



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.



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 thousands and thousands of pieces. 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.

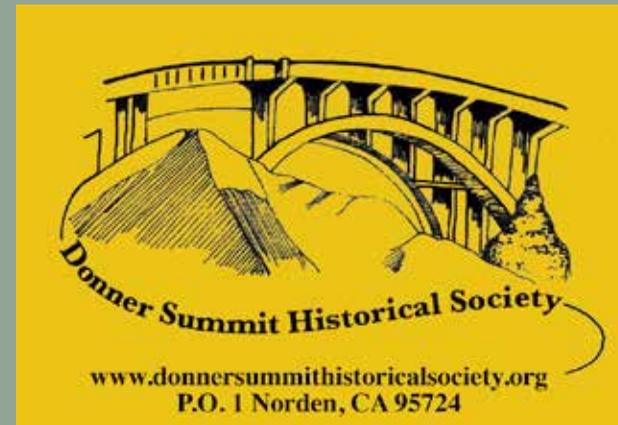
The Native Americans of Donner Summit also ground smaller depressions into granite, called cupules

which are about an inch deep and an inch and a half in diameter (above). No one knows why there 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) | mule ear seeds (Wyethia) |
| tarweed seeds | | squaw root (epos) |
| Brodiaea bulbs | | goose berries |
| Manzanita berries | green shoots | miner’s lettuce |
| wild onion | juniper berries | termites |
| crass | grasshoppers | larvae |
| blackberries | | |
| caterpillars | | |



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NATIVE AMERICANS OF DONNER SUMMIT AND SUMMIT VALLEY

