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**Indians in Town and Country:
The Nisenan Indians'
Changing Economy and Society
as Shown in John A. Sutter's
1856 Correspondence**

ALBERT L. HURTADO

Most students of California Indians in the 1850s have dwelled on the violence that native people endured at the hands of whites.¹ Tribes that were directly in the path of the Gold Rush were most severely affected because miners forced Indians off of valuable mineral and farm lands and commonly killed those who resisted. Even the most docile natives became victims of infectious diseases; tens of thousands of Indians did not survive the decade.² The minority who survived often relied on seasonal labor for white ranchers who seldom had compunctions about exploiting Indian workers. Nevertheless, a few native people were able to exert a measure of control in this new world and became fixtures of daily life in California's mining and agricultural settlements. Thus California Indians became an impoverished racial minority living on the margins of white society.

The Nisenan Indians who occupied rich agricultural and gold-bearing lands in central California shared this sorry fate, yet little is known of the details of Nisenan history in the 1850s.³ The fullest record of Indian life during the Gold Rush era exists in the

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correspondence of the Office of Indian Affairs, but federal agents concentrated their vision on the reservations that they administered where only a minority of the state's Indians lived.⁴ For hundreds of small Indian communities a few scattered documentary references constitute a fragmentary record of their adjustments to the new conditions that beset them. Dispersed among the farms and towns of the Sacramento Valley, Nisenans were out of the view of federal Indian agents, so official records seldom mentioned them. As a result, rare documents that describe the Nisenans—like the two John A. Sutter letters printed with this essay—expand our understanding of Indian adaptations to white society and of how farmers and bureaucrats dealt with Indian workers.

Nisenan history in the 1850s, the letters will show, was dramatic and tragic, but it was also idiosyncratic, isolated, and local. Nevertheless, Nisenan Indians shared in a historical process that affected millions of diverse peoples all over the world: modernization. In short, the world was becoming more urban and less rural, more industrial and less agricultural, as capitalism became the predominant economic system and Europe came to dominate the world. People in all traditional societies—like Indians—found it increasingly difficult to maintain old ways of life and were forced to take up new ones. Especially in frontier areas where free white labor was scarce, native people became part of a coerced labor force.⁵ California was no exception.

As historian Richard White explains, one of the common themes of Indian relations was the drive to bring "Indian resources, land, and labor to market."⁶ Whites were not always consistent or successful in attaining this goal, but in California economic conditions, frontier demography, and historic circumstances conspired to make Indian labor a fundamental part of the frontier economy.⁷ Thus Indians who worked for whites had to adjust to changes in the California economy as the first shudders of modernization began to be felt. In a process often masked by the violence and racism that also characterized the age, natives accommodated to the new order. An investigation of Indians' adjustments to modernizing California, this essay suggests, draws a more complete picture of native society, provides a micro-study of Indian labor relations, illustrates the tensions between rural and town life, and suggests some of the ways that changing conditions affected Indians and whites.

Nisenan Encounters with Newcomers

To understand Sutter's letters requires a knowledge of the historical world in which he and the Nisenans lived. The Nisenans had the good fortune to possess lands rich in natural resources that bordered the American and Feather river drainages before white settlement overwhelmed the Indians in the nineteenth century (Figure 2.1). Like other central California Indians, the Nisenans were hunters and gatherers. Acorns and salmon were staples of their diet, supplemented with grass seeds, deer, elk, and antelope meat. A wealth of food sources and a temperate climate combined to support an Indian society that lived in relative ease.⁸ As among other California peoples, clusters of Nisenan *rancherías* formed *tribelet*s that recognized a headman who exercised authority and settled disputes. The Hok *ranchería* near present day Marysville was one of the major Nisenan population centers associated with the *tribelet* that encompassed the territory near the confluence of the Bear and Feather rivers. Hok persisted into historic times as the namesake of John A. Sutter's Hock Farm.⁹

Nisenan contact with whites preceded Sutter's arrival by several decades. In 1808 Ensign Gabriel Moraga and a small force of Spanish soldiers encountered Feather River Nisenans, whom the officer described as "completely hostile." The Spaniards killed one Indian in a skirmish with Nisenans who wounded a soldier. Moraga saw "many Indians" on the Feather and counted seven *rancherías*.¹⁰ Moraga's expedition notwithstanding, the Nisenan remained on the periphery of Hispanic exploration and settlement.¹¹ Far more significant was the advent of the fur trade in 1827 with the arrival of the Anglo-American Jedediah S. Smith. Smith's expedition killed several Nisenan Indians near the American River in the Sierra Nevada foothills. North of the American River wary Nisenans—perhaps knowing of the Smith killings—generally kept away from the trappers.¹² Smith led the way for hundreds of succeeding American mountain men and inspired the Oregon-based Hudson's Bay Company to send annual brigades into Nisenan country, where they sometimes camped on the Feather River. Hudson's Bay men brought the usual accoutrements of the business: trade goods and disease. In 1833 the "honorable company" inadvertently imported malaria, which killed thousands of California Indians and

depopulated whole communities.¹³ The Nisenans were particularly hard hit. In 1839 a company employee reported that the Feather River rancherías were in a state of "extreme destitution"; Indians came to the white camp "in crowds" to have their "wants relieved."¹⁴

Debilitated by disease and partially reliant on trade with whites, the Nisenans were ill-prepared to resist the first permanent settler in their country, John A. Sutter, who founded New Helvetia in 1839. The fur trade had introduced the Nisenans to frontier capitalism, but Sutter and his agricultural enterprise made these tribal people even more dependent on labor and trade. Perhaps regarding Sutter's settlement as a convenient source of trade goods, many Indians soon accepted his presence. After establishing an armed post in Nisenan country on the American River, Sutter settled Hock Farm on the Feather. Indian labor was central to Sutter's success in California. Nisenan Indians tilled his fields, harvested his crops, tended his herds, and worked in Fort Sutter's shops. Sutter used a combination of coercion and rewards to induce Indians to work for him. He paid cooperative Indians with trade goods, and used corporal punishment to regiment reluctant workers. Sutter created a military force composed of Nisenan and Miwok Indian soldiers to force unwilling Indians to labor. The Indian army also protected Sutter's property, as well as his white neighbors.

Not all Indians passively accepted Sutter's control. Unhappy Nisenans sometimes ran away and Miwoks south of New Helvetia raided his herds, so Sutter frequently used his army to put down Indian rebellions and suppress livestock raiding. The old tactic of dividing Indian societies to conquer them worked well for Sutter. Whites thought he had a remarkable ability to control native people and make them useful to settlers.¹⁵ In 1842 John Yates observed the accomplishments of Hock Farm Nisenan workers that convinced him that "civilisation had obtained a footing & that there was every likelihood of its making rapid progress in the land."¹⁶

However whites may have perceived the situation, Sutter's settlements proved to be detrimental to Indians. While some native people worked for Sutter voluntarily, the frontier entrepreneur forced others to labor in his fields and sent Indian captives to work on other California ranchos, a practice that tended to break

up Indian families. At the same time, Sutter interfered with Indian family life by restricting polygyny, a marriage custom that traditionally had been limited to a few powerful Indian men. Perhaps recognizing the importance of plural marriage as a badge of status in Indian society, Sutter permitted Indian headmen who cooperated with him—so-called captains—to retain the custom, thus rewarding compliant natives and fortifying his role as a leader in the Sacramento Valley. As befit powerful men in Niseanan country in the 1840s, Sutter and other white men had polygynous unions with Indian women.

Evidently Sutter's economic and social arrangements promoted Indian population losses. An 1845 census of the Sacramento Valley showed that Indians who were most closely associated with New Helvetia suffered higher population losses. In addition, these native communities had proportionately fewer women, possibly a result of venereal and other diseases spread by whites. The dearth of Indian women meant that Indian communities would have difficulty reproducing enough children to replace population losses. Thus, Sutter's appearance heralded a prolonged period of demographic decline.¹⁷

Using brute force, trade, and other incentives, Sutter attracted the Indian workers who created New Helvetia—an exotic marchland on the far western periphery of European influence. As historian Bernard Bailyn has suggested for colonial America, California can be regarded as a bizarre retrogression of the European cultures that spawned it.¹⁸ In an early stage of capitalist development, New Helvetia was a large-scale plantation-type enterprise buttressed with coerced native labor and suffused with violence.¹⁹ The Indian people who encompassed Sutter's domains had accepted or rejected new ways as circumstances demanded and created a way of life that was substantially different from their former hunting and gathering societies. Sutter helped to set these changes in motion but—as we shall see—he could not entirely control them.

Sutter and the Office of Indian Affairs in California

After the American conquest of California, Sutter's reputation earned him a federal appointment as an Indian subagent in 1847. Two years later, when the rush for gold was well underway, he

declined a new appointment because of old age and pressing business matters. Sutter was busy trying to use his experience with Indian labor to profit from the gold discovery by supplying white argonauts with Indian miners, but the Gold Rush eventually destroyed his empire and increased his debts. Beset by creditors, Sutter retreated to his Feather River property, where he continued to farm and to employ Indians. Sutter's financial difficulties multiplied and his political influence declined until it seemed he had no role to play in the Indian policy that the federal government advanced in the new state.

In the 1850s federal agents designed an Indian policy that was intended to meet the exigencies of the Gold Rush. First they negotiated eighteen treaties with California tribes, ostensibly setting aside land for them in perpetuity and providing goods and services necessary for their survival. The United States Senate, acceding to the desires of Californians who claimed the treaties excluded too much valuable land from white settlers and miners, refused to ratify the treaties (see Figure I.1). Then the government established a series of temporary Indian reserves that were supposed to be supported with the crops grown by the Indian inmates. When white settlers needed the reserves, the government would move the Indians to a new location. The temporary reserves failed because Congress did not appropriate enough money to support them, much less provide relief for the tens of thousands of non-reservation Indians who needed assistance in the 1850s. Finally the system was abandoned in favor of reservations established by presidential order.²⁰

During this turbulent time only a minority of Nisenans—like other California Indians—lived on reserves. Some of the Nevada County Nisenans had moved to the Nome Lackee reservation after Thomas Henley, California Superintendent of Indian Affairs, compelled them to leave their homeland.²¹ The remainder worked for whites, fled to remote areas where they could subsist without white interference, or were overwhelmed by frontiersmen. To control non-reservation Indians, the California legislature passed a law that provided for the indenture of Indians not already employed by whites. This measure also defined a class of Indian crimes such as livestock theft and setting prairie fires. The law empowered white employers to treat Indians fairly and encouraged them to set aside land for their native workers; but since Indians could not testify against whites in California

courts, they received little protection and great abuse under this law.²² Using the law as a pretext, whites in some parts of California rounded up Indians and compelled them to work.²³

Federal Indian officials had little direct influence on events that occurred off the reserves. Nevertheless they sought out information and advice from whites who were closest to the scenes of Indian and white relations. Superintendent Henley appointed several unsalaried special Indian agents to inform him about local conditions.²⁴ Sutter learned about the special agents in 1856 when he was in straitened financial circumstances.²⁵ He asked Superintendent Henley for authority over the Indians near Hock Farm who were no longer willing to work for a pittance. Evidently Sutter saw an opportunity to reclaim some of his old power over Nisenan workers and perhaps salvage his deteriorating business fortunes. While he gave Henley an overview of the Nisenans in the mid-1850s, Sutter compared the current situation with earlier times. Thus, we can see how the Nisenans and Sutter adjusted to the upheavals of the Gold Rush era.

Sutter's Letters

Sutter's letters and Henley's replies have been preserved in the correspondence of the Office of Indian Affairs in the National Archives.²⁶ Sutter's letter of February 9, 1856, is a holograph original while the other is a copy made for Henley's files. The Henley copy has fewer spelling and grammatical errors than the Sutter original, indicating that a scribe took the trouble to correct some of the old pioneer's writing. The spelling and Sutter's unmistakable syntax are reproduced here as they are in the originals. For the sake of clarity, punctuation and paragraphs have been added silently following the modern method of the *Harvard Guide to American History*.²⁷ Brackets are used to indicate added words and my interpretation of unclear passages.

JOHN A. SUTTER TO THOMAS J. HENLEY,
FEBRUARY 9, 1856, HOCK FARM

Sir,

I take the liberty of giving you some information of the Indians on this river so far as Marysville and environs. At Nicolaus are

the Olash²⁸ Indians consisting of only a few perhaps in all about 14 or 15 Souls. The Yukulmey²⁹ tribe 3 miles below Hock farm is nearly extinct and the few survivors are here united with the Hock³⁰ tribe. The Yukulme' & Hock are about in all about 35 Souls (Men, Women & Children) then about 3 Miles higher up are the Sishaw³¹ consisting of very few, which are now united with the Yubu³² tribe, in Yubu City. Higher up on the right and left bank of Feather River are the Boga's,³³ Daichera's,³⁴ Tomcha's³⁵ & Bubu's.³⁶ Of them I know very little only that they come from time to time to the City of Marysville, and conduct themselves nearly but not quite so bad as the before mentioned tribes.

In the first place these Indians are all idle and dont like more to work unless they are paid more as they earn. It is now a Year ago I had every week from 4 to 6 to work at one Dollar Cash per day. This I could no more stand, and since employed them no more longer, as I found it not advantageous, as for a small amount more I can get good white laborers and have not the trouble to watch them. And one Indian eats more provisions as 2 or 3 White Men will, and then, when they work one week, the next they will rest and others come in their place. Rest[:] this will say [i.e., this means] they go to Marysville and buy bad Rhum or Whiskey and get drunk and disorderly.

Formerly I paid them in clothing and provisions, but this would no more answer them, [since] nothing as the Dollars could bring them to work. Because in Marysville they go to do a little some thing, fetching water, or wood in a Kitchen of a Hotel or boarding house, there they get to eat and perhaps 25 or 50 Cts according [to] their work, which of course goes immediately for Grog. And the Clothing they pick up in the backyards, which peoples [are] drowing [throwing?] away, and sometime they are in possession of more Money which they get for their bows & arrows which they sell to high prices likewise other curiosities, fish, fowls, berries etc. when they are not to[o] lazy to get them; and then, there goe's they money for bad liquor, which they drink to such an excess, that when they don't fight and kill [one] another, the bad liquor will kill them; it happened about 3 weeks past, that 5 men and two women died in the Yubu Rancheria (not in the Hock Rancheria and not in one but in two Days, like the "Dem: Inquirer" in Marysville³⁷ said) in two Days from the effect of Liquor.

It is not quite a year yet when the Sishaw & Yubu and a few of the Hock's had a fight when desperately drunk, in which four had been killed and about 5 or 6 badly wounded, but are well again; of such things Civil Authorities dont take Notice at all and Nobody take care of them.

A most cruel Act happened about two years ago in Hock Rancheria. One of the Yukulme' tribe, who have a wife and Children, wanted absolutely an other Woman of the same tribe. She was a widow of the deceased Olash Chief, and of the Yukulmey tribe. The Woman did not like nor want him, and particular as she was pregnant. This fellow took his Gun (they have even fire Arms, some of them) and shot the Woman twice, once in the Abdomen, the second time in the leg, and than masacred her most cruelly with his Knife till she was dead. During this it was night the whole Rancheria was deadly drunk, Men and Women even boy's. You can hardly imagine what for scenes happen when they are intoxicated, and what for a Noise. Then the fights begin about the Women, because not all of them have Women,³⁸ they take them on their hair and drag them naked over the Ground to their holes etc. The man who has Killed the above mentioned Woman, left immediately to parts unknown, as I intended to take him prisoner. These Indians are just now doing what they please, and I am not a little afraid for next Summer and fall, for my Orchards & Vineyards. They can act so independent now, they will steal continually how they have done it already, and will steal at any time when they have a chance. Such things happened no more [did not happen] when they has been under my control.

I wish now you would do me the great favor to remove these few tribes which behave so badly to the next reservation. I cannot stand it any longer; and how longer the worse will it be, as the largest part of the timber is cut down, so that they cannot more get their Acorns and Grass seed like before. The Squatters drove them away last fall when they went to get Acorns. They told them that they want them for their hogs etc. So is it with the grass seed. They people will no more allow them even this. They say they need the Grass for Hay.

They are nearly all time in want of food now, and formerly they had plenty. I am informed that Major Bidwell,³⁹ Mr. Sl. Neal,⁴⁰ and a good many others in the Valley have the Indians under Control and make them work for a small compensation.

It is certainly hard to take them away against their will to a reservation, but there are only two ways: to take them away make them work and provide for them; or if you would give me the Control *only of the Hock and Yukulmey Indians*, I would make them work and pay them a reasonable Compensation, in food and Clothing. And when they know that it is your Order, they will do so, in preference of leaving the Grounds where they are born and where their Ancestors have dwelled.

If you honor me with an Answer, I shall feel much obliged to You. I am with the highest Respect

Your Most Obedient Servant

J. A. Sutter

[Rubric]

Sutter compared the state of affairs in 1856 unfavorably with the way of things a decade before. Instead of being reliable, pliant workers, the Nisenan had become more independent. Formerly they worked in return for old clothes, but Sutter lamented that now “nothing as the Dollars could bring them to work.” Sutter also asserted Indian workers were so inefficient that it was cheaper to employ whites. Furthermore, some of the Indians had guns and were a threat to the white community. Sutter feared that Nisenans would steal his crops and thus would cause yet another drain on his dwindling resources. Once a man with an enviable reputation among whites for his ability to control Indians, an exasperated Sutter now claimed to be victimized by them.

However, Indians suffered too. Sutter described social disintegration and despair that was manifested by Indian drunkenness and violence directed at other Indians.⁴¹ At the same time, disease had taken such a high toll that several *rancherías* amalgamated so the survivors could continue to live in a community controlled by Indians. Two *rancherías* that Sutter had relied on for native workers in the 1840—Mimal and Honkut—no longer existed, although survivors probably lived in one of the united communities.⁴² *Ranchería* locations in 1856 (Figure 2.1) seem to indicate that consolidated communities tended to settle in locations as close as possible to Marysville (see notes 28–36).

Indian community control, however, did not mean that Indians could cope effectively with all the social stresses associated with the great upheavals of the 1850s. The Yukulme man who had murdered the widow of the Ollash chief gave violent expression

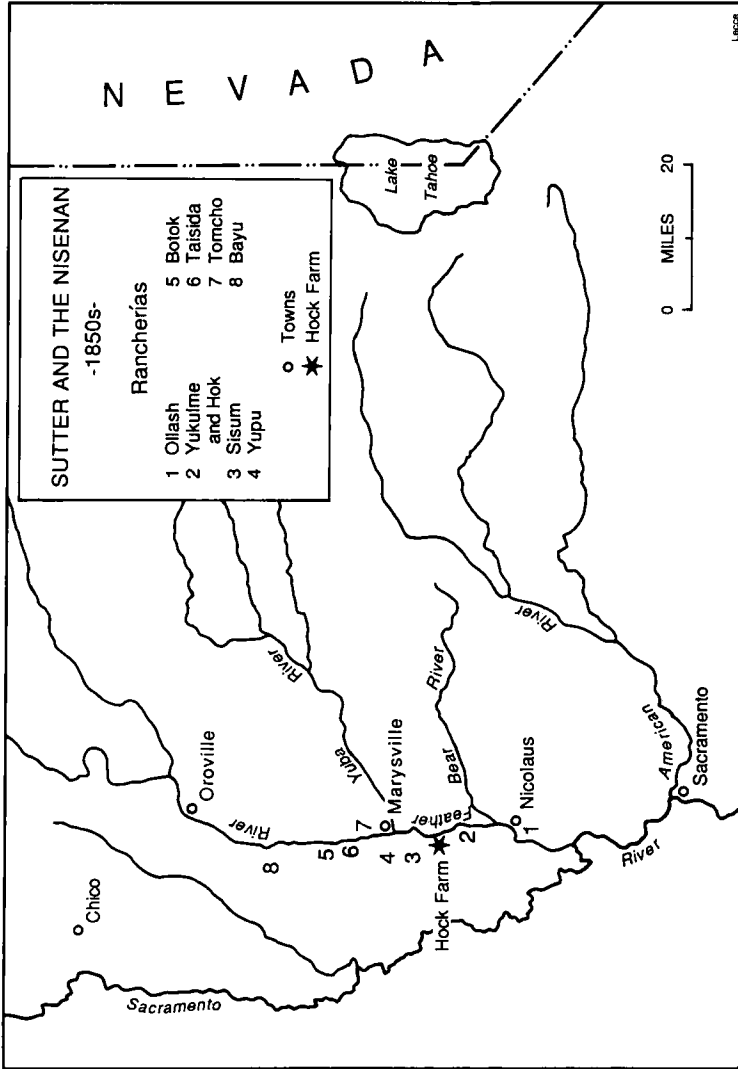


FIGURE 2.1 Sources: Alfred L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (Washington, D.C., 1925); Norman L. Wilson and Arlean H. Towne, "Nisenan," in Robert F. Heizer, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 8, *California* (Washington, 1978); and John A. Sutter to Thomas Henley, February 9, 1856, Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, California Superintendency, 1849-1880, National Archives, RG 75, Microfilm Publication M234, reel 35.

to the social dynamics of community mergers. He may have been trying to accrue power in two groups through plural marriage—a common tactic in pre-contact times.⁴³ Frustrated, he lashed out at the woman who had thwarted his plans.

Even though there were clear signs of Nisenan decline, Sutter still portrayed them as flexible people who adapted to difficult new circumstances. After a decade of exchanging their services for New Helvetia trade goods, Nisenan workers embraced wage labor. Moreover, they set a comparatively high value on their work—at least a price higher than Sutter was willing to pay. As the Nisenans shifted from barter, they moved from the rural countryside to the local urban center. Nisenans found willing employers in Marysville, where they joined the money economy as casual laborers. True, they sometimes spent their money on things that Sutter did not approve of, got drunk, gambled, and had poor work habits, but in Sutter's time employers commonly made the same complaints about workers of every race and nationality.⁴⁴ Nisenans who sought solace in the bottle and wagered away their meager incomes were unwittingly replicating an experience pioneered by the working-class urban poor. Indians had entered the marketplace, but under-employment and poverty as well as opportunities and novelties characterized their role in the white-dominated society.

Superintendent Henley acted on Sutter's letter. After meeting with Sutter and the Indians in the fall of 1856 in Yuba City, Henley gave Sutter the appointment that he sought and ordered all of the Indians to move to Nome Lackee reserve. Local interest and federal aims did not always fit as neatly as they did in the case of Sutter and Henley, but this instance shows how a federal officer served a white landowner while giving scant attention to the interests of the Nisenans. Henley assumed that whatever was good for the white community would be best for the Indians. The Nisenans in the early 1850s had been able to escape Sutter's dominance over their social and economic lives only to see the federal government reestablish his authority over them. For the Nisenans this turn of events was a blunt reminder of their relative power in the new scheme of things.

As Sutter had predicted, the prospect of removal caused great alarm among the Nisenans. Four rancherías asked Sutter to intervene with Henley on their behalf. They promised to behave according to Sutter's standards if only he would use his influence

to get permission for them to stay on the Feather River. Since their request fit well with his wishes, Sutter wrote Henley again.

JOHN A. SUTTER TO THOMAS J. HENLEY,
DECEMBER 1, 1856, HOCK FARM

Dear Sir:

Since I had the pleasure of seeing you, in Yuba City, the Indians of Hock, Yukulmey, Sishum, and Olash Tribes, consisting, altogether, of between 55 and 60 persons, including women and children, presented themselves several times, last week. They said that they wish very much to be not removed from soil on which they are born, and where their forefathers have resided; and pledged themselves that they would behave well, be obedient, and work, and go no more to Marysville. They would be willing to fence in a large field, and would like to have a large crop of wheat, next summer. I told them that I would let them have the land just in front of the ranchería, joining my enclosure, and would do the plowing and sowing, for them, with my teams, if you would be so kind and let them have the seed wheat. I told them that I would write to you about it. I think about 50 bushels would be not too much—because with the surplus they could pay to get it into flour. I have plenty of my old reaping hooks, which I would let them have; and with them they have been accustomed to work. I think this would be a very good plan, because, when the acorns fail, they live very miserable—which happens very frequently; and even if the acorn crop is good, like this year, the oak trees are very much disappearing, in our vicinity; and some ungenerous settlers will even not allow them to take acorns, near their houses, and want to save them for their hogs.

They told me that they would be willing to work, again,—that is, their young men—long time. I did no more ask them to work for me, as they made great pretensions, so that I did prefer to employ white people. Now, they promise to work at reasonable prices; and so they can always find employment, and would receive their pay in clothing and provisions, and not in money.

If the Yubu Indians were removed, I have no doubt that they will behave well; and I hope that I can make them good and useful to the community. Very often *they* had spended whole weeks

with the Yubu Indians, in drinking and gambling; and by day-time they amused themselves in Marysville.

If you approve this plan and grant their prayers, you will be pleased to let me know, in time.

Should these Indians have continued in their bad habits, I would have been most desirous to see them removed from here; but as they will be good and manageable, I have no objection to their remaining here, and so will nobody in this neighborhood. I would then make a full report of their proceedings and behavior, and send it to you, every two or three months.⁴⁵

Your presence had a very good and wholesome effect. They have seen now that they can be removed;—before they would not believe it.

I remain, with the highest esteem & respect,
Your most obdiedient servant
J. A. Sutter

P.S. Oregon wheat will not answer. I sowed some, last year, like a good many farmers, but it have proved to be a failure.

Henley agreed to Sutter's proposition and authorized him to purchase forty bushels of wheat at government expense. The superintendent observed, however, that selective Indian removal contradicted federal policy in California and ordinarily would not have been allowed. Henley was prepared to make an exception for Sutter as long as the Nisenans remained "industrious, temperate, and peaceable." The superintendent cautioned Sutter "not to let the Yubu Indians know that yours have been allowed to remain," although it is difficult to understand how this information could be kept confidential.⁴⁶ In justifying his actions to Commissioner of Indian Affairs George W. Manypenny, Henley observed that Sutter "is the Pioneer of California; and his character for hospitality, generosity, and true friendship for the Indians is proverbial." The Nisenans' appeal to remain on the Feather River "was too much for his generous nature to refuse; and at his earnest request, this deviation from the general rule is permitted." Henley had no doubt that Sutter would be a faithful guardian of the Indians on his ranch, "many of whom were his companions, in this country, long before its occupation by the Americans, and fought with him in the contest which acquired Cala."⁴⁷

Nisenan Survival, Sutter, and the Market Economy

Henley may have misunderstood Sutter's motives, for there was more than a little self-interest in Sutter's plea for the Indians. Sutter was unhappy paying cash for native labor and wanted to remove only Indians whom he perceived as troublesome. He looked back to a time when Indians worked only for trade goods, but the Nisenans had already accepted a place in the cash economy. Sutter could recover the old conditions of Indian service only by relying on the federal government to exert its authority over the Indians, who now understood that their old employer had little personal power over them. In effect, Henley allowed Sutter to retard the integration of Indians into the white economy and community by permitting him to reestablish archaic labor relations that were becoming increasingly incongruous with Indian and white life in the 1850s. By granting Sutter's request for seed wheat for the Indians, Henley in effect gave a federal subsidy to Sutter's farm. Seen in this light, the Nisenans had adapted to new conditions while Sutter was unable to adjust without help.

The resurrection of the patterns of labor and trade that prevailed in the 1840s was not enough to sustain Sutter in California. In the spring of 1857 creditors forced a sheriff's sale of Hock Farm. Somehow Sutter managed to redeem his property in October, a happy event that inspired the old pioneer's friends to mount a wreath on his portrait at the state fair.⁴⁸ Always hard pressed—Sutter's reputation for generosity was rivaled by his renowned poor business acumen—he remained at Hock Farm until a transient burned his house in 1865. Having lost most of his belongings, Sutter left California and retired to the German-American settlement of Lititz, Pennsylvania, whence he regularly petitioned Congress for money that he claimed from the United States.⁴⁹ In the last year of his life he was reduced to accepting charity from a collector of pioneer autographs.⁵⁰

The Nisenan experience with Sutter shows that we need to revise our ideas about what happened to Indians in the 1850s. Simple generalizations about the destruction of California Indians obscure the complexities of the historical situation. While whites undoubtedly exploited many California Indians and annihilated whole tribes, we must take local conditions into account to understand what happened to specific groups. Opportunities for

survival existed and Indians seized them. Where Indians were a convenient and necessary source of labor, they could join the burgeoning money economy, albeit on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. The Nisenans in Sutter County were fortunate to have a choice between farm work and casual labor in Marysville, and many of them chose the opportunities that the town afforded. As has been the case so often in other times and places, the opportunities of city life enticed rural people to town.⁵¹

In the 1850s Marysville's urban attainments were limited, but the little city attracted Nisenan laborers who regularly worked for petty cash. Urban Indians sold their traditional weapons partly because they wanted cash, and partly because they had little utility in a world that whites enclosed for farms and where game was scarce. Not all Indians went to town voluntarily. Some farmers preferred to employ whites, and others drove Indians away entirely in order to preserve resources for their livestock. As a result, Indians were both pushed and pulled to town. When Sutter wanted Indians back on his farm on terms that were most favorable to him, Nisenan workers preferred other opportunities. They reluctantly accepted Sutter's proposal only to avert the threat of forced removal. In effect, Henley used the power of the federal government to make peons of free laborers.

It would be instructive to know whether the Nisenans had a better chance at survival in an urban or a rural setting, but the rapid changes of the 1850s make such a comparative study impossible. Clearly, Sutter's maneuvers in 1856 did not help preserve a substantial Indian population in Sutter County. The 1860 census listed only ten Indians; a mere twenty lived there at the end of the nineteenth century.⁵² Were the Indians who disappeared casualties of the forces of modern life, or did they disappear because whites barred them from participating fully in Sutter County's market economy? In the mid-1850s the Nisenans had tried to draw closer to urban life and wage labor, but Sutter and Superintendent Henley drove them back, preferring to relegate Indians to a more primitive existence in northern California's emerging capitalist economy. Whatever benefits modernization and integration into the market economy might have afforded working Indians, Nisenans were debarred not because they were ill-prepared to participate, but because the federal government blocked the market door.

This essay—limited as it is—shows how problematical was the

California Indians' struggle for survival. Besides the peculiar brand of Euro-American racism that was current in the 1850s, California's native people were subject to other complex situations and human motivations. Nascent capitalism, Sutter's insidious designs, a compliant Indian superintendent, the fascinations of town life, and Indian needs and perceptions all were at work in the Nisenan world. Each of these elements exercised its own peculiar influence. Left to their own devices, the Nisenans might have made a distinctive accommodation to their new surroundings, but in 1856 Sutter and Henley curtailed Indian control over the terms of Nisenan survival. Sutter's power to manipulate the Indian superintendent and his devotion to old patterns of Indian labor combined to force Indians to step back into an archaic system of labor and social relations. In mid-nineteenth century California, force kept Indians down on Sutter's farm, where their role in the agricultural economy amounted to a status of peonage. In Sutter County, where the free market was fully open only to whites, Indians lived with constraints and conditions that limited their participation and ultimately their survival in a new world that they had helped to make.

NOTES

1. Robert F. Heizer and Alan F. Almquist, *The Other Californians: Prejudice and Discrimination under Spain, Mexico, and the United States to 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 23-64; Robert F. Heizer, ed., *The Destruction of California Indians: A Collection of Documents from the Period 1847 to 1865 in which Are Described Some of the Things that Happened to Some of the Indians of California* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1974); Robert F. Heizer, *They Were Only Diggers: A Collection of Articles from California Newspapers, 1851-1866, on Indian and White Relations* (Ramona, Calif.: Ballena Press, 1974); Jack Norton, *Genocide in Northwestern California* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1979); Lynwood Carranco and Estle Beard, *Genocide and Vendetta: The Round Valley Wars of Northern California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981). George Harwood Phillips has looked beyond the destruction of native people to describe Indian adaptation to Hispanic and white influences, *Chiefs and Challengers: Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). James Rawls explores how the white image of California Indians changed over time and culminated in an orgy of extermination in the 1850s in *Indians of California: The Changing Image* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).

2. Sherburne F. Cook, *The Population of the California Indians, 1769-1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 44-45.

3. Sherburne F. Cook, "The American Invasion, 1848-1870," *Ibero-Americana* 23(1943):1-115.

4. Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, California Superintendency, 1849-1880, National Archives, RG 75, Microfilm Publication M234, (hereafter cited as M234:reel number).

5. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 98-99; Howard Lamar, "From Bondage to Contract: Ethnic Labor in the American West, 1600-1890," in *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America*, ed. Steven H. Hahn and Jonathan Prude (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 293-96.

6. Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), xvii.

7. Albert L. Hurtado, "'Saved so Much as Possible for Labour': Indian Population and the New Helvetia Work Force," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 6, no. 4 (1982): 63-78.

8. Norman L. Wilson and Arlean H. Towne, "Nisenan," in *Handbook of North American Indians: Vol. 8, California*, ed. Robert F. Heizer, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 387-88.

9. *Ibid.*; Lowell John Bean, "Social Organization in Native California," in *Native Californians: A Theoretical Retrospective*, ed. Lowell John Bean and Thomas C. Blackburn (Socorro, N.M.: Ballena Press, 1976), 102. Anthropologists accept Hok as the antecedent of Sutter's Hock Farm, but some historians believe that the name originated with Sutter, who called his Feather River place the upper or "hoch" farm. Mildred Brooke Hoover, Hero Eugene Rensch, and Ethel Grace Rensch, *Historic Spots in California*, ed. William N. Abeloe, 3rd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 544. Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names: The Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 141, accepts the Indian origin of Hock Farm. Gudde was a professor of German at the University of California, Berkeley, and wrote *Sutter's Own Story: The Life of General John Augustus Sutter and the History of New Helvetia in the Sacramento Valley* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936). If Hok had German roots then for some reason Sutter—a native German speaker—preferred to misspell a name that he had applied to the land.

10. Gabriel Moraga, *The Diary of Ensign Gabriel Moraga's Expedition of Discovery in the Sacramento Valley, 1808*, ed. and trans. Donald B. Cutter (Los Angeles: Glen Dawson, 1957), 17-18, 25.

11. Sherburne F. Cook, "Colonial Expeditions to the Interior of California, 1800-1820," *University of California Anthropological Records* v. 16, no. 6 (1960).

12. George R. Brooks, ed. *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith: His Personal Account of the Journey to California, 1826-1827* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1977), 166; Harrison C. Dale, ed., *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829*, rev. ed. (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1941), 247-55.

13. Sherburne F. Cook, "The Epidemic of 1830-1833 in California and Oregon," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 43(1955): 303-25.

14. E. E. Rich, ed., *The Fort Vancouver Letters of John McLoughlin*, 3 vols. (London: Champlain Society for the Hudson's Bay Company Record Society, 1941-44), 2:252-54.
15. Albert L. Hurtado, "Ranchos, Gold Mines and Rancherías: A Socioeconomic History of Indians and Whites in Northern California, 1821-1860," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1981), 60-129; James Peter Zollinger, *Sutter: The Man and His Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939); and Richard Dillon, *Fool's Gold: The Decline and Fall of Captain John Sutter of California* (New York: Coward McCann, Inc., 1967).
16. John Yates, "Sketch of a Journey in the Year 1842," MS, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
17. Hurtado, "'Saved so Much as Possible for Labour,'" 63-78.
18. Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 112-13.
19. Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, 90-94, 99-100.
20. Kearny to Sutter, April 7, 1847, Governor's Letter Books, National Archives, RG 393, Microfilm Publication M182; T. Ewing to Orlando Brown, Nov. 17, 1849, M234:32; Sutter to the Secretary of the Interior, May 23, 1850, M234:32. Johann August Sutter, *The Diary of Johann August Sutter* (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1932), 45-46. See also Albert L. Hurtado, "Controlling California's Indian Labor Force: Federal Indian Administration during the Mexican War," *Southern California Quarterly* 61 (1979): 217-38; Edward E. Hill, *The Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-1880: Historical Sketches* (New York: Clearwater Publishing Co., 1974), 19-27; William Henry Ellison, "The Federal Indian Policy in California, 1846-1860," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 9(1922): 35-67; Harry Kelsey, "The California Indian Treaty Myth," *Southern California Quarterly* 56(1974): 273-94; and James J. Rawls, *Indians of California*, 137-60; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 1:381-402.
21. Henley to George Manypenny, Nov. 3, 1855, M234.
22. An Act for the Government and Protection of the Indians," *Statutes of California*, 1850, Chapter 133.
23. George Harwood Phillips, "Indians in Los Angeles, 1781-1875: Economic Integration, Social Disintegration," *Pacific Historical Review* 69(1980): 427-51; Rawls, *Indians of California*, 90-104; Heizer and Almquist, *The Other Californias*, 39-58.
24. For example, see Alex H. Putney to T. J. Henley, Nov. 4, 1857, and Sept. 31, 1858, M234:35 and M234:37; and J. Markle to Henley, Dec. 17, 1858, M234:37.
25. *California Farmer and Journal of Useful Science*, June 5, 1857, 164.
26. M234:35.
27. Frank Friedel, ed., rev. ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 31-32.
28. The Ollash Nisenan ranchería was originally located on the west bank of the Feather River about fifteen miles south of Marysville. Wilson and Towne, "Nisenan," 388.
29. The Yukulme ranchería had been about seven miles south of Marysville on the west bank of the Feather. *Ibid.*

30. The Hok ranchería was approximately seven miles south of Marysville on the west bank of the Feather at Hock Farm. *Ibid.*

31. Sishaw is probably Sutter's rendition of the Sisum ranchería located about four miles south of Marysville on the west side of the Feather. *Ibid.*

32. The Yupu ranchería was originally located at Marysville. *Ibid.*

33. Probably the Botok Konkow located about ten miles north of Marysville on the west bank of the Feather. Francis A. Riddell, "Maidu and Konkow," *Handbook of North American Indians: Vol. 8, California*, Robert F. Heizer, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 370-71 (location shown on figure 2.1). Alternatively, it could have been Bauka, about twenty miles north of Marysville as shown by Alfred L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (1925; reprint ed., Berkeley: California Book Co., 1953), 394, plate 37.

34. Possibly the Taisida ranchería that was found about one mile south of Botok, *ibid.*, 370-71, 388.

35. Riddell reports the Tomcho Konkow ranchería about three or four miles north of Marysville on the west bank of the Feather. *Ibid.* Wilson and Towne show Tomchoh Nisenan ranchería two or three miles north of Marysville on the east side of the Feather, (location shown on figure 2.1). "Nisenan," 388. Kroeber reported Tomcha about seven or eight miles north of Marysville on the east bank of the Feather, *Handbook of California Indians*, 394, plate 37.

36. Possibly the Bayu, reported as fifteen or seventeen miles north of Marysville on the west bank of the Feather. Wilson and Towne, "Nisenan," 370-71; Riddell, "Maidu and Konkow," 388; Kroeber, *Handbook of California Indians*, 394, plate 37.

37. No newspaper by this name was published in Marysville.

38. Shortages of women were common among gold rush Indian populations. Albert L. Hurtado, "'Hardly a Farm House—A Kitchen Without Them': Indian and White Households on the California Borderland Frontier in 1860," *Western Historical Quarterly* 13 (1982): 245-70.

39. John Bidwell arrived in California in 1841, worked for Sutter for several years and established his own rancho in the present city of Chico, where he employed native laborers. Hurtado, "'Hardly a Farm House—A Kitchen Without Them,'" 259-62.

40. Samuel Neal arrived in California in 1844 with John C. Frémont, worked for Sutter, and established his own ranch on Butte Creek. Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of California*, 7 vols. (San Francisco: The History Company, 1886-1890), 4:792.

41. Phillips, "Indians in Los Angeles," 427-51.

42. Hurtado, "Saved So Much as Possible for Labour," 73.

43. Bean, "Social Organization," 111-12.

44. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 19-22.

45. Since further correspondence from Sutter does not appear in M234, either he neglected to report to Henley or the correspondence has been lost.

46. Henley to Sutter, Dec. 4, 1856, M234:35.

47. Henley to Manypenny, Dec. 4, 1856, M234:35. During the Mexican War Sutter commanded Indian troops at Fort Sacramento—formerly Sutter's Fort—

but saw no combat. See MS 28, 29, 63, Fort Sutter Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

48. *California Farmer and Journal of Useful Science*, June 5, 1857, 164; and *ibid.*, Oct. 9, 1857, 100.

49. Richard Dillon, *Fool's Gold*, 342-50.

50. John A. Sutter to Smith Rudd, Oct. 30, 1879, Nov. 7, 1879, Dec. 26, 1879, Rudd Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana; on Sutter's death see Allan R. Ottley, ed., *John A. Sutter's Last Days: The Bidwell Letters* (Sacramento: Sacramento Book Collectors Club, 1986).

51. Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 489-91.

52. Cook, *The Population of the California Indians*, 56.