

Scholars and Collectors Among the Sierra Miwok, 1900-1920: What Did They Really Find?

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From 1900 to 1920 anthropologists, scholars, and collectors traveled among the Northern, Central, and Southern Miwok of California's Sierra Nevada mountains. Racing to record a rapidly disappearing and changing culture, they failed to understand the complex changes which the Miwok had already experienced during the previous century, and sometimes misinterpreted or misunderstood the Miwok people they spoke with. In their efforts to collect data on an idealized, pre-contact past, they have provided us with valuable information about the Miwok people, yet they have left us with many puzzles.

Most of these ethnographers and collectors were apparently aware, to some extent, of the population loss that had taken place among the Miwok during the gold rush period. Yet they did not seem to have understood the full impact of those events, or of others that took place before and after the 1850s. By 1900 the Miwok people's culture had already changed drastically due to European and Euro-American influences.

Shortly after 1800, there were a few Spanish forays in Miwok territory in the Sierra Nevada foothills: these were of a transitory nature and had little impact on the Miwok (Cook 1943; 1960; 1962). A small number of Sierra Miwok peoples went to Missions, especially Santa Clara and San Juan Bautista during the 1820s (Randy Milliken pers. com. 1992). After California became a possession of Mexico in 1821, and the subsequent end of the mission system (1834-1836), there were pronounced consequences for Miwok people. Native people who had lived and worked for decades on mission lands left the missions. These people probably included not only Coastal people, but also San Joaquin River groups who had been at the missions since 1811-1816 and east-side San Joaquin tribes who came to the missions since 1822-1824. By the 1840s, deprived of former homelands which were now occupied by Spanish, Mexican, and Euro-American settlers, many of these people traveled to the Sierra foothills and

joined Miwok villages, importing their own, and Spanish, languages, foods, clothing styles, and technologies (Bates and Lee 1990:25-6; Bigelow 1856:130; Broadbent 1964:321, 340, 341; Castillo 1978:104-05; Fremont 1887:444; Morgan and Scobie 1964:106, 123, 129, 144-45; Shipley 1962).¹

Between 1830 and 1840 diseases of European origin reached epidemic proportions in the San Joaquin Valley, resulting in a staggeringly high death rate among Indian people of Central California. Survivors of decimated villages in the San Joaquin Valley also fled into the Sierra and made their homes with Miwok people there. Such population relocation and losses changed the make-up of Indian villages throughout the Sierra Nevada (Cook 1943:11-2; Latta 1977:109).

From 1840 on, many Miwok villages must have been amalgamations of Miwok, Yokuts, and former Mission Indian groups. Unable, or perhaps unwilling, to subsist solely on native foods, many of these transplanted Indian people recognized a ready supply of meat in the herds of horses that grazed in the Coast Range across the San Joaquin Valley. While horse raiding villages had first developed in 1812-1816 in the San Joaquin Valley, these Miwok horse-raiding villages continued the practice. Indian people raided the ranchos, driving herds of horses into the Sierra, where horse-flesh became a major food source (Bennyhoff 1956:6; Bigelow 1856:130; Broadbent 1974:86-99; Fremont 1887:444; Brown Tadd pers. com. 1984; Morgan and Scobie 1964:123, 129; Wood 1954:16).

As this new horse-centered culture was developing in the 1840s, the discovery of gold in 1848 brought thousands of miners to the Miwok homeland. By 1850 roads and towns were established throughout Miwok territory by gold miners. Most gold rush immigrants were single young men, hoping to get rich quickly and return to homes in the East. They had no long-term interest in California, and many believed that killing Indians was their duty (Bunnell 1880:165; Davis 1911:338; Hurtado 1988:101; Paul 1988:128; Perlot 1985:228). While there were instances of



1. The Central Miwok village of Mass, Sonora, c. 1920 (?). As gold miners left the Sierra, Miwok people often went back to former village sites and inhabited the cabins abandoned by miners. This village was occupied by Miwok people as late as 1950. Courtesy of Mary Etta Segerstrom.

peaceful coexistence between the Miwok and European and Euro-American miners, some Miwok people made sporadic and isolated attacks on Euro-Americans; the Miwok were the subject of organized raids and isolated acts of violence by the miners, as well as the victims of Federal and State punitive expeditions. Miwok people were displaced from their villages and many were killed or died of disease and starvation (Bunnell 1859, 1880; Crampton 1975:15, 34-7; Fletcher 1987:18-20; Hutchings 1856; Lester 1873b:10-11; Morgan and Scobie 1964:120-28, 147, 197, 198, 200; Perlot 1985:138,165; Russell 1951a:55; b 63-71; 1968:15-40). It is estimated that the Sierra Miwok lost more than ninety percent of their population in the sixty years before the 1910 census, shrinking from an estimated 6000 to 9000 people to 670 individuals (Cook 1943:43; Kroeber 1921:54; 1922:445; Levy 1978:402).²

Miwok people who survived the gold rush period retreated to villages in the higher elevations of the Sierra. In Tuolumne County, many of the Miwok people who had lived in the Sonora area moved to villages far up the Stanislaus River canyon. Perhaps as early as the 1860s and 1870s, after major placer gold mining activities had subsided, these people moved down into villages such as Potato Ranch or Italian Bar, creating new villages which were an amalgamation of the survivors and offspring of people from villages which had once been at these locations, and villages at lower elevations. As more miners left the Sierra, Miwok people often went back to former village sites from which they had been evicted by miners

two decades earlier and inhabited the cabins abandoned by miners (Brown Tadd pers. com. 1992).³

By the 1860s many Miwok people were working for Anglos in hard-rock mining operations. Large Miwok villages (with populations of perhaps over one hundred residents each) sprung up at locations such as Red Cloud in Mariposa County, at about four-thousand feet in elevation between the Tuolumne and Merced Rivers. The Red Cloud village was a large one, apparently inhabited by both Central and Southern Miwok people. With the closing of these mines during the late 1890s (Gudde 1975:142), Miwok people left to seek work in other areas. Some went west to Merced Falls, and later to Yosemite Valley (Bates and Lee 1990:189). Others went north, worked in the logging industry in Tuolumne County, and many eventually settled at the Tuolumne Mewuk Rancheria (Brown Tadd pers. com. 1992).⁴ (Fig. 1)

Thus, by the time ethnographers reached the Sierra Miwok around 1900 the Miwok had undergone a multitude of changes. Not only must their culture have changed dramatically, but the Miwok people living in any one location may have originally been from as far as twenty or thirty miles away.⁵ This situation was not noted by many ethnographers conducting research over the next fifty years. A. L. Kroeber, writing in 1955, still believed that:

In California, however, the Indians, where they survive at all, mostly dwell today where their great-grandfathers did; or, if they have re-

treated, it is usually only a few miles. They have therefore kept contact or familiarity with their old sod. Their distribution is essentially the 'native' or wild one. (Kroeber 1955:x)

When the ethnographers at the turn of the century began their work among the Miwok, there wasn't much information available to prepare them for their work; there was little published material. The only lengthy published treatise on the Miwok at that time was Stephen Powers' chapters on "The Miwok" and "The Yosemite" in his "Tribes of California" (Powers 1877). These ethnographers were a group of diverse individuals whose methods and reasons for collecting materials and information among the Miwok were often different. Six such ethnographer/collectors stand out for their work among the Miwok: Charles P. Wilcomb, C. Hart Merriam, John W. Hudson, Grace Nicholson, Samuel A. Barrett, and Edward W. Gifford.

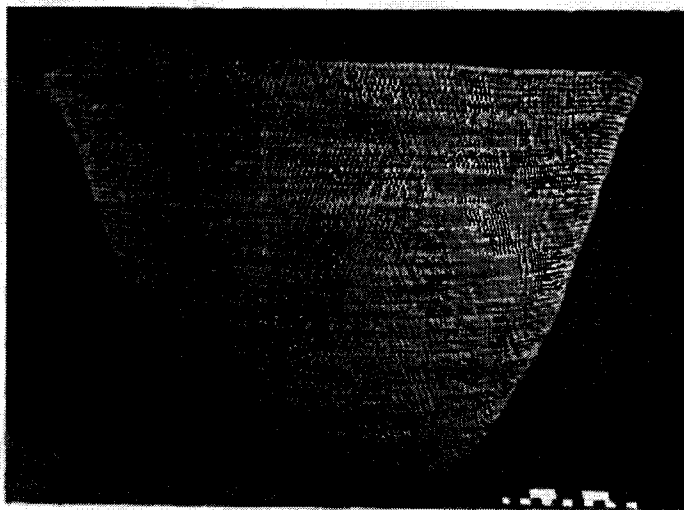
Charles P. Wilcomb is perhaps the most enigmatic of the group. Primarily a collector, he was curator of the Golden Gate Museum and later of the fledgling Oakland Museum. His trips through Miwok territory in 1908 and 1910-11 netted a fine group of materials for the Oakland Museum collections. His entries in the accession book at Oakland generally listed only "East Central California" for his 1908 Miwok collection; in his 1910-11 collection he listed the location, and occasionally the person from whom he purchased each object. Apparently Wilcomb kept a separate listing of his sources, for when he exchanged a large portion of his Miwok collection with the American

Museum of Natural History, and sold another portion to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, he was able to supply precise village locations for every object. Why he did not enter this information into the Oakland Museum catalog is unknown; perhaps he was protecting his sources from other collectors.

It appears that Wilcomb generally assumed that the objects he collected at any village were representative of the people who lived in the village. A large acorn feasting basket (Oakland Museum, cat. no. 16-1205), for example, was collected from Bill Fuller at Bald Rock (Fig. 2).⁴ On the basis of other documented pieces, it can be surmised that the basket was probably made by Fuller's wife, Annie Jack (Fig. 3), a Northern Miwok from Railroad Flat—a post contact village that was an amalgamation of various Indian people. Wilcomb's assumption that artifacts purchased in one location were indigenous to that location was common in California ethnography.

Wilcomb's collection also differs from that of other ethnographers in its assembling of objects that constitute "workshops." While most collectors secured token samples of medicinal and food plants or basketry materials, Wilcomb's collections were more encompassing, pertaining to many different industries, including what appears to be the general contents of a Miwok home. While his Miwok collections of this type are not so thorough as those he made for the Maidu and Patwin, Wilcomb collected great quantities of native foods and baskets that appear to represent sets of baskets used in different processes. While Wilcomb primarily collected to create museum

2. Miwok coiled feasting basket, collected from Bill Fuller, Central Miwok, by C. P. Wilcomb. On the basis of other documented pieces, it can be surmised that this basket was probably made by Fuller's wife, Annie, Northern Miwok. Courtesy of the Oakland Museum, cat. no. 16-1205.





3. Annie Fuller, Northern Miwok, 1913. Annie Fuller lived with her Central Miwok husband Bill Fuller at his village of Bald Rock. Photograph by E. W. Gifford. Courtesy of the P. A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. neg. no. 15-5544

exhibits, his extensive collections of Miwok and other Central Californian artifacts contain unique materials that allow us to more fully understand native life. It is unfortunate that his relatively early death at the age of fifty, and the subsequent loss of his field notes, prevented his making more contributions to California ethnography (Dawson 1979:64; M. Frye 1979:37; T. Frye 1979).

C. Hart Merriam was an unusual ethnographer among the Miwok. Originally a biologist, Merriam started visiting with Miwok people at least as early as 1898, returning until at least 1920.⁷ He never collected for any institution, but he added many Miwok baskets to his personal collection, and made copious notes. While he published little on the Miwok during his lifetime (Merriam 1907, 1910, 1917, 1918), several volumes of his field notes and unpublished manuscripts concerning the Miwok were published posthumously (Merriam 1955; 1966-67, 1979).

Merriam seems to have been a memorable, likeable man. On one of his visits to Yosemite, an Anglo visitor described him as:

A stout jolly, laughing eyed man. His round face full of kindliness. A directness in words that proved the man of the world. A lover of animals surely, but seemed never to impress one with the sentimental side. All was direct, breezy and serious, little poetry, but a rugged love of outdoor life. (Chapman 1901)

Merriam's love of the "outdoor life" included his enjoyment of time spent with native people. While visiting among the Southern Miwok northeast of Mariposa in 1902, Merriam wrote in his diary:

Among white folks I always feel that I am of little account, but I get along all right with Indians and they always like me and treat me well. They (both men and women) often tell me that I am not like other white folks—meaning of course the kind they usually come in contact with. Thank God I'm not. (Merriam 1902:210)

Merriam was interested in native languages, although the orthography he developed to record these languages is less than precise (Heizer 1979:1). He apparently understood the Miwok languages to some extent, which enabled him to comprehend some of the conversations and orations he heard among these people (Merriam 1955:57).

Merriam was an astute observer of material culture, such as basketry. Whereas some ethnographers were forever confused about the relationship between work face and coil direction in basketry, or about the identification of plant species, Merriam had a clear understanding of such details and was usually able to identify plants and technologies accurately. Thus when Merriam found a basket that appeared to be of Western Mono manufacture being made by a Miwok woman in Sonora, he was astute enough to notice the apparent contradiction. When he questioned the maker, he found that she was enamored of the Western Mono style, and had learned from a Western Mono woman who was visiting Sonora (C. Hart Merriam Collection, U. C. Davis, catalog number 146). A Miwok man near Mariposa asked Merriam in 1902 if Merriam could identify where some of their baskets were made. After identifying Northern Miwok, Nisenan and Mono Lake Paiute baskets for the man, Merriam was told by him that "I knew more about baskets than