

Paiute Friends

The first school was just north of Mono Inn. Lulu Biggs was one of the first teachers. Later, Lulu married the miner Phil Lorendo of Rattlesnake Gulch (to the left of Mono Diggings.)

I went to school with the Conways, De Chambeaus, and many Paiute children.

The Paiute camp was about a mile to the north of my home. As I visited the Paiute camp often, I observed their way of life, and saw the foods they ate and how they were prepared. Their diet was varied, on a "catch as catch can" basis. The grey squirrels were plentiful, as were ground hogs and sage hen, which were snared or shot. These were used in stews and soups, as a change from the abundant trout. Fishing was "out of this world" in the early days. There were fine-eating cut-throat trout in the lakes, native brook trout in the streams, and golden trout in the lakes at higher elevations. Surprisingly enough, there were few deer on the eastern slope of the Sierras; however, rabbits were plentiful, especially cottontail and jacks.

Each fall, the Paiutes looked forward anxiously to the harvesting of the pinenut crop (the nut of the piñon tree) which was very unpredictable. Whites never gathered them, so the Paiutes traded pinenuts for a similar weight of white flour. Today, they are gathered by all, selling in markets for \$2.50–\$4.00 per pound. Gathering them is a pitchy job, and very hard work. A long, slim pole was used by the Paiutes to knock them gently down out of the cones. The whole village would camp on the most plentiful sites, staying as long as five weeks. The Paiute women gathered the nuts, while the braves sat around making bird points (arrowheads) out of the local obsidian. Later, they would kill birds and rabbits with the points.

The nuts were stored near the "wikiups," the Paiute huts. A rock circle foundation was made, the nuts piled high within, then covered with branches and dirt to serve as insulation during the winter. They were the main source of food during the long winter ahead. The women ground them into flour for mush, bread, and soup.

Pinenuts are excellent roasted, and are very high in protein. The nuts were traded to the Diggers and Yokuts of Yosemite² in exchange for acorns which could be ground into a fine powder to make a mush. This was made in large quantities, and kept near or under the table. It was served cold. I had the dubious pleasure of tasting it when Nellie Reynolds, a Paiute basketmaker, offered me some, saying, "It tastes just like ice cream." We dipped our fingers in it and ate in that fashion. It was white like ice cream, but there the resemblance ended. It was *very, very* bitter.

The Mono Basin Indian (Ku-zed-i-ka Paiute) also harvested *ku-cha-bee*

² Yosemite: "Grizzly Bear"

from the shores of Mono Lake.³ They were seined, then dried and added to soups or pinenut flour. In the spring, after a high protein diet of pinenuts and *ku-cha-bee*, the Paiutes eagerly gathered wild onion, wild seeds, and watercress.

They anxiously awaited the ripening of the "buckberries," in August. These grew on trees 10–16 feet tall. As far as I can determine, buckberries are native only to Mono Basin. A large grove was located along the banks of lower Rush Creek. The berries were red, tart, and juicy, resembling currants. They were gathered by placing a canvas on the ground, then hitting the branches sharply with a pole. The reasons for gathering them in this fashion, were because it was faster than "hand-picking" and because of the sharp, two-inch thorns that covered the limbs of the trees. The harvest for the day usually filled a large wash tub (5–10 gallons). Water from the creek was poured on to cover, floating off the leaves and

³ Kuzedika Paiute: Before the white man came, there were nomadic hunters, gatherers, and traders living along the shores of Mono Lake. These were the Ku-zed-i-ka Paiutes, the "fly pupae" eaters. At the end of each summer, they harvested *ku-cha-bee*, the dried larvae and pupae of the Mono Lake brine flies, an important food staple. The word "Mono" means "brine fly" and "fly people," not in the Paiute language, but in the language of their Yokut neighbors, who lived in the Yosemite region and who also considered the brine fly a delicacy.

insects, leaving the fruit ready to eat. (Paiutes usually held the berries in their hand, salted them, and ate them raw. Whites simmered them for their juice, making a delicious red-orange, tangy jelly which was considered an excellent accompaniment for meat and fowl.)

Now, however, buckberry gathering is only a fond memory. The diversion of water away from Rush Creek, over a period of many years, caused the buckberry groves to wither and die. There are a few on the

north shore of Mono Lake that occasionally still bear small amounts of fruit.

One of the boys who lived at the camp near my home was Caseuse Mike, He and I became friends of long standing. He was very intelligent and an excellent athlete. When he was fairly young Caseuse married

Minnie Turner. Minner and her sister, Carrie Bethel, are remembered as two of the best basket makers of Mono Basin. They were responsible for numerous willow and beaded baskets, intricately patterned and finely

woven. Some of their work may be seen in local museums. Although they have died, a grandson, Raymond Andrews, carries on the family crafts.

Quite often you could see Indian women gathering willow material in the vicinity of the Thompson Ranch. The willow bark was wound into coils, as twine. Other materials were used for the colored design, which usually depicted something close to nature, like the sun, coyote, rain, lighting, or snake. The red root that was used to make the dye was gathered in Yosemite.

The mothers made beautiful willow cradleboards, or *hu-ba*. These were tied together with buckskin, and had an overhang to keep the sun off the baby's face. The overhang had either a red or blue design, designating whether the baby was a girl or boy. Some cradleboards were beautifully beaded.

Paiute mothers carried their babies on their back for hours. A Paiute baby was seldom heard to cry. Paiute women worked in season on the white man's farms, leaning the baby up against a tree while they beat peas, wheat, or whatever crop they were working on against a large canvas with beaters they had made, then cleaning the seeds with winnowing baskets.

Paiute men were hired in the hay fields and did other regular farm work. When they had time, they hunted rabbits. It is a sad, but true, fact that many white employers took advantage of them. The Paiutes knew this, but were helpless to do anything about it.

As young men, Caseuse and I ran about 12 miles to and from our road jobs at Tioga Pass. We were also on the Mono Lake baseball team. Dick Charlie was our great pitcher and Harry Bethel was the catcher.

Harry Tom had a reputation as a great bronco rider. He was a small man with lots of strength and courage. At rodeos in Yosemite Valley, he often took first prize. He is well remembered for successfully riding the outlaw horse, "Steamboat."

On the south side of Mono Lake, we had no black-tail rabbits. There were cottontail and snowshoes (white), which were never very plentiful. They were prized by Paiutes and whites for their fine eating quality. At Black Point, near the north shore of Mono, there were literally thousands of black-tail jacks. The Paiutes used them as one of their main foods, relying on their skins to make warm rabbit blankets. Since it took numerous skins to make a blanket, the braves frequently had rabbit drives, most of which were at Black Point.

The method of trapping the rabbits was to weave a mesh fence 20 or 30 feet wide, and place it at the bottom of the small canyon. Two braves

held the corners. Many other converged at the top and sides of the draw, carrying clubs, while herding the rabbits down into the net.

Because of the milder climate there, the Paiutes usually wintered on the east side of Mono Lake, near Warm Springs. In the spring, they returned to Mono's shores to begin their food gathering.

The Paiutes loved the balmy summers. On Sundays, especially, they could be seen walking for many miles,⁴ trudging to Hammond's Store to make their weekly purchases, to visit, and play the hand game (a game of chance) they enjoyed so much.

In those years at Mono Lake, I got to know many Paiutes well. I was their friend, and they were mine. Not many white men made such friendships. Most gave the Indian a bad time at every opportunity. Jake Gilbert's story is a good example.

Jake Gilbert lived at Paiute camp about six miles from the south shore of Mono Lake. He was known throughout the valley as a good worker, and excellent at breaking saddle horses. No one had ever seen Jake get bucked off by a horse. Many ranchers hired him because he could do so many things well.

In 1899, he had patiently tried to right a wrong done against him. It turned into a disaster and he got into serious trouble with the law. When I got acquainted with him, around 1914 or so, he never mentioned the episode. We often hunted rabbits and went on rabbit drives together; but what I know about the events at Samman Springs did not come from Jake.

⁴You could tell the Paiute families for many miles away, as they walked according to a caste system. The father walked in front; the mother or grandmother walked behind at a discrete distance; and the children were strung out in single file.