

The Indian People of Ahwahnee



EVERY CULTURE EXPERIENCES *a continual process of change. The American culture in 1851 was experiencing economic and social changes that, in turn, affected the culture of the Indian people of Yosemite, the Ahwahneechee. When the Mariposa Battalion entered Yosemite Valley in the spring of 1851 pursuing Chief Tenaya, they took as prisoners people whose ancestors may have inhabited Yosemite for as long as 4,000 years. Chief Tenaya and his kin were taken to the Fresno River Reservation northeast of the present-day city of Fresno. Details are unclear, but Chief Tenaya and an unknown number of his people returned to Yosemite in the Fall of 1851.*

The year is now 1872. The village you are about to visit represents the National Park Service's interpretation of the Miwok culture 20 years after initial contact with non-Indians.

COVER PHOTO: *Miwok woman and girl, Yosemite Valley, 1870s. Note the additional fabric added to enlarge the woman's bodice, as well as her hair, which was apparently previously cropped in mourning.*



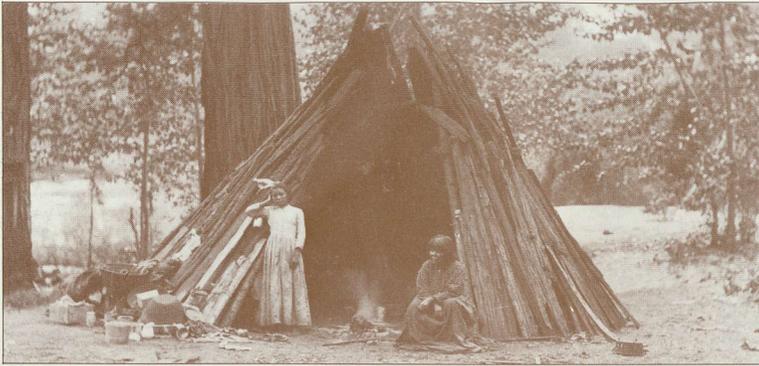
Indian boys swimming in the Merced River in June, 1872.

Even after contact with non-Indian people, the Ahwahneechee continued to use many native plants as food sources. The staple food came from the acorn of the black oak. Acorns were collected in the fall, dried, shelled and pounded; because it contained tannic acid, the acorn flour had to be leached. Ground acorn flour was spread in a sand basin and cold water poured over it several times, causing the tannin to percolate through the sand. The acorn flour would separate into three layers of dough according to degree of fineness. Each grade of dough was boiled in watertight baskets by placing hot basaltic stones in the acorn flour/water mixture. Soup, water biscuits and porridge were eaten daily even after the native people were introduced to non-Indian food.

Other useful plants included mock-orange for arrow shafts, manzanita berries for cider and buckeye nuts, a substitute for acorn when the crop was poor.



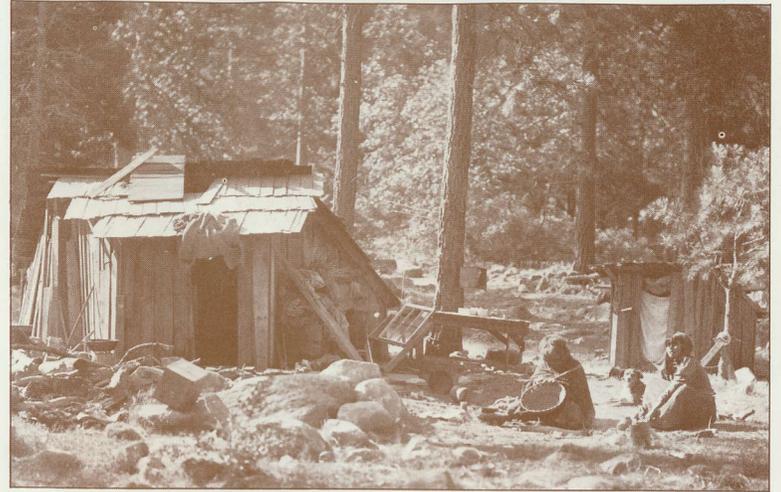
The home of Captain One-Eyed Dick, leader of the Yosemite Miwok in the late 1800s.



U-mu-cha, bark dwelling house. Yosemite Valley, 1880s. Baskets and metal containers lie next to the dwelling.

The tall, pine bough-covered structures you see are called *chuckah*, used for acorn storage as late as 1910. The chuckah construction is simple, requiring four or more posts from six to fifteen feet in length placed in a circle, usually around a stump or rock. Grapevine or long willow withes then were twisted around the ring of posts, making a strong, fence-like binding in several rings. Willow, deerbrush or white fir branches were then placed tip-end on the center or stump, with the butt-ends in the air. From this point, the chuckah was finished from the inside, a person climbing into the hollow and lining the inside with wormwood, which discourages insects. Once finished, acorns were passed to a person inside who would fill the granery until it was lined with up to 500 pounds of acorns. The tops were covered with pine needles, wormwood and a cap of incense-cedar bark, while the sides were thatched with ponderosa pine boughs.

The large structure on your right is a *hangi*, or roundhouse. It was and is used for ceremonial dancing and prayer. It is made of oak posts lashed with grapevine and shingled with incense-cedar bark. The smaller structure to the left is the sweathouse, used for ceremonial purification before dancing or hunting.



Calapine (left) and an unidentified Miwok woman at their home in Yosemite Valley in June of 1901. The house, although based on non-Indian architecture, still retains a dirt floor and a smokehole in the center of the roof over the firepit.

Central to the village, both in location and cultural importance, is the granite acorn-pounding rock. The table, along with such utensils as coffee pots and grinders, glass jars and cast-iron pots, are all evidence of contact with Anglo pioneers. But the acorn still was a predominant food and baskets still favored for cooking and storage.

The Miwok dwelling is called *u-mu-cha*. Not to be confused with the hide-covered *tipi* of the Plains Indians, *u-mu-cha* are covered with the same materials as the *hangi*. Look at the interior construction and notice that pine and cedar poles are lashed together with wild grapevines. The one home that is different is made from cut lumber and fashioned after a simple pioneer cabin. Although this type of house was rare in the 1870s, it had begun to dominate the Miwok village by the 1890s.



Yosemite Indians in the 1880s. Left to right: Susan Lawrence, Johnny Lawrence, Sally Ann Dick, Johnny Dick.

Culture is always in the process of change. You have seen a display of some of the changes that took place in Miwok culture during the late 19th century. As with any interpretation of the past, many subtle and complex relationships never can be recaptured or portrayed adequately. Interpretation of Native American cultures is even more difficult because the story is told in the language and from the perspectives of people outside their cultural frame of reference. As a result, the story of the Ahwahneechee's relationship with their non-Indian neighbors of the 19th Century is but one of many still unfolding.

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