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INDIANS



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THE CALIFORNIA TRIBES

Some 62 distinct tribes are known to have lived in or wandered through what is now California at some time in the past. Many of these were village groups whose tribal designation has come from ethnological research rather than from their own name for themselves. The linguistic and cultural diversity make it very difficult to describe these early inhabitants. The three main northern tribes--the Karoks, the Athabascan Hupas, and the Algonkian Yuroks--resembled the Indians of the Northwest Coast culture. Primarily hunters and fishers, they possessed a more advanced technology and system of mythology than the California Indians further South, and their social organization was on more of a property basis. The Yuman Indians of the Colorado River Valley in Southeast California were similar in culture to the corn-growing Indians of Arizona and New Mexico.

The majority of California Indians, reflecting influences from both the Basin and the Plateau cultures, were food-gatherers. Agriculture was nowhere practiced. The primary staple was the acorn, though some fishing and small game hunting was done. These Indians lived in clusters of hamlets in the winter and in wandering bands during the summer. Distinct tribes, as they occurred in many other parts of America, did not exist; the small village was the most common unit of organization. Though not warlike, these tribes were provincial and quarrelsome, and the Maidus even posted sentries on the hills to ward off strangers. The religion and ceremonies of this region were simple, centering mostly around puberty and death. The most highly developed art was the weaving of baskets, those of the Pomos being among the most excellent of any Indian tribe, and so finely woven that a microscope is required to count the stitches.

Everything changed with the coming of the white man. Although Portuguese, English and Spanish navigators had explored parts of the West Coast beginning as early as 1542, making some contact with the Indians, the first European attempt to colonize the region came in 1769 with the founding of a Franciscan mission called San Diego. Spanish missions, which in the next 50 years were to total 21 throughout the State, were at best a form of beneficent servitude, and their rigid discipline led to both demoralization and population decline among the "Mission Indians". When the Mexican government, succeeding the Spanish occupation in 1834, secularized the missions, and the Indians were turned out on their own, they no longer knew how to take care of themselves as their ancestors had done.

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The impact of white immigration was more severe on California Indians than on those of any other U. S. area. The little resistance these unwarlike tribes offered to seizure of their lands was almost always ineffectual. After the 1849 Gold Rush, the dislocation and decimation of the Mission Indians and the rest of the California Indians was greatly accelerated. Although a series of treaties was negotiated in 1850 to provide reservations for the Indians whose land had been seized, pressure from the new state of California kept the U. S. Senate from ratifying the treaties and the tribes were further shattered. Some of the approximately 25,000 California Indians left on the many small reservations and rancherias made a great effort to maintain their Indian identities, but the names and cultures of many native tribes have been forgotten.

Many services once provided in whole or in part for California Indians by the Indian Bureau are now furnished by the State and its local subdivisions. All California Indian children are now educated in public schools. Most counties offer welfare and public health services to Indians on the same basis as to other residents. This began with a decision by the State attorney general in 1952, when California recognized its obligation to serve Indians on reservations just as other resident citizens.

This trend continued in 1953 with the enactment of Public Law 280 which conferred upon the State of California jurisdiction over civil and criminal matters arising on Indian Reservations. Accordingly, Bureau services were reduced or withdrawn, depending on the proportion of State assistance.

In 1958, through Public Law 85-671, Congress provided for the withdrawal of Federal responsibilities over certain Indian lands in California. Forty-one rancherias were given an opportunity to prepare plans for dividing among themselves the respective properties held in trust for them as individual groups by the Federal Government. This act was amended on August 11, 1964, to include all rancherias and reservations lying wholly within the State.

SUGGESTED READING LIST - CALIFORNIA

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