

# The Maidu of Indian Valley, California:

## *A Short History*

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The lands of northern California provided a diverse landscape for numerous native people and many distinct tribal groups before the introduction of Europeans. Today in fact, California has a larger Indian population and more tribes than any other state. The Sierra Nevada Mountains as well as the canyons and valleys of the Sacramento and Feather rivers, supported the Maidu people, who lived free from whites until early in the nineteenth century. Indian Valley, located about halfway between Reno and Redding, was part of this traditional territory. Greenville is the largest of several small towns that ring the picturesque valley, which remains semi-isolated due to the steep canyons, tall peaks, and rushing rivers, once home to the Maidu.

## **Pre-Contact History**

The Maidu, with three primary linguistic divisions, Nisenan, Yamonee, and Konkow, utilized the abundant resources of their mountainous terrain. There was no need for farming due to abundant game (deer, elk, bear, rabbit, fish, waterfowl) as well as a steady supply of acorns, manzanita berries, and assorted roots. The Indians lived in semi-submerged homes built from logs and covered with dirt to resist the winter cold, while a lighter version of this structure remained cool in the summer sun. Maidu entertained each other with songs, stories, and with a drum made from a half cylinder of sycamore trunk partially submerged over a hollow trench, it could be played either with the feet or with a pair of “drumsticks.” Maidu also played a number of games common to California Indians, including a relay football race complete with goal posts, gambling with marked sticks, and a type of lacrosse in which the stick had a simple loop rather than a net.

The Maidu were among the most talented indigenous basket weavers of the Americas. Their beautiful baskets were as small as a thimble or as large as three to four feet across and could

be made from a broad variety of plant materials to allow ultimate functionality and versatility. The woven utensils were strong, durable, and practical, and could be woven tight enough to even remain waterproof. The specialized shapes of these vessels, conical, round, or bucket shaped, made it easier to gather and store a number of different food products. Most baskets were decorated with either simple or ornate patterns and designs that were created through the weaving process. Grasshoppers, worms, raccoons, and duck wings are common abstractions from Maidu baskets, which are now quite valued by modern collectors.

The mythology of the Maidu, though varied between bands, generally incorporated the figures of Kodoyanpe the Earthmaker, Onkoito the Conqueror, and Coyote. The local religion, primarily a male secret society called the Kuksu cult, was also practiced by some Pomo and Patwin Indians, and can be characterized by the Kuksu, or “big head,” dances, in which the participants bedecked themselves with paint, feathers, ornaments, and grass veils. Kuksu himself was believed by the Maidu to be the first man, while neighboring tribes thought he was the god of the south, or a sylvan spirit. Northern Maidu bands preferred burial of the dead while southerners engaged in a death ritual involving burning the deceased’s home, body, and possessions, and annually celebrating the anniversary of the death.

## **The Arrival of the Anglo-Americans and the Reservation System**

In 1848 gold was found at Sutter’s Mill California, and whites began to settle the Sierra Nevada rivers in great numbers to claim the best panning sites. Indians from throughout California were removed from their homelands and many Maidu were forcibly marched to Mendocino County via the Round Valley Trail of Tears (1862), in which nearly half of the over four hundred Indians

perished. Many young California Indians were also subjected to government and private boarding schools which sought to educate native children while isolating them from their Indian culture. By the late 1800s the majority of the Maidu homeland had been destroyed or seized by settlers, miners, and ranchers, and the Indian population had been decimated by waves of endemic diseases, loss of resources, and wholesale slaughter. One estimate holds that in a mere thirty years the Maidu population decreased from approximately 10,000 to as few as 330.

In Indian Valley a small school was opened at Greenville by female settlers and the Women's National Indian Association in 1888. The self-proclaimed mission of the women was to Christianize the small native population by providing education and a haven free from persecution by Whites. The school struggled under economic hardship and began receiving partial government support in 1894 before bequeathing full control to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1899. The BIA transformed the Greenville Indian School into a non-reservation boarding school the following year, and it served as a temporary, if involuntary, home for Indian students from all over California until it burned down in 1920.

Federal authorities chose not to rebuild the school after the fire and the school grounds were placed in federal trust. The Greenville Rancheria, sometimes referred to as the Old Mission Site, was thus created. (Rancheria is a Spanish term that translates as bunkhouse or worker's quarters but was used in California to refer to a small reservation.) The Maidu of Greenville officially became wards of the federal government and received an increase in services and supervision from the BIA. Such a relationship, tenuous as it may have been, was short lived. In 1953 a federal termination policy was begun with the passing of Public Law 280, which allowed individual states to assume jurisdiction over Indian lands. Made possible by waning political

support for America's reservation Indians, and John Collier's resignation as Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs which left Indian tribes without an advocate in Washington, Termination was an attempt to conclusively assimilate Indians into white culture. The national Termination statistics are staggering. Between 1953 and 1964, when President Kennedy discontinued the practice, over one hundred tribes lost their federally recognized status, more than 1.3 million acres were removed from federal trust (many lost to Indians forever), and nearly 13,000 Indians were removed from the roles of the BIA. In 1958 the Greenville Rancheria, along with some forty others, was eradicated by the California Rancheria Termination Act. Maidu individuals and families living at Greenville were given allotments of the rancheria land (the original school grounds donated by private citizens), which was no longer held in trust status and thus subject to taxation. Because of termination and allotment most Greenville Maidu lost their lands and almost all of the original rancheria inhabitants were forced to move away from the area.

Termination was a disastrous national policy that destroyed tribal communities, and in combination with Indian relocation programs, served to urbanize Native Americans in greater numbers than ever before. The subsequent era of self-determination allowed terminated tribes to be reinstated and Indians to take a greater role in their own government and economy. After several years of litigation seventeen terminated California rancherias regained federal recognition in a 1983 U.S. District Court decision known as the Tillie-Hardwick ruling. This action reinstated the Greenville Rancheria of Maidu Tribe, and restored the original rancheria land to the status of Indian Country, though none of the original 275 acres were actually returned to Indian ownership. The Greenville Rancheria elected its first tribal council in 1988 and the tribe now exists as a government

without any land base. The modern tribal government, which was formed along the guidelines of the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), maintains its sovereign status after struggling to establish an administrative and financial infrastructure. The tribe currently operates two medical clinics, and is aided by two local non-profit organizations; The Roundhouse Council, and The Maidu Cultural and Development Group, which work toward educational, economic, and cultural goals for local Indians. The Maidu of Indian Valley have worked tirelessly to reestablish their tribal community and to ensure the preservation of Maidu culture in the future.

## **Peter Lassen**

Peter Lassen was a Danish emigrant who fled from poverty and arrived in Boston in 1830 seeking a fresh start in America. He made his way slowly westward, residing first in Philadelphia and Missouri, before eventually reaching Oregon in 1839. When Lassen established his Bosquejo Ranch in 1845, near the confluence of Deer Creek and the Sacramento River, it was the most northern settlement in California. The infamous Lassen trail was soon struck in order to bring supplies, pack animals, and more emigrants from the East. This "Lassen Cutoff," as it was known, was a particularly dangerous branch of the Oregon Trail that crossed both desolate desert and arduous passes. Lassen was a man of many interests who held positions as Surveyor, President of the Nataqua Territory, and also obtained Mexican citizenship. Mount Lassen, Lassen County CA, and Lassen Volcanic National Park are all named for this intrepid explorer, who finally struck gold in the Honey Lake Valley in 1855 after many years of prospecting,.

## **Ishi**    *“The Last Wild Indian”*

Ishi was a Yahi-Yana, and not a Maidu, but his story and the plight of his people, is representative of the relationship between miners, ranchers, and farmers who settled in northern California and their Indian neighbors. The territory of the Yana lay just north of the Maidu, in the foothills of Mount Lassen, and the Yahi were the southernmost of the Yana bands. Ishi was hungry and dazed with his hair burned in mourning when found in 1911 near the town of Oroville. The Yana were believed extinct after military campaigns by the U.S. Army, forced removal (many went to Round Valley, CA), and territorial skirmishes with white settlers (including The Three Knolls Massacre Ishi survived as a youth).

After a brief internment in the Oroville jail (the locals didn't know where to put him) Ishi was befriended by an anthropologist from Berkeley named Alfred Kroeber, who had been trained by the legendary Franz Boas. Kroeber with the help of Thomas Waterman and Edward Sapir worked to communicate with Ishi and document his language. Ishi taught Kroeber much about Indian life before the white man came, and the two considered each other friends. Ishi spent his last healthy years demonstrating native craftsmanship as a display in the Museum of Anthropology at UC San Francisco, before growing sick and finally dying from tuberculosis in 1916, a mere five years after his appearance in Oroville. Ishi was heralded as the “last wild Indian” and his story was popularized by a biography written by Alfred's wife Theodora Kroeber. Several other books, and a few films have been produced which chronicle his story. Ishi never forgot about the loss of his family and kin, but he was gracious for the friendship of Kroeber and Waterman and being able to share his Yana culture with the America.

### **Here are some informative websites.**

The official website of the Greenville Rancheria of Maidu Indians (also has historical information).

<<http://www.greenvillerrancheria.com/>>

The Indian Valley Chamber of Commerce has a number of pictures of the area.

<<http://www.indianvalley.net/>>

A Maidu history presented by the Feather River Tribal Health.

<[http://www.frth.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=36](http://www.frth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=36)>

Wikipedia has articles on the town of Greenville, Maidu Indians, and Federal Indian Policy.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenville%2C\\_California](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenville%2C_California)>

### **Here are some good books that expand on the information presented.**

The personal history of a Maidu traditionalist, originally published in 1977.

Potts, Marie. The Northern Maidu.

A detailed history of the California gold rush and its impact on the Indians of California.

Hurtado, Albert L. Indian Survival on the California Frontier.

An explorative history of Indian boarding schools.

Churchill, Ward. Kill the Indian, Save the Man.

A biography of Ishi “the last wild Indian in North America.”

Kroeber, Theodora. Ishi: In Two Worlds.

A later account of Ishi’s story that attempts a more enlightened telling.

Starn, Orin. Ishi’s Brain: In Search of America’s Last “Wild” Indian.

My “sourcebook” for Indian politics.

Wilkins, David. American Indian Politics and the American Political System.