

# FIRST PEOPLE OF THE BLUFF AREA

Fair Oaks sits on a fraction of land that was occupied for at least 10,000 years by indigenous people. The Valley Nisenan populated the area for about 5,000 years until the middle of the 19th century. The word "Nisenan" (meaning "on our side of the river") was used as a self-designation by the southernmost of the three groups of Maidu who lived near the Yuba and American Rivers.

## Where did they live?

Archeological studies show some of the Nisenan lived in many villages near the north banks of the American River.

The Nisenan learned to live with the variable nature of the river. They harvested the plentiful wildlife and moved their camps to avoid the extremes of the summer heat or winter floods in the valley. Temporary shelters were built in the summer to protect against the sun. As the river changed course villages would be moved to new areas nearer the water.



Permanent villages were built on natural knolls near running water or year-round springs. The "Kum," a meeting house, was the center of community life. It was usually a large, conical structure, partially dug into the ground. In the village, large barrel-type baskets were used for storing acorns and fish were dried over wooden pole racks.

## What was their culture like?

The women gathered tule, willow, redbud, sedge roots and bracken fern to create sturdy baskets. These were used to gather and store food, catch fish, cook, carry babies, and store tools and supplies.

Beads made from abalone and olivella shells from the Pacific Ocean were found at all early sites, indicating trade with coastal communities.

Clothing was minimal for the Nisenan in the moderate climate of the Sacramento Valley. In the summer the adults wore shredded grass or tule skirts. During the winter, they added blankets or capes made of woven rabbit fur for warmth.

## What did they eat?

Food was plentiful for the Nisenan people. The men hunted, trapped and were expert fishermen known for their effective fishing nets. Salmon and other fish were also speared or caught in a small weir in the river and dried for winter use. The Native women gathered a variety of plants for food and medicine.

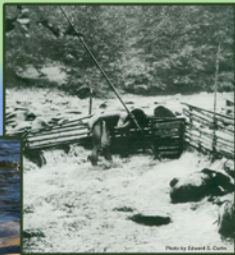
At the center of the Nisenan diet was the acorn. These were ground using one of the many mortar holes that had been worked into a massive slab of bedrock called a grinding rock, often next to the river. The tannic acid in the acorns was leached out with water. The acorn meal was supplemented by seeds, roots, berries, fruit, worms, insects, shellfish, fish and the meat from small mammals, deer, elk, and antelope.

## What happened to them?

Trappers, explorers and settlers who arrived here before and during the Gold Rush brought diseases, enslavement and other hostilities to the native communities.

They began disappearing as their cultures and environments were altered. By 1859, an estimated 3,500 (of the original 27,000) Nisenan were left, and most of them were faced with starvation. By about 1890, the population of Nisenan, as with most California Indians, had been nearly decimated. The few survivors worked on farms or ranches and mines, and clung to remnants of their culture.

Eventually, with the help of concerned California citizens, ranchers were secured for some of the communities, and Native leaders emerged to organize and unite the different tribes who are still trying to attain better laws for governing their lives. Today they treasure the timeless knowledge and methods of their ancestors and teach them to their children.



Fish weir



Grinding rock at Sailor Bar



Log boat



Nisenan Ceremonial dress

For more information on the Nisenan people visit the Effie Yeaw Nature Center or see [www.amha.org/books/fbluff.html](http://www.amha.org/books/fbluff.html)

This sign was sponsored by Rand Jacobs, Fair Oaks Honorary Mayor 2010-11



# American River Parkway

