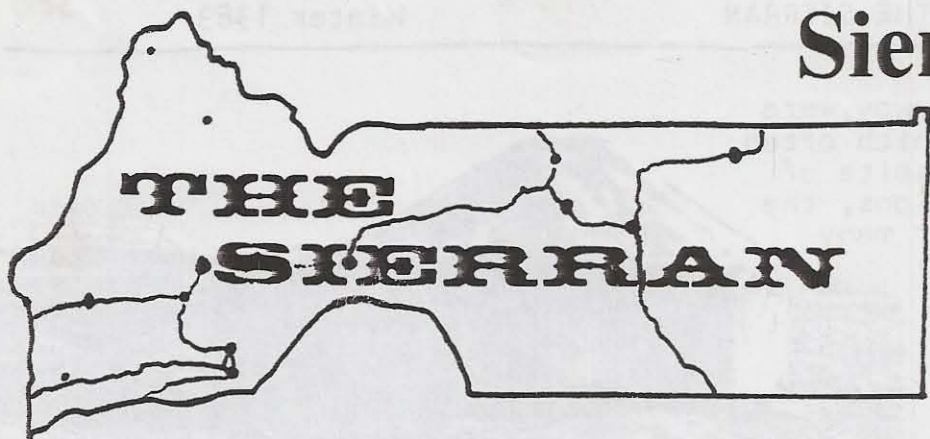


Sierra County

Historical Society



Member of California Conference of Historical Societies

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THE WORLD OF THE WASHOE

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is not a definitive history of the Washoe--that has yet to be written. It is meant to acquaint our members with an Indian group which lived in the Eastern part of Sierra County, which managed to survive for some 800 years or more, and who very quickly ceased to exist as a cohesive culture within three generations after the arrival of the White Man in the 1850's. Now, only one Washoe still lives in the Loyalton area. We could learn much from a study of the Washoe--a people who avoided warfare and violence and who lived in perfect harmony with their harsh environment.

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THE PLACE The world of the Washoe encompassed five small valley areas which were adjacent to each other and which hugged the eastern slope of the Sierras. The Southern Washoe lived in the Carson City and Washoe Valley area, the Central Washoe lived in the Reno area, and the Northern Washoe lived in the Southern*and Eastern Sierra Valley area. The whole world of the Washoe was only approximately sixty miles long (from north to south) and twenty miles wide. The environment, by any measure, is a harsh one. The

*Long Valley Area



{(A view of Sierra Valley from Yuba Pass, looking east to the more arid part of Sierra Valley--the home of the Washoe. Courtesy of Eastman's Studio, Susanville, Ca.)

land ranged from semi-arid in the North to arid in the South, and much of the area was covered with sagebrush. Irrigation has, of course, changed these conditions in the present decade. Fish and game were not plentiful, nor was there a great supply of wild berries and fruits. The climate of the region ranged from hot summer days to winter temperatures which were well below 0°. The Washoe were not blest with friendly neighbors. To the north were the Modoc, a tribe which held off the U.S. Army for a time. To the west were the California Indians who, on their summer journeys into the mountains, made frequent invasions into Washoe territory.

(.)

To the east, not many miles away, were the dreaded Piute, a tribe which often kidnapped Washoe women. In spite of these many formidable conditions, the Washoe managed to survive for many centuries.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE WASHOE

While the Washoe practiced monogamy, polygamy and polyandry, monogamy was the most common practice. The family was the major kinship group. The family occupied one home-site and consisted of one or sometimes two nuclear families who were of the same ancestry. Often distant relatives or non-relatives were attached to the family. The home-site or household was also the basic economic and political group and took care of its own problems of food gathering and discipline. Beyond the household there existed a community band which was composed of a group of households. The communities came together for hunting and for social occasions. There was no overall chief of the Washoe tribe. Local leaders did arise in the communities, but their only function seemed to be to call the people together for ceremonial occasions. Special leaders were chosen for the rabbit, the deer and the antelope hunts, but their authority ended with the hunt. A shaman existed in each group. His job was to use magic to cure the sick, to placate the bad spirits and to control events that affected the welfare of the people. The headman of the antelope hunt was usually the shaman. The Washoe had no courts to settle crimes or disputes but had a code of conduct by which problems were settled. Food disputes were rare among the Washoe. Serious disputes brought on the possibility of a feud. Vengeance could be taken by killing one's antagonist in a secret ambush. This act was always kept a secret because retaliatory killings



This picture of a Washoe house was taken in 1901. The Washoe used whatever was at hand to build dwellings. Courtesy of the Nevada Historical Soc.

could be expected if the killer's identity became known. Because the Washoe were a peaceful people, these killings were very rare.

(Credits to Tim Rupp, L.H.S. Class of '84, for information in the above portion of our article.)

FOOD GATHERING BY THE WASHOE

The gathering of food for immediate use and for the long and cold winter took most of the Washoe's time and energy. It was the responsibility of the women to collect roots, berries, seeds, insects and plants. It was the responsibility of the men to hunt for game and to fish. Both men and women helped to gather acorns and pinenuts, although the women prepared the nuts after they had been gathered. The process of preparing the acorns took considerable time. The outershell was removed with a firm tap and winnowed off the skins. The acorns were then pounded into a meal with mortars and pestles. The tannic acid in the meal had to be removed. This was usually done by placing the meal in a basket which was lined with grass or leaves. Water was then poured over the meal which carried off the tannic acid. The meal could then be used in soup, in patties and for mush. The mush was prepared by

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS!

The Sierra County Historical Society is an organization of people interested in preserving and promoting an appreciation of the rich history of Sierra County. The Society operates a museum at the Kentucky Mine in Sierra City, is affiliated with the Loyalton Historical Park and Museum, holds quarterly meetings, publishes a bulletin (The Sierran) and conducts historical research. Members are sent notices of Society activities, receive bulletins and are admitted free of charge to the Kentucky Mine Museum and Stamp Mill tour and to the Loyalton Historical Park and Museum.

Sierra Co. Historical Society
P.O. Box 260
Sierra City CA 96125

Send membership dues to
Ms. Maren Scholberg,
Box 144
Sierraville, CA 96126

OFFICERS

President-	- - - -	- Lincoln Madsen
Vice President	- - - -	- Rita Bradley
Secretary-	- - - -	- Georgene Copren
Treasurer-	- - - -	- Maren Scholberg

Editor, Winter 1989 edition of
"The Sierran" - Milt Gottardi
* * * * *

MEMBERSHIP FEES

Junior (under 17)	-----	\$5.00
Senior (over 60)	-----	\$5.00
Individual	-----	\$10.00
Family	-----	\$15.00
Business	-----	\$25.00
Supporting	-----	\$25.00
Sustaining	-----	\$50.00
Educational Inst.	-----	\$25.00
Life	-----	\$100.00



Now is the time to renew your membership in the Sierra County Historical Society. Send your fee to Maren Scholberg, address above. If you sent your membership fee in response to the information in the summer bulletin, you have been credited with 1990 dues, and should have received your 1990 membership card. Now is the time. Mail your membership as soon as possible, please!!!

NOTES FROM THE FALL SOCIETY MEETING

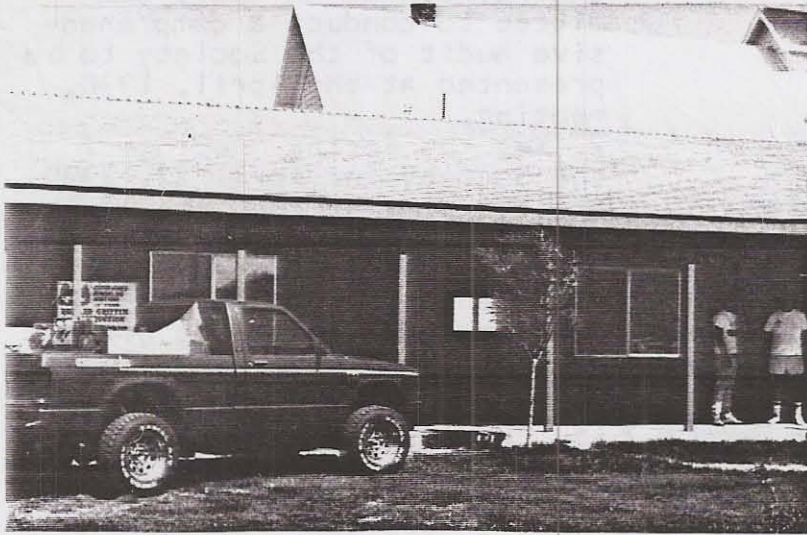
The Fall meeting of the Historical Society was held on October 8, 1989, at the Loyalton Social Hall. After a delicious pot-luck lunch, capped by Georgene's cheesecake, the Society took the following action:

- ✓1. Directed Milt Gottardi to publish the Winter-'89 bulletin
- ✓2. Directed K. Donelsen to publish the Spring-'90 bulletin.
- ✓3. Adopted the original membership fee schedule (which appears in this bulletin) but allowed those who responded to the fees announced in the Summer bulletin to be granted 1990 membership.
- ✓4. Appointed Bill Copren as chairperson of an audit committee to conduct a comprehensive audit of the Society to be presented at the April, 1990, meeting.
- ✓5. Set the Spring meeting of the Society for April 22, 1990, at 1:30 p.m. at the home of Amy Bowman in Loganville, Sierra Co. No potluck.
- ✓6. Will adopt a policy at the April meeting governing gifts and loans and times when loans may be gotten by the donor.
- ✓7. Appointed Bill Copren and Milt Gottardi to formulate a Joint-Powers Agreement between the Society and the City of Loyalton for adoption at the April meeting
- ✓8. Appointed (she was gracious enough to take on the job) Maren Scholberg as the membership chairperson and directed that all membership fees go to Maren.
- ✓9. Approved expenses-one can check the minutes.
- ✓10. Suggested that, if possible, Kentucky Museum staff be included in the Oakland Museum staff visit.
- ✓11. Discussed Society finances, action to be taken after the audit report at the April meeting.

NEW RESEARCH CENTER AT LOYALTON HISTORICAL PARK AND MUSEUM!

The newest addition to the Historical Park and Museum at Loyalton is a historical research center. The building was constructed with a grant from the State of California (Historical-Park and Recreation Grant) and completed during the summer of '89. The Research Center is attached to part of the museum and sits in front of the old school-Catholic Church building (the oldest building in Loyalton) which is also part of the museum complex.

The Research Center has two rooms for meetings, group research and individual research. A large room contains files, artifacts, a typewriter for people who wish to type notes, etc., and a small kitchen area for simple refreshments for groups.



The recently completed Research Center at the Loyalton Historical Park. Photo-courtesy of "The Sierra Booster"-

If any member of the Sierra County Historical Society wishes to do research during the time of the year when the museum complex is closed (October to March), he/she may obtain a key at the Loyalton City Hall.

If any of our readers have any letters, photos, records, newspapers, etc. which could be used for historical research, please don't throw them away--

either give or lend these important items to the Research Center.

If any of our readers live in the Loyalton Area and wish to donate some of their valuable time during the summer, we are asking for volunteers to help us with the task of cross-filling the information we have. The resulting card-catalogue will help historians who do research at the Research Center.

REMEMBER READERS, don't throw anything away. If you don't know whether or not your information has any historical value, give it to us and let us decide. It will surprise you what type of info. you consider trivia has great historical value.

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THE WORLD OF THE WASHOE (Continued from page 2, col. 2.)

The mush was prepared by putting the meal into a watertight basket with hot, clean rocks which then heated the meal into mush. The rocks were removed when the mush was done and the mush then eaten. A good cook who was imaginative would add nuts and berries to the mush. If the mush were bitter or unappealing to the eye, or if the implements used for cooking had been dirty, the woman was known as a bad cook.

Pinenuts were an important part of the Washoe diet because they (or meal prepared from them) could be stored for winter use. The men assisted in the first part of this process--getting the pinecones from the trees. The rest of the job was women's work. The nuts were removed from the pinecones. Next, small twigs or sticks were separated from the nuts in winnowing baskets. The nuts were then put into a basket with hot coals to roast. When done roasting, the

nuts were cracked with a stone and put in a winnowing basket to separate the nutmeats from the shell. The nuts were roasted one more time and then stored in baskets for future use. The pinenuts could be eaten raw, could be boiled into mush or ground into meal for cakes. Tiny babies were often fed a thin mush made from pinenuts. The mush was rich in protein and fat and a welcomed part of the diet.

Hunting was the job of the men. Anything that could be eaten was hunted, but squirrels, birds, deer and rabbits were most commonly hunted. Deer hunting required mental and physical preparation as well as skill. Before the hunt, the men entered a sweathouse where they fasted, sweated, smoked and dreamed. They rubbed themselves with herbs to disguise their scent. They sometimes disguised their bodies with skins and acted like deer to be able to get close to the herd. Deer were used in many ways. The antlers were used for chipping arrowheads and the bones as awls for piercing animal skins or making baskets. Pouches and tying material were made from intestines. The meat was roasted, stewed or dried for future use.

The biggest hunt of the year was the rabbit drive. Men from many communities helped in this important event. Men used pointed sticks without arrowheads, nets, snares or throwing sticks to kill the rabbits. The meat of the rabbit could be cooked or dried. The dried meat could also be ground into a meal and used for eating during the winter months. The rabbit drive was important not only for food but for the skins of the rabbit. These pelts made the most important clothing of the Washoe--the rabbit blanket. Every person in the Washoe community had his/her blanket. This was a large blanket prepared from many pelts sewn together and was used during the cold winter season for warmth. Because the Washoe wore very little clothing, this rabbit blanket was important for the very life



(A Washoe man and women in their rabbit blanket-photo taken in the 1890's--courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society)

of the individual during the cold months of winter.

It is interesting to note that the Washoe hunters were very ecological. They never killed more than the people needed. When they killed an animal, they said a prayer to its spirit so that it could be reborn.

THE RELIGION OF THE WASHOE

The Washoe didn't have an organized body of religious beliefs nor any type of organized religion with specific ceremonies or priests. Beliefs seemed to even vary from group to group. The Washoe did have legends concerning the creation of the Washoe and their world, but these didn't seem to be as important as the belief in spirits. The spirit world was very real to the Washoe and the spirits tended to be capable of doing harm to the Washoe. The shaman's main duty was to placate the spirit so a sick person could get well or so the spirit of a dead person

would not return to harm the living.

* * * * *

We have managed to only give you, our readers, a small look at the Washoe. We hope this brief introduction will help to preserve the memory of these fascinating people. We thank Tim Rupp and Shantel Scatena (who contributed info. on food gathering) for much of the info. in this article. Sources used by these students include The Washo Indians-Gardner, Washo Indians of Ca and Nev., Freed, The Two Worlds of the Washoe-Downs, Wa She Shu-Nev. Inter-tribal Council, Whispers From the First Californians-Fabe, etc., and Ethnographic Notes on the Washo-Lowie. Information taken from the notes of Edna Gottardi from interview she conducted with Washoe people during the 1940's and 1950's. The University of Nevada has an excellent collection of books on the Washoe and the Museum at Loyalton has a good display of artifacts of the Sierra Valley Washoe.



"Big Lucy"-taken in Loyalton-1905,
Thompson Studio-note baskets made
by Lucy.