



**Native Indians & The Gold Rush:  
A California Holocaust  
By Manny Silva**

In *Myron Angel's 1883 History of San Luis Obispo County*, the author describes the tumultuous early years of Post-Mexican War San Luis Obispo County. Murders, Banditry and animosity between the newly arrived Americans and long-established Californios notwithstanding, the author also describes local raids by bands of California Indians:

***“To add more to this chaotic condition of society, the Tulare Indians made frequent incursions into this section, driving off from the ranchos bands of horses, which they killed for their flesh, upon which they mainly subsisted, preferring it to that of other animals...”***

On its face, one might conclude from this statement that an unwarranted native uprising was taking place. But this would be a mistake. In fact, the Tulare Indians were a group of several distinct tribes [known collectively as Yokuts] that, like many other tribes throughout California, were fighting for their very survival in a rapidly changing landscape.

Prior to the Gold Rush and the early years of Statehood, California was the home to native peoples who had lived upon the land for thousands of years. There were an estimated 150,000 Indians living in California. By 1870, that number had been reduced to only about 31,000. This was accomplished through disease, slavery, and outright deliberate extermination by the newest conquerors of California.

Native Indians & The Gold Rush, cont'd:

In 1851, California Governor Peter Burnett declared:

***“[Unless the Indians are sent east of the Sierras] a War of Extermination will continue to be waged until the Indian race should become extinct...”***

An estimated 60% of the California Indian population was lost to new diseases introduced to them by the Gold Rush settlers. Bounty's were also paid on the Indians. The scalp of a native American brought .25 cents, while a severed head brought \$5.00.

And then there was Slavery. A young Indian boy was worth up to \$60.00, while the price for a young Indian girl could go as high as \$200.00.

Besides the aforementioned factors, exploitation of natural resources through mining, timber-cutting and farming were also placing great pressure on the native peoples environment. Unlike the white man, they did not view the land as theirs to exploit as they saw fit. Rather, they chose to live gently upon the land in harmony with nature.

By November 1856 the last band of Yokuts had been subdued and removed to the Fresno reservation. There were an estimated 14,000 Yokuts when the California Gold Rush began. By 1870 less than a thousand remained alive.

It would be convenient to blame the U.S. Army or a few wayward settlers for these abominable acts, but this would be a great mistake. As contemporary Native American Historian Jack Forbes writes:

***“The bulk of California's Indians were conquered, and died, in innumerable little Episodes rather than in large campaigns...it serves to indict not a group of cruel Leaders, or a few squads of rough soldiers, but in affect, an entire people, for the Conquest of the Native Californian was above all else a popular, mass, enterprise.”***

The extermination of the native peoples of California came to an end with the conclusion of the Modoc War of 1872-1873, the last armed resistance by California Indians. Although perpetrated on a smaller scale, the California Gold Rush's impact on the native California peoples was in no way any less a Crime against Humanity nor any less pardonable than the Holocaust of Nazi Germany.

In the end, perhaps the most poignant expression of the California native peoples heartfelt desire for peace were spoken by the Great Chief Tenaya, of the Ah-wah-nee-chee People:

***“We do not want anything from the White Men. Our women are able to do our work. Go then; Let us remain in the Mountains where we were born; Where the ashes of our Fathers have been given to the Winds.”***