the land claimed in the treaties, however, and refused to ratify them. The Senate quietly ignored these treaties and allowed them to fall into obscurity. They explicitly disregarded the land needs of

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[39] Johnson, *History of Us*, 158-166; Lindsay, *Murder State*, 247-255, 319; Madley, *American Genocide*, 178-179.

[40] Johnson, *History of Us,* 158-159; Lindsay, *Murder State*, x-xi, 9; Madley, *American Genocide*, 87, 97-98, 178, 183.

California's native peoples and further exacerbated the diminishing land rights Native Californians held.[41]

In 1856 the Federal Government established the Nome Cult Indian Farm, later renamed the Round Valley Indian Reservation, on Yuki land in Mendocino County. The government hoped the reservation would simultaneously provide Native Californians with a permanent home and remove them from white settlements and much-desired arable land. Moving to Round Valley was not optional, however. Between 1856 and 1873 both the federal and state government removed Native Californians to Round Valley. The Yukis, who continued to live on their ancestral lands, were confronted with new arrivals from all over Northern California: Nisenan, Nomlaki, and Konkow peoples from across the Sacramento Valley and foothills; Lassik, Cahto, and Wailaki peoples from Mendocino and Trinity Counties; Pomo peoples from Sonoma, Mendocino, and Lake Counties; and Atsugewi, and Achumawi peoples from Lassen and Plumas Counties. By forcing these vastly different Native people to live together, the government aimed to weaken individual cultures and languages, eliminate traditional hunter/gatherer practices, and push a white, Christian way of life on California's Native peoples.[42]

Conditions at Round Valley were terrible. The Native peoples living there relied on allocations from the government to support themselves, rather than annuities from treaty negotiations as was common for Native Americans on reservations in other parts of

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[41] Johnson, *History of Us*, 211-212; Larisa K. Miller, "The Secret Treaties with California's Indians," *Prologue Magazine,* Fall/Winter 2013, 39.

[42] William J. Bauer Jr., *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here: Work, Community, and Memory on California's Round Valley Reservation, 1850-1941* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2, 18, 37, 56; Johnson, *History of Us*, 176-177, 181, 191.

the country. Through the 1850s and 1860s the government continually decreased its funding for Round Valley, leading to extreme deprivation. Lacking the money to buy sufficient clothing, workers became sick from exposure. The decreased workforce led to food shortages, as fewer people were able to plant, tend, and harvest crops. In 1859, a visiting army officer estimated that eight to ten Round Valley residents died per day—mostly from starvation and syphilis. In an effort to discourage communal landholding, as was traditional for Native Californians, the government created farming plots for each family. The farming plots were too small to be commercially successful, however, and were barely large enough to support a family. To support themselves, the Native people at Round Valley combined farming and traditional hunting and gathering practices. While some stayed at Round Valley and did their best to adapt to their situation, others fled the reservation.[43]

In August of 1859 many Nisenan people fled the reservation. Round Valley had a substantial population of white squatters and they often attacked the reservation's residents over minor disagreements or petty theft. Round Valley officials turned a blind eye to the violence and failed to protect the Native peoples from the squatters. Of the approximately 200 Nisenan people living at Round Valley, only twenty-five stayed. Although some dispersed into the coastal foothills and joined Native communities there, most walked home to the Sacramento Valley and Sierra foothills. From the mid-nineteenth century on, most Nisenan people lived near Nevada City, Auburn, and along isolated parts of the Sacramento River. They did not have legal rights to the land they

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[43] Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 41-43.

formed their communities on, but they were able to remain on small plots of land with relatively little intrusion from white settlers. Native Californians who didn't live on one of the state's federally-recognized reservations had no legal rights or protection from the state or federal government. The federal government continually underestimated the state's Native population in censuses and denied the existence of non-reservation communities.[44]

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Northern California Indian Association, a charitable organization that wanted to educate and civilize Native Californians, learned about the unratified 1851-1852 treaties from Native elders. They began pressuring the Senate to recognize Native American land rights in the state and provide non-reservation tribes with land ownership, as laid out in the treaties. In 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt signed a bill allowing a survey of California to determine how many tribes were homeless and living off of reservations. Between 1906 and 1910, Congress appropriated money to purchase land for homeless Native Californians. These parcels, called rancherias, allowed tribes across California to receive federal recognition and permanent homes for the first time since the 1850s. Presidential Executive Orders specified that these lands were reservations for community use. The federal government recognized 51 self-governing rancherias in California, including two Nisenan tribes—the Nevada City Rancheria in 1913 and the Auburn Rancheria in 1917. The government created a combined community for Nisenan and Miwok peoples living along the

[44] Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 44; Johnson, *History of Us*, 191-192.

Sacramento River. It purchased land for them near Shingle Springs, creating the Shingle Springs Rancheria in 1920.[45]

VI. Termination

Beginning in 1944, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) began proposing that Congress eliminate California's rancheria system. Popular sentiment supported the assimilation of Native Americans into white society. The reservation and rancheria system were seen as a hindrance to assimilation, as it was believed that they kept Native Americans separate from other Americans. Congress also wanted to eliminate the services provided to Native Americans on rancherias and reservations, both as a cost cutting measure and to reduce their reliance on the government. Congress terminated more than one hundred tribes across the United States, impacting more than 12,000 Native Americans. A large portion of these terminated tribes were in California; the California Rancheria Termination Act of 1958 slated forty-one rancherias for termination. Both the Auburn Rancheria and the Nevada City Rancheria were among the forty-six tribes that were terminated over the next decade. Shingle Springs was not terminated as they did not have federally approved articles of association until 1976. Without the support of tribal governments or lands or federal support for financial and health services, many Native Californians moved to cities and urban areas. By 1980, fewer than twenty percent of Native Californians lived on reservations or rancherias.[46]

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[45] Johnson, *History of Us*, 197-199; Miller, "The Secret Treaties with California's Indians," 40-45; Shingle Springs Rancheria, "A Brief History of the Tribe," accessed October 13, 2019; "The Restoration Act," United Auburn Indian Community, accessed October 13, 2019.

[46] Johnson, *History of Us*, 197-199, 216-217, 226-232; "A Brief History of the Tribe," Shingle Springs Rancheria.

Although some federal officials, including President Lyndon Johnson, opposed termination, the government continued to terminate tribes into the late 1960s—UAIC was not officially terminated until 1967. Tribes across the country filed lawsuits to regain their federal status. Reversing termination and instituting self-determination policies—the rights of Native Americans to govern themselves and have autonomy over federal policies affecting them—were major focuses of the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1970, President Richard Nixon publicly denounced termination and spoke in favor of self-determination. In 1973 the Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin successfully challenged their tribe's termination and became the first tribe to have their federal status reinstated. Rancherias in California began regaining federal status in the late 1970s and a 1983 class-action law case regained recognition for seventeen rancherias. UAIC successfully reversed their termination in 1994. Five California tribes are still fighting for restoration, including the Nevada City Rancheria.[47]

VII. Today

Six decades after termination policy began, there are now 109 federally recognized tribes in California and nearly one hundred different rancherias and reservations. Despite the violence of the nineteenth century and the political upheaval of the late twentieth century, Nisenan people continue to live in their traditional homelands and are proudly reclaiming and revitalizing their culture and heritage. Pan-Indian organizations across California organize Big Times, Pow Wows, and cultural events

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[47] Johnson, *History of Us*, 216-217, 226-232; "Our History," United Auburn Indian Community, accessed October 13, 2019.

where they perform dances and ceremonies, demonstrate and sell traditional arts and crafts, and celebrate their heritage. Traditionalists and Native educators are committed to teaching their communities' children and sharing accurate information their cultures with the broader public. Although the Nisenan language remains critically endangered, children and adults can once again learn it at classes taught by UAIC, the Nevada City Rancheria, and the Shingle Springs Rancheria. Language educator and artist Alan Wallace even created a Nisenan-language rock opera, "Something Inside is Broken," which has toured around the Sacramento area and in neighboring states.[48]

In California, representation continues to be an issue for Native peoples. The Nevada City Rancheria took the United States government to court in 2014 to sue for reinstatement of their federal status. The judge found in favor of the government and denied their claim. Despite this, the Nevada City Rancheria is still working to find another legal avenue to federal status. They host a number of fundraising and visibility-raising events in the Nevada City-Grass Valley area, including an annual Nisenan Heritage Day. There are two other Sacramento-area tribes of Nisenan people who have never had federal recognition—the Colfax Rancheria and the Strawberry Rancheria. These two tribes continue to petition for legal status.[49]

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[48] Pat Dean, conversation with author, May 1, 2019; Stephen Magagnini, "American Indian rock opera shines unflattering light on Sacramento pioneer John Sutter," *Sacramento Bee*, May 11, 2016; "Youth Education," Shingle Springs Rancheria. accessed October 13, 2019.

[49] Johnson, *History of Us*, 295-301.

CHAPTER 3

NATIVE AMERICANS AND MUSEUMS

Museums can be difficult and painful spaces for Native Americans. To many Native peoples they are synonymous with institutionalized racism and colonialism. Museums continue to rely on outdated exhibits that portray Native Americans as solely historic cultures, giving the impression that Native peoples are extinct. Institutions across the country house objects that were stolen or unethically collected by archaeologists and anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Native communities and museums are still working to repatriate the nation's vast collections of Native American human remains. In the wake of the Self-Determination movement of the 1960s and 70s, museums have been working to rectify decades of poor relationships and discrimination. Today, museums focus on sharing authority and decolonizing their exhibits. Sovereign tribes operate their own museums and cultural centers, taking the public interpretation of their history into their own hands. This chapter will examine relationships between museums and Native Americans, both historic and current.

I. Historic Methods of Interpreting Native American Culture

The first museums were private collections of "curiosities." Wealthy Europeans and Americans displayed foreign and exotic items in their homes for guests. Thomas Jefferson had a small museum at his home, Monticello, where he displayed maps, paintings, and sculptures. He also had an "Indian Hall" to display Native American objects—many of which were collected for him on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In Europe, collections began to be opened for public viewing in the eighteenth century.

These early public museums focused on improving and perfecting human existence by displaying natural wonders as well as important artistic and scientific works. They committed themselves to researching and collecting artifacts. Countries used museums to build national identity as they expanded their colonial boundaries. They highlighted the differences between the home country and colonized lands and peoples, emphasizing national superiority and the need for a paternalistic state. Early American museums mirrored European institutions. Collectors and curators were particularly interested in Native American artifacts and used them to promote colonial agendas. In the late nineteenth century, American museums grew rapidly and became more formalized. In this same period, anthropology emerged as a distinct discipline. Anthropologists encouraged studying other peoples through analysis of material culture and museums began collecting culturally significant objects with ferocity.[50]

Native American lifestyles were rapidly changing at the turn of the twentieth century as tribes faced population decline, relocation, and land theft. The federal government aimed to assimilate Native peoples into mainstream American society by eliminating traditional lifestyles and cultural practices. Government-run boarding schools punished Native American children for speaking their native languages and forced them into American modes of dress and appearance. The 1883 Code of Indian Offenses

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[50] Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 8-11; Raney Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture At Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xi; Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 86; Joshua M. Gorman, *Building a Nation: Chickasaw Museums and the Construction of History and Heritage* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2011), accessed November 5, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, 31-32.

banned traditional religious practices, including dances and feasts, and arrested those caught practicing. The 1887 Dawes Act forced Native American families onto individual allotments, disallowing traditional, communal land stewardship. An estimated 600,000 Native peoples lived within the modern borders of the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century; only about 250,000 remained at the turn of the twentieth century. Anthropologists believed that Native American were going "extinct" and they wanted to document and collect as many items as they could before cultures disappeared. The director of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology hired researchers to specifically to document vanishing Native American tribes, with their main goal being the collection of material artifacts.[51]

Collectors and researchers used any means necessary to secure items. Although they collected artifacts under the guise of scientific curiosity, some collectors became obsessed with finding the best and most museum-worthy examples of artifacts. They tricked people into giving away artifacts and coerced impoverished Native Americans into selling invaluable spiritual items. Some researchers simply stole items when they couldn't convince someone to give or sell it to them. George Dorsey, the first anthropology Ph.D. from Harvard University and a curator at Chicago's Field Museum, told one of his assistants:

> When you go into an Indian's house and you do not find the old man at home and there is something you want, you can do one of three things: go hunt up the old man and keep hunting until you find him; give the old woman such price for it as she may ask for

[51] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 23; Duane H. King, "Exhibiting Culture: American Indians and Museums," *Tulsa Law Review* 45, no. 25 (2013), 25-27; Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in Nation and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 10-11.

it running the risk that the old man will be offended; or steal it. I tried all three plans and I have no choice to recommend.[52]

Collecting Native American artifacts became a hobby for private collectors as well. Some privately held items later made their way to museums, others were sold to souvenir shops.[53]

Archaeologists and anthropologists also claimed artifacts and human remains from Native American graves. Fashionable theories of racial hierarchies, eugenics, and craniology encouraged grave robbing. Craniologists believed that measuring skulls allowed them to determine the personality and intelligence of the deceased and to predict the behavior of different racial groups. The Army Medical Museum housed an entire craniological collection, formed in 1867 with an inaugural 143 Native American "specimens." These skulls were later transferred to the anthropology department at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. In 1868 the U.S. Surgeon General, General Madison Mills, ordered military personnel to "aid in the progress of anthropological science by obtaining measurements of a large number of skulls of the aboriginal races of North America."[54] Soldiers and surgeons scavenged Native American human remains from battlefields to bring back to the museum, sometimes waiting until nightfall to avoid conflict with Native peoples. They also gathered remains as trophies from sites of anti-Native American violence, such as the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado. As late as the 1950s tourist shops sold scalps and parts of Native American skeletons as souvenirs.[55]

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[52] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 23.

[53] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 100; King, "Exhibiting Culture," 25-27.

[54] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 85.

[55] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 86, 203; Moira G. Simpson, "A Grave Dilemma: Native Americans and Museums in the USA," *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 6 (October 1994), 27.

Early twentieth century archaeologists believed that Native American bones were like any other artifact. They did not see themselves as grave robbers or desecrators of the dead, rather they believed that they were obtaining invaluable objects for researching and understanding American peoples. Franz Boas, considered to be the Father of American anthropology, reflected on his grave digging, "it is most unpleasant work to steal bones from a grave, but what is the use, someone has to do it."[56] Significant anti-Native American racism and the belief that Native peoples were representative of a more primitive time allowed scientists and scholars to proceed without legal or moral interference. Researchers unearthed ancient graves as well, excavating burial sites and mounds across the country. Some excavations were open to the public, allowing them to view the exposed human remains in situ.[57]

Early museum exhibits about Native Americans presented their cultures as primitive and uncivilized. These displays usually appeared in natural history museums, rather than historical institutions, often alongside taxidermied animal scenes and dinosaur skeletons. Native peoples were presented as parts of nature and corresponding artifacts were classified by their origin, evolutionary status, and similarity to other objects. Exhibits grouped tribes together by regions, presenting them as uniform peoples despite historical, cultural, and linguistic differences. Native American artifacts were not considered refined enough to be included in art museums. Dioramas of Native American life, showing village and hunting scenes, became a popular way to contextualize objects.

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[56] Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums,* 13.
[57] Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 12-14.

These exhibits emphasized the notions that Native Americans were in the process of extinction. Dioramas focused on single, unchanging points in time and presented Native peoples in solely historic terms. Locating these exhibits next to examples of extinct animals further presented Native life as primitive, unchanging, and incompatible with the modern world. In the 1950s the National Museum of Natural History redesigned their Native American exhibits and separated them from the galleries of extinct animals but still portrayed them as part of the natural world. It would not update its exhibits again until the 1980s. Similarly, the Field Museum continued to display exhibits from the 1892 Columbian Exposition until the early twenty-first century.[58]

Some anthropologists worked with Native American informants to better understand objects and lifestyles, although their conclusions based on these conversations tended to be colored by colonialist attitudes and racial bias. Others believed that incorporating living Native peoples into their research negated scientific impartiality. They argued that they could learn more about Native cultures through observation as they would not be subject to biases on the part of the informant. Museums frequently left indigenous communities out of conversations about their culture, instead allowing white outsiders to make interpretive assumptions about a community's history, values, and material culture.[59]

In some instances, museums placed living Native peoples on display. Admiral Robert Peary brought six Greenlandic Inuit people to the United States as human

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[58] Joshua M. Gorman, 24-25; King, "Exhibiting Culture," 26-27; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 14-16.

[59] Bench, *Interpreting Native American History*, xi-xii.

exhibits. Upon arrival he displayed them on his ship, dressed in traditional parkas in the New York summer heat, and then at the American Museum of Natural History. Their "home" at the museum allowed visitors to look down into their living quarters. Peary promised them that they would be able to return to Greenland—all but two died of tuberculosis in New York. The museum dissected their bodies and kept their remains on display, finally sending them home them to Greenland in the 1990s. One of the survivors returned to Greenland, the other, a child, was rehomed with the museum's chief curator as an assimilation experiment. In California, Ishi, the last of the Yahi tribe, lived out the remainder of his life in an apartment at the U.C. Berkeley Museum of Anthropology (now the Phoebe Hearst Museum). Anthropologists studied Ishi and used his knowledge to document Yahi culture. Despite Ishi's wishes, doctors at the University of California medical school performed an autopsy on him after he died in 1916. They cremated Ishi's body but sent his preserved brain to the Smithsonian, where it sat on a shelf in a jar of formaldehyde until being repatriated in 2000.[60]

II. Changing the Legal and Political Landscape

Slowly, over the course of the twentieth century, Congress enacted laws to protect and repatriate Native American human remains and artifacts. Initial legislation focused on protecting natural wonders and archaeological sites. In the last years of the nineteenth century Americans became increasingly concerned that historic and cultural resources would be irreparably damaged or totally destroyed by looting and improper excavations. In 1906 President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Antiquities Act into law, creating

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[60] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 5; King, "Exhibiting Culture," 26-27.

federal protections for natural landmarks and historic sites. The law allows presidents to protect sites by creating national monuments. It also created a permitting process for archeological digs and legal punishments for looters. Although the Antiquities Act aimed to protect indigenous heritage sites, it did not allow Native Americans any authority over their artifacts or human remains. It did not recognize tribal interests in preserving and protecting their own cultural resources. All responsibility for cultural resource protection fell on anthropologists and archaeologists, allowing cultural objects and remains to become property of the Federal Government.[61]

Museum and collection management practices became a focus for the American Indian Self-Determination Movement in the 1960s. They viewed museums as tools of continuing colonial oppression. Although Native peoples had objected to grave digging for nearly a century, their protests became more frequent and more organized. In the last half of the twentieth century, activists successfully challenged many aspects of museum curation. They staged sit-ins to protest offensive and stereotypical representations of Native cultures in museum exhibits. They interrupted archeological digs to demand respect for their ancestors' remains. They encouraged more Native Americans to enter museum professions, promoting change from inside institutions. Requests to repatriate sacred items, funerary objects, and human remains became a major issue for both Native peoples and museums. Several tribes had made repatriation requests throughout the preceding century but very few succeeded in having objects returned. In 1937 the

[61] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 212; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 14; "American Antiquities Act of 1906," National Park Service, accessed April 28, 2019, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/legal/american-antiquities-act-of-1906.htm.

Hidatsa of North Dakota successfully campaigned for the Museum of the American Indian (New York) to return a sacred bundle, although the agreement required that they give up other objects in return. In 1971 Onondaga Iroquois protests led to the passage of the "Wampum Bill," which required the state of New York to return eleven stolen wampum belts. Wampum belts hold both religious and historical significance as the patterns on the belts constitute the only written history of the Onondaga. New York agreed to repatriate the belts on the condition that the Iroquois build a museum to house them on the Onondaga Reservation.[62]

The repatriation landscape changed in 1978 when the people of the Zuni Pueblo of New Mexico asked the Denver Art Museum to return three stolen War Gods, or Ahayu:da. Ahayu:da are the wooden forms of spiritual protectors that guard the Zuni people. While meeting with the Denver Art Museum, the Zuni learned of other Ahayu:da in museum collections all over the country. They made a high profile appeal to the Smithsonian to return the Ahayu:da housed there. The Zuni argued that War Gods are communal property, and thus cannot be legally sold or traded without permission of all tribal members. The Smithsonian agreed to review thousands of Zuni objects in its collection although it did not return any War Gods until 1987. The FBI offered to confiscate all Ahayu:da held in museums, but the Zuni preferred to work personally with collecting institutions. Despite the positive reception the Smithsonian gave to the Zuni's repatriation requests, the Denver Art Museum initially refused to return the three

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[62] Blair, Bowen. "Indian Rights: Native Americans versus American Museums: A Battle for Artifacts." *American Indian Law Review* 7, no. 1 (1979), 125-126; Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 35, 76; "The Sacred Bundle," *The New York Times*, December 8, 1937, accessed April 29, 2019.

Ahayu:da. They believed that they were doing the right thing by preserving Zuni objects. They also believed that starting the repatriation process could create a precedent that would empty their collection. Public sentiment tended to support the Zuni's claims, however. Under intense public scrutiny, the Denver Art Museum returned their three War Gods in 1980 after the Zuni arranged to place them in a high security holy place. By 1991 sixty-five Ahayu:da had returned to the Zuni Pueblo.[63]

Despite the success of the Zunis' efforts, museums continued to disagree with them about the War Gods' care. Curators objected to the Zuni placing the Ahayu:da in an exposed outdoor shrine, rather than in a museum at the pueblo. The Zuni believe that "putting a War God under glass is not preserving culture," rather, "the way you preserve Zuni culture is by using the War Gods in the ritual for which they were created."[64] The Zuni create religious objects with the intention that they will decay and return to the earth. Returning the Ahayu:da to an outdoor home allowed this process to begin again. Curators felt that this ignored decades of meticulous conservation work and care. Conflicts over the care and preservation of Native American objects impacted museums and tribes across the United States.[65]

Native American activists fought similar battles for the repatriation of human remains. Legal challenges gained momentum in the 1980s. In 1986, a delegation of Northern Cheyenne people visiting the National Museum of Natural History learned that the Smithsonian's collections held 18,500 Native American human remains. The

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[63] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 20-22, 35-41; Simpson, "A Grave Dilemma," 28.
[64] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 48.
[65] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 18; Simpson, "A Grave Dilemma," 29.

Northern Cheyenne immediately contacted their senator, John Melcher. In response, Melcher drafted and introduced the Bridge of Respect Act, which would have created a commission to mediate disputes between museums and Native Americans. Although the bill did not become law, it did spark a Congressional debate about human remains, sacred objects, and repatriation. Walter Echo-Hawk, a Native American rights attorney, represented tribes across the country in the fight for repatriation legislation between 1986 and 1990. In an impassioned interview with *People* in 1989, Echo-Hawk explained, "if you desecrate a white grave, you wind up sitting in prison. But desecrate an Indian grave, and you get a Ph.D. The time has come for people to decide: Are we Indians part of this country's living culture, or are we just here to supply museums with dead bodies?"[66] In the last half of the 1980s museum professionals and politicians slowly came to see repatriation as a human rights issue.[67]

In 1988 the National Association of Museums began encouraging its members to find collaborative solutions to repatriation requests. Not all museums embraced the shifting landscape, however. Many met the prospect of repatriation with hostility; like the curators at the Denver Museum they worried they might lose their entire Native American collections. Physical anthropologists did not want to lose remains that could hold scientific value. Some museum professionals objected to and were offended by the idea that they had mistreated Native American objects and remains. Although some

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[66] Montgomery Brower and Conan Putnam, "Walter Echo-Hawk Fights for His People's Right to Rest in Peace—Not in Museums," *People*, September 4, 1989, accessed May 2, 2019, https://people.com/archive/walter-echo-hawk-fights-for-his-peoples-right-to-rest-in-peace-not-in-museums-vol-32-no-10.

[67] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 75; Joshua M. Gorman, *Building a Nation*, 36.

tribes established museums to house returned objects, many others put the items back to use or returned them to their disturbed locations. In the museum world, many feared that items might be poorly cared for or destroyed as a part of the repatriation process.[68]

Four years and sixteen drafts after Melcher brought his initial bill to Congress, repatriation became American law with the passage of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The law gives Native American lineal descendants, tribes, and Native Hawaiian groups rights over the "the treatment, repatriation, and disposition of Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony … with which they can show a relationship of lineal descent or cultural affiliation."[69] Federal agencies and museums receiving federal funding must, "consult with Indian Tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations to attempt to reach agreements on the repatriation or other disposition of these remains and objects. … Disposition may take many forms from reburial to long term curation."[70] It also requires archaeologists to consult with tribes and Native Hawaiian groups if archaeological digs encounter Native American cultural items on federal or tribal lands. NAGPRA recognizes historic discrimination and disregard for Native American religious beliefs, burial practices, and cultural autonomy. It brought about a major shift in the relationship between the United State government, museums, and Indigenous

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[68] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 109-110; Joshua M. Gorman, *Building a Nation*, 36.

[69] Francis P. McManamon, "The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)," reproduced online for the N.P.S. from Linda Ellis, *Archaeological Method and Theory: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 2000), accessed May 5, 2019, https://www.nps.gov/archeology/tools/laws/nagpra.htm.

[70] Ibid.

communities as collaboration and communication became commonplace. Native peoples felt that museums were finally required to seriously consider their assumed authority over cultural items and remains.[71]

As museums learned about objects in their collections, many softened their initial attitudes and became more willing to return items to requesting tribes. Collections inventories showed that many human remains held in museums were brought in with so little documentation that they had very minimal scientific value. Museums appreciated the opportunity to deaccession objects and make space for more relevant and scientifically useful collections. Despite the positive changes it has brought, gaps in NAGPRA have created challenges and major disputes. 650 museums and federal collections repositories in the United States hold Native American human remains, but only an estimated twenty-seven percent have been culturally affiliated with living tribes. Congress chose not include provisions in NAGPRA for unidentifiable and unaffiliated remains. Cultural affiliation under NAGPRA could only be proven for remains connected to present day tribes or groups. The remains of historic or prehistoric groups with no affiliated living descendants did not immediately qualify for repatriation under NAGPRA, even if a group made a claim for them. Native American advocates argued that "unaffiliated" remains do not exist—they believe that all lives are related and that they have ancestral ties to even the most ancient of remains. Archaeologists in turn argued that ancient remains, such as the 9,000-year-old Kennewick Man (also called the

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[71] Joshua M. Gorman, *Building a Nation*, 36; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 18; Simpson, "A Grave Dilemma," 29.

Ancient One) discovered in Washington in 1996, were too old to be considered Native American. They firmly refused reburial requests for the Kennewick Man and maintained that he could not be culturally affiliated, despite genetic testing that proved relation to the Colville people of Washington. In response to conflicts like those surrounding the Kennewick Man, 2010 Congress added an amendment to NAGPRA, outlining processes for repatriating unaffiliated remains. The amendment requires museums to consult with tribes on unaffiliated remains and allows for them to be returned, even if their affiliation is scientifically underdetermined.[72]

III. Current Relationships and Curatorial Practices

Cementing repatriation in American law opened the door for more Native American participation in museums. Through the repatriation process, museums and Native peoples built relationships and developed trust. Working partnerships between museums and Native Americans became commonplace following successful co-curating at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). In 1989 President George H.W. Bush signed an act creating the NMAI as the Smithsonian Institution's sixteenth museum. The museum would have three campuses: the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, a new and specially created storage facility in Maryland, and a museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The Heye Center opened in 1994. The National Mall museum officially opened to the public in 2004.[73]

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[72] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 200-203, 218-220, 253-258.
[73] Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 75.

The Smithsonian understood that curating Native American history without the involvement of Native communities was no longer an option. As a result, the Smithsonian appointed W. Richard West, Jr., a Southern Cheyenne lawyer, as the museum's founding director. West committed the museum to collaborating with Indigenous peoples in early policy statements; its founding mission was to, "affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary culture and cultural achievements of the Natives of the Western Hemisphere by advancing, in consultations, collaboration and cooperation with them, a knowledge and understanding of their cultures."[74] Both the Heye Center and the NMAI worked closely with numerous sovereign tribes while they developed the museums and their exhibits. Native voices were included in all aspects of the project, from content, to architecture, to landscaping. A group of Native elders chose the museum's location on the mall through prayer and discussion; a red stone on the floor of the museum marks the place the elders chose. The NMAI co-curated its three permanent exhibits with twenty-four different tribal nations from across the United States. While there have been criticisms of some curatorial choices—a common complaint is that there is an emphasis on survival but relatively little discussion of the colonialism they had to survive—the museum has generally been applauded for its commitment to including numerous and diverse Native voices and opinions.[75]

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[74] Kristine Ronan, "Native Empowerment, the New Museology, and the National Museum of the American Indian," *Museum & Society*, no. 12 (July 2014), 133.

[75] Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 220; Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI," *The American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3&4 (Summer /Fall 2006), 634-636; Ronan, "Native Empowerment," 133-135.

At the time of the museum's founding, collaboration with Native American advisory boards was not unheard of—the Boston Children's Museum had worked with one since 1973. The Smithsonian is the most visible American institution to co-curate with Indigenous groups, however. The scale of its collaboration, both in terms of the size of the museum and the number of tribal partners, remains unparalleled. As the United States' most prominent institution, it inspired other museums across the country, both large and small, to work with Indigenous co-curators and advisors. Shared authority—the process of inviting non-professionals to participate in the curatorial process—has become common practice for curating exhibits on Native American art, history, and culture. When working with Indigenous communities, "the role of the professional museum curator or staff member is defined as that of a facilitator who puts his or her disciplinary and museological expertise at the service of community members so that their messages can be disseminated as clearly and as effectively as possible."[76] When co-curating with Native American groups, the partnered community is typically allowed final say in content and text; the museum acts as a space for Native people to share and display their own values and history rather than as the intellectual authority. When sharing authority, curators also defer to traditional methods of artifact care, preservation, and handling. They respect that some objects are understood to be living entities and their proper care requires that they be touched and used for their intended purpose.

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[76] Ruth B. Phillips, "Introduction," in *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, eds., (London: Routledge, 2003), 163.

Curators work with tribal partners to avoid displaying sensitive objects or those deemed inappropriate for public viewing.[77]

Sovereign tribes have also opened their own museums and cultural centers. Tribal museums tend to emphasize the present and future; whereas twentieth century American museums portrayed Native peoples in purely historical terms, present-day tribal museums seek to remind viewers of their continued existence. They display contemporary art and cultural items while discussing history and traditional life. Tribal museums serve their communities by offering courses and workshops on traditional arts and languages and opening themselves up as spaces for music, dancing, and storytelling. They encourage pride in Native culture and identity and emphasize the education of their own people. Like the NMAI, tribal museums have been criticized for glossing over difficult topics, including the long-term impacts of colonialism.[78]

As more museums become comfortable working and sharing authority with tribal partners, curators and activists have begun pushing for museums to expand their commitment to inclusive history by decolonizing themselves. Decolonized museums and exhibits do not shy away from the difficult, disturbing, and upsetting parts of Native American and colonial history. They challenge the legitimacy of colonialism and open themselves to conversations about its ongoing effects. Both tribal and non-tribal museums can better contextualize their discussion of Indigenous survival and modernity by fully explaining what Native peoples survived and overcame. Although such

[77] Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 22; Phillips, "Introduction," in *Museums and Source Communities*, 163; Simpson "A Grave Dilemma," 32-34.

[78] Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, xii; Gorman, *Building a Nation*, 37-38; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 19-21.

discussions can be painful, proponents of decolonization argue that the process helps to heal inherited traumas and community grief. Unresolved historical grief contributes to high rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide in Native American communities. Museums can atone for their role in Native American oppression by confronting colonial legacies and offering themselves as a place of community building, healing, and reconciliation.[79]

[79] Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, xiii, 72-74; Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, "We Must Decolonize Our Museums," (video of lecture at TEDxDirigo), December 6, 2016, accessed January 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyZAgG8--Xg; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 119-120, 123-124, 169-175.

CHAPTER 4

CREATING AN EXHIBIT

This chapter discusses the process of curating *The Nisenan: A History of the Sacramento Valley*. It covers my inspiration for the project and my prior curatorial experiences. It also discusses the use of shared authority and principles of decolonization as attempted and practiced in the curation process at the Sutter County Museum. Finally, it covers the creation of the text panels and the installation of the exhibit.

I. Exhibit Inspiration

One of my main goals for this exhibit was to utilize both shared authority and decolonizing frameworks. These two curatorial models are considered best practice. I modeled my exhibit and curation process on other, successful Native American history exhibits. Some of these were first-hand examples, while others I discovered during my thesis research and coursework at Sacramento State. These examples include the Chicago History Museum (Chicago, IL), the Maidu Museum and Historic Site (Roseville, CA), and the Sutter County Museum, and the Abbe Museum (Bar Harbor, ME).[80]

Although shared authority is currently the considered best practice when curating exhibits on Native American, shared authority is not exclusive to Native American museums and exhibits. The Chicago History Museum (formerly known as the Chicago Historical Society) has greatly improved its community involvement and relationships by adopting shared authority as one of its philosophies. This museum provided me with a

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[80] Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture At Museums and Historic Sites*, 41; Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 2.

useful example of both good and bad shared authority practice. Founded in 1856, the Chicago Historical Society originally focused on preserving the patriotic history of Chicago. The museum sought to modernize its image in the 1980s and began a major overhaul of its exhibits. The most revolutionary of these exhibits, *Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture*, experimented with intellectual authority. It gave its constituents' as much input in the exhibit as trained museum professionals. *Neighborhoods* interpreted life in four Chicago suburbs. Museum staff worked with each neighborhood to create advisory committees. They attempted to pair the communities with employees of corresponding cultural and religious backgrounds. Unfortunately, the museum's optimistic intentions caused it to cast its net too wide. *Neighborhoods* was simultaneously criticized for being too inclusive and yet not inclusive enough. The museum failed to form relationships in immigrant communities due to language barriers. Some members of the neighborhood advisory committees felt silenced by more vocal neighbors and did not feel that the exhibit accurately represented them. It avoided difficult conversations about racism, drugs, prostitution, and violence in favor of nostalgic history. Ultimately, the exhibit suffered from a lack of proper curatorial oversight; critics complained that the final exhibit placed an overwhelming emphasis on multiculturalism but lacked historical analysis as to of why and how the neighborhoods became diverse.[81]

The Chicago History Museum worked to improve its shared authority practice in the decade after *Neighborhoods* went up. A 2001 temporary exhibit, *Out of the Loop:*

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[81] Catherine M. Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History: The Chicago Historical Society and the Transformation of an American Museum* (DeKalb, IL: Norther Illinois University Press, 2005), 11-13, 27, 32, 104-8.

Neighborhood Voices, used shared authority to tell the story of Chicago since World War II. It demonstrated commitment to diverse voices by using multiple perspectives from each community. Unlike *Neighborhoods,* it engaged with controversial social topics and demonstrated the interconnectedness of each community's history. The Chicago History Museum's experiments with shared authority demonstrated that it is possible to create fully collaborative exhibits. Through the failure of *Neighborhoods* and the success of *Out of the Loop*, the museum learned that curatorial authority can indeed be shared but that oversight from experts is necessary to create high quality, professional exhibits.[82]

In the Sacramento region, the Maidu Museum and Historic Site provides a practical and tangible example of shared authority in action. The museum is located on the site of an ancient Nisenan village in Roseville. I worked there as an intern from February to May of 2018. Archaeological evidence suggests that Native Californians lived at the current site of the museum for at least 3,000 years. It is home to numerous bedrock mortar holes, petroglyphs, and rock art and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. An interpretive center opened at the site in 2001. In 2010 the interpretive center moved into a new building—a roundhouse, specifically designed to house the museum. The local Native American community was very involved in the planning process for the roundhouse and helped make decisions about the architecture, exhibits, interpretive panels, trail signs, and collections. The permanent exhibits discuss traditional Nisenan society, diet, medicine, games, weaponry, and basket weaving. They also discuss trade, language, nineteenth century removal policies, and present-day Native

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[82] Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 118-120.

Californians. The verbiage of the text panels and the script for the tours was created with and approved by tribal partners. After completion, the Native community continued to be involved in museum events and temporary exhibits and as docents at the site. In July of 2018, the city of Roseville's budgetary constraints forced the museum to reduce staffing and undergo a partial closure. The museum no longer has a curator and is only open to the public on Saturdays. As such, it is not able to have temporary exhibits or community events.[83]

Prior to its partial closure, the museum's temporary galleries primarily displayed contemporary Native American art. Although the museum prioritized Nisenan and Native Californian artists, Native American artists from all over the country were welcome to display their art. Sigrid Benson, former curator, encouraged the artists to be as involved as possible in the installation of their exhibits. During my internship I worked under Benson and was able to actively participate in the collaborative curatorial process there. She carefully listened to and honored Native Californian-specific requirements, such as object handling restrictions and requests to include certain plants in the display cases as natural insecticides. During my time at the museum, I found Benson's shared authority practice to be simple and easy to follow—listening to and respecting the cultural knowledge and values of those she worked with was her main priority. Benson did not present herself as the museum authority, but as a partner and an advocate for artists and traditionalists.

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[83] Sigrid Benson, conversations with author, February-May, 2018; Megan Wood, "Museum Brings Maidu History to Life," *Gold Country Media*, March 2, 2010.

I also found shared authority inspiration at the Sutter County Museum. The Sutter County Museum has used principles of shared authority in several exhibits, although I was not involved in the curation process of any of them. Its Multicultural Wing, installed in segments over the last decade, features a series of permanent exhibits that explore the diverse cultural make-up of Sutter County. It includes exhibits on Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Hmong-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Punjabi-Americans in the Yuba-Sutter Region. These exhibits were curated with the assistance and involvement of members of each community. Since then, these communities, particularly the Punjabi community, have been more involved with the museum and have aided in positive publicity. While interning at the museum and working on the Nisenan exhibit, I found the multicultural wing to be a good source of inspiration for the type of community involvement shared authority can create for institutions of all sizes.[84]

The process of decolonizing a museum goes hand-in-hand with shared authority—museums cannot decolonize without allowing colonized groups to determine their own interpretive narrative. Such institutions do not avoid painful or difficult parts of history, rather they discuss them openly in order to promote healing for colonized peoples. Indigenous museums scholar Amy Lonetree argues that though service to Native Americans should be the primary goal of decolonization, neither the United States nor Indigenous groups have fully grappled with the legacy of colonialism and decolonized exhibits can help both move forward and form better relationships. Historian and anti-

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[84] Jessica Hougen, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2019; *Marysville Appeal Democrat*, "Multicultural wing at museum nears completion," January 20, 2016.

colonial scholar Winona Wheeler writes, "[d]ecolonization is about empowerment—a belief that situations can be transformed […] and a willingness to make change. It is about transforming negative reactionary energy into the more positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities."[85] I believe exhibits that discuss genocide, enslavement, and colonialism aid both the Native community and museum goers by interpreting historical wrongs in a format that is comfortable to the broader community. Most Americans trust museums to tell accurate history, making them an excellent space to begin decolonizing narrative. A groundbreaking 1994 study, organized by historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, found that Americans believe museums are the most trustworthy source of historical information—more so than teachers, professors, or books. Given the high level of historical authority museums are believed to hold, they are a safe space to challenge the traditional, sanitized version of western settlement history. It is my hope that my thesis exhibit will inspire non-Native visitors to reflect more deeply on California's history. The lack of critical education about Native California in both museums and schools is a detriment to the state's Native communities and illustrates the State of California's reticence to grapple with its historical crimes. Although the Sutter County Museum is just one small museum, I believe that any attempt to start a decolonizing conversation is valuable and beneficial.[86]

[85] As quoted in Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 9.

[86] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 21-22; Clifford E. Trafzer and Michelle Lorimer, "Silencing California Indian Genocide in Social Studies Texts," *American Behavioral Scientist* 58, no. 1 (2014), 67.

Although I had experienced shared authority at several museums prior to working on this exhibit, I had not worked at or visited any decolonized museums. While the Maidu Museum certainly championed shared authority prior to its partial closure, it was not necessarily decolonized. Its permanent exhibits discuss Native American boarding schools and forced relocation, but do not address state-sanctioned violence. It does not include any references to genocide, enslavement, or intendureship. Unfortunately, I do not know if this was the Native community's decision, or the decision of the curator at the time. Since I did not have in-person experience to guide this aspect of my project, my inspiration came from examples discussed in scholarly works. I used the activism of Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, a nationally-recognized decolonizer, to form an image of what decolonizing would look like for me. Former director of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine, Catlin-Legutko worked with local Wabanaki people to transform the museum into a Native American-focused institution and undo the harm of anthropology's colonizing origins. She prioritized Wabanaki voices and perspectives and allowed the full measure of their story to be told—including painful truths both past and present. [87]

Based on these examples of shared authority and decolonization, I determined that myself and the museum needed to primarily offer ourselves as a place of conversation and equality. Director Hougen and I did not want to present ourselves as the experts; rather, we wanted to create an equal partnership with our tribal advisory committee, each using our knowledge and experience to create a mutually beneficial and successful exhibit. Although decolonization has been criticized as "revisionist," I believe that it is

[87] Catlin-Legutko, "We Must Decolonize Our Museums."

quite the opposite—rather than "revising" the historical narrative, curators are instead opening their institutions to more inclusive and thorough understandings of history. By welcoming an exhibit that uses a decolonizing approach, the museum is allowing itself to become a welcoming space for formerly colonized and oppressed peoples.

II. Working with Tribal Partners: Shared Authority in Practice

Given our mutual commitment to shared authority, Director Hougen and I agreed that we could not begin the exhibit curation process without the input of local indigenous people. While I felt that it was most important to include Nisenan voices, Director Hougen and I agreed that it would be beneficial to include other interested tribes and Native American groups. I did not want to begin intensive writing and exhibit planning until I knew what these groups wanted to highlight and avoid. We began reaching out to potential tribal partners in the summer of 2018.

In July 2018 Director Hougen started a conversation with Melodi McAdams, a cultural resources supervisor with the Tribal Historic Preservation Department at the United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria (UAIC). UAIC is a federally recognized tribe whose members are of both Miwok and Maidu (specifically Nisenan) descent. Initially Director Hougen wanted to see if the museum could become a repatriation worksite for tribal elders. As part of her visit to the museum, McAdams looked at the existing Nisenan exhibit. She was relieved to hear that Director Hougen had already looked for and found someone to reinterpret the exhibit. She noticed issues we were already aware of—specifically the lack of tribal involvement in the second exhibit, the exclusive use of past tense, and the lack of present-day information. Additionally,

she identified several artifacts in the exhibit that she felt were culturally sensitive and should be removed from public display.[88]

Following their meeting, I set up a phone call with McAdams in August of 2018. She reiterated the thoughts she had shared with Director Hougen and expressed interest in becoming a consultant for us. She also suggested that I commission living artists to create material culture to display in the exhibit, given that many of the items in Sutter County's collection were determined to be inappropriate for display. McAdams gave me the name of two UAIC affiliated artists who she felt would be willing to create traditional items that the museum could purchase.[89]

Once we solidified our partnership with UAIC we reached out to two other local tribes: Enterprise Rancheria of the Estom Yumeka Tribe of Maidu People, a federally recognized tribe, and Nevada City Rancheria, a terminated tribe of Nisenan people. We worked with Enterprise Rancheria throughout the curation process but did not move beyond introductions with the Nevada City Rancheria. We also started a conversation with Pat Dean from the American Indian Education Program of Marysville. We considered collaborating with the Cachil Dehe Band of Wintun Indians in Colusa, but ultimately didn't due to business disagreements between their tribe and Enterprise Rancheria—we did not want to accidentally create any animosity at our planning meetings.

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[88] Jessica Hougen, e-mail message with author, July 26, 2018.
[89] Melodi McAdams, conversation with author, August 13, 2018.

Arranging a meeting with all of our tribal partners took some time. We initially planned a meeting for early February of 2019. None of our tribal partners came to this first meeting so we tried again for the end of February. The rescheduled meeting was very successful. Three representatives from UAIC—McAdams and Rebecca Allen from the Tribal Historic Preservation Department and one enrolled tribal elder, Elvira—and one representative from Enterprise Rancheria—Lathecia Watson—attended. We invited representatives from the American Indian Education Program and the Nevada City Rancheria but neither were able to attend. At this meeting Director Hougen and I outlined our goals for the exhibit and my project and asked our tribal partners to share what they would like to see in the exhibit. We inquired about their former museum experiences, both good and bad, and asked what we should avoid doing. The group was highly engaged and very interested in our project. They were excited to have the communication channel open and appreciated that we wanted to work with them throughout the curation process.

Their highest priority was making sure that we portrayed a living Nisenan culture—not a static, solely historic people. They also agreed with our desire to be honest about the brutality and violence of California's past; they did not want this information hidden or glossed over. They especially wanted us to include this information given that the museum is located in a county named for John Sutter. They requested that we acknowledge the historical stewardship of the museum's land, perhaps as a separate panel. They wanted us to discuss traditional ecological knowledge and fire management practices as they felt that these are important both for understanding their

culture and for their current political relevance. They hoped we would mention the differences between Valley and Foothill Nisenan people and not reduce the region's Indigenous experience to a monolithic cultural block. They suggested that we use tribe or village names instead of generalizations and "Native American" instead of "Indian" when referring generally to Indigenous people. They also asked us to include Native artists, designers, and advisors in as many aspects of the exhibit as possible. They proposed that we use a Native American graphic designer and echoed McAdams' suggestion of hiring Indigenous artists to create items for the exhibit.

The group did not have many specific comments about the exhibit's historical facts as they felt they did not know much about the "textbook" side of their history. They felt they were better versed in their tribes' culture and traditions than in historical facts. I asked for suggestions of books or written sources to use for my research but they didn't have any recommendations; they hoped I would be able to suggest books so that they could learn more. I was not expecting them to be unfamiliar with this history; I was hoping for a little more input to help guide my research and panel writing. This did allow me some curatorial freedom, however.

Unfortunately, this first meeting was also our last. We were unable to get all of our tribal partners together again for another meeting. We tried to arrange multiple meetings, both in person and over the phone, but were unable to get our partners to commit to attending. Although I am not entirely sure why our attempts to organize another meeting were unsuccessful, I believe it had more to do with our tribal partners limited time rather than a disinterest in the exhibit. Pat Dean from the American Indian

Education Program of Marysville helps plan many regional Big Times and Pow Wows and Enterprise Rancheria hosted the grand opening for their new casino on October 30, 2019; as such both were unable to devote as much time to the exhibit as they had hoped to. Although I wanted input from our tribal partners about everything in the exhibit, I had to be firm about the exhibit timeline in order to meet my thesis deadlines with Sacramento State. This meant that I could not always wait for their comments. I continued to send my panel text drafts and updates about the exhibit to our tribal partners and used the feedback I did receive to guide the process forward.

Each draft of my panel text was reviewed by three members of UAIC's Tribal Historic Preservation Department. I wanted a larger tribal audience to review the panels but this was ultimately not feasible. McAdams told me that UAIC tribal members typically take several months to review museum exhibits and our deadlines were too tight to accommodate a lengthy review process. The historic preservation department has helped create several sets of interpretive panels—both as advisors and as authors of their own panels. Although not all members of the historic preservation department are enrolled tribal members, they feel that their close conversations with tribal members have helped them become well-versed in the interpretive requirements and desires of the broader tribal community. I was able to incorporate all of their suggestions and they were satisfied with the final panels.

A few of our tribal partners felt that the exhibit focused too much on Nisenan history and culture and not enough on that of other local tribes. Unfortunately, these comments were not accompanied by more in-depth suggestions on what to add or change

to make it more inclusive. I personally did not agree with this suggestion—including the history and culture of other tribes in the exhibit seemed as though it would make the exhibit too lengthy and potentially confusing for the visitor. Additionally, all of my research had focused on Nisenan people and discussing the traditions and culture of other tribes would have required me to backtrack in my curation process. Given that my stated goal was to curate an exhibit about Nisenan people in the Yuba-Sutter Region, I chose to stick with my initial plan and did not proceed with this suggestion.

While I am glad that Director Hougen and I were able to foster tribal involvement in the exhibit, I was disappointed that I could not get more consistent input from our tribal partners since one of my primary goals in curating this exhibit was to utilize shared authority. I wish we had been able to form a closer relationship with the Nevada City Rancheria and the American Indian Education program. I also regret not reaching out to Shingle Springs Rancheria—unfortunately, it did not occur to me to contact them until too late in the curation process. I am confident that the text panels reflect the general desires of all of our tribal partners but would have gladly welcomed more feedback about them from a broader audience, even if I disagreed with or could not accommodate their comments. Were I to attempt this process again, I would start the conversations with Native groups sooner and lay out a definitive timeline earlier. During my internship at the Maidu Museum, Benson cautioned me that artists and Native communities often work on different timelines than museum professionals. In her curation process she frequently gave earlier-than-necessary deadlines in order to ensure that exhibits would be ready on time. Director Hougen also had this experience in previous museums. I believe that my

tight deadlines were detrimental to the amount of input and involvement we were able to get from our tribal partners. The location of the meetings also may have prevented participation. Shared authority experts and advisors recommend having meetings on tribal lands. While the museum is roughly equidistant from UAIC, Nevada City Rancheria, and Enterprise Rancheria, it is still a long drive for all three communities. Although it might have necessitated separate meetings for each tribe, I believe that a meeting closer to or at each community could have helped created broader interest in the exhibit.[90]

III. Writing, Designing, and Installing a Decolonized Exhibit

Prior to curating *The Nisenan: A History of the Sacramento Valley* for the Sutter County Museum, I had never curated an exhibit to completion. As part of my coursework for the Public History M.A. program I took an exhibit curation course with Dr. Ty Smith, director of the California State Railroad Museum. We helped curate a new exhibit at the California State Railroad Museum (CSRM) that discussed the railroad's role in California's agricultural boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. We chose the topic, decided on the overarching themes, and wrote the panels. Unfortunately, we did not finish the exhibit by the end of the semester and were not able to help install the exhibit or make final choices about the text, images, and design. I helped install exhibits in some of my internships, but did not help plan or design them. This meant that the bulk of the curation process was new to me.

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[90] Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, 36.

I modeled my initial exhibit planning off of the process used by Dr. Smith and the CSRM. I used the museum's exhibit planning template to create a purposeful storytelling statement which succinctly outlined my intentions for the exhibit. I drafted this prior to our meeting with our tribal partners and used it to guide our meeting. Once I determined that it met their approval I began drafting the exhibit panels. Their content suggestions were fairly general, allowing me to make my own decisions about what to include. Although I wanted my text to be as specific to the Yuba-Sutter Region as possible, this was ultimately not feasible for most of my panels due to a lack of historical information. Since the Nisenan population of Sutter County was nearly non-existent by 1860, I had to broaden my geographic scope in order to tell a complete story. I emphasized regional history whenever possible while providing a more general interpretation of history.

Following current interpretive principles, I worked to create an engaging, relevant, and intellectually accessible exhibit. Text panels should not simply list facts, they should tell a story that engages the visitors. Freeman Tilden, the considered by many to be the father of interpretation, believed that "interpretation is revelation based on information."[91] Using Tilden's principles, I sought to create an exhibit that encourages learning by compelling the visitor to challenge their prior assumptions about Native Americans. I also sought to make it relevant to visitors by using the National Park Service's (NPS) "universal concepts" theory. The NPS posits that these concepts tap into universal human feelings and emotions and allow visitors to create a connection with the

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[91] Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 9.

information. For the Nisenan exhibit I chose to emphasize themes of fairness, hope, cruelty, sorrow, and survival.[92]

The CSRM requires exhibit panels to be written at a fifth to sixth grade reading level; this is considered to be accessible level for the majority of visitors. I attempted to use this standard for all materials for the exhibit, including panels, handouts, and artifact labels; due to some of the Nisenan words and technical terminology used in the panels, they read at more of an eighth grade level. I used a scholarly, professional tone but avoided excess use of historical dates, technical jargon, and passive voice. To help hold visitors' interest, I kept the panels concise and under 230 words. Although the CSRM aims to keep panels below 200 words, Director Hougen felt that it was appropriate for the panels to be slightly longer if necessary.

I chose to structure my panels in chronological order, beginning with the pre-contact period and ending with the present day. I used Nisenan-specific monographs to help determine which historical events and cultural practices were the most important. Although Nisenan culture varied between the foothills and the valley, historians and anthropologists believe that there were enough commonalities between the villages in the valley that I was able to use general sources about Nisenan life to guide my writing. There are no monographs specifically about Native American life in Sutter County so I pieced together non-indigenous histories to create a cohesive story. Sources about John

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[92] Sam H. Ham, *Interpretation: Making a Difference on Purpose* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2013), 1-8, 34; John Summers, *Creating Exhibits That Engage: A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2018), 9-10, 62-76.

Sutter proved particularly useful, as he interacted the most with Nisenan people in the Yuba-Sutter region prior to the Native population collapse of the Gold Rush.

Although it was always my intention to create a decolonized exhibit, I was concerned that my commitment to sharing historical truths might offend some visitors and Museum Association members. Based on my research, I determined that, in the Nisenan context, a decolonized exhibit would include an honest look at the labor practices of John Sutter, nineteenth and twentieth century anti-Native American laws, the indentureship system, and forced assimilation policies. I also knew it would need to discuss genocide and racial violence. Sutter County tends to be proud of its association with John Sutter and the museum's exhibit on him is devoid of any references to his treatment of Native peoples. The racial violence of the nineteenth century is troubling and difficult for anyone to discuss, much less for those who are not familiar with it or have never had to contemplate this period of California history. I wanted to be accurate in my interpretation and committed to the decolonization of history without causing unnecessary controversy for the museum. Even in Native American museums, discussing westward expansion and the colonizing practices of the United States government can be painful and unwelcome. Some groups do not want to paint themselves as victims and want to focus on survival, rather than dwelling on the past. Fortunately, our tribal partners wanted historical honesty and would not have supported an exhibit that avoided the unpleasant aspects of the region's history. Although they wanted to emphasize their cultural survival, they also wanted to ensure that the museum's visitors understood what

they had survived. Director Hougen and I agreed that we should write the exhibit that our tribal partners wanted and not be overly concerned about offending any visitors.[93]

To supplement the panels, I created handouts to provide a more in-depth look at certain topics. This included a handout about California's genocide and the rancheria system. I am still working with our tribal partners to create a kid-friendly handout about Nisenan myths. We chose to discuss genocide at a more surface level on the panels since some aspects of the white settlement period might be challenging for younger children. Many of the museum's visitors are elementary school students and we wanted our panels to be accurate but appropriate for all age levels. We did not include any exhibit elements specifically for children. Although the museum incorporates the Nisenan exhibit into its guided school tours, there is currently nothing in the exhibit that children can touch or engage with separately from adults. This will likely be something the museum needs to add in the future.

Although our tribal partners mostly assisted with the content and verbiage of the exhibit, we also used their suggestions to choose material culture for the exhibit. The museum has a very small collection of Native American artifacts and, since the many of them were found to be culturally sensitive, Director Hougen and I determined that more items would be necessary. With McAdams' help, Director Hougen and I determined that the only items from the museum's collection that we could respectfully display were the baskets and the stone mortars. At the advice of our tribal partners, we decided to acquire and display mostly modern items in the new Nisenan exhibit. We felt that commissioning

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[93] Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 6-8.

modern items was the most effective way to avoid displaying anything inappropriate—we would be receiving explicit permission to use the items in the exhibit. It would also allow us to emphasize the survival of Nisenan culture by displaying things made by a local, living Native Californian. At the suggestion of McAdams and UAIC, I reached out to Vince LaPena, an artist and traditionalist of Wintu descent. LaPena agreed to make Nisenan items for us to display in the exhibit. I initially requested only a handful of items—a digging stick, a deer hoof rattle, and a soaproot brush—but asked LaPena to add any other items he thought were necessary or relevant. Ultimately LaPena made thirteen different traditional items for us, all of which he felt were important for understanding the history and culture of Nisenan people and Native California. Director Hougen ordered new plinths and plexiglass covers to display these items.

While I was excited to receive modern items for the exhibit, I was worried that this decision be confusing; I assumed visitors would expect to see historic artifacts accompanying exhibits about the past. I also did not want the items on display to be mistaken for replicas—though they were created for us, they are real, functional, and accurately constructed. Director Hougen and I decided to create a separate panel to discuss our use of modern artifacts. We explained our thought process through a discussion of the fraught relationship between Native Americans and museums. I wanted to offer visitors a "behind the scenes" look at curatorial decisions and encourage them to engage with the provenance of museum collections. Our tribal partners agreed that this panel would not only help provide context for the artifacts, but alert the public to unethical collections practices and this aspect of the Indigenous rights movement.

We were not able to accommodate our tribal partners' requests that we hire a someone of Native American heritage to design the panels. Although I liked this suggestion, I wanted to use someone relatively local as our graphic designer and I was not sure how many Northern California designers would meet this criterion. At the suggestion of UAIC I reached out to a designer of Chumash descent in Southern California. Unfortunately, we were not able to get in touch soon enough to meet our printing deadlines. I believe that, had I geographically widened my search I could have found a Native American designer, but I was concerned about timeliness and cost. Director Hougen and I decided to go with the museum's usual designer, Gina Crawford. I found both modern and historic photographs for the panels—I wanted to make sure that the images I chose shared a sense of modernity and did not want to use only sepia-toned photographs. UAIC generously shared several images of enrolled tribal members participating in cultural site protection and restoration efforts. The photographers and the tribal members agreed to let us use the photos in the exhibit at no cost.

In total, this exhibit cost about $8,000 to complete. Graphic design, image rights, and printing the panels cost about $2,755. New plinths, plexiglass tops, and plexiglass display pieces cost about $3,800. We also paid Vince LaPena for the objects he created for us. Director Hougen secured an initial contribution of $2,000 from the Yuba City Sunrise Rotary Club. After we completed the text panels, UAIC made an additional donation of $25,000. We will use some of this donation to get high quality object labels designed and printed. We will also put it towards the exhibit's opening reception.

Director Hougen plans to use the remaining funds for future Native American events at the museum.

Initially, we planned to open the exhibit in June 2019. Director Hougen removed the former Nisenan exhibit as part of the museum's interior remodel and we wanted to have the new exhibit installed in time for the post-remodel grand reopening. Unfortunately, the process took longer than we were expecting and the panel text was not finalized in time. Since we did not want to reinstall the old exhibit, Director Hougen and I created two interim text panels. These panels explained that a new exhibit was in progress. I provided a description of the process and themes of the upcoming permanent exhibit and explained why we felt the former exhibit needed to be replaced. I also included a land acknowledgement—our tribal partners requested that we include a land acknowledgment in the exhibit and we were able to create one in time for the interim exhibit. We also incorporated the acknowledgement into the final exhibit. Director Hougen displayed them with a few baskets and a mortar and pestle. The interim panels remained up from June 2019 until November 2019, when we installed the permanent exhibit. I believe that they were an effective placeholder and provided a good preview of what the final exhibit would look like.

Although we installed the exhibit in November 2019, Director Hougen and I are not planning a formal opening reception until Spring 2020. We envision this event as more of a community fair than a formal exhibit reception. We are hoping to hire a Native American food truck and we will offer space for Native American vendors to sell traditional crafts and art. We have asked our Enterprise Rancheria to share a traditional

welcoming of their choice. I believe that hosting this type of community gathering at the museum will inform a much wider audience about the new exhibit. The lengthy timeline will allow myself, Director Hougen, and our tribal partners more time to plan a quality, collaborative event.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Inspired by principles of shared authority and decolonization, I successfully curated a new exhibit on Nisenan history and culture for the Sutter County Museum. Through collaboration with UAIC, Enterprise Rancheria, and the American Indian Education Program, I created a collaborative exhibit that met the needs of local indigenous communities. This exhibit, entitled *The Nisenan: A History of the Sacramento Valley*, clearly conveys that Native Californians are not extinct, but living, modern cultures. It also allows visitors to learn more about the relationship between Native Americans and museums. It is honest about the brutality of the post-Gold Rush period and the crimes of the government, but remains optimistic about the future of the Nisenan people. I hope that it encourages visitors to think about Native Americans in the present tense and makes them more aware of the complex relationship between California and its Native peoples.

In this paper, I presented an overview of my research and the process I used to complete the exhibit. In total it took me fifteen months to finish this project. This exhibit challenged me to adapt to the needs of our tribal partners, artists, and fellow museum professionals. I learned to adjust to a changing exhibit completion timeline while sticking to my own thesis deadlines. I used Indigenous museum theory, best curatorial practices, CSUS coursework, and my own internship experiences to guide the process. I also found inspiration in several museums across the United States.

Shared authority can be difficult to execute but immensely rewarding. I believe that improving relationships with Native communities is one of the most important issues facing museums today. Although I wish that I had been able to receive more consistent input from our tribal partners, I feel that the final exhibit is representative of their desires. I hope that a reinterpretation of Nisenan history brings positive publicity and strong tribal relationships to the Sutter County Museum. The exhibit opened to the public on November 19, 2019. I am curious and excited to hear feedback and reactions from museum visitors.

APPENDIX A

EXHIBIT PLANNING, PREPARATION, AND INSTALLATION MATERIALS

(*Sutter County Nisenan) Exact Title TBD*
Exhibit Proposal
Community Memorial Museum of Sutter County

Jessalyn Eernisse
Sacramento State Public History
M.A. Thesis Project

Exhibit (working) Title: ***unknown currently***
Opening Date: Mid-June, 2019
This form is adapted from one used by the California State Railroad Museum exhibit team.

Overall Exhibit Purposeful Storytelling Statement
The purpose of this exhibit is to tell the story of the Nisenan people who lived in the Sutter County region prior to the arrival of Europeans and Americans in the nineteenth century. This story will help visitors understand that the Nisenan (and indigenous Californians generally) are not an extinct people. It will broadly educate about all aspects of both pre and post contact Nisenan culture. It will also invite visitors into the discussion surrounding culturally sensitive objects and the display of Native American artifacts in museums. The story will be considered successful if it encourages visitors to think about indigenous peoples in the present tense. It will also be successful if it inspires more local participation and interest in the museum, especially among minorities

Proposed Panels & Story Outline

1. Who Are the Nisenan?
2. Pre-Contact Life in Sutter County
    a. Houses and village structure
    b. Family/gender roles
        i. This may be a topic that is better explained within each panel.
    c. Food
    d. Recreation
3. Nineteenth Century
    a. Early European visits to the region, Hudson's Bay, and Malaria Outbreak
    b. Sutter
    c. Gold Rush and settlement of Sutter County
4. Cultural Recovery
    a. Tribal sovereignty
        i. Termination policies
    b. Today
5. Relationships between Native Americans and Museums
    a. A bit on the evolution of museums, how they started as Cabinets of Curiosity
    b. How museums ended up with so many inappropriate artifacts.
        i. "Saving" cultures (when anthropologists thought Native cultures would be eliminated in order to promote whiteness).
    c. Why we're displaying modern artifacts

Exhibit Proposal

8/13/18

Call with Melodi McAdams

- Expressed desire for more ethical exhibits
    - Specifically with artifacts, they're the most ethical if they're made for display
    - Potential funding from UAIC for commissioned objects
    - Maybe they can be touched?
    - Museum's mortars and baskets = ok
- Would the museum be open to growing certain plants in the garden? Soaproot, wormwood, are there oak trees around?
- Wants to consult throughout the process
- Would the traditionalists we hire be willing to let us film them making objects? We could play the video at the museum as part of the exhibit
- Avoid blanket statements and generalizations

Minutes from Phone Call with Melodi McAdams, UAIC

2/25/2019

Tribal Partners Meeting #1

In Attendance:

- Jessalyn Eernisse, Community Memorial Museum of Sutter County
- Jessica Hougen, Community Memorial Museum of Sutter County
- Elvira, United Auburn Indian Community
- Lethi Watson, Enterprise Rancheria
- Rebecca Allen, United Auburn Indian Community
- Melodi McAdams, United Auburn Indian Community

Have you had any good experiences with museums in the past?

- Oroville Visitor's Center
  - They engage in regular communication with local tribes
- Community Memorial Museum of Sutter County
  - Really appreciative that Jessica removed inappropriate artifacts from display so promptly. Also appreciative that she asked in the first place.
- Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History
  - The museum wasn't good on the whole when representing Native Americans, but they did appreciate that they sourced artifacts in the exhibit (tribe)

Have you had any bad experiences with museums in the past?

- Butte College
  - There is a display of Native American artifacts (baskets and cradleboards) that they won't let students or anthropology department touch or look into. They also won't give any information on the provenance of the items.

How can we avoid making the mistakes that museums have made in the past?

- Conversation is the best way to avoid mistakes of the past or alienating tribal partners.

What is important to include in the exhibit?

- Central Valley = traveling route
- Seasons are important, people moved with the seasons
- Work on the levees shows that the Yuba/Sutter region was an area shared with many peoples
- What the culture looks like today—it continues to change, it is not stagnant.
  - Information on living communities is essential
  - How traditional culture and practices continue.
  - Destruction of cultural sites in the present.
- The brutality of the history is very important, especially given the name of the county.
- Graphic design done by people from the Native community, if possible.
- Language – when being general they prefer "Native American," but would generally prefer that we use specific tribe or village names.
- Land acknowledgement – who's land are we on now?
  - Maps also tell stories, what should be Native land but is instead tiny rancherias

Tribal Partners Meeting Minutes, Page 1 of 2

- Differences between valley and foothill people
- Traditional ecological knowledge and fire management practices
- Hand games

What kind of items should we include?

- The best way to display native American artifacts (when there is concern about the appropriateness of items in collection)
    - Hire a traditionalist to make things for the exhibit.
        - Include text or labels that explains that these are modern items made for the museum
            - This is already our intention—they were very happy that we planned to do an entire panel
    - Casting a replica
        - This doesn't always mean that it is still appropriate to display. For example, if the item is sacred a model isn't really any better.
        - This can be done with 3D printing but it doesn't always yield the best results.
- UAIC wants us to commission pieces, as it gives back to the community. They can help with funding if necessary.
    - Ongoing upkeep by artist
- Basketry is beautiful and world famous, can we include stills of basketry process?
    - Baskets need to be touched.
- Regalia perhaps?
    - Pine nut beads, shell beads

Exhibit Opening

- Will the museum allow vendors at the exhibit opening?
- A screening of the UAIC Feather River documentary?
    - Possibly associated cultural shorts as well.

Ongoing Relationship

- Youth engagement
- Acorn demonstrations in Chico schools, perhaps having something like that at the museum for youth education.
- Workshops with contemporary artisans and cultural educators at the museum?
- Collaboration with all tribal groups, but especially groups who are historically from the area.

Tribal Partners Meeting Minutes, Page 2 of 2

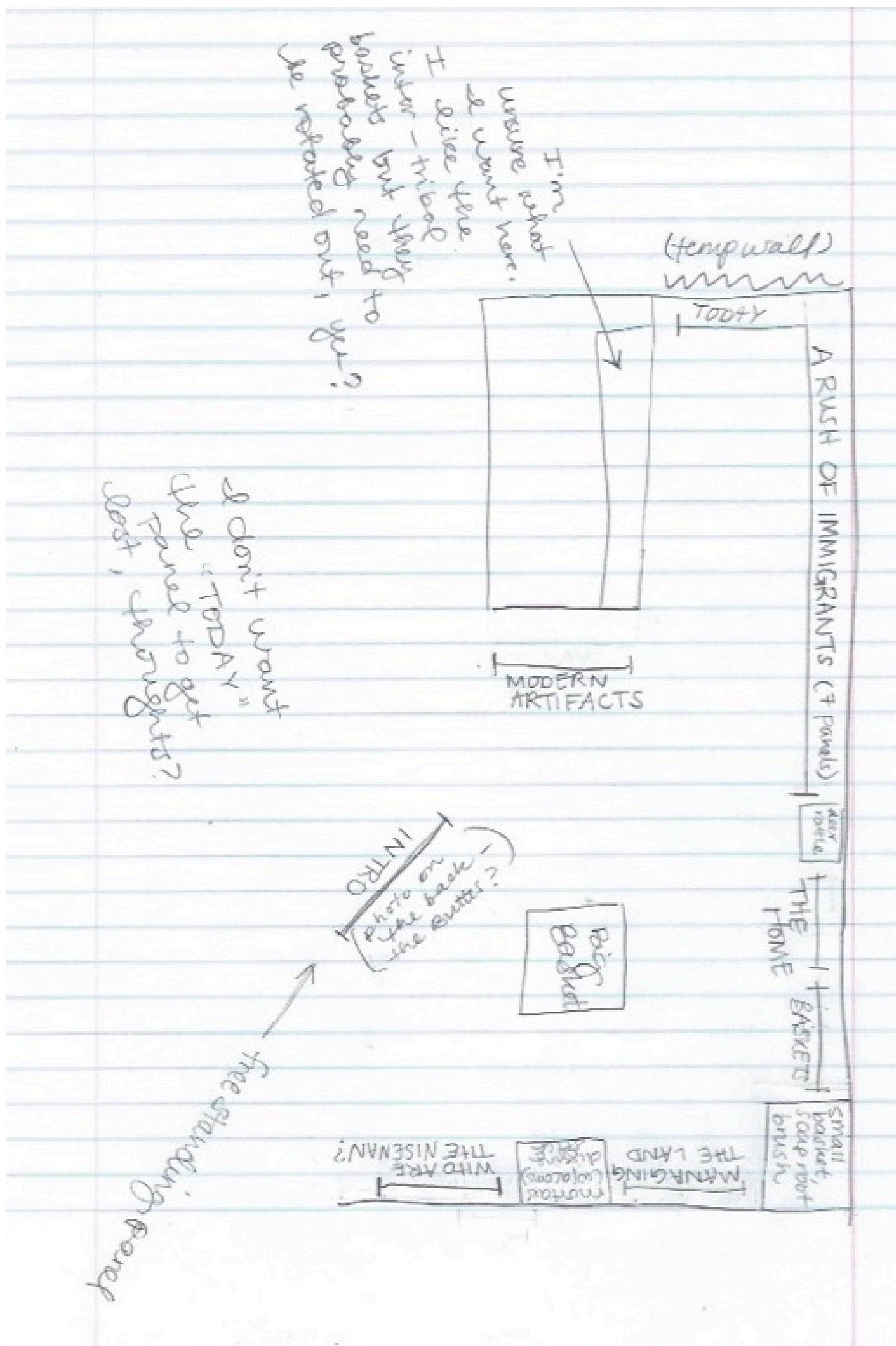

Exhibit Floor Plan

Interim Panels

This space will house a new exhibit about the Nisenan and Maidu people of the Yuba-Sutter region. Our former Nisenan exhibit was showing its age and we decided it was time to create something new. We are excited to bring an updated perspective on Native Californian life to the museum.

Nisenan and Maidu people have called the Sacramento Valley home for thousands of years. We want to share their history but do not want our exhibit to be trapped in the past. Nisenan and Maidu people are members of modern, living cultures. They are not extinct. Native peoples faced racialized violence, forced assimilation, and mandatory resettlement as white settlers flooded into California. They resisted and persevered despite intense discrimination. We want to emphasize their survival and celebrate the preservation of their cultures.

Our new exhibit will be a collaborative effort with local tribal groups. We, the museum, are not experts about Native American culture or history. We have asked people of Nisenan and Maidu heritage to share their history with us. They will help us choose the story and images that best explain their culture. Indigenous artists are creating traditional objects for us to display. With their guidance we know that we are accurately representing Native American life in California and the Sacramento region.

Interim Panel Text

Land Acknowledgment

We, the Sutter County Museum, acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the Nisenan people. They have been stewards of this land since time immemorial and did not leave it willingly. We acknowledge the land theft, enslavement, and genocide that forced them away. We honor and respect the Indigenous people who are still connected to this land. We invite our visitors to consider the legacy of colonialism and to support Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

Land Acknowledgment Text

You Are Standing on Nisenan Land

Nisenan people have called the Sacramento Valley home for the entirety of their history. Historically, they were hunter/gatherer peoples, with a distinct culture and traditions spanning generations.

This exhibit tells the story of our region's Nisenan people. It is a story of their history and cultural survival. Despite legalized discrimination, racial violence, and forced assimilation at the hands of white Californians, Nisenan people are still here. Today, they are tribal members of several Rancheria groups in the Sacramento region. They are proudly

Thank You

Curated by: Jessalyn Eernisse, CSU Sacramento Public History Department

Tribal Partners and Advisors: Enterprise Rancheria of the Estom Yumeka Maidu Tribe, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria, The American Indian Education Program of Marysville

Material Culture Created by: Vince LaPena

Sponsors: United Auburn Indian Community, Yuba City Sunrise Rotary Club

Special thanks to Sigrid Benson, former curator of the Maidu Museum and Historic Site, for inspiring a passion for shared authority and collaborative exhibits.

Finalized Text, Panel 1 of 12

Who Are the Nisenan?

The Nisenan are indigenous Californians. Their lands stretch from the Sacramento River in the east to the western slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Their region includes the cities of Auburn, Marysville, Nevada City, Roseville, Sacramento, and Yuba City. At least 75,000 Native Americans lived in the Sacramento Valley before white settlement. Archaeologists believe that it was one of the most densely populated areas of the United States.

Nisenan means “from among us.” It is how Nisenan people refer to themselves. Anthropologists sometimes call them the Southern Maidu because they have cultural and linguistic similarities to neighboring Mountain/Yamonee Maidu, and Konkow Maidu peoples. These groups are three distinct peoples.

PHOTO 1:
Left to right: Herbert Young (Mountain Maidu and Mechoopda Konkow Maidu), George Nye (Nisenan), and Dewey Conway (Mechoopda Konkow Maidu) in traditional dance regalia. Photograph taken in Chico circa 1920.

Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Community Ethnic Survey, 1983/146/0587

Finalized Text, Panel 2 of 12

Managing the Land

Traditionally, Nisenan people carefully managed their lands with controlled burns. Burns encourage new plant growth, spread seeds, and create better grazing for game animals. Small burns prevent big wildfires by burning off flammable plant debris. Nisenan people also weeded, pruned, and thinned plants in the wild. They spread the seeds of edible plants. Indigenous communities continue to use these methods to control and protect their land.

Uuti (acorns) were once the most important food for Nisenan peoples. They are very nutritious and stay fresh for many years. Families would have a two or three year supply of acorns available at all times, stored in a granary near their ***hu*** (home). They also traded acorns with tribes on the coast and in the eastern Sierra Nevada. Nisenan communities still work together to gather acorns in the fall, as their ancestors did. Acorns are dried and then ground into flour to make soup, porridge, and bread. Acorns contain bitter tannic acids that must be leached before they are edible. Nisenan people leach tannins by flushing ground acorn meal with water.

Other traditional foods include salmon, grasshoppers, deer, and rabbits, as well as wild fruits, nuts, and roots. Traditionally, men were responsible for hunting and fishing. They caught fish with nets and basket traps and hunted with traps, clubs, and arrows. Women prepared food and gathered edible plants.

PHOTO 2:
Three women of the Sacramento Valley, drawn by Henry Brown, an artist who visited California in the early 1850s. The woman in the center has a burden basket on her back. Nisenan people use burden baskets to gather and carry food.

HM 62464, Drawings of Henry B. Brown, 1851-1852, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

Finalized Text, Panel 3 of 12

The Home

Traditional Valley Nisenan homes were called ***hu***. They were dome shaped and made of willow branches and bark. They were dug about four feet into the earth and insulated with tule and earth to keep out the intense valley heat.

Each family had their own ***hu***. Married couples often lived with the husband's parents. Grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren all lived under the same roof. Villages also contained a ***k'um*** (community building) and a men's sweathouse. The community used the village ***k'um*** for ceremonies and celebrations. In the winter they met there for storytelling, singing, and dancing. Men visited the sweathouse daily to clean themselves and socialize.

Villages had a leader, or headman. The headman settled disputes and acted as a representative to other villages. As many as 1,000 people could live in a single village. Nisenan people typically built their villages next to rivers. Large communities included ***Pusune***, near present-day Sacramento, ***Yupu***, at the mouth of the Yuba River, and ***Hok***, south of Yuba City.

PHOTO 3:
A Nisenan village near Yuba City, 1852. This drawing shows many ***hu*** and acorn granaries.

Rubiales.

What is Tule?

Tule [too-lee] is a tall grass that grows in marshes and along rivers in the Central Valley. Native Californians use tule to make clothing, mats, baskets, and even canoes. The low-lying land in the valley used to be marshland and tule grew everywhere.

PHOTO 4:
A field of tule in the Sacramento Valley.

MSS 160, Dorothy M. Hill Collection, Meriam Library Special Collections, California State University, Chico

Finalized Text, Panel 4 of 12

Baskets

Native Californians are world-famous for their basketry skills. They are highly skilled weavers and create baskets for many different purposes. Baskets were traditionally used for gathering food, carrying water, cooking, and food storage. They also served as cups, plates, and bowls for eating and drinking. Today, they serve many of the same purposes, or are used for display.

Nisenan weavers typically make their baskets out of willow and redbud. They can be made in all sizes and shapes and are woven loosely or tightly depending on their purpose. Water and cooking baskets are woven so tightly that they are watertight. Nisenan people place hot stones in baskets to heat food and boil water. Open weave baskets are used as traps for fish and grasshoppers.

PHOTO 5:
A Nisenan woman places a hot stone in a basket to heat food. Photo taken at Bidwell Bar, California, 1903.

MSS 160, Dorothy M. Hill Collection, Meriam Library Special Collections, California State University, Chico

PHOTO 6:
Mountain Maidu weavers Lilly Baker (right) and her mother, Daisy Baker (left), make a basket together, circa 1960. Lilly was a master weaver who taught many weavers across Northern California.

MSS 160, Dorothy M. Hill Collection, Meriam Library Special Collections, California State University, Chico

Finalized Text, Panel 5 of 12

Malaria

A few European and American explorers visited the Sacramento Valley during the Spanish Colonial Period (1769-1821) but did not settle here. The Nisenan remained independent from Spanish colonizers. Unfortunately, they were not protected from the diseases that Europeans carried and spread.

In 1833 fur trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company brought malaria with them into the Sacramento Valley. Malaria did not exist in California before this. The wetlands of the valley were the perfect environment for the mosquitos that carry malaria. This caused the disease to quickly and aggressively spread through the region. At least two-thirds of the valley's population died.

Valley Nisenan survivors fled to Nisenan villages in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Malaria did not reach there and trappers did not venture that far east. Those who stayed in the valley continued to suffer from malaria. They also faced increasing competition for food as trappers visited the region more often.

After crossing the Feather River those villages along the Sacramento, which in the winter previous were each inhabited by hundreds of Indians were desolate and the abodes of ruin… The same appalling proofs of this dire calamity were constantly presented to us … as we re-passed through, along by, and around those silent and vacated villages which some ten months before we had seen swarming with Indian life...

- Juan José Warner, fur trapper, 1833

Finalized Text, Panel 6 of 12

An Intruder in the Valley

In 1839, John Sutter, a Swiss immigrant, took over lands and built a fort in what is now Sacramento. The malaria epidemic had killed so many people that the Nisenan could not organize a large-scale resistance to Sutter. He took advantage of this and forced them to work at his fort. He used armed troops to convince local tribal headmen to send workers to him. If they refused his troops attacked. Others wanted to trade with Sutter but were only allowed to buy things from his store in exchange for their labor. Native peoples were forced to stay at the fort because of these debts.

Sutter also built a ranch along the Feather River. He purposely located it next to Hok, a Nisenan village, so that he could easily find workers. At Hock Farm he continued to force local Nisenan people to work for him. To keep them from running away, they were locked into their sleeping quarters overnight. Both Nisenan histories and white observers tell of workers being forced to eat out of troughs like livestock. If they disobeyed or refused to work for him they were whipped, jailed, or killed.

Finalized Text, Panel 7 of 12

A "Free" State

In 1848, Sutter's workers discovered gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Within a year, 100,000 people from all over the world flooded into California. Many of these newcomers believed Native Americans were racially inferior. The new state of California quickly passed racist laws that denied basic rights to Native Americans. Native Americans could not vote and they could not give evidence against a white person in court. Any white Californian could legally force Native Californians off land owned by white people, even if the land traditionally belonged to Native peoples.

California also allowed indentured servitude for Native Americans. An indentured servant is an unpaid employee who is bound to work for certain number of years. This created a system of slavery even though California prohibited the enslavement of African Americans. Native American adults could be indentured for being "vagrant." Native Americans who were jobless, begging, drinking alcohol, or living an "immoral" life were all considered vagrant. White Californians believed these laws would "civilize" Native peoples.

Native American children could also be indentured. These children were usually stolen from their families. Raiders attacked native villages and kidnapped children, selling them to white settlers as indentured servants. This system ripped a generation of children from their families, language, and culture. Indentured servitude was legal in California until President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

... it is enough to chill the heart of man to know that these vile kidnappers in human flesh are making a regular business of killing the Indians in the mountains, or running them off, and kidnapping their children, packing them about the country, like so many sheep or swine to sell, at retail or wholesale.

Marysville Appeal, 1861

PHOTO 8:
The earliest known photograph of an Indigenous Californian. This unknown Nisenan man sat for a daguerreotype sometime in the 1850s.

Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum, Los Angeles; 1346.G.1

Finalized Text, Panel 8 of 12

Land Theft

After the Gold Rush, many immigrants to California became ranchers or farmers. They wanted land and did not care about the Native people already living there. Across the state, settlers formed militias to violently drive Native Californians from their ancestral homes. They attacked or brought legal action against Native people who tried to hunt or practice traditional burning on their lands. Some Nisenan people were forced to relocate to the Round Valley Indian Reservation in Mendocino County. Others tried to stay on their ever-shrinking ancestral lands.

Round Valley Indian Reservation

The Federal Government created the Round Valley Indian Reservation as a new home for Native Californians. Moving to Round Valley was not optional. Tribes from all over Northern California were forced to live there and work as farmers. These tribes did not speak the same languages or practice the same religions. The government believed that forcing Native people together and teaching them how to farm would make them more American.

Round Valley was a terrible place to live. The government did not set aside enough money for it to be run properly. The people living there did not have enough food or clothing. The farming plots were too small to be commercially successful and were barely large enough to support a family. To support themselves, the Native people at Round Valley combined farming and traditional hunting and gathering practices. They did their best to adapt to their situation and form new communities.

PHOTO 9:
Indigenous men from various Northern California tribes and white government officials. They are standing at the site of the future Round Valley Indian Reservation, circa 1858.

Mendocino County Historical Society Photographic Collection, all rights reserved

Rancherias

Culture, history, and geography are closely linked for Nisenan people. Leaving their ancestral lands meant separating them from thousands of years of community and tradition. Some Nisenan people hid from the government and avoided moving to Round Valley. Others ran away from the reservation and returned to their homes. They were able to stay in their traditional regions, although farmers continued to steal their lands.

Native Californians finally received land rights in the early 20th century. The Federal Government gave them small tracts of land called rancherias. Presidential Executive Orders specified that these lands were reservations for community use. The Federal Government recognized 51 self-governing rancherias in California.

Finalized Text, Panel 9 of 12

Termination

In the mid 20th century many Americans still believed that Native Americans should assimilate into white society. In the 1950s, Congress acted on this notion. They ended their recognition of 46 tribes in California. This cut off funding for Native American assistance programs. They sold rancheria lands without the permission of the Native people living there. This process was called termination.

Native American activists took the government to court. In the 1980s, they won their case and successfully reestablished federal recognition for many rancherias. The battle to end termination did not happen overnight. One of our tribal partners, the United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria, did not receive renewed federal recognition until 1994. There are still five rancherias fighting to have their federal recognition reinstated. This includes one Nisenan community, the Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria.

Finalized Text, Panel 10 of 12

TODAY

Today, California is home to the largest population of Native Americans in the country. Native Californians are proudly reclaiming their culture, traditions, and languages. In the Sacramento region, children and adults can once again learn the Nisenan language. Local rancherias and non-profits have created educational programs to teach indigenous languages, history, and traditional ecological knowledge. Native people gather across the state to share their traditional dances and celebrations with the community. Despite decades of anti-Native American policies, attitudes, and violence Nisenan people and their culture have survived and once again thrive in the twenty-first century.

PHOTO 10:
Jason Camp, a Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the United Auburn Indian Community, helped coordinate the protection of a cultural site on the Feather River near Yuba City. Many California tribes are involved in cultural site protection and restoration. They work to ensure that these sites are preserved for future generations.
Photo used with permission of Jason Camp and the United Auburn Indian Community.

PHOTO 11:
Tribal Elder Dolly Suehead, United Auburn Indian Community, holds a native plant from a Native Californian cultural site. She and other UAIC members work together to care for and monitor this site.
Photo used with permission of Dolly Suehead and the United Auburn Indian Community.

PHOTO 12:
Dancers in traditional regalia.
Photo by Avery L. White, 2018.

Finalized Text, Panel 11 of 12

What Are All These Modern Artifacts?

Many of the artifacts on display in this exhibit are not historic. Most were made specifically to be displayed here in the Sutter County Museum. Although they are modern, they are still real, traditionally crafted items. They are not replicas.

Museums have not always treated Native American artifacts with respect. In the late 19th century, many anthropologists believed that Native Americans would assimilate into mainstream American culture and become culturally "extinct.". Anthropologists, archaeologists, and other collectors wanted to gather as many artifacts as they could to "preserve" the material aspects of these cultures before they "disappeared."

Some artifacts were not collected in ethical ways. Many Native American artifacts found in museums were stolen from graves. Other items were sold out of desperation, without the permission of the community. Many are sacred or of spiritual value. Displaying them goes against community beliefs.

Through conversations with the United Auburn Indian Community, the Sutter County Museum recently learned that many of its Native American artifacts were not appropriate to display. We did not want to tell the Nisenan story without physical examples of culture. We commissioned local indigenous artist Vince LaPena to make items specifically to be displayed. These items now belong to the museum.

Finalized Exhibit, Panel 12 of 12

Old Exhibit, Image 1 of 4

Old Exhibit, Image 2 of 4

Old Exhibit, Image 3 of 4

Old Exhibit, Image 4 of 4

Interim Exhibit, Image 1 of 2

Interim Exhibit, Image 2 of 2

In Progress~

A NEW EXHIBIT ON THE NISENAN AND MAIDU

Our former Nisenan exhibit was quite old and out of date. In museums, permanent exhibits are usually up for 8-10 years before being refurbished or replaced. As this exhibit had been up for well over 20 years, it was past time to replace it. We are excited to bring an updated perspective on Native Californian life to the museum.

When completed, our new exhibit will tell a story of racialized violence, forced assimilation, and mandatory resettlement. We aren't shying away from the difficult parts of the past. More importantly, it will tell a story of survival. Of resistance. Of resilience. And of a vibrant, modern, living culture.

Many of us, when we think of Native Americans, think of Edward Curtis-style photographs- sepia in tone, showing people in traditional dress, often feathered headdresses and the like. The perpetuation of this stereotypical image has done a huge disservice to Native Americans, as it has led people to think of them as a people in the past, extinct or assimilated. Our exhibit aims to change this perception by sharing their history, yes, but also by emphasizing their survival and celebrating the preservation of their cultures.

Our new exhibit is a collaborative effort with local tribal groups. We, the museum, are not experts of Native American culture or history. We have asked people of Nisenan and Maidu heritage to share their history with us. They will help us shape the story and choose the images that best explain their culture. Indigenous artists are creating traditional objects for us to display. With their guidance we know that we are accurately representing Native American life in California and the Sacramento region.

Interim Exhibit, Panel 1 of 2

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We, the Sutter County Museum, acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the Nisenan people. They have been stewards of this land for all their history and did not leave it willingly. We acknowledge the land theft, enslavement, and genocide that forced them away. We honor and respect the Indigenous people who are still connected to this land. We invite our visitors to consider the legacy of colonialism and to support Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

Interim Exhibit, Panel 2 of 2

Exhibit Mockup, Image 1 of 5

Exhibit Mockup, Image 2 of 5

Exhibit Mockup, Image 3 of 5

Exhibit Mockup, Image 4 of 5

Exhibit Mockup, Image 5 of 5

Exhibit Installation, Image 1 of 4

Exhibit Installation, Image 2 of 4

Exhibit Installation, Image 3 of 4

Exhibit Installation, Image 4 of 4

APPENDIX B

FINALIZED EXHIBIT IMAGES AND MATERIALS

YOU ARE STANDING ON NISENAN LAND

Nisenan people have called the Sacramento Valley home for the entirety of their history. Historically, they were hunter/gatherer peoples, with a distinct culture and traditions spanning generations.

This exhibit tells the story of our region's Nisenan people. It is a story of their history and cultural survival. Despite legalized discrimination, racial violence, and forced assimilation at the hands of white Californians, Nisenan people are still here. Today, they are tribal members of several Rancheria groups in the Sacramento region.

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Thank You

Curated by: Jessalyn Eernisse, CSU Sacramento Public History Department

Tribal Partners and Advisors: Enterprise Rancheria of the Estom Yumeka Maidu Tribe, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria, The American Indian Education Program of Marysville

Material Culture Created by: Vince LaPena

Sponsors: Yuba City Sunrise Rotary Club

Special thanks to Sigrid Benson, former curator of the Maidu Museum and Historic Site, for inspiring a passion for shared authority and collaborative exhibits.

Panel 1 of 12

Left to right: Herbert Young (Mountain Maidu and Mechoopda Konkow Maidu), George Nye (Nisenan), and Dewey Conway (Mechoopda Konkow Maidu) in traditional dance regalia. Photograph taken in Chico circa 1920.

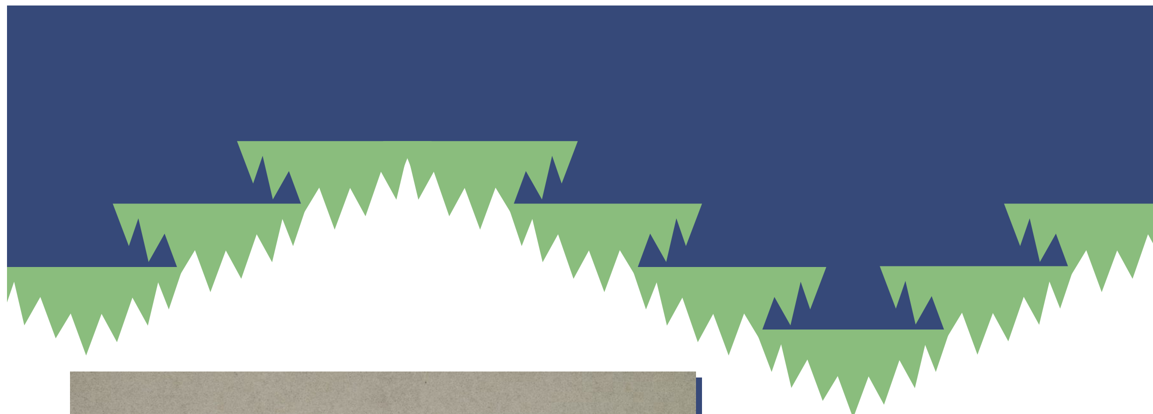
Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Community Ethnic Survey, 1983/146/0587

WHO ARE THE NISENAN?

The Nisenan are indigenous Californians. Their lands stretch from the Sacramento River in the east to the western slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Their region includes the cities of Auburn, Nevada City, Roseville, Sacramento, and Yuba City. At least 75,000 Native Americans lived in the Sacramento Valley before white settlement. Archaeologists believe that it was one of the most densely populated regions of the United States.

Nisenan means "from among us." It is how Nisenan people refer to themselves. Anthropologists sometimes call them the Southern Maidu because they have cultural and linguistic similarities to neighboring Mountain/Yamonee Maidu, and Konkow Maidu peoples. These groups are three distinct peoples.

Panel 2 of 12



MANAGING THE LAND

Three women of the Sacramento Valley, drawn by Henry Brown, an artist who visited California in the early 1850s. The woman in the center has a burden basket on her back. Nisenan people use burden baskets to gather and carry food.

HM 62464, Drawings of Henry B. Brown, 1851-1852, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

Traditionally, Nisenan people carefully managed their lands with controlled burns. Burns encourage new plant growth, spread seeds, and create better grazing for game animals. Small burns prevent big wildfires by burning off flammable plant debris. Nisenan people also weeded, pruned, and thinned plants in the wild. They spread the seeds of edible plants. Indigenous communities continue to use these methods to control and protect their land.

Uuti (acorns) were once the most important food for Nisenan peoples. They are very nutritious and stay fresh for many years. Families would have a two or three year supply of acorns available at all times, stored in a granary near their ***hu*** (home). They also traded acorns with tribes on the coast and in the eastern Sierra Nevada. Nisenan communities still work together to gather acorns in the fall, as their ancestors did. Acorns are dried and then ground into flour to make soup, porridge, and bread. Acorns contain bitter tannic acids that must be leached before they are edible. Nisenan people leach tannins by flushing ground acorn meal with water.

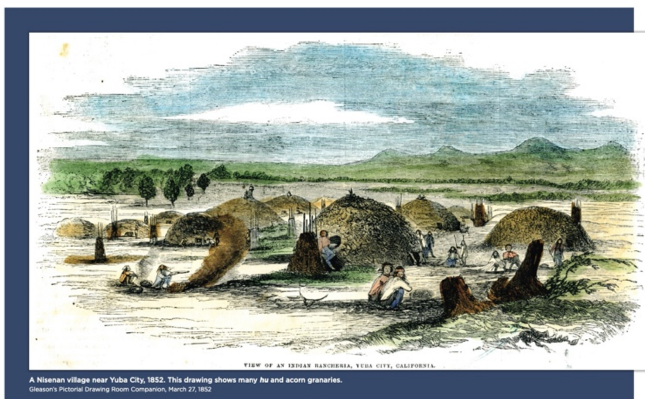
Other traditional foods include salmon, grasshoppers, deer, and rabbits, as well as wild fruits, nuts, and roots. Traditionally, men were responsible for hunting and fishing. They caught fish with nets and basket traps and hunted with traps, clubs, and arrows. Women prepared food and gathered edible plants.

THE HOME

Traditional Valley Nisenan homes were called ***hu.*** They were dome shaped and made of willow branches and bark. They were dug about four feet into the earth and insulated with tule and earth to keep out the intense valley heat.

Each family had their own ***hu.*** Married couples often lived with the husband's parents. Grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren all lived under the same roof. Villages also contained a ***k'um*** (community building) and a men's sweathouse. The community used the village ***k'um*** for ceremonies and celebrations. In the winter they met there for storytelling, singing, and dancing. Men visited the sweathouse daily to clean themselves and socialize.

Villages had a leader, or headman. The headman settled disputes and acted as a representative to other villages. As many as 1,000 people could live in a single village. Nisenan people typically built their villages next to rivers. Large communities included ***Pusune,*** near present-day Sacramento, ***Yupu,*** at the mouth of the Yuba River, and ***Hok,*** south of Yuba City.



A Nisenan village near Yuba City, 1852. This drawing shows many *hu* and acorn granaries.
Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion, March 27, 1852

What is Tule?

Tule [too-lee] is a tall grass that grows in marshes and along rivers in the Central Valley. Native Californians use tule to make clothing, mats, baskets, and even canoes. The low-lying land in the valley used to be marshland and tule grew everywhere.

A field of tule in the Sacramento Valley.
MSS 160, Dorothy M. Hill Collection, Meriam Library Special Collections, California State University, Chico

Mountain Maidu weavers Lilly Baker (right) and her mother, Daisy Baker (left), make a basket together, circa 1960. Lilly was a master weaver who taught many weavers across Northern California.

MSS 160, Dorothy M. Hill Collection, Meriam Library Special Collections, California State University, Chico

BASKETS

Native Californians are world-famous for their basketry skills. They are highly skilled weavers and create baskets for many different purposes. Baskets were traditionally used for gathering food, carrying water, cooking, and food storage. They also served as cups, plates, and bowls for eating and drinking. Today, they serve many of the same purposes, or are used for display.

Nisenan weavers typically make their baskets out of willow and redbud. They can be made in all sizes and shapes and are woven loosely or tightly depending on their purpose. Water and cooking baskets are woven so tightly that they are watertight. Nisenan people place hot stones in baskets to heat food and boil water. Open weave baskets are used as traps for fish and grasshoppers.

A Nisenan woman places a hot stone in a basket to heat food. Photo taken at Bidwell Bar, California, 1903.

MSS 160, Dorothy M. Hill Collection, Meriam Library Special Collections, California State University, Chico

Panel 5 of 12

MALARIA

A few European and American explorers visited the Sacramento Valley during the Spanish Colonial Period (1769-1821) but did not settle here. The Nisenan remained independent from Spanish colonizers. Unfortunately, they were not protected from the diseases that Europeans carried and spread.

In 1833 fur trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company brought malaria with them into the Sacramento Valley. Malaria did not exist in California before this. The wetlands of the valley were the perfect environment for the mosquitos that carry malaria. This caused the disease to quickly and aggressively spread through the region. At least two-thirds of the valley's population died.

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Panel 7 of 12

A "Free" State

The earliest known photograph of an Indigenous Californian. This unknown Nisenan man sat for a daguerreotype sometime in the 1850s.
Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum, Los Angeles; [illegible]

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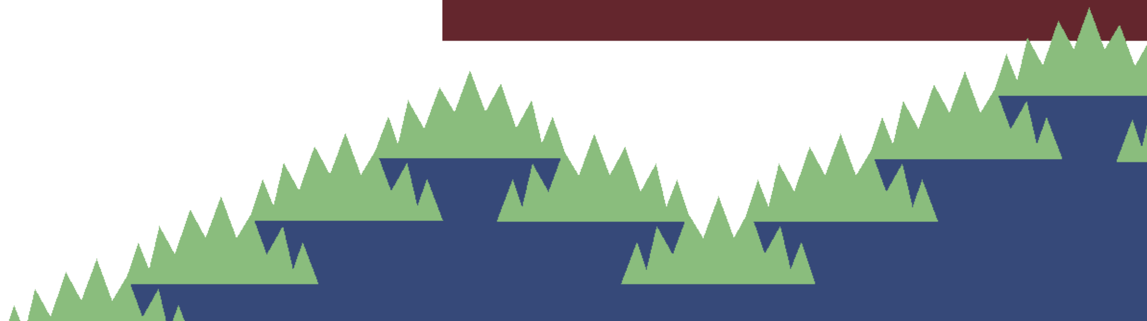

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ROUND VALLEY INDIAN RESERVATION

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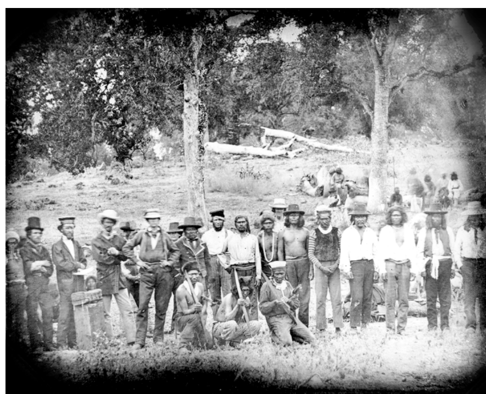

Indigenous men from various Northern California tribes and white government officials. They are standing at the site of the future Round Valley Indian Reservation, circa 1858.

Mendocino County Historical Society Photographic Collection, all rights reserved

RANCHERIAS

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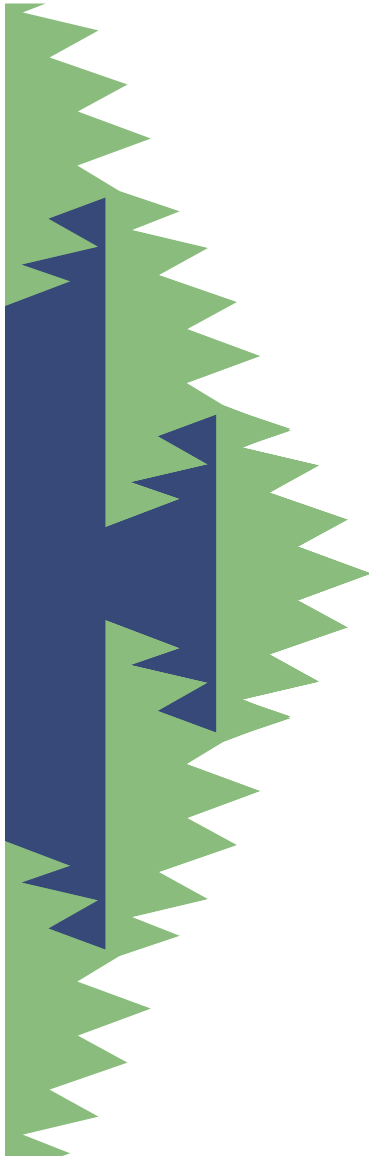

TERMINATION

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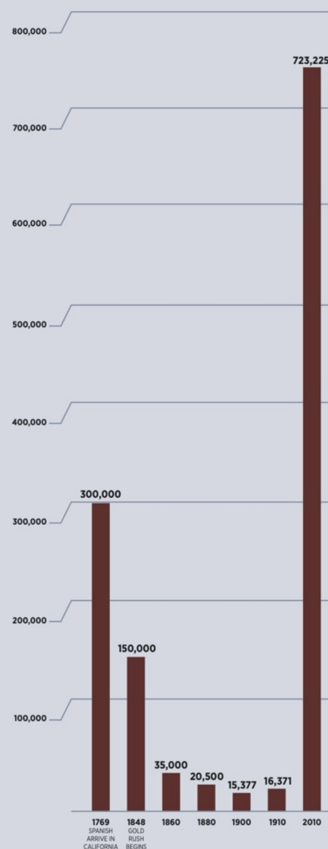
A group of dancers and traditionalists share dances and songs they learned from Nisenan, Wintu, Pomo, and Maidu elders. This photo was taken at the fourth annual Nisenan Heritage Day, hosted by the Nevada City Rancheria.

Photo by Avery Leigh White, 2012

CALIFORNIA'S INDIGENOUS POPULATION



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Finalized Exhibit, Image 1 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 2 of 13

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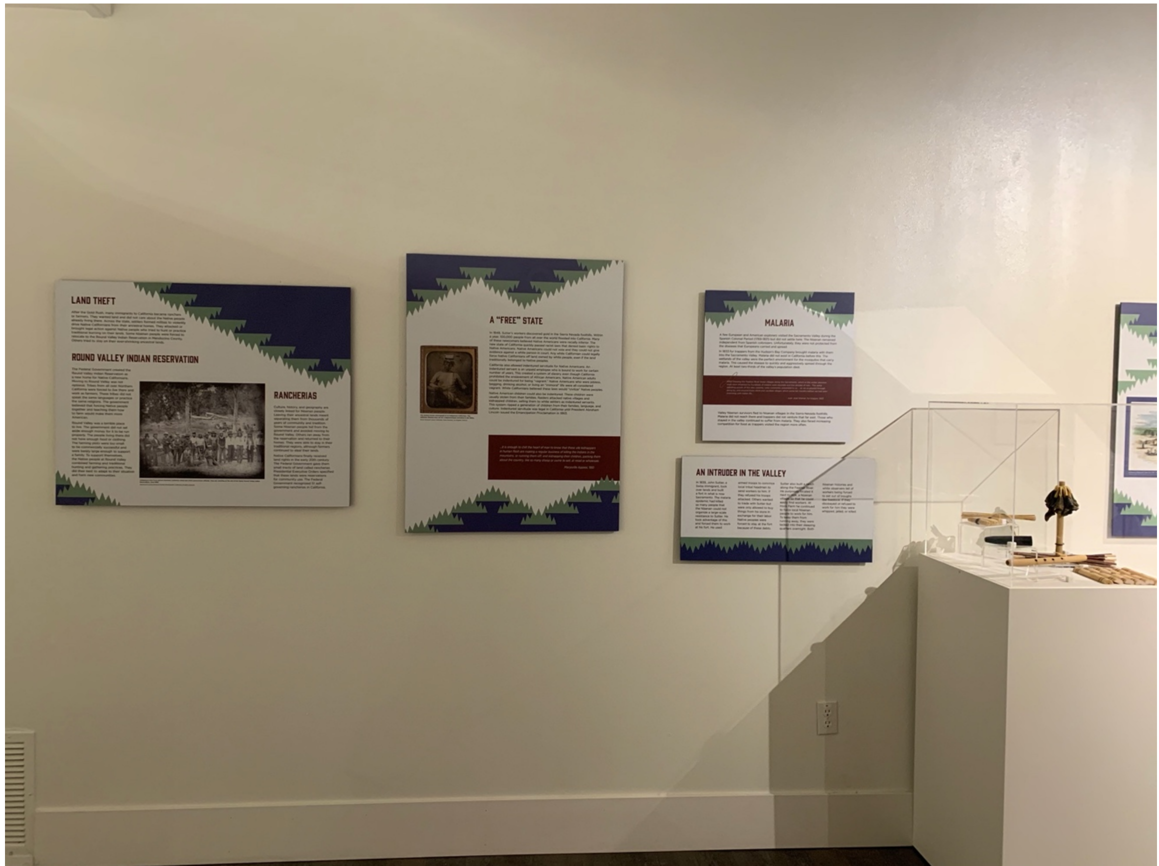


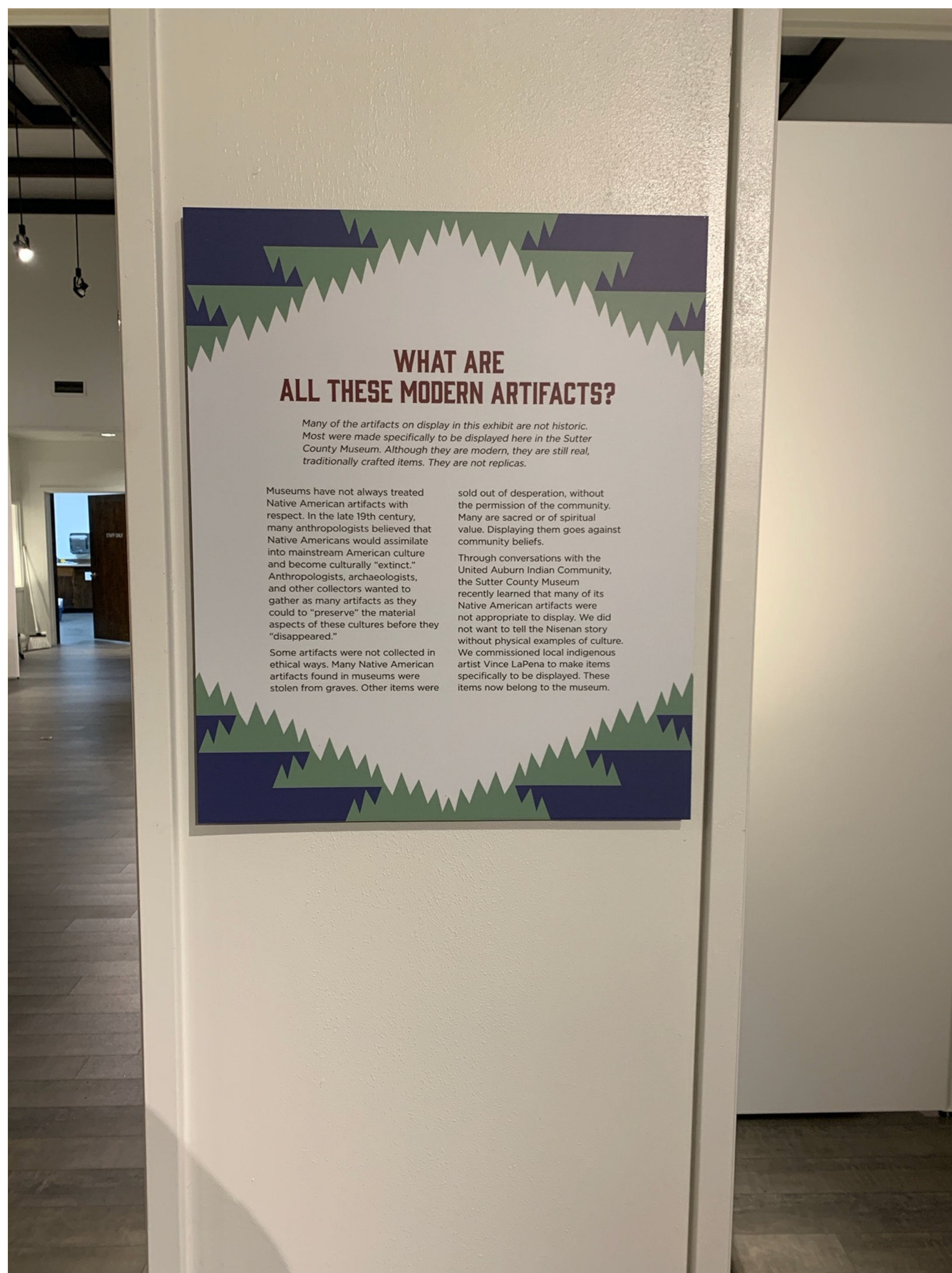
Finalized Exhibit, Image 4 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 5 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 6 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 7 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 8 of 13



Finalized Exhibit, Image 9 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 10 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 11 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 12 of 13

Finalized Exhibit, Image 13 of 13

1. Worm Carrier

sedge grass, leather tie, dogbane fiber string

Worms are carried inside of cases like
these and used as fish bate.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

2. Deer Bone Awl

sharpened deer bone

Awls are used to weave and repair baskets.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

3. Grapevine Hoops

grapevine

Grapevine hoops are rolled along the ground
or tossed in the air as a target practice game.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

4. Digging Stick

fire sharpened edges

Digging sticks are used to dig up roots and bulbs.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

Case #1 Object Labels

1. Basket

coiled redbud basket

This basket has signs of wear and bug damage.
It is missing some stitches and has been repaired.

Found in the Sutter Buttes, date unknown

2. Soap Root Brush

soap root fibers, cotton fiber string,
soap root pulp glue

Soap root brushes are used to brush ground acorn meal out of baskets and mortars while making acorn flour.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

3. Basket

materials unknown

This basket is watertight. It was made by a Native woman who lived near the Sutter Bypass in the early 20th Century.

Found in Butte Slough, c. 1912

4. Soap Root Brush

soap root fibers, pine pitch/charcoal glue

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

5. Basket

coiled reed basket

Foothill Nisenan, date unknown

Case #2 Object Labels, Page 2 of 2

1. Elderberry Flute

elderberry wood with burnt holes

Musical instruments like this one were played for fun.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

2. Staves Set

maple wood staves with burnt designs, willow counting sticks

Staves is gambling game, played for fun and for money.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

3. Steatite Pipe

steatite (soapstone)

Smoking was a pastime for older people.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

Case #3 Object Labels, Page 1 of 2

4. Handgame Set

deer leg bones with pitch/charcoal stripes,
willow counting sticks

Handgame is a gambling game, played for fun and for money.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

5. Deer Hoof Rattle

elderberry wood handle with burnt designs,
dogbane fiber string, leather strips, and deer hooves

Young women received rattles like this one at puberty. They were used in the deer dance ceremony and as a rhythm instrument.

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

Case #3 Object Labels, Page 2 of 2

1. Soap Root Brush

soap root fibers, dogbane fiber string,
soap root pulp glue

Vince LaPena, c. 2019

2. Mortar and Pestle

granite

Stone mortars and pestles were used to grind food, especially acorns.

Found in Yuba City, date unknown

3. Basket

sedge, redbud, and willow

Unknown origin, c. 1890

Case #4 Object Labels

Rancherias verses Reservations

After California became a state, the government wanted to create reservations for Native Californians. Reservations are plots of land reserved for Native Americans by the United States government. Native Californians and government officials negotiated eighteen land treaties between 1851 and 1852.

Unfortunately, the Senate questioned the California tribes' rights to the land and refused to ratify the treaties. The government only created two reservations in Northern California—Round Valley and Hoopa Valley. Most Native Californians did not live on the reservations. These tribes became homeless as they did not legally own their ancestral lands. They also lacked federal recognition, which meant they did not have legal representation or government support.

At the turn of the twentieth century Native elders told members of the Northern California Indian Association (NCIA), a charitable organization, about the unratified treaties. The NCIA lobbied for the federal government to recognize Native American land rights in California. They wanted the government to honor the promises it had made fifty years before by giving land to the homeless tribes.

In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt commissioned a survey of California to count the number of non-reservation tribes. Between 1906 and 1910, Congress set aside money to purchase land for these homeless Native Californians. The parcels, called rancherias, allowed fifty-one tribes across California to receive permanent homes and federal recognition.

Exhibit Handout #1

Genocide in the Golden State

"Now that general Indian hostilities have commenced, we hope that the Government will render such aid as will enable the citizens of the North to carry on a war of extermination until the last red skin of these tribes has been killed. Then, and not until then, are our lives and property safe. Extermination is no longer even a question of time—the time has already arrived, the work has been commenced, and let the first white man who says treaty or peace be regarded as a traitor and coward."

- *Marysville Daily Herald*, August 12, 1853

Between 1846 and 1873, California's government carried out a genocide against Native Californians. American settlers wanted land and were willing to take the most extreme measures to get it. They believed indigenous Californians were savage, violent, and racially inferior. In his 1851 State of the State Address, California governor Peter Burnett declared that "a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct..."

The state government paid militias to violently drive Native people off their land and attack those who resisted or fought back. Vigilante groups killed Native Californians to "protect" settlers from crimes. These crimes were usually minor offenses, such as livestock theft. State authorities refused to prosecute white settlers who committed crimes against Native peoples, including rape and murder. They also looked the other way when militias massacred Native peoples in far-Northern California.

Historians believe that as many as 16,000 Native Californians died during the genocide. In June 2019, Governor Gavin Newsom became the first California governor to formally acknowledge and apologize for the genocide.

Exhibit Handout #2

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