

NATIVE AMERICANS ON DONNER SUMMIT

California must have been an interesting place in pre-Columbian times. It was the most populated area on the continent and the most diverse ethnically and linguistically. There were nine language families in the Sierra alone.

THE MARTIS CULTURE

The first known residents of Donner Summit were a group of Native Americans called the Martis. They were only semi-permanent, occupying Summit Valley in summers and retreating to the foothills on both sides of the Central Sierra in the winters.

The Martis have left evidence of their presence in many areas of the summit in the form of petroglyphs, mortars and metates, and flakes left over from knapping projectile points.



The Martis occupied the summit from about 2,000 B.C. to 500 A.D. Although archeologists can make hypotheses, no one knows for sure from whom the Martis were descended, who their descendants were, or where they went.

The Martis Culture arose when the climate of Western Nevada changed becoming cooler and wetter. Lake Tahoe filled and overflowed down the Truckee River. Game increased and the Sierra became more hospitable.

The houses in which the Martis lived were depressions dug into the ground with conical coverings of bark, brush, and skins like the drawing above. They carried things in water tight baskets which were also used for cooking. Heated rocks, called boiling stones, were placed in the baskets to cook food.



The Martis occupied Summit Valley until about 500 A.D. when the climate became drier. Maybe more importantly, simultaneously, the bow and arrow was developed by the area's Native Americans. The new weapon had more power, greater accuracy, and greater range.



It must have changed hunting methods and the kinds of food that could be acquired. It may have changed culture. Maybe new prayers were needed. New skills were needed. Maybe values changed.

One change is clear. The Martis had worked almost exclusively with basalt to craft tools and projectile points, like the ones seen here. Basalt cannot be crafted into the finer and lighter points needed on arrows, so with the change to bows and arrows, chert and obsidian were valued. Those are not available on the Sierra Crest though.



The Martis may have moved to the Yosemite area where about that time distinctive projectile points resembling the Martis' appeared and where there is obsidian.



The culture was only discovered relatively recently, by R. F. Heizer and A. B. Elsasser, two California Indian scholars from U.C., while building a cabin at South Lake Tahoe in 1953.



THE PETROGLYPHS

The most obvious evidence of the Martis' presence on Donner Summit are the petroglyphs found in dozens of places. The pictures here are Donner Summit area petroglyphs and have been digitally enhanced for easier viewing. Similar symbols are found in many places in the northern Sierra Nevada, usually on gently sloping granite slabs with good views of surrounding peaks.



Archeologists estimate that the petroglyphs in this area are as much as 4,000 years old. They were created by pecking through the surface of the glaciated bedrock using a tool called a

hammerstone. Most are geometric shapes – wavy lines, circles, and zigzags. Human and animal forms, such as stick figures and deer or bear tracks, are much less common.

No one knows for sure why the petroglyphs were made but they took a lot of effort and so must have been important to the culture. They may have had mystical or magical meanings. They may have been records of what happened or wishes for what was hoped to happen. A local archeologist, Willis Gortner, has also made a persuasive case that some of the petroglyphs were maps like maybe the one at the top of the next column. He has placed



current maps of rivers on petroglyphs and they match!



The rock art sites are exposed to the harsh environment of the high Sierra. The natural process of exfoliation (peeling away of layers of rock due to the freezing and expansion of water) is at work on Sierra granite. This leaves the petroglyphs fragile and vulnerable to destruction.



Just below Rainbow Bridge are the most accessible Summit petroglyphs. They are memorialized by a 20 Mile Museum sign and a stone monument. It is an extensive petroglyph site that contains over 200 rock art elements. Although the petroglyphs here are hard to see they are fascinating.



Someday the petroglyphs will be gone and along with them will go the tangible record of the first visitors to Donner Summit.

