

What was traditional life like?

Prior to the gold rush in Nevada and surrounding counties, the Nisenan inhabited villages scattered all over the landscape. Each was made up of extended family groups of different sizes and led by a Headman or Headwoman.

Towns such as *daspah*, *woloyu*, *'ustomah* and *kiwimdo* thrived in rich, sustainable partnerships with the ecosystems of the Yuba and Bear River watersheds.

What is the Nevada City Rancheria?

The gold rush marked the end of the ancient Nisenan lifestyle and the ability of the Nisenan to thrive on their own land. The massive influx of gold miners and settlers created competition for resources (food and medicinal plants), destruction of the environment and persecution of the Native people, ultimately forcing consolidation of many Nisenan villages in the 1840s-50s into one area on Cement Hill in Nevada County, which became the Nevada City Rancheria.



Traditional acorn mash preparation

In 1887, Tribal Chief Charley Cully obtained a federal land allotment protecting 76 acres of Nisenan land on Cement Hill. It was his hope to secure a home for his people forever. In California, Native American reservations are called rancherias. After Cully's death in 1911, his land was converted by President Woodrow Wilson into the Nevada City Rancheria by executive order. Nevada City Rancheria is still a name used to identify the Tribe of Nisenan who are descended from the families that lived there.



Chief Charley Cully (d. 1911) fought for Nisenan Tribal Sovereignty and established a secure homeland within their Ancestral territory



Nevada City Rancheria Indian Baseball Team c. 1906

What happened to the reservation?

From the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, the United States promoted a federal policy of "Indian termination." Congress passed several laws, including the California Rancheria Termination Act of 1958, focused on terminating rancherias and removing their statuses as federally recognized Native American Tribes; over 90% of targeted rancherias were terminated including the Nevada City Rancheria. With the loss of their Ancestral land, the Nisenan also lost rights to almost all of their ancient burning (cremation) sites and burial grounds. Fortunately, one burial ground survives and is protected.

The terminations were identified as illegal in the 1970s. As the result of lawsuits and legislation, 41 California rancherias have been restored. The Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan are one of three terminated Tribes left behind and still fighting for restoration.

What language is spoken?

The traditional language of the Nisenan people is also called Nisenan, which means “from among us”. Nisenan is a critically endangered language which many Tribal members currently work to revitalize by taking classes and speaking with their family members. Language preservation is part of the larger Cultural revitalization efforts undertaken today. Nisenan, along with Konkow, Mechoopda and Maidu, are languages descended from a very old, parent language group identified by linguists as proto-Maiduan.

Because of this parent language grouping, the Nisenan were previously inaccurately labeled as “Maidu” or “Southern Maidu,” but they are a separate Tribe with their own Cultural lifeways, different territory, and their own distinct language. The Nisenan do not identify as a Maidu subgroup.



Current Tribal Council Chairperson Richard Johnson as a small child on the Rancheria and contemporarily showing traditional Nisenan crafts and tools to children.

What are you doing today?

All Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribal Members continue to live on their Ancestral Homelands, currently within 33 miles of their original reservation land. They are a functioning and contributing part of the local community fabric and wish to regain the prosperity they had in the days long ago. Their non-profit organization, the California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project, or CHIRP, hosts an annual celebration of their Culture in November called Nisenan Heritage Day. They lead a campaign to have their Federal recognition restored. They practice their language and traditional songs and dances to keep them alive for the next generation. In 2018, CHIRP acquired land along Deer Creek and worked with local business owners and residents to build and launch the Ancestral Homelands Reciprocity Program.

California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP) is a 501c3 created to preserve, protect and perpetuate Nisenan culture.

Nisenan.org

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The Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria



Roundhouse of the Nevada City Rancheria

Who are the Nisenan?

The Nisenan are the Indigenous people of the area famous today as the heart of the gold rush. Nisenan families have made their homes in the foothills of Northern California for thousands of years. The Nisenan were highly sought after healers and holy people. They were known for their beautiful, watertight basketry.



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