

The Wiyot Tribe:

A Short History

Prepared by the Sierra Service Project

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Introduction

The Wiyot people have lived on California's northern coast around what is now known as Humboldt Bay for thousands of years. Their traditional territory was bounded on the north by the Little River and on the south by the Bear River. The territory extended inland to the first set of mountains. The name Wiyot means "where the rivers meet."

The center of the Wiyot world was the ancient village of Tuluwat, located on Indian Island - a small island in Humboldt Bay. Tuluwat was the site of the Wiyot's annual World Renewal Ceremony. This seven to 10 day ceremony marked the start of each new year.

Although estimates vary, there were probably 1,500 to 2,000 Wiyots living in this area at the time of the California Gold Rush.

Traditional Wiyot Life

Prior to the arrival of European-Americans to California, Wiyot life probably changed little over hundreds of years. California for the Wiyots truly was a land of plenty. The rivers were full of salmon and other fish. The thick forests contained ample wildlife which could be hunted with bows and arrows. The coastal bays contained clams and other shellfish. Wiyots also used the roots of local plants in their diets and for medicines, and gathered berries, hazelnuts, wild onions and wild potatoes.

Wiyots used dugout canoes made from redwood trees for ocean and river travel. They also were basket weavers, using local materials to create beautiful and very functional baskets for carrying water, storing food, etc.

The Wiyot people apparently lived peacefully with neighboring Indian groups - the Yurok, Hupa, Tolowa, Karuk, and Wintu people - and traded with them. Since resources were plentiful, there really was no basis for conflict between neighboring groups.

The California Gold Rush

The Wiyot world was turned upside down in 1849 with the arrival of gold-seeking adventurers from the United States and other parts of the world. Nearly overnight, the Wiyot way of life was largely destroyed. At times, there may have been 15 or 20 thousand miners in the Wiyot and surrounding territories. Destruction of Wiyot culture occurred in several ways:

Through trespass. Miners arrived via ship and rushed up the rivers and creeks in search of gold. The Wiyots lived in small villages - collections of redwood huts - in the flats and meadows along these waterways. These settlements were literally "in the way" of these miners and were indiscriminately destroyed. Indians who resisted and tried to protect their homes were often murdered.

Through flooding. Hydraulic mining, which involves massive destruction of hillsides in search of gold, quickly replaced panning. Hydraulic mining brought with it massive flooding that destroyed more villages.

Through ethnic cleansing and murder. The history of indiscriminate and savage killing of native men, women and children in California is well documented, although it isn't well known. First, you have to consider the people that the gold rush brought to California. According to "Ethnography and Archaeology of the Wiyot Territory, "In fact, during the early mining days in California, there were gathered together some of the wildest, most reckless, savage, and dangerous men ever collected in a similar area anywhere in the world." Indians were killed for sport - shot for target practice. Organized massacres took place, most of which were not documented.

According to "Understanding Tolowa Histories" by James Collins, "Following unspecified Indian-white conflicts during 1851-1852, Del Norte [north of Humboldt Bay] settlers attacked and burned the northernmost village of Howonquet in 1853. About seventy people were killed. A well-remember massacre occurred in the late fall of that year, at the village of Yontocket on Lake Earl, north of Crescent City. During a winter dance, probably a ten-day World Renewal Dance, an armed contingent of Crescent City settlers attacked, killing a large number of dance participants, and burning the village to the ground."

This item appeared in the Marysville [California] Weekly Express on April 16, 1859: "A new plan has been adopted by our neighbors opposite this place to chastise the Indians...Some men are hired to hunt them, who are recompensed by receiving so much for each scalp, or some other satisfactory evidence that they have been killed. The money has been made up by subscription."

The U.S. Army took an active role in this process. In 1864, the Yreka Semi-Weekly Union ran this matter-of-fact report: "The new military commandant of the district, Col. Black, is doing good service in Indian hunting. He keeps his troops in the mountains most of the time scouting, and has introduced a new method of treating hostile Indian prisoners - hangs them all. That style of dealing with a murdering Digger [a derogatory term for coastal Indians] is very effective, and meets with universal approval by the citizen inhabitants of the hostile region. It seems to be a general sentiment here that a mean 'Digger' only becomes a 'good Indian' when he is dangling from the end of a rope, or has an ounce of lead in him."

Post Order No. 24, issued by Fort Gaston [present day Orleans, California] on June 26, 1863, read: "All Indians found south of the trail usually traveled by mules from Martins Ferry on the Klamath River ... will be shot on sight. "

Not everyone was silent about these outrages. On May 31, 1856, The Sacramento Union newspaper wrote that "the accounts of Indian hostilities...are almost invariably exaggerated. A small affair is soon magnified into a battle, and the origin is not infrequently attributed to Indian Outrages, while the account should read 'White man's oppression.' The Indian war is defunct. The whole matter has been a cowardly farce, the threatening legions of Indians turning out to be but about 100, seeking refuge in a brush from the rowdies, who, on the least occasion, delight in the sport of shooting them. As in all cases of this kind, the fault has been with the whites."

The San Francisco Bulletin ran an article on June 1, 1860 which state that "society is completely demoralized on Eel River; and the thugs are largely in the majority, led on by Wiley of the Humboldt Times and by Van Nest the sheriff. Young men talk and think of nothing else but hanging and killing young Diggers and their mothers. The pulpit is silent, and the preachers say not a word."

Enslavement. The Indian population was also decimated by the practice of slavery, which was legalized by an 1850 California law and continued well after slavery was abolished in the rest of the United States. According to accounts at the time, young boys sold for \$60, while a young girl could sell for as much as \$200. It is estimated that 4,000 children were bought and sold in this manner.

The Indian Island Massacre: February 26, 1860

"About four o'clock on Sunday morning five or six men came to the island armed with hatchets. Mercilessly, the hatchet descended on all alike, old and young, women, children, and infants. Their skulls were cleft, their spines severed, their bodies thrust with bowie-knives. The work of destruction was finished in a few minutes, and while the dead and dying lay strewn over the ground, the fire from one of the burning cabins lit up the ghastly scene."(1)

The massacre of 60 to 100 Wiyot children, women and elderly people occurred during the annual World Renewal Ceremony in 1860. The men had left the island to bring food and water from the mainland and the people on Indian Island were defenseless. The attack was planned and coordinated; two other gatherings of Wiyots were attacked and murdered on the same night.

The Indian Island massacre had a devastating impact on the Wiyot people. An entire generation of Wiyot children were killed, creating a nearly-insurmountable challenge to the transfer of cultural knowledge. With the murder of most of the women, knowledge of many food gathering, cooking and basket weaving techniques were lost, some of them forever.

To make matters worse, the U.S. Army began an aggressive campaign of hunting down, rounding up and removing Wiyots "for their own protection" immediately after the massacre. It was reported at the time that over 800 Indians were captured and held under guard along Humboldt Bay. These people were eventually forced to march to the Klamath Reservation and later to existing reservations in Smith River and Round Valley.

In the 12 years between the discovery of gold in 1848 and the Indian Island massacre in 1860, it is estimated that the population of Wiyots dropped by 90 percent - from around 2,000 to around 200.

Establishment of the Wiyot Reservation

After removal to Round Valley and other locations, some Wiyots returned to their traditional territory along Humboldt Bay. In the early 1900's, 20 acres of land along the Eel River estuary was donated by a church group to homeless Wiyot Indians. This land was brought into trust status by the federal government in 1908 and became known as the Table Bluff Rancheria.

Termination and Reinstatement

The California Rancheria Act, passed by Congress in 1958, resulted in the "termination" of the Wiyot tribe (and many other California tribes). Termination meant that land previously held by the tribal community was dispersed to individuals and often sold. The law was challenged in court and resulted in a 1981 court ruling re-instating tribal status for the Wiyots.

Under threat of another lawsuit because of unhealthy living conditions on the old reservation, the federal government purchased 88 acres of land in 1991 as the site of the "new reservation." The present-day Table Bluff Reservation is on this new site overlooking Humboldt Bay and is about 1 mile from the old reservation, where some tribal members continue to live.

There are currently 580 enrolled tribal members. The reservation is home to between 100 and 150 people.

The Indian Island Sacred Site

The Wiyot Tribe has been very successful in a project to acquire ownership of the Indian Island traditional village site and site of the 1860 massacre. Through the Wiyot Sacred Site Fund, the tribe was able to purchase 1.5 acres in 2001 and began the work of cleaning up years of pollution and waste on the site. In 2006, the City of Eureka returned 60 acres of the island to the tribe, an historic act by the city. An active clean-up and restoration effort is underway on the island and the Tribe plans to eventually build a ceremonial and interpretive center.