

**THE VALLEY NISENAN:
EARLY RESIDENTS OF MAIDU PARK, ROSEVILLE CALIFORNIA**

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TERMS:

BEDROCK MORTARS: Deep circular holes in granite bedrock used for grinding acorns.

PESTLE: Elongated cobble tool used with mortar holes for grinding acorns.

PETROGLYPHS: Artistic designs pecked or abraded into rock surfaces.

MIDDEN: Dark sooty soil at Indian village sites formed after intensive occupation.

The Roseville area, including the place known as "Maidu Park", lies within the region occupied by the Valley Nisenan at the time of first contact with Euro-americans. The term Nisenan, which means "of us" or "from our side", is applied to the southern Maidu Indians who made their home in the drainages of the American, Yuba and Bear Rivers, and the lower reaches of the Feather River (Wilson and Towne 1978:387). They have been subdivided into Hill and Valley groups who spoke a mutually intelligible Penutian dialect.

Nisenan population in pre-contact times is thought to have numbered about 9,000 (Kroeber 1925). Political organization was based on "triblet" groups who centered around group ownership and use of a territory. Formal food gathering quests were based on seasonal ripening and the intimate knowledge of resources near their villages. People did not depend on one crop, they gathered staples all year. Hunting, gathering and fishing activities, however, were intensified in the late fall. It was then that whole families or villages would go to gather acorns. Young men would occupy themselves hunting or fishing while women and children would gather acorns dislodged from their branches by old men using long poles. When the crop was especially abundant, acorns were stockpiled in large granaries and occasionally traded. Often the grass under oak trees was burned to make acorns easier to gather (Wilson 1982:7).

For consumption, acorns were removed from the bottom of a granary, cracked on an "acorn anvil" (a flat stone with a small pit pecked into it), and ground into a fine flour using a bedrock mortar and stone or hardwood pestle. A soaproot brush was used to control scattering. After leaching in a sandy basin to remove tannin, the flour was cooked into a mush, soup or baked into cakes. Water tight baskets were used to boil it with rocks from a fire dipped in water before being placed in the cooking basket. (This practice tends to fracture the stones and

accounts for their abundance in the archaeological deposits of living areas.) Constant stirring prevented the basket from being burned in the process. Digger pine and sugar pine nuts were also highly prized. Buckeyes, which required careful leaching, were used as an emergency food source when the acorn crop was poor.

Roots were also important food to the Nisenan. They were dug with fire-hardened digging sticks along water courses in the spring and summer. Roots were consumed raw, steamed, baked or dried for later use. Littlejohn (1928) describes the wild onion (ohan), wild sweet potato (su'kum), and "Indian potato" (du'bus) as being the most desired. Grasses, herbs and rushes provided food as well as material for baskets and clothing.

Game was abundant in Nisenan territory. Roasting, baking and drying were all used when hunting was successful. Communal deer drives were practiced. Several villages might participate with the best marksmen doing the killing with bow and arrow. A circle of fire was used to drive the deer to a central area, often a rocky hilltop, where hunters would be waiting. A group "captain" would divide the results.

Single hunters would stalk deer or rabbits using hide and antler decoys. Antelope were hunted in drives or with decoys. Elk were killed when they were most vulnerable - on soft ground near streams. Nets, deadfalls, traps and snares were set to capture smaller game. Beals noted that nearly all foods were eaten. No insect or animal is mentioned as avoided except for the grizzly bear, dog, wolf and coyote. The only birds not eaten were the buzzard, eagle and pileated woodpecker (1933:346).

Grasshoppers were especially prized by the Valley Nisenan. Joel Parker Whitney, an early settler in the Roseville - Lincoln area, provides the following description of their capture by native people who were still visiting the area:

"These Indians often engaged in gathering grasshoppers when they were plentiful, in the following manner: First, by sinking a well-hole in a convenient locality, of some five or six feet in depth and of equal width, keeping it half full of water; then engaging all hands with bushes and tree branches in beating forward the grasshoppers on the ground toward and into the well, where they were soon drowned; then heating some large stones on a fire made for the purpose, from which the stones were rolled forward when sufficiently heated into the well, and the water, heating up, cooked the grasshoppers. When accounting done by the head chief, the hoppers were raked out upon the adjoining ground to dry; the latter effect being reached, they were then packed away in skins for use" (Whitney 1906:30).

Fishing was important in the drainages of the American River. Salmon were netted and speared in season from favored fishing locations that might be owned by the group. Dip nets and weirs were also used. Lamprey eels were gathered when moving upstream to spawn. Where they used their sucker mouths to ascend rocky stretches, they could be easily captured. Trout and

suckers were taken with soaproot poison or driven into the shallows to be captured by hand. Large quantities of freshwater mussels were harvested; so were crayfish.

The Nisenan built two types of permanent structures, the dwelling (hu) and the dance house (kum). Valley people built their dwellings on the ground surface with a frame of green oak poles that they covered with vertically stacked bark, brush or grass bundles. Earth was then piled on top. The door was said to have no particular orientation (Beals 1933:344). The kum was a larger structure, sometimes 20 feet or more in diameter, which was excavated several feet into the earth. Forked oak posts formed the center supports (two or four were used depending on structure size) around a central fire pit. Young pine or buckeye poles served as rafters. The whole structure was then covered with bark, grass and earth. The kum was a ceremonial, not secular structure. A great deal of importance was attached to its erection and maintenance.

Major Nisenan settlements were concentrated along the larger streams where village sites often occupied low hills with a southern exposure. Typically, four to twelve family dwellings measuring ten to twelve feet in diameter would constitute a village. Fifteen to forty people might be in residence. A larger village might contain a kum and numerous acorn granaries.

While the food technology and seasonal round are well established for the Nisenan from ethnographic accounts, place and village names are poorly known. Littlejohn (1928:34) provided ethnogeographical information for the Roseville area.

NISENAN VILLAGE SETTLEMENTS NEAR ROSEVILLE

Pitchiku A Nisenan village is reported where Roseville is now, about one mile west of Maidu Park. This is said to be only a temporary camp for acorn gathering. Other informants contradict this and talk of a dancehouse. Archaeological surveys indicate this area must have had a more glorious history in earlier centuries. Deep middens, abundant bedrock mortars, rich artifact concentrations indicate an intensive occupation along Dry Creek in the present city of Roseville, and a cluster of village sites including one with elaborate petroglyphs exist at Maidu Park which is one mile east of town. One or both of these places might have been the Nisenan village of Pitchiku.

Bakacha At Rocklin, this was a permanent settlement, but had no kum. (Note: the exact site referred to here has not been identified. Mining may have erased some evidence, but these terms probably refer to general not specific locations.)

Bamuma Where the town of Lincoln now stands, about 12 miles east of Auburn. There was no ceremonial dancehouse (kum) there, as it was only for fishing, hunting rabbits, and gathering acorns. (This is somewhat at odds with the abundant archaeological deposits recorded there.) There was a big salt spring at Bamuma which was controlled by the Auburn people. The settlement was said to have been named by a man named "Ba" (wild carrot) who ate his lunch there

one day. When he had finished and departed, the Indian children picked up and ate what he had left behind. They found it tasted salty. (Note: the exact site of this salt spring and camp have not been determined. There are several village sites with numerous bedrock mortars and significant archaeological remains along Auburn Ravine in present day Lincoln. As is the case in many inland cultures worldwide, salt was a highly prized commodity which could be a valuable trade item to those who controlled its source.)

Nisenan social organization was village based with kinship relationships being of paramount importance. Leadership was provided by a headman or "captain" who organized group ceremonial functions and coordinated group hunting efforts. Leadership was by group acclaim when the group lost faith in a captain, a new one would be chosen. A highly regarded man or woman might fill this role. A typical group would control a defined geographic area that might encompass 100 square miles. Relations were generally friendly, but disputes would sometimes occur over trespass, hunting rights, sorcery or ceremonial obligations. Murder was always avenged by killing the murderer, or, preferably, a close relative. Fighting was usually carried out on an individual basis, but when feuds broke out between families, raids and surprise attacks were not uncommon. Usually a dispute was settled by one family moving away to take up residence elsewhere. Sometimes, however, disputes led to serious action. The killing of Auburn/Nevada City men in a dance house near Roseville in the 1820's caused a deep seated hatred of these people. The foothill Nisenan explain the devastating malaria epidemic of 1833 as being caused by foothill shamans sending "bad air" into the valley as vengeance (Payen 1961:23).

Beals' informants were unanimous in reporting that the Nisenan always burned their dead, until the practice was stopped by whites. In cremation, all property (except house, wife and children) was burned. The house would usually be torn down and moved a short distance away. Charred remains were placed in a basket and buried by the same people who burned the body (Beals 1933:363). Kroeber was told that only those who died of sickness were cremated; otherwise, burial being the customary way of disposing the dead (1929:265). Very little is known about the Nisenan mourning ceremony other than early travelers to the region note great gatherings, wailing and faces covered with ashes (Wilson 1982:19). Important seasonal dances were the Kamin dance, performed in late March for the first clover or beginning of spring; the Weda or flower dance of late April; Lole dance, done in honor of the first fruit; Dape or coyote dance; Nemusla or "big time" where people might come from great distances to participate; and the Husla, a local, festive dance (Wilson 1982:19). The Kuksu religion and its dances also made a late entry into Nisenan territory.

Trade was well developed between mountain and foothill groups, but less so between valley and foothill people. From the mountains came black oak acorns (the most highly prized type) and sugar pine nuts in exchange for salt, game, fish, roots, grasses, beads and shells. Salt springs are reported at Bamuma and at Siyakaiyan, near present day Cool (Littlejohn 1928:34). These places are said to have endowed their owners with a very favorable trade balance. The valley Nisenan also traded widely outside their own linguistic group. To the Washoe they supplied

acorns; to the Patwin, obsidian, woodpecker feathers and shell beads. They received carrying baskets, seed beaters and winnowing trays from the Washoe. Log rafts were received from the northwestern Maidu (Davis 1961:42).

The Nisenan were relatively untouched by Euro-american influence until the beginning of the 19th Century. In 1833 a devastating malaria epidemic struck the Nisenan as well as many other interior California groups. Up to 90 percent of the aboriginal population may have perished within a few years. The influx of miners and settlers that followed James Marshall's gold discovery in 1848, put an end to the traditional Nisenan way of life. Many individuals and families have survived, however, and Nisenan culture, dances and crafts are currently being revived. Traditional Nisenan society is well described in Beals (1933), Kroeber (1925) Wilson and Towne (1978), Wilson (1982) and Littlejohn (1928).

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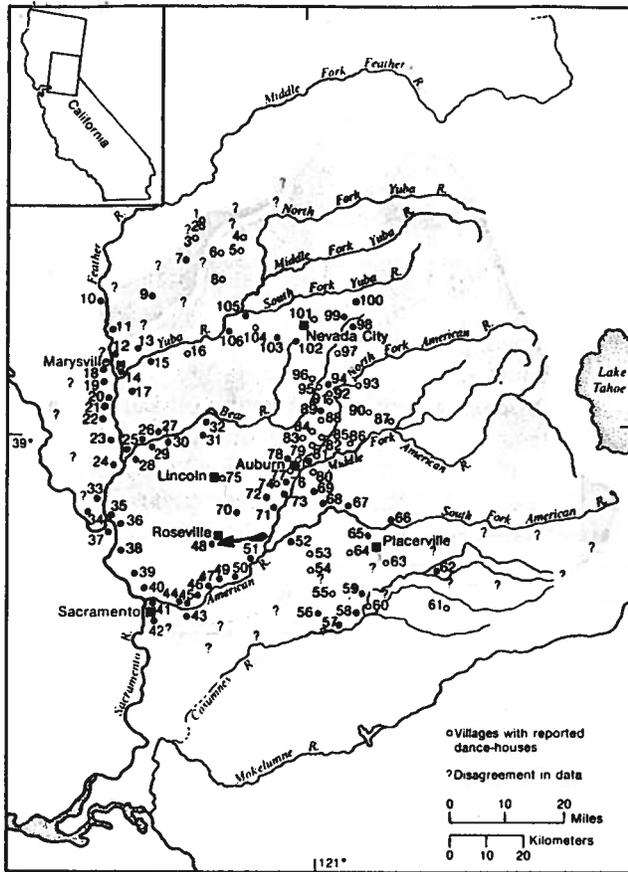


Fig. 1. Tribal territory with selected major villages. 1, Chichimbupu; 2, Manoma; 3, Onehuyan; 4, Mominku; 5, Polomyan; 6, Kaloma; 7, Helto; 8, Tuhu; 9, Toto; 10, Bayu; 11, Honkut; 12, Tomchoh; 13, Kulu; 14, Yupu; 15, Chiemwie; 16, Onopoma; 17, Taisida; 18, Molokum; 19, Mimal; 20, Sisum; 21, Hok; 22, Yukulme; 23, Popo; 24, Ollash; 25, Holloh; 26, Lelikian; 27, Intanto; 28, Homiting; 29, Talak; 30, Mulamchapa; 31, Bushamul; 32, Shutamul; 33, Yokol; 34, Olo; 35, Wollok; 36, Leuchi; 37, Nawe; 38, Wishuna; 39, Totola; 40, Pusune; 41, Momol; 42, Sama; 43, Yalisumni; 44, Sekumni; 45, Kadema; 46, Kishkish; 47, Yamankudu; 48, Pichiku; 49, Ekwo; 50, Shiba; 51, Yodok; 52, Yukulu; 53, Bamon; 54, Polunkit; 55, Chitokpakan; 56, Wapumni; 57, Kutba; 58, Komyan; 59, Opok; 60, Miminik; 61, Chletisu; 62, Chikimisi; 63, Ilemo; 64, Wuhulak; 65, Ekelepakan; 66, Tumeli; 67, Koloma; 68, Chapa; 69, Okilkil; 70, Bakacha; 71, Odayan; 72, Tete; 73, Opule; 74, Pihu; 75, Bamuma; 76, Kotomyan; 77, Hu'ul; 78, Molma; 79, Bisian; 80, Siyakayan; 81, Chulku; 82, Didit; 83, Penui; 84, Popokemul; 85, Hakaka; 86, Watas; 87, Hempamyam; 88, Wemea; 89, Oyema; 90, Hembem; 91, Koyo; 92, Sumyan; 93, Palampenonu; 94, Soloklok; 95, Kaubusma; 96, Tuyi; 97, Siponi; 98, Ustuma; 99, Wokodot; 100, Kushna; 101, Tetema; 102, Hi'et; 103, Tsekankan; 104, Kayempaskan; 105, Yamaku; 106, Panpakan. These names have been anglicized wherever possible on the basis of the spellings in Kroeber 1925, 1929. Sources: Bancroft 1874-1876; Beals 1933; Bennyhoff 1961; Delano 1854; Gudde 1933; Hodge 1907-1910; Kroeber 1925, 1929, 1932a; Lienhard 1941; Littlejohn 1928; log of the ship *Alert*, 1841; Merriam 1966-1967; Powers 1877; Riddell 1972; Sacramento Claims 1928 (45 Stat. 602); Schoolcraft 1860; Sutter 1939; Wilkes 1849; Wilson 1957-1963.



NAA, Smithsonian.

Fig. 4. Captain Tom of Auburn wearing a rabbit-fur robe, flicker quill headband, a stick with woodpecker scalps and flicker feathers, and an abalone gorget. Photograph probably by A. W. Chase, before Aug. 1874.



Fig. 3. Lizzie Enos leaching acorn meal. A bedsheet is placed in a sand basin and surrounded with pine needles. The meal is put in the sheet and warm water is poured over it. Photograph by Norman Wilson, Oct. 1958.

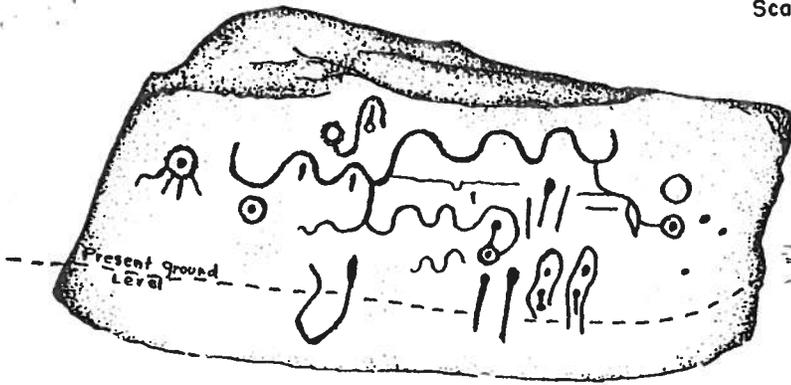


Fig. 2. Lizzie Enos using a soaproot brush to sweep back into the mortar acorn meal scattered during pounding. A Maidu winnowing tray lies nearby. Photograph by Norman Wilson, Oct. 1958.

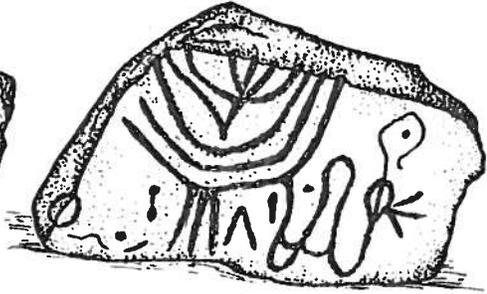


NAA, Smithsonian.
 Fig. 5. Captain Tom's wife wearing 10-yard necklace of 1,160 "money" beads made of clam (probably *Saxidomus* sp.) and a deerskin girdle and headband decorated with abalone. Photograph probably by A.W. Chase, before Aug. 1874.

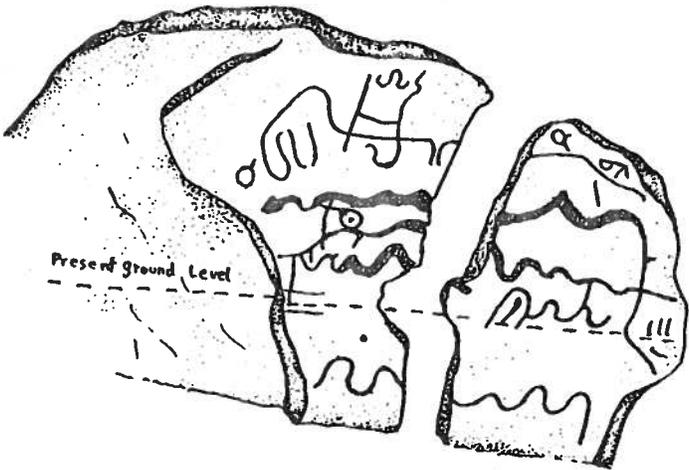
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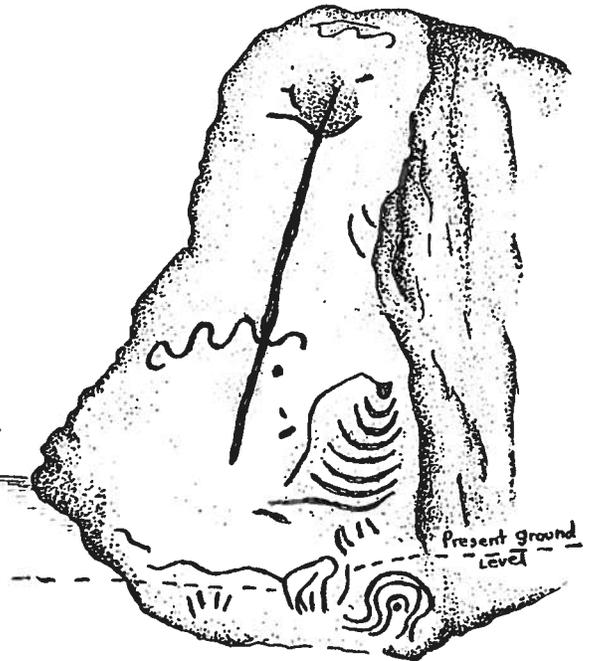
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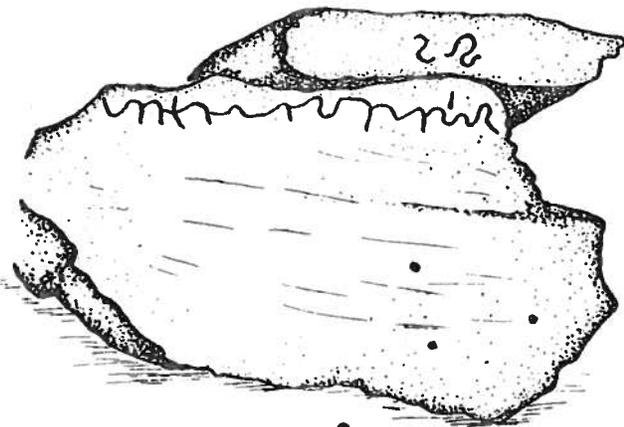
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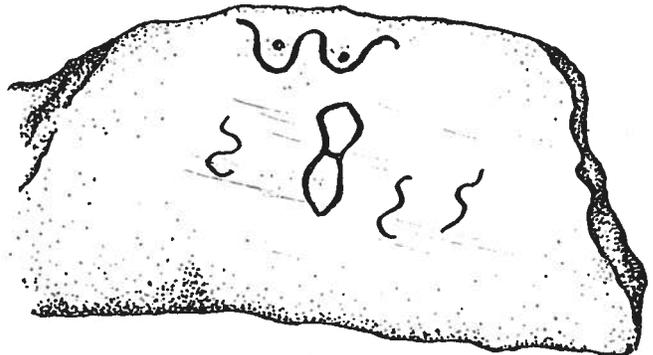
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PETROGLYPHS AT MAIDU PARK
illustrated by:
Louis A. Payen (1959)