

ETHNOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

The Washoe, who occupied approximately 4000 sq mi along the California/ Nevada border, were divided into three regional subdivisions: the *Wel mel ti* or northerners, occupants of the Truckee Meadows, Honey Lake, Sierra Valley, Truckee-Donner Lake, Washoe Valley and Eagle Valley; the *Pau wa lu* of Carson Valley; and the southerners, or *Hung a lel ti* of the Woodfords-Markleeville area (Figure 4). As with other Great Basin groups, these designations were not "band" names, but merely geographical labels for the fluid population that wintered in these areas (d'Azevedo 1986:469). Each division ranged over an east-west slice of territory including the eastern desert slope of the Sierra Nevada, the upper western slope, and the wide range of habitats between the desert valleys and the alpine peaks. In addition to this "heartland," the Washoe apparently made joint use of adjoining territories with the neighboring Paiute and Maidu. For example, although the eastern "boundary" of Washoe lands ends at the crest of the Pah Rah and Virginia ranges, they often fished as far east as Clark's Station, ca. 8 mi east of Vista (Zeier and Elston 1986:13, Lowie 1939:347). The population density of the Washoe, at 2.7 persons per sq mi, was the highest in the Great Basin and attests to the productivity of the environment (Price 1980:46).

The *Wel mel ti* group, with whom we are primarily concerned because of their occupation and use of the Washoe Valley and Truckee Meadows vicinity, were active in a wide variety of ecological zones. The valleys provided antelope and jackrabbits, with concentrations of plant life, waterfowl, and fish along the several permanent drainages in the area. The foothill regions possessed bulbs, roots, and ample deer populations. The mountainous areas had deer, small game, and many heavily stocked fishing lakes such as Washoe and Little Washoe lakes, while mountain sheep lived on the high peaks. The western slope provided acorns, more deer, and the opportunity to trade with neighboring groups.

Several named places are known in relation to *Wel mel ti* land use patterns. Like all Washoe groups, they spent the summer at Lake Tahoe, or *Da ow a ga*. They made the spring trip via Washoe Valley (*Tso ya da ow* or "cat-tail lake"), where plants ripened early. Their area included the north and northeast shore of the Lake Tahoe, with known camping places at *Ma goi ta*, where fish and wild rhubarb were available, and *Mot lum watah*, where the same resources and berries were collected at the junction of a stream with the lake (Inter-Tribal Council [ITC] 1976:3-13). Fish were dried for later consumption while in the high country; they could not be transported to the warm lowlands without rotting (Downs 1966:14).

After the summer season of fishing ended at Tahoe, families either moved to the west side of the Sierra Nevada for the acorn season or north to Honey Lake Valley for the same purpose, in either case often traversing Squaw Valley, where deer hunting was especially productive. Those visiting the west side may have traveled as far as Colfax and Auburn. Pine nuts were collected during the exodus from the high mountain areas, in the pinyon regions to the south of the Truckee River. Winter brought people down to the valleys for the Truckee River trout run and the rabbit drives in Eagle and Washoe valleys, where they finally wintered at locations where water never froze such as springs in Eagle Valley, the Steamboat Hot Springs, and the Truckee Meadows area (*Wel ga nuk*). Their movements at different time of the year are summarized in Table 1, the *Wel mel ti* seasonal round (ITC 1976:3-13).

Clearly, focus on the three major food procurement activities--hunting, fishing, and gathering--required access to different environmental zones as well as a flexible pattern of social organization that allowed people to cluster together or disperse into small groups according to the nature of the seasonally

Table 1. Reconstructed Seasonal Round of the *Wel Mel Ti*.

Month	Location, Population Movements	Fish	Hunt	Gather	Zone
APR	Disperse uphill as snow melts, plants mature	Trout run, Truckee River	Waterfowl eggs	Bulbs, roots, waterfowl eggs	Valley foothills
MAY	To Tahoe, north shore via Washoe Valley trail	Trout run, Truckee River and Tahoe streams; Lahontan sucker, Long Valley, Honey Lake		Sunflowers, rhubarb, bulbs, roots	Foothills, mountain meadows
JUN	Congregate at north shore Tahoe	Trout and Tahoe sucker runs		Bulbs, roots	Mountain Meadows
JUL	Dispersed families	Lahontan tui chub		Strawberries, cattails, mountain seeds	Mountain meadows
AUG	Dispersed families	Individual fishing	Deer, quail	Valley seeds, bulbs	Split between mountain and valleys
SEP	Towards lowlands, via Squaw Valley, west side Sierra, Honey Lake Valley		Deer	Valley seeds, acorns	Foothills, valleys
OCT	Clustered families	Truckee River trout run	Deer	Acorns north, pinenuts south	Foothills
NOV	To Eagle and Washoe valleys	Truckee River trout run	Deer	Rabbit drives, antelope, birds	Valleys
DEC	Winter camps; Truckee, Eagle Valley, Steamboat Springs	Truckee River trout run	Stored goods		Valleys
JAN	Winter camps	Fishing	Stored goods		Valleys
FEB	Winter camps	Fishing	Deer	Stored goods	Valleys
MAR	Small parties move uphill as snow melts			Camas, valley greens	Valleys, foothills

From Zeier and Elston 1986:15, d'Azevedo 1986:472-475, ITC 1976:3-16, Downs 1966:10-20.

available food resources (Downs 1966:13-36). The extended family was the primary social unit, and the household the dominant economic one. Plant food collecting, with the exception of pine nuts, tended to fragment people into small family units, as did small game, deer and mountain sheep hunting, and fishing outside of the seasonal runs. People met in larger aggregates during fish runs, rabbit drives, antelope hunts, pine nut gathering periods, and winter encampments, where units such as the community, the band, and the tribal division had meaning (Price 1980:46). The greatest number of people gathered for the early summer fish runs and the pinyon harvests; both were occasions for various kinds of social activity. By extension, ritual life blossomed during these periods (Price 1980:40).

The pine nut festival, or *gumsabay*, was the major social event of the year (Price 1980:40; Downs 1966:22-24). The period just prior to the pine nut harvest was the most affluent season; hunting, fishing, and gathering were all extremely productive. Large gatherings were possible at the conjunction of routes to various family-owned pinyon areas. These groupings ranged from groups of households to bands to entire tribal divisions depending upon the summer take and the predicted pinyon crop (Downs 1966:23). Ritual bathing, prayer, dancing, gambling, and games followed, marriages were arranged, and hunters supplied meat for feasting while women gathered the first of the pine nuts (Price 1980:28). This activity continued from four days to two weeks before the families dispersed to their individual groves for the pinyon harvest proper, which were often delineated by lines of rocks (Lowie 1939:303).

Only events for which the timing could not be controlled--birth, girl's puberty, boy's first kill, and death--occasioned social events outside these times of gathering.

The return to the valleys was often slow. Price (1962:34) estimates that each family could make as many as four caches of pine nuts with 300 to 600 lbs in each. While Price maintains that most were stored on the spot, Downs (1966:25) describes the arduous transport of these goods to the lowlands, with several days required for the move of a few miles.

Upon arrival in the valleys, rabbit drives were held to provide a supply of fur and dried meat for the coming winter. Every family owned a net into which rabbits could be driven; often, families combined their nets and their efforts into a large drive (Downs 1966:27). These drives could be extraordinarily productive. Since they occurred in the valleys near the wintering camps, transport was not a problem. Antelope drives could utilize the same personnel and the same valley locations.

With the onset of winter, people gathered into camps near streams, where they subsisted mainly upon stored goods supplemented by occasional fishing and hunting expeditions. Mountain sheep occurred on a mountain "this side [west] of Derby Dam" and were caught by the use of drive fences (Lowie 1939:328). Deer drives were undertaken occasionally; a group of men would travel up to 30 mi in two days, set up a camp, and hunt for up to a week (Lowie 1939:326). Fishing platforms were constructed on both sides of the Truckee all the way to Derby Dam (Lowie 1939:348). These communities were often organized around an active male, who was a relative or hunting partner to the other males (Price 1980:47).

These seasonal movements gave rise to various housing types, their elaborateness dependent upon the amount of time spent at a single location. Summer structures consisted only of sunshades, or rectangular ramadas with thatched roofs, and sometimes a semi-circular windbreak. Fishing platforms were constructed over streams as well (Price 1980:55). These spring/summer camps provided an opportunity for social activities such as dances and games, organized along moiety lines. The camps were set up in an open circle, or U- curve, and events took place inside (Lowie 1939:304).

Winter camps were set up in a much more permanent fashion. A location was chosen near a spring, a hot spring, or a river, where the flowing water would allow fishing to continue after the hard freeze, but away from the floodbanks of major drainages (Price 1980:48, 54). Settlements consisting of two to ten structures were placed as near as possible to the pine nutting grounds, and on a well-drained sunny southern exposure (Moratto 1984:14). The winter house or *galesdangal* was a cone-shaped structure 10 to 20 ft across, with a shallowly excavated floor, a 3-in deep rock rimmed central firepit, a central smokehole, and an eastern entrance, sometimes with a passageway attached. An 8-to-10 ft wide semi-circular brush and pole windbreak might be constructed to keep snow from drifting across the entrance. These structures were often re-used for many winters, and in fact may have been permanently inhabited by those segments of the population not prepared to go on the extensive seasonal treks, such as the young and old (d'Azevedo 1986:472). On the Truckee River, inhabitants of such camps could take advantage of the lowland trout runs from April to June, and the abundant vegetation at the river's edge, including camas, sego lily, wild onion, tules, cattails, and various seeds. The summer habitation of winter camps would entail the construction of sun shades and additional windbreaks (Moratto 1984:14). Due to the permanence of these winter camps, those who wintered near the same area came to view themselves as members of a single community over time.

Winter houses were abandoned as they became less easy to repair, but were also intentionally evacuated and burned when the owner died. Disposal of the dead seems to have involved a variety of practices depending upon the circumstances of death. The deceased could be cremated in the house, buried near the place of death, or wrapped and left in a tree. When burial took place, property and food were placed in the grave, and the grave covered with stones; other property of the deceased was destroyed (Price 1980:31).

Sweathouses have been inconsistently reported for the area, and it is unknown whether their ethnographic references reflect post-contact circumstances. They were described as large enough for only a single person, and to be used exclusively by shamans. A small (3-ft wide) rock ring was composed of flat rocks, with the interior slightly excavated; a firepit and limbs across the top completed the structure (Price 1980:56).

Temporary shelters were constructed as birth houses. A shallow trench was excavated, and hot coals were buried beneath a bed of sand. Apparently, these were not always built (Price 1980:18).

Seasonal movements also involved contact with other Indian groups. The *Wel mel ti* of Truckee Meadows had an especially close relationship with the Northern Paiute, with whom they exchanged fishing and hunting in the meadows and gathering and deer hunting on Peavine Mountain for access to cui-ui fisheries at Honey and Pyramid lakes and the lower Truckee River as well as acorns on the west side of Honey Lake Valley (d'Azevedo 1986:471). Acorns, shells, and obsidian were sometimes traded directly for cui-ui fish. The Washoe also traded and intermarried occasionally with the Miwok, and less frequently the Maidu and Nisenan, with whom the relationship was less trusting. Washoe exports included salt, obsidian, pine nuts, and rabbitskins; the Californians reciprocated with papam bulbs, acorns, skins, shell, and kutsavi grubs (d'Azevedo 1986:471).