

THE NISENAN PEOPLE

This article on the Nisenan people was prepared by Norman L. Wilson, retired State Archeologist with the State of California. Among many other credits, he was Coordinator of Native American Programs and his work on the Nisenan Indians was included in the Smithsonian Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 8, for which he received much acclaim as an authority on his subject. Mr. Wilson is also a Life member of the Placer County Historical Society.

THE NISENAN PEOPLE OF THE MAIDU TRIBE OF CALIFORNIA INDIANS inhabited the valley plain and mountains at such historically familiar places as Sacramento, Marysville, Nevada City, Auburn, Coloma and Placerville. These natives, whose name simply means "People", were a vibrant nation of friendly, happy people who identified themselves by village rather than tribal name.

Prehistorically, the Nisenan occupied the drainages of the American, Bear and Yuba rivers, from the Sacramento River in the west to the crest of the Sierras to the east. They spoke a dialect which identified them from the Northern Maidu and they diverged into two distinct cultural groups known as the Valley Nisenan and the Mountain Nisenan.

The Valley Nisenan lived along the valley drainages and were river-oriented in their lifeways. Their ancestors had lived similarly in the same region for at least two thousand years. Villages were built on low mounds and sometimes numbered over five hundred people. Houses were dome-shaped, covered with earth or tule. Each large village had a dance house which was semi-subterranean and sometimes measured over fifty feet in diameter. Other structures included brush shelters, sweat houses and acorn granaries.

Villages with a population of over five hundred people are unusual for non-agricultural peoples, but the Central Valley supported many such Indian villages prior to the Anglo intrusion. Nowhere in Nisenan mythology or folklore is there mention of starvation which indicates a great natural abundance.

Their food included acorns and seeds, tule roots, berries and fruits, Salmon, sturgeon, trout and other fresh-water fish that were obtained by using tule boats, and log canoes, weirs, nets and harpoons. Fresh-water shellfish, water fowl, game animals such as elk, deer and antelope and smaller species provided an abundant variety of food throughout the year.

The Mountain Nisenan lived in the foothills and along the ridges of the steep Sierra canyons. Their food included acorns, seeds and game with less emphasis

on the water fowl-fish foods of the valley people. These mountain villages were much smaller and it was common for small family groups to live away from the main village during the seasonal food gathering rounds. Their culture was much simpler than the valley people with whom they sometimes fought.

The Nisenan, like most Central California Indians, made fine basketry, feather robes and elaborate ceremonial costumes. There was extensive trade between villages as well as surrounding groups including the Coastal Indians to the west and the Washoe to the east. The largest social-political unit was the village which had its headman or "captain" who usually inherited his office but could be chosen as leaders for such activities as hunting and warfare. Each village had a town crier who spoke to the people on social behavior and announced any news. Perhaps the most important persons of the village were the shamans or religious leaders, which among the Nisenan, could be either men or women. They cured the sick and practiced revenge, conducted elaborate religious ceremonies and attempted to control the natural environment with their magic. It was not a male-dominated society with women in a subservient role. Even though there were secret fraternal societies and restrictions on the use of the dance and sweat houses, in everyday life the women were respected and each person fulfilled a life role to make the village a vital unit.

Ceremonies related to the seasons, harvesting of food and rituals centering around their origin, their Gods and rules of social behavior were very important to the Nisenan. These were performed through dances involving God-impersonations and the enactment of mythical stories of the Nisenan past. The rituals surrounding death were very important to these people also. It was vital that they be buried at the village of their birth. There were family mourning ceremonies at the time of death involving the whole village. At the "second burning" a great amount of personal wealth was burned in memory of the dead.

The Nisenan had brief contact with the Spanish when Moraga traveled through the valley in 1806, Father Duran in 1818, and with the Spanish and Mexican expeditions and escaping missionized Indians. Their first real contact with the Anglos came with the trappers such as Jed Smith and the Hudson Bay Company men after 1828. These contacts culminated in a devastating epidemic which wiped out over half of the Valley Indians in 1833, a blow from which they never recovered. Captain Sutter and other settlers after 1839, further disrupted the remnants of the Valley Nisenan culture but had little effect on the mountain peoples who carried on their prehistoric lifeways until the discovery of gold and the ensuing Gold Rush.

They were an honest people who tried to remain friendly with the European

newcomers. Yet, their nation was virtually destroyed by the ethnocentric attitude of the Anglo invaders who brought with them preconceived animosity toward all Indians. Lack of immunity to introduced diseases also hastened their demise.

Unfortunately, the Mountain Nisenan villages occupied logical sites for gold camps, and within two or three years those Indians who had not adapted to the ways of the Whites, were scattered throughout the less desirable areas in the mountains. Early settler accounts verify that the Nisenan were friendly people with the highest regard for the Americans, yet they were hunted down and killed indiscriminately, men, women and children, and their villages destroyed by the gold-seekers. This senseless killing was often for revenge when the Anglos could find no one else to blame. The Indians were scapegoats for the frustration of the newcomers as were most minorities during the California Gold Rush.

Throughout this time of desecration and wanton destruction, a few of these proud people managed to survive in more remote areas and at the edges of the gold towns, and carry with them the cultural values and lifeways of their ancestors. Those who could find work were employed in logging, ranching, construction and domestic pursuits. Many ceased to identify themselves as Indians to avoid harassment by the Whites.

Today, the remaining Nisenan Indians are regaining the pride of their ancestry. We are only beginning to appreciate these proud and happy people who lived for thousands of years in harmony with their land and their resources.

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