

History of the Area Now Called Camp Hi-Sierra

Before reading, a reminder: History is long and many of its details are lost to those of us now living. The following is only a brief summary of the known information from the extremely local area. It is not at all exhaustive - and even a fully researched history should always be assumed to be incomplete. We continue to learn about the past, updating our understanding of it as we go.

Tuolumne Band of the Me-wuk

Members of the Me-wuk band are the earliest known people to inhabit the valley in which Camp Hi-Sierra now resides. For thousands of years a large group of related tribes, known collectively to us today as the Miwok (also spelled Me-wuk, Miwuk, or Mi-wuk), lived in a vast area stretching across California and along the Sierra mountains, especially the foothills. Grinding holes in the rocks and the occasional small stone artifact, are the main indicators we have that they stayed in this valley specifically - likely during the warmer months of the year only.

The name Me-wuk, as with many indigenous groups around the world, comes from the word for “people” in the languages of these related tribes. Due to generations of experience, the Me-wuk are very knowledgeable about the resources of the land and how to use them. They hunted and gathered their primary food staples of fish, acorns, and deer meat, often supplemented with various wild berries, seeds, and nuts. During times when resources were not readily available on their land, the Me-wuk would migrate to trade with others, sometimes including long trips into the higher elevations of the mountains for game during the warm-season. The Me-wuk also lit periodic fires in grasslands and forest patches to refresh the resources of the area, in a practice recognized only recently by modern science as central to increasing the ecological diversity of the area.

The Me-wuk tended to belong to groups of small villages. The typical village consisted of *umachas* (cedar bark homes), *chakkas* (acorn granaries) and a *hangi* (ceremonial roundhouse). The ceremonial roundhouse was the epicenter of village life and used for a variety of purposes by different groups, including worship. Dances are still held in the roundhouse of the Tuolumne Me-wuk today as a way of giving thanks and respect.

The era of the Gold Rush (1848) was traumatic to all the Miwok tribes in many ways. As prospectors rushed West, they drastically altered the environment that had sustained tribes across California. Rivers were re-routed, disrupted, or filled with soil from blasting and mining - all of which destroyed fish habitat. Land that the Miwok gathered food on was cleared for cattle, who ate the acorns that formed a major dietary staple. Miners and homesteaders sectioned off land and declared it their own, while bringing in diseases for which the Miwok had no immunity, causing many deaths. Militias from the federal government specifically hunted down and attempted to annihilate those of the native population who had not retreated to more isolated areas. Prior to outside contact, the Sierra Miwok population was estimated at over 10,000 people. In the 1910 census, it was counted at 679.

Today, the Sierra Miwok number over 3,500 individuals. Around 400 are members of the Tuolumne Me-wuk Tribe, a sovereign nation with its own laws, government, and social services. It seeks to “uphold social and economic stability through self-reliance and to promote the health, safety and welfare of our Indian people.”

(Paraphrased largely from the Me-wuk Nation website - see it for further information!)

Homesteading of the Jenness Family

Throughout 1865 - 1879, a number of land plots, including this valley, were homesteaded by the Jenness family, who became large landholders and lumbermen in the area. This family consisted of Thomas Jenness and his wife Julia, as well as two sons: Thomas and Edward. Not terribly much is known to camp at this time of their personal lives. To obtain full property rights from the US Government, the family had to “improve” the land through buildings, cultivation, etc. for 5 years - as called for by the 1862 Homestead Act. For camp’s parcel, that improvement may have consisted of logging operations in partnership with Cold Springs Mill.

Cold Springs Mill, Sonora & Standard Lumber Companies

In 1903, construction on the Cold Springs mill began, just northwest of what is now the Archery Range. It was built and operated by the Sonora Lumber Company, a newly incorporated logging operation apparently meant to challenge the massive Standard Lumber Company (SLC) as a competitor. Logging and lumber had become a key industry in the county, and both Edward and his brother Thomas Jenness seem to have been involved in the new logging firm as partners. In 1904, the Mill became operational, but the company proved to be short-lived.

In 1905, shortly following the death of the elder Thomas Jenness, the SLC bought out the Sonora Lumber Company. A lawsuit by the brothers Jenness alleged that this had been done without the full knowledge of the stockholders, yet nevertheless in 1906 the brothers entered into an agreement with the SLC. For \$1000, it allowed the company access to “all the timber and trees now standing, growing, down or upon” large portions of the Jenness family holdings - with the area Camp now stands as the epicenter.

Loggers clear-cut the valley for the mill worksite, and then built branching log chutes out into the deeper woods to haul in downed trees. Hardwoods like the Black Oak were a favorite, but pines and alders were not spared. It is unclear if (outside of the mill area) the SLC did any selective logging of older, larger trees. At the time, growing ecological concerns pushed many logging groups in the Northern Sierras to attempt what was seen as a more sustainable practice, at least on paper. However, this backfired: leaving only the younger trees promoted regrowth, but caused them to grow much closer together. This choked off species that needed more light, such as the Black Oak, resulting in dense stands of mostly Pines and Cedars, which increased the fire danger of the area.

The Cold Springs Mill was destroyed by such a fire in 1908, setting off a sizable forest blaze. It was rebuilt in 1909, and the gang saws are said to have gone through 140,000 feet of lumber a day at its peak. The sawdust from all this lumber was dumped in an enormous pile that became the backstop of the Archery Range, until 1913, when the Cold Springs Mill was dismantled. Only the concrete foundations you see today, and the dust, were left behind.

Camp Hi-Sierra, Boy Scouts of America

In 1949, Edward Jenness, now the sole surviving brother, sold 100 acres of the area to the Santa Clara County Council, for \$10 plus other considerations. The first official summer camp season in 1949 was likely quite small. We know that it ran for 3 weeks, with only 6 youth staff. Everyone ate outdoors, and meals were prepared in a small “cook shack.” The cook himself slept in what we now call the Clavey Shack: the only building left from the mill days. Around 1950, this cook shack was updated to a wooden dining hall, and updates continued in the form of a Health Lodge, Showers, Tent Platforms, and a true Water System with wells. Later, a removable dam was installed.

For over 70 years, camp has operated successfully, running programs and badges on a variety of scouting subjects. Some, like the Trekking program for older youth, have faded away. Others: like Climbing, Nature, Shooting, Swimming, and a unique Foxfire program, have become hallmarks of the camp - along with the best staff around.

Sometime in the first few years, the camp had an honor society based upon a Sawmill theme. However, this was quickly supplanted by the Tribe Program, with a Native American theme that used belt stamps and later beads to recognize accomplishments and service at camp. Recognizing the misconceptions this encouraged, yet also the intent and good that the program did, the organization chose to transition to a theme centered on stories, and was renamed the Saga of Hi-Sierra in 2021. This also made space for educational programs about the Me-Wuk. Throughout 2023, tribal members regularly visited camp and taught scouts about their culture & history.

After the 2017 camp season, camp began a major facilities update, replacing most of the buildings on the West side of the river, including Dining Hall, Staff Quarters, Health Lodge, and more. The camp will continue to grow and change, making a space for the introduction of youth to the wilderness, until it is time for a new group to arrive, and begin the next chapter in the story of this valley.