

Nisenan Indians of the Nevada City Rancheria

by Shelly Covert

BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST WHITE MAN, THE indigenous people living in what later became Nevada County had peacefully occupied the land for thousands of years. Scattered across the large area between the Yuba and Bear river watersheds were dozens of Nisenan camps or “campoodies,” each made up of extended family groups of different sizes.

A perception that Nevada County is a part of Maidu territory is inaccurate. The error is a common one, caused by the mistaken assumption that the term “Maidu” represents a single tribal unit. In fact, Maidu refers to a very large and diverse *linguistic* unit.

The Northern Maidu and the Nisenan are sub-groups of a parent Maidu stock, which in turn is part of a larger Penutian language group that includes Miwoks, Wintus, Yokuts, and others. And within the Nisenan and Northern Maidu were many individual groups speaking a variety of dialects—each as different as German is from Italian.

In the act of recording and preserving local history (indigenous and non-indigenous alike) the Nisenan portion has been overwritten and altered in the past two decades. Inaccuracies and misinformation have crept into the public discourse, examples of which can even be found in Nevada County newspapers, books and semigovernmental reports.* Fortunately, by moving back in time one can find factual and accurate information about the indigenous people who lived on these lands.

Members of Nevada County’s old pioneer and settling families still remember oldtimers like “Chief” Louis Kelly, Frances “Dutch” Rose, Pete Johnson and wife Margaret, the Housel brothers(who were part Nisenan and part Cornish), the Potts men, and others. It is from such pre-contact Nisenan elders that today’s Nisenan families descend.

Older Nevada City residents recall the careful words of Chief Kelly, the last Nisenan headman appointed in the traditional way, who said: “a ‘big man’ must be consistent, patient and level headed. A man who was fast to anger would not be fit, nor would a greedy man be followed by the people.”

*As, for instance, in books such as *Grass Valley, Images of America*, by Arcadia Publishing; in cultural reports like the *Historic Context for Empire Mine Historic District, Nevada County, California*, *Empire Mine State Historic Park Environmental Restoration Project*, prepared for the Northern Service Center Department of Parks and Recreation; and articles in local newspapers.

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Chief Kelly’s grandmother, Betsy, recalled how, as a child, she saw the first ox-drawn wagons enter Nevada City. Betsy was born in the village of Oustomah, almost on the very spot where the Nevada County Court House stands. She lived to be well over 100 years old. She was blind but could still weave the watertight baskets that the Nisenan were so expert in crafting.

Other surviving Nisenan family members descend from Pamelo, who was the headman of nine “tribelets” that had existed in this area long before county lines existed. Headmen had a main village for their permanent home, but would travel equally between the other villages under their leadership. Pamelo’s main home was at Cocosa (modern day Lake Wildwood). Above Pamelo in hierarchy, was Chief Wehmeh (often called “Weimar” by gold rush pioneers).

By studying the large number of newspaper articles pub-

In 1973 Doris Foley examined the deputy sheriff badge given to Chief Louis Kelly by Sheriff George Carter in about 1930.

Kelly was born on July 7, 1885, in the Indian camp west of Nevada City and graduated from the Indian Flat School. Kelly succeeded Charley Cully as the local Nisenan chief.

(Photo by John Hart in The Union)





Map of California Indian linguistic groups. (Adapted from Handbook of North American Indians by Robert F. Heiser, as published in Surviving Through the Days, edited by Herbert Luthin, UC Press Berkeley, 2002)

several historically significant exhibits: Victorian era items, examples of Chinese culture, Donner Party artifacts and the Nisenan exhibit. The museum endeavors to strengthen the fragile voice of the Nisenan people by keeping on display the tribe's historically and culturally important relics. In fact, many of the items on display are the only known examples that remain.

But, who are the Nisenan? What is their history; and their legacy? If we could turn back time and imagine Nisenan life before the Gold Rush, we would capture a glimpse into a rich and ancient culture and observe a people who had survived the ebbs and tides of time.

While not a technologically advanced people, the Nisenan were complex and ingenious, and they lived as part of a perfectly balanced ecosystem. The people were one with the land in the greatest sense. Everything needed in life was provided in nature: food, clothing and medicine; from the most menial daily item to the most intimate and sacred ceremonial object. Life then was truly "green living," taking advantage of the bounty provided here in the foothills environment

lished beginning in the early 1850s and continuing for a hundred years, along with the Federal Population Census (taken every ten years) and a special Census of Non-Reservation California Indians in 1906, the Nisenan descendents living here today can document their lineage to the original indigenous people. In addition to the stories and traditions handed down to the families living here today along with photographs there is an opportunity to view the rich cultural history that was left behind.

On display in a museum in Nevada City is a collection of Nisenan tribal artifacts. There are watertight baskets made by the hands of women long ago., There is sacred regalia worn by the warriors of a time long past; there are stone artifacts even older. This small exhibit contains most of what remains locally of a decimated culture that once thrived in the foothills. The Nevada County Historical Society's Firehouse No. 1 Museum occupies a lovely Victorian building, originally built as a firehouse in 1861. It houses

and wasting nothing. Salmon, deer, elk, insects, worms, and small animals like rabbits, squirrels, etc., were hunted

Watertight baskets woven by skilled Nisenan women are on display at the Historical Society's Firehouse No. 1 Museum in Nevada City.



Belle Rolfe Douglas, born in Nevada City in 1868. Her father was Ianthus J. Rolfe, a Gold Rush pioneer who published the *Nevada Democrat* and the *Daily Gazette* before his death in 1907.

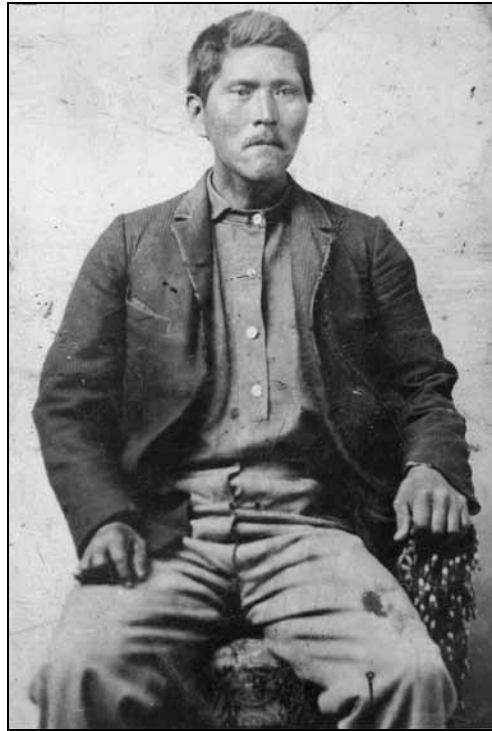


Photo taken about 1890 of Headman Charles Cully, whose land allotment became the reservation known as the Nevada City Rancheria.

by the Nisenan, and every part of the animal was used. For instance, when a salmon was caught, its meat could be fileted, the head boiled to create strong glue, and even the bones were integrated into other foods by being ground into a powder. The Nisenan did not waste and were careful to not create refuse on the land.

The local Nisenan were known for their beautiful, wattertight basketry and their highly sought after healers and shamans. The people were family oriented and enjoyed an incredible landscape from which all life emerged and would eventually return. Prior to the Gold Rush, the Nisenan governed themselves through a complex hierarchy of government beginning with the head of family up to the regional or territorial headman.

One hundred years after the Gold Rush, the citizens who formed the Nevada County Historical Society had an ongoing and extremely important relationship with the local Nisenan Indians. It is because of individuals like Doris Foley that Nisenan artifacts remain to be enjoyed by the public and the Tribe. It seems these relationships with the non-native community were not completely uncommon. Sprinkled throughout Nisenan history are altruistic pioneers and settlers who took it upon themselves to protect the local

Indians from complete annihilation. An example would be the Craig family, who in 1852 homesteaded Nisenan Tribal land. At the time, there were between 1,800 and 2,000 Indians living on Cement Hill in Nevada City. The Indians from Chicago Park, Smartsville, Washington, Grass Valley, Oregon House, Dobbins, Pleasant Valley, Camptonville and other once-prominent Nisenan towns had consolidated on Cement Hill, as it was somewhat of a stronghold; a tract of land close enough to the center of county government so



The Nevada City Rancheria as photographed in 1907 by Charles C. Pierce. (University of Southern California Libraries photo)



The current Nevada City Rancheria Tribal Council Chairman Richard Johnson as a very young boy near Nevada City.

that it was relatively safe from the persecution the Nisenan were receiving at that point in time.

Later, at a time before women in the United States could vote, the Nisenan would be protected by a strong woman, Belle Rolfe Douglas. Belle was born in Nevada City in 1868, the daughter of Gold Rush pioneers. She was a charter member of the local Native Daughters of the Golden West, Laurel Parlor #6, and with the assistance of the Native Sons of the Golden West, they secured lawyers to represent the Nisenan and assist Headman Charley Cully in obtaining a land allotment in 1887. Upon Cully's death in 1911 the Sons and Daughters intervened again, this time using Nevada City's not insignificant political influence to obtain a presidential executive order from President Woodrow Wilson that turned Cully's land allotment into a federally recognized reservation called the Nevada City Rancheria.

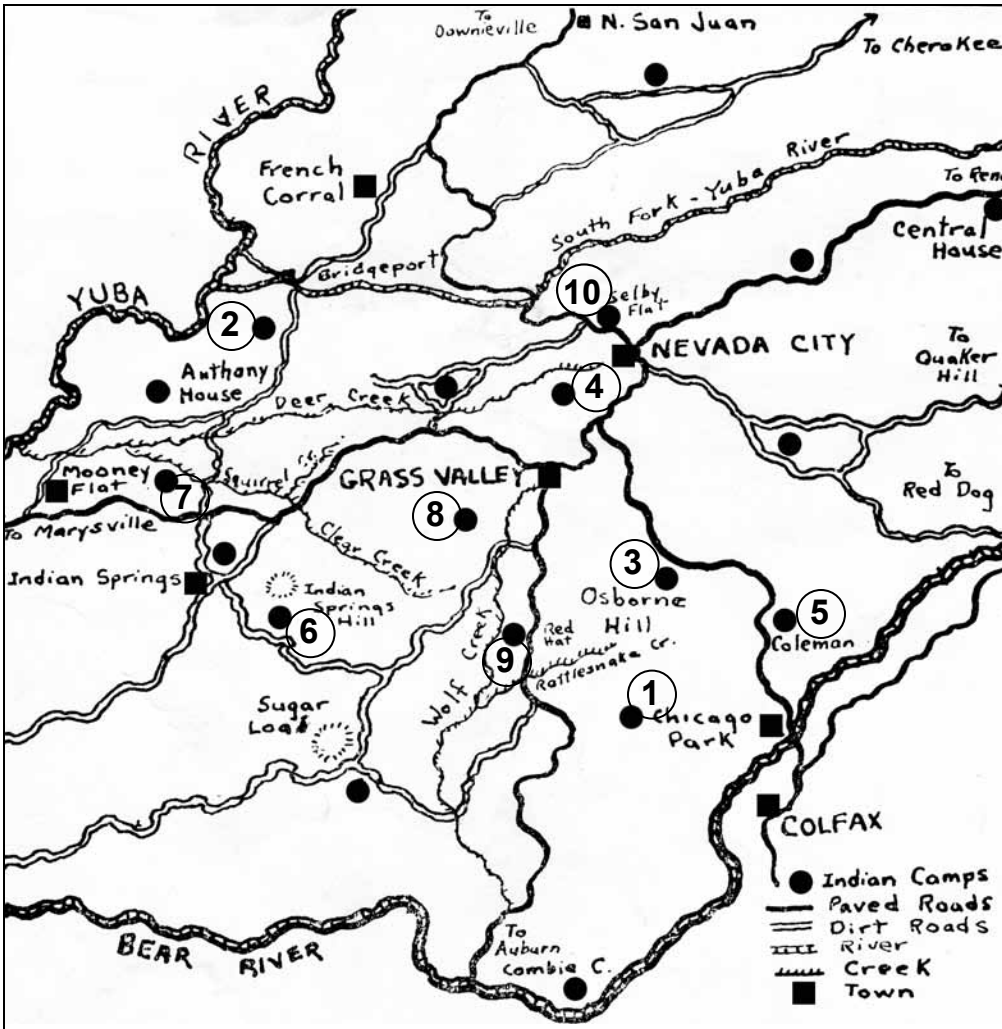
Unfortunately, the Nevada City Rancheria was terminated by Congress in 1964 during the termination era and the Rancheria act. The Tribe's land was sold at auction to the highest bidder. Today, all but four of California's 44 terminated Rancherias (or reservations) have been restored and the Tribes have regained their federal status as Indians. The Nevada City Rancheria is one of the four that was not restored. The local Nisenan continue to fight for restoration, and in order to do so all members of the Nevada City Rancheria are required to clearly show their genealogy and document their direct family ties to this place prior to 1848, confirming the Tribe's existence into the future.

Today, the Nevada City Rancheria and its Nisenan people are governed by a modern Tribal Council. The current Council Chairman is Richard Johnson, who, along with Tribal Elders Rose Kelly Enos and Carol Mix Hall, was born on the Rancheria. In 1951 authorities removed all the children from the Rancheria and placed them in foster care. The Tribe is not certain exactly how or why these removals happened but has begun research into the details.

Historically, American Indian children throughout the West have been forcibly removed from their natural homes and placed in Indian Boarding Schools. These schools allegedly were created in order to "kill the Indian and save the man." Horrendous stories of widespread abuse in these schools have now come to light. Generations of Native Americans suffered at the hands of the Boarding Schools and the various "missionaries" who ran them for the federal



Apache children before and after being taken from their families and sent to an Indian Boarding School.



Doris Foley prepared this map of known Indian camps for the Nevada County Historical Society *Museum Edition Bulletin* in 1953. She identified the numbered camps as (1) Storms' Ranch; (2) Pleasant Valley; (3) Day's Ranch; (4) Indian campodie near Nevada City; (5) Seims Ranch at Orchard Springs; (6) Loney Ranch; (7) Barbara Ranch on Clear Creek above Penn Valley; (8) Butler and Squirrel Creek ranches; (9) Rattlesnake Creek; (10) Selby Flat near Nevada City.

Louis Kelly's granddaughter, Rose Kelly Enos, Nisenan matriarch and culture bearer. (Rose Kelly Enos photo © 2010)

government. Many Native people suffer from post-traumatic stress and historical trauma, much like what was experienced by the survivors of the European holocaust.

The Boarding School's forced assimilation policy quickly and efficiently eliminated the use of native language and culture from the Nisenan youth; at the same time instilling a sense of shame about their roots and their families. Nisenan Elders have recounted their experiences with emphasis on the shame factor.

With the help of community members such as Dr. Tanis Thorne, Dr. Sheri Tatsch and Judith Lowry, and community organizations like Sierra Streams Institute and the Nevada County Historical Society, the Nisenan have endeavored to reverse much of the misinformation that was being spread in the community in recent decades.

The Nisenan have also begun exploring avenues to establish an archival and cultural center. It is crucial that all Nisenan documentation be gathered and housed in one location to ensure the true and correct history remains intact for generations to come.





Nevada Indians confined at Nome Lackee reservation near Tehama in 1856. Chief Wehmeh (wearing stovepipe hat and military coat) is behind three hunters with bows. White overseers and federal investigators are at right. When it was decided to move them to another reservation, most of the Nisenan went AWOL and returned to Nevada County. (Peter Shearer photo)

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