

Native Americans in the Bridgeport Area

From about 2000 BC to about 500 AD, the Bridgeport area was inhabited by the Martis people. These nomadic residents hunted big game in groups using the atlatl (spear thrower). They gathered various kinds of seeds and used grinding stones to process them. They lived wherever food and game were most plentiful.

About 500 AD, the Nisenan came to the area. Bridgeport primarily was a fishing and hunting area; a large village was located along Deer Creek near present-day Lake Wildwood. The Nisenan were hunter-gatherers, and the land provided them with plentiful running water, game and plant foods, and basic materials needed to fabricate homes, tools and finely crafted baskets. Baskets were used for cooking, serving, gathering and storing. The baskets were made from a variety of materials, the most basic being peeled willow and peeled or unpeeled redbud. Though these functional baskets were simple in the two-color design, they were as beautiful as any in California and were finely crafted. The Nisenan brought with them a technology for leaching tannic acid from acorns. Acorns were easily stored for long periods of time and were abundant. Because of the steepness of the river canyons, most of the trading was done with the people to the west.

Villages consisted of a central sweat lodge, or dance house (where the chief lived), and five to ten family dwellings. Several villages made up a 'triblet'. Tribal boundaries were marked, sometimes with petroglyphs and may have been patrolled. In the spring and summer, members of the village would move to higher elevations to collect ripening plants and to follow the migration of game. In the fall, they would return to the village to harvest the acorn crop. Winter was the social season and the beginning of the ceremonial cycle. Groups spent long winter nights in the dance houses listening to stories. People from other villages were invited to visit and join in. It was a time for dancing and looking for mates. In the Bridgeport area, Nisenan villages were located on the west side of the Yuba River near and above Rice's Crossing, on Deer Creek near Lake Wildwood and at Bridgeport. Other villages were at Mooney Flat and Indian Springs. Nisenan descendants are still present in the area and are seeking to have their federal recognition restored to their tribe.

In June 1848 gold was discovered on the Yuba River by Jonas Spect near Rose's Bar downstream from Bridgeport. By 1850 the area swarmed with more than 2000 miners. A large mining operation was underway at French Corral, three miles upriver. European contact brought a halt to the well-established Nisenan way of life. With the discovery of gold came devastating diseases and loss of the native people's traditional resources. Settlers seeking land for grazing and lumber for construction simply took over the available resources. In the process they polluted the river with mining debris and cut down many trees including the oaks that provided food and shelter materials for the Nisenan. A small village on the west side of the Yuba River opposite Point Defiance continued into the 1930s. Plentiful artifacts of Nisenan

occupation remain in the area, primarily grinding holes in rocks used to grind acorns and midden mounds, the organic residue from long periods of food preparation.

Pictured here one can see the transition from traditional housing to that of a more modern means. The small bark house in the forefront sits in contrast with the historically current housing of 1907. The little shacks in the background even made the local newspaper as they sported actual windows.



Nevada City Rancheria Campoodie, 1907