

YOSEMITE VALLEY

HISTORY

MILITARY CAMPAIGNS AGAINST THE MIWOK INDIANS

Discussion and quotes from *The Piercing of the Yokut Shield*

A history text by Dr. John M. Anderson

If you search for information about the Miwok Indians and their town sites in Yosemite Valley on the world-wide web, you will find more than 10,000 webpages listed under the 'Yosemite National Park.' And if you searched for webpages keyed to the name Yosemite, you will be offered over 50,000 citations. The vast majority of these webpages are commercial and/or operated by local, state, or federal government agencies for tourist purposes.

Unfortunately, very few of these webpages offer the visitor to Yosemite anything more than a cursory history of the Miwok Indians who were the original occupants of the Yosemite valley. There is actually a great deal of information available on the Miwok, and the story of their dispossession of this beautiful valley. Commercial and government sources downplay this history, in favor of more upbeat environmental and 'white settler' gold rush stories. Yet there is a great deal to be learned for an honest historical appraisal of the park's Native American heritage. Reading about the Miwok war can enrich every visitor's understanding of the unique role that the valley played in ancient California.

An Overview

Everywhere around Yosemite Park are reminders of its Miwok heritage. Yet, without background information, the casual visitor seldom recognizes the fundamental historical role played by these native Californians in the park.

I know that when my wife and I first visited the park for a winter tent stay, we stopped to look at such popular sites as the Tenaya lodge, but failed to pick up on the fact that this tourist facility was named after a Miwok nationalist leader who tried to rally his people to protect themselves from a series of ongoing raids by hostile miners in the 1850's. The lodge is now advertised as a 'retreat' for urban visitors from San Francisco and other crowded cities. But it is also important to remember that it was once a retreat for Teneiya, when he fled to the Yosemite valley with a large contingent of Miwok being chased by American raiders.

The story of Teneiya's dramatic stay in Yosemite is not typically featured in the park's literature and public presentations, so this webpage has been made available to supplement your understanding of the park's heritage.

The discovery of the fabulously rich Miwok gold fields triggered a massive invasion of California by Americans and Europeans. The sudden influx of heavily-armed foreigners has been popularized in the American mass media as the Fortyniner Era because it began in 1849.

From the beginning, American miners attacked local native towns, seizing their food supplies and forcing the residents into servitude in the mining camps. By 1851, the Miwok and other Penutian speaking peoples were so embittered by their treatment by the American invaders that many had withdrawn into the relative safety of the higher Sierra mountains. Others remained in their hometowns, hoping that recent marriages to influential Americans would protect their families from further harm. One of the most powerful of these American relatives was James Savage.

The Americans Expand the Warfare

Savage had overextended himself, underestimating his native relatives who increasingly resented the meager number of rifles he would sell them. It became clear over the winter that Savage had no intention of making good on his promises of large numbers of modern firearms in exchange for Miwok and Yokut gold. The native men had worked into the bitter winter snows, extracting ore, expecting immediate acquisition of rifles. Instead they watched Europeans buying the weapons, while Savage's clerks put them off saying the supplies were too low for native sales. In mid-December, Savage left on a diplomatic mission to San Francisco... While they were away, three hundred Miwok and Yokut mine workers suddenly disappeared from the placer labor camps after being warned by their nationalist relatives the miner's plan to kill them in a surprise attack. Within days, the Butterfly War broke out, causing havoc in the region." (page 11).

"A battalion of army troops soon arrived to reinforce the miners. Jointly they initiated burn and destroy operations against all surrounding native communities. By the time deep snows stopped the killings, the Americans had either enslaved or killed most of the civilians still in the region. Governor Teneiya ordered his followers to withdraw into the deeper mountains, but the Americans followed them further and further into the interior even as far as Yosemite valley. Here they stopped temporarily in January, because Teneiya offered to negotiate a peace treaty rather than continue the killings.

Yosemite Valley was a sacred shrine to his people, and he did not want to see it defiled by

warfare. In spite of his efforts, the colonials betrayed the truce and tried to annihilate the Miwok nationalists in a sneak attack. The Miwok had fortunately recognized the duplicity of the Americans and placed scouts all around their encampment. By the time the attacker reached the settlements, the residents had successfully fled up the canyon trails into the higher mountains.

Hearing of Teneiya's narrow escape in Yosemite, other [native] politicians traveling to the peace conference disbanded, leaving the assassins [hostile miners wanting to kill them] frustrated. The Americans quickly sent out detachments to raid local Miwok settlements before the dispersing politicians could sound the alarm. The colonial leaders hoped that capturing the women and children would break the resistance movement. But news reached many Miwok families in time for them to flee. Vigilante groups tried to track down the civilians in February storms, but eventually gave up when it became impossible to travel in deep snows.

It was during this extermination campaign that the Yokuts' northern neighbors, the Nehmu, withdrew east of the great mountains [the Sierras], reinforcing the towns of the Pavotavo (Mono) lake area. This was surely the case for the Nehmu populations living upriver from Savage's facilities. Meanwhile, the army turned its attention on the Chowchilla Yokut, to avenge smoldering grudges of two to three years duration. According to general policy, a scorched earth campaign was implemented, quickly eliminating the native food storage facilities and forcing them with winter coming on to sign a treaty ceding much of their territory." (page 14)

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The Piercing of the Yokut Shield (Anderson) goes on to describe how the defeat of the Miwok, led to the expansion of the war south against their neighbors the Yokuts. The rapid collapse of the Yokut defense left the Tejon Indians defenseless, and they soon signed the Tejon treaty of 1851.

*This webpage is meant as a supplement to the webpages of the Yosemite National Park.

It does not necessarily represent the views of any group, organization,
or governmental body including the Miwok.

The Piercing of the Yokut Shield (Anderson) is no longer in print. It will eventually be entered
in full text for free download through the John M. Anderson Library Project.

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