



The Maidu Indians

The Indians that lived in and around present day Roseville were the Southern Maidu or Nisenan. Current archaeological thought is that these Indians most likely descended from people who migrated from Siberia down and along the coast of California, and then spread throughout North and South America. California Indian people tell us that they evolved from this landscape and are a part of this land. However they arrived, by 15,000 years ago, people were living over both continents, and their populations were growing.

There were somewhere between 310,000 and 500,000 Indians living in what is now California when the first Europeans arrived. This was approximately 10% of the Indians living north of Mexico. The greatest number lived in the Central Valley because of its rich resources.

The Maidu, which means “the people,” lived not only in the Sacramento Valley, but also in the surrounding foothills. The southernmost were called the Nisenan, which means “from among us” or “on our side”. Maidu society consisted of tribelets. A tribelet was a group of two to twenty or more villages. In each group one village was the main village, the site of the ceremonial and religious buildings such as round houses. The villages could be as large as 500 people or as small as one or two families. Organization in the villages was informal. Leaders were more like advisors. There might be one leader for war, another for religious matters; but one leader could not speak for the village on all matters.

The Maidu spent about ½ of their work day hunting, gathering and preparing food and the implements used for these tasks. Like most Native Californians, the Nisenan used acorns extensively. Acorns provided a well-balanced nutrition of carbohydrates, proteins and fat. The acorns were gathered in the fall. Some were used immediately and the rest were stored in freestanding granaries for use in the winter. After shelling, the acorns were ground in mortars into a meal, much like our current day flour. Before the meal could be eaten the bitter tasting tannic acid needed to be removed. The meal was placed on leaves in a sand depression, and water was poured over the meal, leaching out the tannic acid. This leached meal was then cooked in a tightly woven basket using fire heated rocks. The nutritious meal could be eaten as a mush, soup or bread. Imagine the time it took to gather and prepare about 500-1000 pounds of acorns for each adult each year! Acorn meal is an efficient food source as it provides more calories per serving than wheat or corn. Nearly everything nature had to offer was used as a food source to supplement the acorns. A few animals were not eaten, such as the vulture, coyote or owl; but other game, fish, seeds, insects, nuts, berries and grasses were included in their diet.

The Nisenan were not farmers. They intensively managed the native plants and the landscape around them for food and fiber. Fires were set annually in the oak woodland to make it easier to collect acorns beneath the oaks. These fires would also eliminate some insect pests and fungi that would otherwise have attacked the acorns. Burning old growth also encouraged new growth, providing more food for the deer, creating larger herds and thus more meat. Bulbs that were dug out of the ground for food usually had little bulblets attached. The larger bulb was taken for food and the smaller bulblets were replanted, making more food available in that location each year.

Willow and redbud were cut or burned back periodically, so that long, straight shoots would sprout for use in baskets. Soil around sedge roots was dug and loosened to encourage growth of straight roots suitable for basketweaving. Indian tobacco, used for ceremonial purposes, was watered and tended. Two hundred years ago, the California landscape looked like a park, because it was tended by all the people who lived here. The valley and foothills provided enough food and shelter to meet their needs.

Because of the abundance of natural resources, the Nisenan had time to practice a beautiful and elaborate form of the Kuksu ceremony, a religion common throughout the Central Valley. During the ceremonies, the people dressed in elaborate regalia and performed dances. Clapper sticks, often made of split and hollowed elderberry branches, were used to provide rhythm rather than drums. There was also time to play and bet on skill, agility and guessing games.

As with all Native Americans, the Nisenan's contact with Europeans brought deadly change. It is estimated that 75% of the Central Valley Indians died in this epidemic alone, leaving entire villages empty. With the discovery of gold in 1848, thousands of miners poured into the area displacing native people and disrupting the lands, waters, and wildlife on which they depended. As pioneers discovered the fertile valley, farmers and ranchers took over the land, forcing natives to abandon their traditional lifestyle. The Nisenan society was changed forever, and the few people left were forced to live by new rules.

The spiritual, community and land management practices used by California Indian cultures are being recognized for their value to society today. The trail tour and the Maidu exhibits in the museum are a good place to start learning about the history of these people as well as their contemporary accomplishments.

