

# NATIVE AMERICANS OF DONNER SUMMIT AND SUMMIT VALLEY



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.

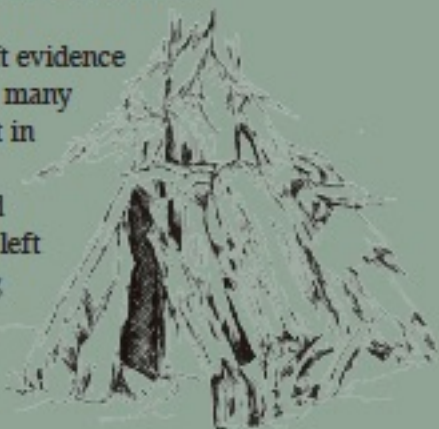
The Martis have left evidence of their presence in many areas of the summit in the form of petroglyphs, mortars and metates, and flakes left over from knapping projectile points.

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 watertight 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 the 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.

Long after the Martis left, and into the late 19th Century, the Maidu, Native Americans from the

California side of the Sierra occupied the Summit much as the Martis had.



## 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. As the sun rises and the light

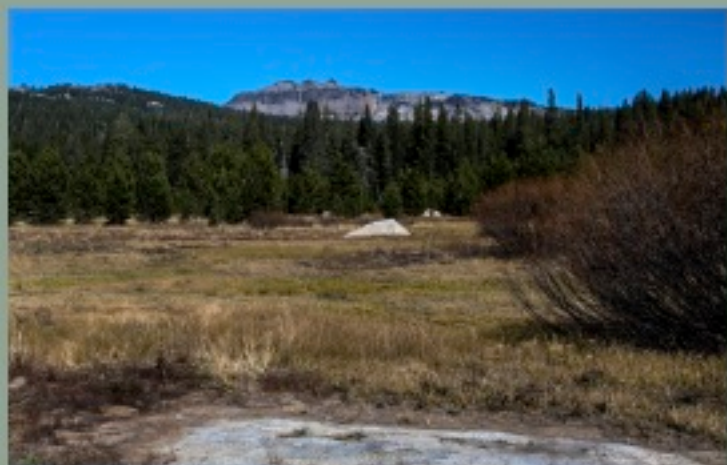
changes the visible petroglyphs change. Prolong your visit and see how many you can find.



Someday the petroglyphs will be gone

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





## THE MORTARS AND METATES

The Martis and the Kings Beach Cultures occupied Summit Valley on Donner Summit during summers for thousands of years and left behind evidence of their residence in many places. The mortars, mostly ground into glacial erratics (large boulders), are not as picturesque as the petroglyphs carved into the Sierra granite bedrock in many places, but they are maybe much more impressive.



The mortars are almost always several inches deep. Granite is one of the hardest rocks on earth. Imagine the time it took Native American women to grind those holes into

the rock while grinding only foods like nuts, seeds and berries. At the mortar sites women passed on important lessons to the young girls. Generation after generation little bits of culture passed on with each meal ground into the mortars.

Metates are large grinding slicks used for grinding seeds into fine flour. A rounded stone, or mano, was used in the grinding.



There are dozens of mortar and metate sites around the meadow. Most are on the outskirts although there are a few in the center, like



the one at the top of the column to the left and its closeup just below it. Some of the sites contain just one or two mortars, while others must have been “party central” as many women at a time worked and talked. Those are called “gossip rocks.”

The men were nearby knapping basalt, fashioning the rock pieces into projectile points for spears. They too passed on cultural knowledge to the boys, summer after summer, generation after generation, until the basalt discards littered the ground in the thousands and thousands. The single mortar to the left has basalt flakes around it.

## WHAT WAS ON THE MENU

For the Martis, and the Kings Beach Culture which came later, the Sierra was a cornucopia – like today’s supermarkets. There were all kinds of game from small to large. Birds and fish were caught with nets. Larger animals were hunted with spears thrown with atlatls (throwing sticks). The Martis did not know the bow and arrow. Hunting was the man’s game.

Gathering was the women’s responsibility and there was so much to gather. Acorns were a staple food and good – at least once the tannins (bitterness) were removed by soaking or washing acorns in water. The acorns had to be carried up from lower elevations. On the Sierra Crest there was also a wide variety of other seeds, nuts, and berries.

Nuts and seeds were ground into flour and then made into a gruel. Acorn meal was also roasted, baked into tortilla type breads, or made into mush using boiling stones which were heated and then placed in baskets holding food or water.

Besides seeds and game local Native Americans ate tubers, bulbs, fruits, berries, grubs, larvae, caterpillars, grasshoppers, and other insects. Sugar pine sap was harvested for eating and seasoning. All of those foods could



have ended up in the mortars for grinding.

The Native Americans of Donner Summit also ground smaller depres-

sions into granite, called cupules which are about an inch deep and an inch and a half in diameter (above). No one knows why they were made or their significance but like the petroglyphs, they must have been important because grinding holes into granite is exceedingly difficult.

## SIERRA CORNUCOPIA

Good Eating:

antelope	rabbits	squirrels
deer	fox	mountain sheep
mountain lion	trout	suckers
wolves	bison	elk
coyotes	bobcat	rodents
small game		

grasses	ferns	grass seeds
pollen	plant bulbs (e.g. Camus Lily)	
tarweed seeds		mule ear seeds (Wyethia)
Brodiaea bulbs		squaw root (epos)
Manzanita berries		goose berries
wild onion	green shoots	miner's lettuce
cress	juniper berries	termites
blackberries	grasshoppers	larvae
caterpillars		



Donner Summit Historical Society

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