Northwest Indigenous Gold Rush History

The Indian Survivors of California’s Holocaust
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The Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria

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The idea for this Native American response to California's three-year (1998-2000) celebration of the Gold Rush sesquicentennial was conceived by Laura Lee George. Laura Lee is the Director of the Indian Teacher and Educational Personnel Program (ITEPP) at Humboldt State University, and a member of the Karuk tribe. In the fall of 1997, Laura Lee decided to have ITEPP's 44 student members divide into groups and collect information on the local indigenous history of the Gold Rush. This information came in the form of personal interviews, archival photos and literature reviews. In the spring of 1998, the information was compiled and edited in order to create this booklet.

The centerpiece of the booklet consists of the interviews seven respected local Native people gave about their families and cultural experiences of the Gold Rush era. These oral histories, which were conducted by ITEPP students, state the truth about what happened between Natives and the non-Natives in Humboldt County from 1848 to 1900. Several nations have been represented in this booklet, among them the Wiyot, Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Tolowa, and Wintu. Archival photos showing the environmental devastation are included; California is still dealing with the damage caused by mining technology used 150 years ago.

Literature and newspaper reviews have shown that most of mainstream America knew about and encouraged the massacre of indigenous people. Editors and writers in newspapers across California wrote of many killings of Native people and called for the extermination of Native people as a whole. In doing this, these editors and writers described Native people as "diggers," "savages," "devils," and other inhumane names, helping create racist stereotypes that still exist. These writers helped create the fake "Indian War" history in California that exists in today's literature; these "Wars" were really the indiscriminate murder of thousands of indigenous men, women and children across California by miners and the US military.

The Gold Rush has long been romanticized in American history. The 49ers have been called heroes, legends, argonauts, and pioneers. Their exploits are remembered and rejoiced in parades, movies, books and school plays. The truth is, many were thieves, murderers, and slave-traders, spurred by a government bent on destroying indigenous cultures in the name of Manifest Destiny. Their greed and the destruction they caused is unparalleled in history.

Ye! California will throw more parades, write more books and create more state-sponsored classroom curriculum in the next two years based on the lie that the Gold Rush was a "grand exodus of souls in the pursuit of gold." This booklet offers a more balanced and realistic view of history, including accounts of massacres, slavery, and the environmental raping of the land. This side of history must be exposed and taught in order to create a better understanding between cultures and pave the way for healing in Native communities.

The interviews included have been edited from the question-and-answer format of the original transcript into a more essay-like form. Aside from editing for grammar and the hesitations normal to speech, the phrasing of the original transcripts has not been changed. Information pertaining to the Gold Rush was used for the booklet, all other information given in the original interviews was edited with the permission of those interviewed.

-Chag Lowry
“In fact, during the early mining days in California, there were gathered together some of the wildest, most reckless, savage, and dangerous men ever collected in a similar area anywhere in the world.”

Ethnography and Archaeology of the Wiyot Territory

Armed militias from surrounding towns spent weeks and sometimes months in the mountains in Humboldt and Del Norte counties destroying Native villages and cultures. Military soldiers in the area from Fort Humboldt to Fort Gaston were supposed to help protect native people from these militias. Instead, they often helped the militias eliminate any native person they could find. Photo courtesy of the Indian Action Council.

My Culture is In My Blood

Cheryl Seidner is the Tribal Chairperson for the Table Bluff Reservation. She has been active in the Wiyot tribe’s religious and political activities for most of her life. She sat down with Chag Lowry and talked about the impact the Gold Rush had on her people, whose traditional homeland stretches along the coast and inland to the first set of hills from Bear River to Moonstone Beach.

He’balo’, my name is Cheryl Seidner. Thank you for letting me talk to you. A long time ago, where can we begin? I guess I never think about it as a gold rush. But if you really stop to think about it I think that’s where the beginning of the downfall of a lot of the Native American peoples of California (began). And there was no one around to have to war with. Everyone seemed to be pretty co-inhabited (in) the area. But in 1850 Eureka was founded. So was a place called Urechichi, and the white people came in. That’s when Eureka was first put on the map as Eureka. So we were here quietly minding our own business. And there were three areas today that we look at. One is Batwat, which is north of here, and that’s Mad River. Wiki, which is Humboldt Bay, and Wiyot which is Eel River today. And the Wiyots, that’s the name that group of people (settlers) decided would be the whole name for the area.
I was told, probably back in 1852, there was a freshwater massacre—there is no record of it. But no one ever talks about it, they might not have thought about it. I think the reason why the 1860 massacre was such a horrid deal was because of Brett Harte, who was living in the vicinity in Arcata at the time, I believe. And he wrote about it. And when he wrote about the 1860 massacre on Indian Island, it did not just get into the local newspapers, it went to San Francisco and then went on to New York, as I understand. So it was one of the first few massacres that got coast to coast publication, or notice. So that was pretty, I don’t know, impressive. I don’t know what to say, but it got out. The word got out!

Other than that, I also was told there was a small massacre prior to 1860 around 1858, but I don’t know where that was. In 1860 the massacre on Indian Island was pretty devastating. Anytime people die it’s devastating under those kind of conditions, any kind of conditions. And the south spit was also hit and so was (the area) around the Eel River, the mouth of the Eel River area. Maybe not quite the mouth of the Eel River but up further. And that’s where my father’s people are from, the Eel River area. My mother’s people are from around Batwat, not Batwat but Wiki, around the Humboldt Bay. And her grandfather was the baby found on Indian Island. And his father was Captain Jim.

Early settlements—A different value system, where nature can be used without regard to the future, was held by ranchers and settlers in the Gold Rush Era. Photo courtesy of the Humboldt State University Library.

He was what the white people called the leader of the Humboldt Bay Indians. And so he would always put the dances on. He was the man in charge of the Humboldt Bay. And I don’t know if he was definitely in charge or the white people said, ‘Well, we are going to take him and make him leader.’ But obviously he was some kind of leader because he was the one putting on the dances on the island. And they called him Captain Jim. So that’s how my mother’s family ended up with the name James. So they lost their Indian-ness already that quickly, and before 1860. He was married and had a baby. After the massacre his wife and the rest of his children were dead, leaving the baby behind with him. He was at home off the island, as all the men usually left during the dances. They would go back to their homes and just left the women and children and the elders, and some young men on the island, while they would go home. It was said at the time that the Wiyot men hid in the bushes and the trees and swam to shore and never helped protect the Wiyot people. And that part wasn’t true. They did not flee. They were gone. They weren’t there.
I think any person would try to defend their families. But they were not on the island. As tradition has it, they would leave the island and go home. For one thing, they would bring back fresh supplies because the island does not support fresh water, to my knowledge. And so they would have to bring back fresh supplies every day. And the dances would last seven to 10 days depending on what they did. (I say this) not knowing all the details of the dances, because since 1860 there was nothing left.

They said that they found between 60 and 80 bodies. They know for sure because they came and got the bodies too, and took them home to wherever they were going. There were survivors, but they weren’t on the island. They survived because they ran. They said that there were three people, or three adults found on the island the next morning, plus the baby. And there was an old woman. I understand she got stuck in the mud. And she was still alive and they said she was sitting there. She couldn’t move because she was stuck in the mud so badly. I guess they said that she was singing. So I don’t know what kind of song, I could only think it was a mourning song.

When I was growing up that was our legacy and that’s what my mother told me and that’s all we know. I knew that story ever since I was a little kid, you know, way back when I was five or six years old. I knew that we were from Indian Island and I knew what had happened. My thing is, I try to make sure people understand. If you know your history, hopefully you won’t repeat history.

The gold rush made people rich. But the only way it made people rich was because they exploited people of color. I don’t understand the greed, “everything can be bought and sold” I guess, is what most non-Indians think. If you are raised Indian, you know that’s not possible. But when the massacre took place it really took away a lot of our identity. The old people who lived through it wouldn’t talk of it anymore. They just said it’s gone, our singers, our regalia, our food, our land, we lost everything. I kind of look at us (Wiyot) as a buffer zone, because you look at the Karuks, and the Yuroks, and the Hupas, they still have their culture pretty much intact. It’s not all intact, but there are people who still speak those languages.
As far as I know, my sister Leona and I have probably the biggest vocabulary, I knew only about 25 words when we started out, now I can say 100. So that for me is really good. Leona is our basket teacher. She has three students and we go out gathering together. And now Leona has taken or about four boys, to go out and learn how to do stick games. We are trying to find Wiyot stick game examples. She is also going to teach them how to make eel baskets or fish traps, so we can have examples of the fish basket. So it basically took 140 years to recover one per cent of what was lost from our culture.

As to who participated in the massacre, it might have been renegades, a goon squad. You know, those kinds of things. There is a book called “Little White Father,” it’s not a real flattering book when it describes Wiyot people. But, it talks about the massacre and it talks about people like Larrabee. And I think the Indian people in Humboldt County need to start getting together and saying we no longer want it to be Larrabee Valley or Larrabee Creek. The Indian people need to band together and say this is an outrage, because he was one of the main characters, as I understand it, one of the main goon squad leaders. He got people together and did little raids here and there. But he owned property up from this man on this river on the other side of Bridgeville, and probably the Van Duuren. And he killed this little (Indian) boy, whose parents lived on this other man’s ranch and worked for him. And this little boy just happened to be on Larrabee’s property and he killed him, and pinned a note to him and sent him down the river on a makeshift raft. And I think the note said something like, this is what’s going to happen to you if you continue to harbor Indian people.

Larrabee also used Indians as target practice. They see an Indian up on the ridge, you know, they start shooting at them and things like that. It’s all in that book. And it just makes your stomach turn. And he brought his goon squad into Eureka and started gathering people. And doing things, you know, beating up people. I guess they said that he was given guns by merchants or the people in town. And they say these people knew who did it. And it wasn’t just the island that got hit that night, it was also the (Indian) people on the south spit and on the Eel River. And they kept saying this is only a coincidence. How can you put together three massacres? They had to have talked about it.

What was interesting in that book is they said they tried to find some family of Larrabee’s. But the heat got so bad for him they moved out of the area. I think the other thing about the gold rush era that really marked our people was after the massacre. They (soldiers) rounded up all the people and put them in the stockyards at Fort Humboldt to “keep them from harm,” where women got raped. Consider this was winter time. It had been raining all the time so you can imagine being out in that rain with no shelter. And women were taken away and raped and brought back. And babies died because of exposure. And then they corralled them all up and shipped them off to three places. I don’t know if they had to walk to these places. I would assume so because there was no modern transportation. They took them to Smith River, Hoopa, and Round Valley. And they all came running home, so they packed them up and shipped them out again. And they came back and after a while they decided just to leave them alone. Some stayed behind because they married into families where they were at. Some came home. So Wiyots are all over the place! People may not think so but they are.

Somebody told us one time that there was no culture left in the Wiyot peoples, and I was so angry and the guy’s like 6’3” and my whole whopping 5’5” you know, I was livid. And I said who do you think you are telling me I have no culture. And this gentleman was of my tribe. “We have no culture left.” I said I differ with you. Down to my socks I differ with you. I said because I was always Wiyot. And I said my culture is in my blood. Whether I speak the language, sing the songs or weave the baskets. I know it’s in me, don’t just sit there and say we don’t have any. You know, the only way you can reclaim something is to do something about it. And I think that is what Leona and I have been doing and I know other people have been doing the same thing. But we are bringing back the basketry and the language. It will be slow. It may never amount to anything. But all I can say is that we did what we could, and I think we can be pretty proud of what we have done, whether it goes any further than this.
The book *Ethnogeography and Archaeology of the Wiyot Territory*, using newspaper accounts of the massacre at Indian Island, describes the slaughter that occurred in February of 1860.

"About four o'clock Sunday morning five or six men came to the island armed with hatchets. Mercilessly, the hatchet descended on all alike, old and young, women, children, and infants. Their skulls were cleft, their spines severed, their bodies thrust with bowie-knives. The work of destruction was finished in a few minutes, and while the dead and dying lay strewn over the ground, the fire from one of the burning cabins lit up the ghastly scene."(1)

![Despite the genocide inflicted by miners, indigenous people still allowed photographers to take pictures. Photo courtesy of the Humboldt State University Library.](image)

Newspapers carried a different account of the rounding up of the Wiyot people after the massacres. The Red Bluff Semi-Weekly Independent wrote:

"The troops engaged in hunting and 'punishing' Indian marauders in Humboldt County, have captured about 875 men, women and children, who are 'corralled' on the Peninsula between Humboldt Bay and the ocean, under the charge of the garrison at Fort Humboldt, and are guarded by lines of sentries. They are well provided for, having comfortable huts, and spend their time in fishing and catching clams and crabs. They will be removed to a reservation, we presume?"(2)

The most anyone in the white community ever did to promote justice in the case of the Indian Island massacre was to write anonymous letters to San Francisco newspapers. The group of armed murderers Ms. Seidner referred to as renegades were known as “thugs” in Humboldt County during the Gold Rush era.

The San Francisco Bulletin ran an anonymous article on June 1, 1860, part of which reads: "Society is completely demoralized on Eel River; and the thugs are largely in the majority, led on by Wiley of the Humboldt Times and by Van Nest the sheriff. Young men talk and think of nothing else but hanging and killing young Diggers and their mothers. The pulpit is silent, and the preachers say not a word." The article goes on, stating "Two or three men who were on the last Grand Jury which sat at Eureka, were thugs. The man L____ is the same person who boasted of having killed sixty infants with his own hatchet at the different slaughter grounds. This is the same man who peddled whiskey to the United States soldiers and the Indian not 18 months ago."(3)

It has been noted during research that whenever the man Hank Larrabee was mentioned in the newspapers, only an “L,” was used, perhaps for fear of retaliation by those who supported his murderous ways.
"We have frequently had occasion to remark that the accounts of Indian hostilities, not only in the North, but in the South, are almost invariably exaggerated. A small affair is soon magnified into a battle, and the origin is not infrequently attributed to Indian outrages, when the account should read "White man's oppression... The Indian war is defunct. The whole matter has been a cowardly farce, the threatening legions of Indians turning out to be but about 100, seeking refuge in a brush from the rowdies, who, on the least occasion, delight in the sport of shooting them. As in all cases of this kind, the fault has been with the whites."

Sacramento Daily Union, May 31, 1856.

This early picture of Trinidad shows the environmental devastation brought about by European methods of building houses and businesses. Photo courtesy of the Indian Action Council.

The Price of Gold

Kate Handwerker-Droz talked with Axel Lindgren about the Gold Rush in the Trinidad area. Axel is a respected Yurok elder.

Some of the Gold Rush equipment was brought in by ship, so they came in on Trinidad Bay. They also brought food in the same way. During the winter time the ocean was rough, so some of these ships that came into the bay tore each other apart and everything dropped off into the ocean.

Indian State Beach is where they (miners) landed. And then they packed their stuff up the hill right down to the end of that main street up there. Then they loaded onto mule trains, and then they had a couple of ways to get out of Trinidad. Some of them went as far as Big Lagoon. And then they went up over the mountain and then got into the Trinity river, Klamath river.

Northwest Indigenous Gold Rush History = 7 = Indian Teacher and Educational Personnel Program
That opened up that whole country for miners. So that’s what happened there. Some of them took the southern route to Weaverville, then they went over the mountain there, along into mining country. I can’t tell you which was… but it seemed they had one thing in mind. And that was to get into the gold fields. And they did, and it didn’t make any difference. How they got in and what was in the road or anything. They just went rushing right through the whole thing, tore (Indian) houses down, tore up villages. So that’s the way it went.

There was a big village, and there was not enough road for them to go through, hauling all that equipment. So what they did was tear down the houses and kept right on going.

(Kate asks if people were living there).

Yeah, my grandfather was the Chief of this Tsurai village down here, and also of the Big Lagoon. They had a pretty good-sized village and a narrow strip through there. So they (miners) took the narrow strip from the villages. My grandfather, he tried to stop them at Big Lagoon, from tearing it apart. He was just young at the time. My grandfather got shot (by a miner) so he couldn’t use his right hand for the rest of his life.

See, they (miners) were the ones going through this land to get back into the Salmon river, Trinity river, and the Klamath river area. Where all the gold mining was done. Why, they move in there and the people had their homes back there, too. And these creeks, you know, this is where they had gardens. Well, they (miners) came in there and took their creek away from them and then they couldn’t grow any food. So you see, that’s what happened. The Native Americans were just in the road because they were here first. And they didn’t know anything about gold-mining.

But the gold miners did, so they just came in and tore everything up. The water supply, the food supply. And that’s how the miners got along when they first came in. Some of them did hydro-mining. You can see the rock piles on the river, yet. And some of the smaller miners used sluiced-box mining.

(Kate asks what kind of effects the mining technology had on the coastal area).

I don’t think in the mining part, but just traveling through is when they destroyed things. They just went through and tore it all up. That’s what happened up here at Big Lagoon. Because Big Lagoon is a neck that’s narrow between the ocean and the hills. And so there’s where the village was naturally, sometimes they would just go right through, tear it up. Like I said, that’s how come my grandfather got shot, because of his defense of that place, because that’s where he comes from.

Miners could move through indigenous lands, destroy villages and murder the inhabitants with the support of the US military. The Yreka Semi-Weekly Union ran this article describing the military’s attitude toward Native peoples.

“The new military commandant of the district, Col. Black, is doing good service in Indian hunting. He keeps his troops in the mountains most of the time scouting, and has introduced a new method of treating hostile Indian prisoners— hangs them all. That style of dealing with a murdering Digger is very effective, and meets with universal approval by the citizen inhabitants of the hostile region. It seems to be a general sentiment here that a mean ‘Digger’ only becomes a ‘good Indian’ when he is dangling from the end of a rope, or has an ounce of lead in him.’’(4)

The Autobiography of Isaac J. Wistar, an early explorer, carries this account of the treatment Native people received from miners.

“On emerging from the ‘one mile gulch’ just above the town (Trinidad), we came upon boiled-shirt gentry (gamblers) who had three Indians bound to trees and were discussing in what manner to put them to death. Some cattle had been killed near the town, and the gamblers, who knew nothing of Indians and could neither find nor catch any wild ones, had seized these poor freindies, who were in frequent and amicable communication with packers and fur men, and living in permanent quarters near-by at the whites’ mercy, would have as soon thought of suicide, as of hostile acts against such dangerous neighbors.”(5)
"In the flush times immediately following the discovery of gold at Coloma, Indian laborers were a common sight in the California mines. Narratives of mining life in 1848 and 1849 frequently referred to groups of Indians who were 'controlled' or 'owned' or 'employed' by whites... This process was alluded to by one forty-niner who commented that 'the Indians on the ranchos in California are considered as stock and are sold as cattle, and the purchaser has the right to work them on the rancho, or take them into the mines.'"

Gold Diggers: Indian Miners in the California Gold Rush by James Rawls

Hydraulic mining completely destroyed mountains, canyons, and rivers. Native sacred sites and burial grounds were lost to this and other forms of mining. California is still dealing with the pollutants from hydraulic mining. Photo courtesy of the Humboldt State University Library.

Nature Versus Money

Josephine Peters, a respected Karuk elder, talked with Rain Marshall about her family's involvement in the Gold Rush.

My mother was part Karuk and part Shasta, and my father was Karuk. I remember that my grandpa died when I was only three years old, but I remember him, and I can remember his hands, he had real big hands, and he was a miner that came from Nova Scotia. He mined along the Salmon River. They had a homestead that was called Butler Flats, and he mined across the river, and he mined the upper part of the property. His name was Hugh Grant.

I was born at Somes Bar. My dad mined, he mined for different people, but all we had to do was do assessment work on the places. Every year you had to do so much digging on your property. He used
Native villages and homes were washed away in the flood of hydraulic-powered hoses manned by greedy miners. If a Native family tried to halt the onslaught, miners would band together and murder them in the name of “keeping the peace” in Humboldt County. Photo courtesy of the Humboldt State University Library.

to tell us to dig a big hole and an assessment would be marked so many yards. It had to be done every year if you had a mining camp. Then later, I guess, it was in the 1870s, the property was turned over into kind of like an Indian allotment.

A lot of the rancherias were washed away. (Due to hydraulic mining). Across from where we lived in Somes Bar, they mined a lot. The lower flat was a sacred place, and there were Indians living there, they had homes there, but they mined. The Indians had to move away, one old guy lived there until he died...and then we put rocks, as kids, around the graves. When they started mining there for the second time, they put cables for the bridge that went across to carry the water, across the river. Right along the side of it, they marked it off with rocks, and they wanted people to leave it alone.

(Rain asks if Josephine knew of any chemicals that were used in mining).

Only the quicksilver. We used it on our side where we lived, where the sluice boxes went up and down. We used to go mine like that. Pan it out, we would find a lot of quicksilver gold there. But my dad used to tell us that when we went to put it all together, that we were supposed to stay back. He had a long spoon with a long metal handle on it and would put it in there, stick it in the fryer and stand back so that we wouldn’t have to breath all that.

Quicksilver is mercury. It collects the gold into one lump and we’d find quicksilver gold that came through the sluice boxes. Just us older kids went panning. I still got my gold. I spent a little one time, but I kept the rest of it. I found some nuggets, we used to stay at the high waters and go up the big rock. We would put a stick in the big rock and use tweezers to pull it (gold) out.

There was hydraulic mining, and then my dad made us a rocker, they call it a rocker. It had a screen, like a box with a screen in it and we would put our gravel into this screen box and shake it back and forth and all of the sand and gold would go through, and the rocks, we would throw off to the side. So that was easier than panning, we could work through a lot of gravel that way.

(Rain asks if Josephine remembers if any Indian families caught any diseases that miners brought with them).

Most of them (Native people) up on the (Salmon) river, I remember that, had tuberculosis.
Over 100 tons of mercury was dug up for use in the gold rush. An estimated quantity of over 7,000 tons of mercury was lost in local rivers during this time. One gram of mercury in a typical mid-western lake is required to violate today’s federal health standards. 250 million cubic meters of mercury-laden sediments from the Gold Rush have filled the San Francisco Bay. Mining completely destroyed many fishing places used by the Native peoples in Humboldt County.(6)

"A new plan has been adopted by our neighbors opposite this place to chastise the Indians...Some men are hired to hunt them, who are recompensed by receiving so much for each scalp, or some other satisfactory evidence that they have been killed. The money has been made up by subscription."

Marysville Weekly Express, April 16, 1859

Soldiers from several military forts in Northern California continued to hunt down Native women, children, and elders clear into the 1870's. Native people of all genders and ages were considered dangerous and a threat to miners and ranchers and their way of life. Photo courtesy of the Indian Action Council.

We Are All Mad

on Griffith spoke with his grandfather, Charlie Thom, about their family's history of the Gold Rush. Mr. Thom is a respected Karuk elder.

My name is Charlie Thom. I lived on (the) Klamath River all my life, but today I live in Scott's Valley. I knew about the Gold Rush. There was a lot of gold taken out, taken from Humboldt, Siskiyou, Shasta and Trinity (counties). All the rivers had gold, a lot of gold. And then in my time in the Thirties there were great, great hydraulic mines, taking everything clear down to the bedrock. Gold (was found), bigger than my fist and a lot of nuggets. Seven to eight ounce pieces of gold, and I myself dug for gold during the Depression. I've seen a lot of hydraulic mines in my time, right around Orleans, Klamath River and Oak Bottom. And pressure mines all the way up the river, clear to Happy Camp.
Placer gold, water moving, hydraulics, erosion, everything taken. I seen that, they (miners) took a lot of Indian land. So you see, Karuks really suffered from this mining. Because all there was left was rock, with all the gold gone. I heard in the history of the mining of gold, of rock plows, way back in 1851 when the first gold hit. The Gold Rush of California, there were thousands and thousands of people, thousands and thousands of people came in 1851.

According to my grandfather, he had to run and hide to survive back in the mountains, scale the mountains, for years and years and years, fleeing from the gold rush miners. But he survived, he got to tell me a lot of things, and of course they (miners) killed a lot of Indians. They killed the Shasta tribe over gold, and today the Shasta tribe is not even recognized as a tribe, because the federal government is so scared to recognize them, because they have evidence of wrongdoing. They can go back to 1848 and 1851. 1860s, all the way through there, they're so scared to recognize them because they have a strong case.

I'm telling you they really raped this land, and I am a full-blooded Indian from the Karuk tribe and it really disturbs me. How this thing came about I don't know. Greed, a lot of blood shed, and I look at the country today. What it is. How can they turn the soil upside down and out and do nothing about it? Today we are living in a rock pile along the Klamath. We're living in a rock pile. No more soil. The erosion came and hit.

But what they (miners) did, what, you call them "human beings," (they) were extra wrong taking everything. They are still taking, and know to take the gold, silver, nickel and coal, and they took the water and then they took the timber. Oh! Man, I'm telling you. We are all mad. I used to wonder who's running the whole goddamn country, and they are still taking.

And so if you have any questions, come when I have more time. I have two days of information. I can tell you as far back as the 1300s.

I was a gifted man. I'm full-blooded Native American.

The newspaper Alta California gives a surprisingly truthful portrayal of miner-Native conflict in Scott's Valley. "Your correspondent also labors under a mistake in representing the late killing of some 40 Indian at the upper crossing in a "fight." It was a cold-blooded, unprovoked massacre. An Indian, sometime in the early part of March, has been shot by a white man at Happy Camp. The Indians on the rivers were exasperated, and perhaps threatened retaliation. At all events, some miners were alarmed, raised a party, surrounded the Rancheria at the Ferry, and killed every man and some women; then proceeding up the river two miles, surrounded another village and killed every man, but one, who escaped wounded, making a total of some 30 to 40 killed. All accounts agree in stating that the attack was wholly unexpected by the Indians, who from the date of the treaty of Scott's Valley in November, had been perfectly quiet and unoffensive..." The Article was signed by R. McKee. (7)
"Following unspecified Indian-white conflicts during 1851-1852, Del Norte settlers attacked and burned the Northernmost village of Howonquet in 1853. About seventy people were killed. A well-remembered massacre occurred in the late fall of that year, at the village of Yontocket on Lake Earl, north of Crescent City. During a winter dance, probably a ten-day World Renewal Dance, an armed contingent of Crescent City settlers attacked, killing a large number of dance participants, and burning the village to the ground."

Understanding Tolowa Histories by James Collins

These Native women (tribe unknown) are waiting at Fort Gaston in Hoopa for rations. Native people were murdered on the spot if miners or ranchers thought they were stealing food or killing cattle. Photo courtesy of the Indian Action Council.

Beauty of a Ceremony

awn White sat down with Jim Bommelyn and reminisced about Wintu ceremonies. Mr. Bommelyn is a respected Wintu elder. The Wintu Tribe is located further inland toward Shasta and Trinity counties. Mr. Bommelyn resides in Crescent City with his wife, Eunice Bommelyn, who is of Tolowa descent. Mr. Bommelyn's family helps carry on the Tolowa ceremonies and traditions.

One time when (Jim's mother) was smaller, where the Burgen Mine is now, it was a big flat, before it was mined off. And the Indians came right down here. And she said her great-uncle, yeah, his name was Ben Howe. He was a sub-chief and he had all this regalia. Anyway, she was small, and they had a big dance.
'Ten nights,' she said, and they had a fire. And they had what they called wickups, with fir bough, and you could make something to temporarily sleep in. And of course, they cooked outside. She said, in ten nights, after they ate, men and women danced together, they went around the fire. And the men, a lot of them had long headdresses that go clear down to their heels, eagle feathers. When they waved their head like that, she said that the headdresses would go like this, back. She said it was beautiful to watch.

And her aunts danced in it, you know. She said that was the last dance she ever saw, had to be about '72 or '73. 1873, because she was so small. And she said one of her aunts was cooking, and had the baskets and hot rocks, and had the acorn soup in there. And she'd take the hot rocks and put 'em in, you know, and take the other rocks out. Well, it would gurgle and pop like cornmeal does, and she wanted to look in the basket, and her aunt said, "No, it'll burn you." Well, she said she peeked over anyway, and about that time it went pfft, and bubbled, and hit her in the cheek. She never forgot that. She was a little kid and never did forget that burn on her cheek.

These Yurok men prepare for the Jump Dance, a ten day ceremony of continual dancing and prayer for world renewal. This ceremony, along with other aspects of traditional culture, had been outlawed and forbidden to perform under penalty of prison, or death by the Federal government. Photo Courtesy of the Humboldt State University Library.


The miners' lack of respect for human life and the beauty of different cultures is readily apparent in an excerpt from Understanding Tolowa Histories, "Vigilante and militia attacks on four major villages and a continuing influx of settlers into the Del Norte region had left Tolowa society in disarray. Many people had died, village sites had been abandoned; settlers as well as miners were pouring into the area. A 320-acre parcel in what would become Crescent City was acquired through a state land warrant. It was surveyed and subdivided in February 1853, and lots were subsequently sold to 27 investors. The town of Smith River, 13 miles north of Crescent City and less than four miles from Howonquet, had been established in 1853."(9)
Remembering The Ways

Chag Lowry spoke with his grandmother, Evelina Hoffman, about her people’s history of the Gold Rush era. Evelina is a basketweaver, and a respected elder in the Yurok tribe.

(Chag asks if there was a gallows built by the military in Humboldt).

Yes, the soldiers came and built it. It was down here on a flat, near a little village in Terwer Valley. The old ones I heard talking, about how they (soldiers) made the thing across a stand, and for whatever reason, they hung them (Yuroks). I guess they were fighting back, and trying to defend themselves, and they were just outnumbered. The soldiers just kept coming, they sent one troop in, then another. Pretty soon they were overpowered. They didn’t know what to do.

(Evelina speaks about events that happened in Trinidad).

I believe they were soldiers that came there, too. Yes, the old people talked and this lady related her story about witnessing where they (soldiers) took children and dragged the ladies by the hair. The reason this lady could live to tell about it is because she hid in the bushes and berry vines. She was covered up, and she witnessed all of that. Some of the people got scalped for whatever reason, as the story always goes.

And further on towards Crescent City, they (soldiers) just came in there just like that, and no matter how you tried to help yourselves, it was never good for the Indian people. I always heard the stories about when the Indians first saw the white man (near Klamath). The white man didn’t know that the Indians saw them as they passed by. They came on horses and when they arrived they were panning for gold in small creeks. The Yurok story is that “the white man did not see us but we saw them.”

And yet they (white people) say today that we weren’t here, when we really were. The old ones said the same thing, we were here for ages and ages, and as they talked I listened. I can remember when the old people used to talk about when they (miners) had the ferry, to ferry people across from the south to go to the north. We walked every place we went, the old people. It was our way of doing things. Or we used a boat. The boat was our car, the river was our highway. But they try to say we were never here to do all that, and that Jedediah Smith came through here and discovered everything, when we were already here.
“Trafficking in Native American labor, especially young women and children, was carried on as a legal business enterprise well after slavery was abolished throughout the United States. An estimated 4,000 children were bought and sold. Newspaper accounts of the time noted that while young boys sold for 60 dollars or so, young women could sell for as much as 200 dollars. The initial basis of this slavery was an April 1850 law, drafted by John Bidwell and passed before the state was even fully incorporated as part of the United States, that allowed settlers to continue to use native peoples as bonded workers, a practice begun under the Spanish occupation.”

Gold, Greed and Genocide

These Native children are being forced to march military-style at the Hoopa Boarding School for reasons unknown. Parents were forbidden to visit their children at these schools. Despite the efforts of the miners and boarding schools, Native people in California continue to practice their beliefs and remain strong in their respective cultures. Photo courtesy of the Indian Action Council.

An Indigenous Perspective

Lonyx Landry interviewed Julian Lang about the impact of the Gold Rush as told by his family elders and his research into the tribal history of the period. Lang is a member of the Karuk tribe, a published author and Karuk tribal scholar, who with his partner, Lyn Risling, have helped revive certain Karuk ceremonies.

There were little garrisons up and down the Klamath River—I don’t know if they had one at Orleans. In 1849, that’s when the miners first discovered gold in northern California, and then, instantly, White men started coming into our country. They were from everywhere, from all over the world. The first wave came and they stripped out the gold, they took as much as they could. A law was made that allowed the “miners” to make indentured slaves out of women, young, like 14 years old. They would just take them, just go into their houses and take them—they were in a territory with no women. Overnight, tent cities and white people jammed the river bars along the Klamath. I imagine there were a bunch of cut-throats, too. These were people who wanted money bad, willing to do anything to get it. [Referring to a sketched map] We [the Karuk tribal people] start at Bluff Creek [7-8 miles upstream of the confluence of the Klamath and Trinity Rivers].
Boarding schools for Native children, such as this one at Hoopa, came about at the end of the Gold Rush era. Native children from all over Northern California (and the country) were sent to these schools supposedly to learn English and work skills. They were forced to cut their hair and forbidden to speak their own language, or they were punished severely.

Photo courtesy of the Indian Action Council.

There were some little placer mining that went on over here-Red Cap is here-and Orleans is over here, and then the Klamath goes on up[stream]. [Above Orleans] there are all of these little places, villages, Peach Creek, Ameekyaaraam. There wasn’t too much gold in there though, very little easy gold.

There were trail systems everywhere, the Indian highways. You could go to Happy Camp, to the Forks of the Salmon, and over the mountains to Weitchpec. All of the village-sites, nearly all of the village sites were ‘flats’, open meadows that sat above the river called benches. Nowadays, many of those benches, the site of the actual villages, are gone. After the first wave of miners in 1849-1850, the second wave were more determined to strip away all the earth with hydraulics, so that, today, the old villages are bedrock. The meadows are gone, everything.

[Referring to the map-sketch again:] Then end result was that up here at Katimini and Somes Bar (they were separate places in the old days), the Salmon River runs this direction, every village was wiped out. The mid- and upper-stretches of the Salmon River were the site of much mining. Black Bear Mine was the most famous mine, established in the late 1860s-era. It turned out to be one of the richest gold mines in the world. There are reports that Black Bear was bringing in millions of dollars per week, I don’t recall the figures. The first 49-ers, though, were not interested in long-term mining, unless they struck it rich. Nearly all of the first wave were looking to ‘strike it rich’.

Remember there were no ‘whiteman towns’ prior to 1849-1850. The country was all Indian, there were the Karuk Peoples and the Konomihu Shasta and the Klamath River Shasta, with the Yurok and Hupa further downstream and southwest. The Chimariko were over the mountains south of us. In 1850, the Indian village that became Happy Camp was, relatively speaking a big
village area. There was a World Renewal Ceremony there at Clear Creek. Overnight this area was inundated. There were 60 thousand people [today Happy Camp's population is about 1,500 souls] roaming through the surrounding hills and river bars looking for gold. The impact was devastating for them, the Happy Camp Indians.

There were skirmishes and even what was called "Indian Wars," Indians repelling the white miners from taking their wives and daughters. In 1850-1851 the whites living around Orleans announced that there was to be a war, all the Indian villages were to be burned unless certain named men, my great-great- grandfather was one of them, were turned over for 'killing a cow'. The vigilante group burned many of the houses at Panamniik (today's town of Orleans) and continued on up to the village-center called Katimiin. When they were scheduled to attack, a second group of white men, led by a man named Brazille, a Frenchman, interceded, and so, the houses in and around Katimiin were not destroyed as they had been both upriver and downriver.

There's many, many stories of this time...

The Hupa tribe near the Trinity river re-acquired over 2,600 acres of wildlands by act of Congress in April of 1998. This land had been originally intended for the Hoopa Valley reservation when it was created in 1864. Miners and settlers prevented the land from being included because they thought it contained gold. No viable gold deposits were ever found there.

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The nations represented in this booklet are still here today, vibrant and alive, despite the genocide of the Gold Rush era. The ceremonies are here, stronger than ever. The regalia still dances. These nations and their members are busy creating new ways to help themselves in today's society. United Indian Health Services is building a new health clinic near Arcata, California with the blessings of the Wiyot people; the clinic will provide many services to American Indians in the area.
Footnotes


7. Alta California, May 21, 1852.


The following members of ITEPP contributed to this booklet, in the form of interviews, literary reviews, photography and research. Their work is deeply appreciated:

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ITEPP’s webpage includes a curriculum page on the California Gold Rush.
Two curricular lessons titled, “Slavery: A California Reality” and “The California Indian During the Gold Rush,” can be accessed and downloaded at the following address: http://www.humboldt.edu/~blm1/
For more information on ITEPP’s Gold Rush Curricular Lessons website, or the Northwest Indigenous Gold Rush History booklet, contact the ITEPP Curriculum Resource Center at (707) 826-5199, or email: blm1@axe.humboldt.edu

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he research and interviews from this booklet provided the inspiration for several related gold rush projects. Chag Lowry and Rebecca Haff, both ITEPP alumni, created a museum exhibit in the summer of 1998 based on the northern California indigenous perspectives of the gold rush era. This project received support and funding from the Seventh Generation Fund, the ITEPP program, the California Council for the Humanities, and the Humboldt Area Foundation.

The exhibit has been displayed in Eureka, San Francisco, and Sacramento. It will be featured at the Carnegie Museum in Eureka, California from January to February 2000. The exhibit will continue to tour California's museums and colleges for two years, and will be on permanent loan to the United Indian Health Services facility starting in 2001. Rebecca and Chag have begun work on a website that will encompass the museum exhibit information. The site will also provide culturally-based curriculum on northern California history to teachers throughout the state. The site will go online in the summer of 1999. If you would like further information on the exhibit or the webpage, contact Chag and Rebecca at (707) 826-0335.

There is still much work to be done to rectify the damage caused to indigenous people during the gold rush era. The history books must present all sides to the Gold Rush, not just the romanticized version. Native people must be represented in all books, literature and movies created about California's history, in a truthful manner. Most importantly, the words of California's indigenous elders must be preserved, taught and remembered, so that future generations will benefit from their knowledge and wisdom.

ITEPP Club: (From left to right, standing,) Leroy Tripp Jr., Malia Castillo, Phil Zastrow-ITEPP Coordinator, ray McQuilles, Buffy McQuilen, William Einman, Edward Garcia, Scott Quinn, Kate Handwerker-Droz, Chag Lowry, Elsie McLaughlin, Rain Marshall, Melanie Sanderson, Lonnyx Landry, Bernadine Whipple, Leo Canez Jr., Michelle Curtis, Shirley Laos, Tracy Marshall, Christina West, Colleen Thornton, Leo Carpenter Jr. (From left to right, kneeling,) Lavina Brooks, Laura Lee George-ITEPP Director, Jessica Fawn White, Marissa McConnell, Virginia Cavasos, Carmen Tirado-Paredes, Denise Barragan, DaVita Copeland, Ron Griffith, Sonya Ariston.