

Nisenan, Rocklin's Earliest Culture

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Photos from Ooti a Maidu Legacy by Richard Simpson



Maidu Lizzie Enos near Meadow Vista in 1954 cracking acorns

They built their villages on low rises along Rocklin's streams, hunted game in Rocklin's hills and meadows and gathered fruits, nuts, seeds and roots here for 1,500 years before European explorers made contact with them in the early 1800's. They were the Nisenan, the southernmost of three linguistic groups of California's Maidu culture.

Nisenan territory was east of the Sacramento River, west of the Sierra crest and generally north of the American River. The northern extent of Nisenan lands included Rocklin but an exact northern boundary is difficult to fix because some Nisenan moved seasonally among mountainous areas, the lower hills and the Sacramento Valley floor.

Their Sacramento Valley lands were only sparsely populated and contained few permanent settlements. Valley Nisenan built sunken 10-15 foot diameter dome shaped homes with earth or tule roofs. Larger villages, which could number up to 500 people, included 50-foot diameter ceremonial dance houses,

acorn granaries and sweathouses where men talked, sang and sweated away their concerns.

The Nisenan raised tobacco and smoked it in stone pipes. They hunted and consumed all available types of animals, but not coyotes because they believed that coyotes embodied the souls of Nisenan ancestors. Men pierced their ears for adornment, trimmed their beards with hot embers and, weather permitting, went naked. Women and children gathered and prepared a wide variety of flora for food. They favored the acorn of the Black Oak which they cracked on acorn anvils, pounded in bedrock mortars, leached with water from nearby streams, cooked in watertight baskets and served as soup, mush or cakes fried on heated flat stones.

Rocklin's Nisenan may have been Valley Nisenan with permanent village sites here, but at least one expert thinks that they were Hill Nisenan who traveled here only seasonally from the Sierra foothills to hunt and gather their food during ripening.

There is ample evidence that Rocklin was an important center of Nisenan life. Dozens of bedrock mortar sites border Rocklin streams. One site, at Johnson Springview Park, contains 62 mortars, is located near a year-around spring and is among low mounds which might cover the refuse of hundreds of years of Nisenan settlement. Also, archeologists have recently identified 33 sites at the northern extent of Clover Valley containing hundreds of bedrock mortars and dozens of depressions in the earth indicating home and dance house locations. Excavations have revealed artifacts of obsidian, seashell and other materials not native to this area, suggesting that Rocklin's Nisenan might have played a central role in trade among Northern California's tribes.

The first Europeans to make contact with the Nisenan were the Spanish in 1808. There is no evidence that the Nisenan were ever missionized, however the Nisenan harbored non-Nisenan Indians escaping the missions during the early 1800's.



Lizzie crushes acorns for bread. According to anthropologist Richard Simpson Lizzie was the last Maidu known to use stone pestles and bedrock mortars for food preparation

In the late 1820's European trappers established camps on Nisenan lands and brought European diseases to the area. In 1833 a plague, believed to be malaria, decimated Valley Nisenan villages. About 75 percent of the villagers perished. Some survivors fled to the hills. A few stayed behind and joined other Indians working at Sutter's Fort in the late 1830's. Soon the 19th century gold rush brought hoards of Europeans to the Sierra foothills. The ensuing widespread destruction of villages and persecution and killing of the Nisenan permanently destroyed the Nisenan culture.

By 1870 only one Indian appeared on the Rocklin census. However in his book Rocklin, Leonard Davis says that, in 1981, several of Rocklin's old-timers could remember stories handed down from their parents and grandparents of Indian women employed to wash clothes in Rocklin in the late 1800's. Some old-timers remembered an Indian encampment in downtown Rocklin as late as 1904. In his book Fortune Built by Gun, Richard Miller asserts that Joel Parker Whitney befriended and regularly had contact with a small band

of Clover Valley Indians, feeding them and observing their life ways including their method of harvesting and drying grasshoppers. This would have probably been during the heyday of Whitney's Spring Valley ranch in the 1880's or 1890's. But by all evidence the Nisenan presence had disappeared from Rocklin by 1904.

