



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Echoes of Our Past

Great Basin Region

Our past: such an important part of our heritage. Often, I think of the ways of our ancestors.

[Teacher and class reciting an Indian language vocabulary lesson]

se-júc-on'
nont-nit'a-de me-júc-on'
ne-júc-on'
nont-not'a-de me-júc-on'
me-júc-on
xwi-ne'-júc-on'

If my people's language died, a part of me would die also. Our language, our customs, our songs, all these are living links to the way my ancestors lived.

This modern world is very different from their world, but I cannot be who I am if I lose touch with theirs. I think about the old world often, even in this world of classrooms, airplanes, ambulances. I do this because I'm Indian. I think it would even be good if you're not an Indian to stop and think about these things. The way people dressed, their shelter, their spiritual beliefs, all go in harmony with the land in which they lived.

In what we now call California, the land contrasts are so great, that where my people, the Tolowa, lived was as different from that of the Chumash, who lived in the south, as it was the Miwok, who lived in the central part of the state, and so are our customs.

There was a special bond between the land and the people. The earth and the water fed them, clothed them, and gave them their way of life. For as long as anybody can remember, the rivers and the forests helped to shape a life of prosperity and permanence for my people here in the north. In the great trees they built strong and sturdy houses, and honored the land, its creatures, and its spirit for everything that they had, and to keep them safe from harm.

Hundreds of miles to the south, different Indians also lived in a land of plenty. From the richness of the land and sea, the Chumash, who lived here in great numbers, developed a culture that was also spiritually rich and deep. Even today it is still possible to feel their reverence for the seen and unseen, for everything around them.

Far from the coast is an entirely different California. It is hard to believe the inland deserts are a part of this same land, but Indian people lived here, too. Looking at this land, but not really

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knowing it, you might think it would be impossible for people to survive here. The Indians of the desert areas knew these places; their lives depended on such knowledge. They knew where to find everything necessary for life. Small family bands moved from place to place in this sprawling land, because only a few could find support; but they survived--each generation teaching the next, just as we do today.

“You get the pine nuts out of the cones. You hold it like this, like this right here. Now go like this, slow, slow, slow at first. You’re going too fast. See? Do it slow. “

In many places in the Southern Desert Indians depended greatly on mesquite beans; they were plentiful and made good food. With these the Cahuilla and other people lived well, even in a dry land.

As all of you have seen, California is a very diverse place, and is very different from place to place.

We’ve only just begun to look into the different cultures in California, we’ve just barely sampled the differences, just barely hinted at the many Indian peoples’ lives who were so different from one place to another.

In many places in the Great Central Valley the land was rich, teeming with life, in contrast to the desert. There were fish, game, seeds, acorns, and tules. Very little of the valley looks now as it did when it was home for perhaps hundreds of thousands of Indian people. Much of what has been drained and is now farmland was wet or marshy. Native grasses and valley oak, elk and antelope, great flocks of waterfowl all thrived here; so the people thrived here also.

In some places in California outside the Great Central Valley, mesquite and piñon nuts were probably a more important food, but for most California Indians the acorn from the oak tree was more important. Have any of you eaten acorns before? [Some students respond.] I sure wouldn’t advise it if you don’t know how to prepare them; you have to remove the tannic acid out of the acorn, and the Indian women knew how to do this. After the acid was removed then they could make bread, they could make mush, or they would just store it for later use.

On the east side of the Central Valley the land begins gently rising, becoming more hilly the farther inland you go. Finally, the great mountains of the Sierra rise up in front of you. Indians lived here, too. Like their cousins in the valley, they used acorns every day. The foothills of the Sierra had many fine oaks and, usually, plenty of acorns.

Where the Sierra Indians lived, the land changed quickly from one place to another. They had a great variety of plants and animals to use for food, clothing, and shelter. From many streams the Indians took salmon and other fish.

Rabbit skins were woven into robes and blankets. Roots and bulbs came from the soil, dug out with a stick that did the job better than a steel spade.

In roundhouses, think of them as churches, the people gathered to dance and give thanks for all the land had given them. Nowhere in California did the Indian people take what they had for granted.

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Indians lived with an important understanding that finally seems to be spreading to others; they knew they were a part of all that exists, not something separate. They knew that what we call Nature could not be harmed without themselves being injured. For the Indian people, this was not a special science, but a guide for everyday life.

It wasn't a passive guide; in many places the people found ways to make Nature's blessings even greater. They tended the earth with care and knowledge. Every day they could see, clearer than most of us today, how much their lives depended on it.

Tules were used to make living huts, and this tradition is still passed on today. Some Indian people burnt off grasses and brush after harvesting the seed, so the new grass would attract animals to hunt, and next year's crop would grow better. Some pruned and trimmed plants, such as tobacco and mesquite, to increase production. Others built irrigation ditches to bring water to dry meadows, then, each year, restored their streams to flow naturally.

The Indians also created a system of trade, linking village to village, group with group. Sometimes passing through many hands, food, medicine, and materials moved long distances in every direction. This way, materials of one area were moved to other places where they were wanted but not available. Clamshell beads crafted on the Northern Coast came into the hands of people living hundreds of miles from the sea.

This was the California the Indians knew, but there was a world outside they never imagined. On a day in 1492, far away from them, people from Europe landed in America.

Today it is celebrated as Columbus Day; you don't even have to come to school. But I want you to see it in a different way. It was not the beginning of a new life, it was the beginning of the end of the old Indian world everywhere here in America. When you look back at it this way, you can see that it was a tragic day for the people already living here.

Europeans had stumbled on what, for them, was a mysterious new world which they knew nothing about. Like blind men, they felt their way along its coastline, but soon they came inland, just as they had already done in Asia and Africa. This was a time when the Europeans moved out from where they lived to dominate a great part of the world.

For a few hundred years it worked. They were driven by hunger for wealth and land, and by powerful religious feelings. As they took control of America, their languages, banners, and religions were different from place to place. To the Indian it was all the same, a threat to the way they lived, and even their very lives.

In California the European empires met as they circled the globe. First came the Spanish, invading up the coast around the time of the American Revolution. They put Indians to work building missions, from which the Spanish hoped to convert them to Christianity. Indians along the coast were hit the hardest. Group after group was drawn into the missions. Overcrowding and disease made the missions into places of death for thousands.

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Indians in the Great Basin area of California were safe from the Spanish, who were never able to gain control so far from the coast. The coming of the Europeans had almost no effect on the Paiute, the Shoshone, and the Kiowa Souix, and other people of the region.

When the fur trappers unknowingly carried disease into the Central Valley in the 1830s, probably malaria, the invisible killer spread from village to village, destroying the strong with the weak, the young with the old. Great numbers of Indians from the Central Valley and the Sierra died. There was no defense against the deadly fever, except not to be near it. Luckily for the Great Basin people, the fur trappers were far from them.

In the 1840s a wave of newcomers moved into California. When they found gold, the wave became a flood. By the early the 1850s the Indians living along the coast, in the Central Valley, and even the Sierras, were being overwhelmed by the newcomers. Almost alone, the people of the Great Basin continued their old way of life, almost as if the lands over the mountains were not being invaded. But the end of their good luck was close.

In 1857 the Comstock Lode was discovered in Nevada. By the beginning of the 1860s a few Americans began spilling into their territory. Cattlemen began driving herds through the Owens Valley to supply the miners in Nevada. The cattle ate the seeds and the plants the Indians needed for their own food. Then hundreds of miners came, looking for gold along the Owens River, and, here and there, settlers built houses where the Indians had always lived. Even some white people recognized the great suffering this was causing the Indians:

“I have heard that the white man went into Owens Valley and took their cattle onto the fields of grass which were cultivated by the Indians. Those poor Indians are doubtless at a loss to know how to live, having their fields turned into pastures, whether they’re willing or not willing.”

When the newcomers began killing Indians in their way, the Paiute fought back. Led by men like Captain George in the southern Owens Valley and Joaquin Jim in the north they struck back. The first troops sent to fight them were defeated and fled for their lives, along with nearly every white settler in the valley. But more troops soon arrived and established Camp Independence on July 4th, 1862.

“Since I came to the valley and commenced killing and destroying whenever I could find an Indian to kill or his food to destroy, they changed their tune, and are anxious for peace.”

A peace treaty was made. All of the Indians kept their side; their enemies did not. In desperation they fought to protect their homelands and their families. Again, the soldiers crushed them, killing every Indian they found and destroying the precious seeds the Paiutes had hidden.

By late spring of 1863, weakened by starvation and disease, hundreds of Shoshone and Paiute began surrendering at Camp Independence. Almost a thousand were forced on a march into exile. Guarded by soldiers, men, women, and children were marched into a land that was strange to them. Most ended up at Tejon Reservation in the San Joaquin Valley or at nearby Fort Tejon. Some did not make it; about 150 ran away or died during the long march from their homeland.

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The fighting was over; many of the people drifted back to their homeland after almost starving where they were sent. But now it was a newcomer's land, not theirs.

Eventually, reservations were set up for the Indians in Owens Valley. Other people from the Great Basin in California, especially the Shoshone, joined them there. They worked to make a new life for themselves in this much different world than they had ever known before.

Today, there are many Indian people in Owens Valley. Some of the Great Basin people of California still live outside it, but most are here. It has not been easy to keep the old languages alive, or the traditions. Many of the younger generation drift away. Through all of this, our elders never forgot how to listen to the echoes of our ancestors, and they, in turn, hand it down to others.

“Yeah, you drink or you eat with this sugu appo.”

[Woman and girl singing together in an Indian language] “Now you try it, try it now.”

[Girl trying to sing the song, then laughing] “You can't make it, huh?”

Today, there are hundreds of thousands of California's people of Indian blood. Many have come from other parts of America to make a better life for themselves; others are native California Indians. The great majority of them live in urban areas, where they work or go to school just like you do.

Without our languages and our customs, without making that other world a part of our lives, we would not be who we are. Any questions?

Running Time: 21 minutes
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