

Chapter 1

**COPPER-COLORED PEOPLE
ON A GOLDEN LAND**

The stubborn and enduring land of California has changed less than its people. From an aeroplane the "coloured counties" are seen spread out like a giant relief map. Mount Shasta looms to the north, Mount Whitney to the south; the Sierra Nevada forms a wall to the east; and beyond Whitney, where the Sierra appears to go underground, the desert takes over. There are the long interior valleys; and there are the tumbled, rough, and wooded Coast Ranges through which rivers and creeks break to the sea. Below, incredible, lies the vast and varied land, its mountains and deserts empty and mute today, while over the accessible valleys and coastal plains a congested and diverse population clusters close to a few centers like wasps around heavy-hanging nests. A constant stream of automobiles, looking from the air like lines of black ants on the march, fills the passes over the Sierra barrier, moving westward to the favored spots. The hills are empty except for lumbering operations wherever there is a good stand of trees; the mining towns of the Mother Lode and the old rancherias are shabby and deserted, or have been taken over by "summer people." The banks of rivers and creeks are empty save for sporadic invasions of fishermen; and the desert is without human occupants except for a citified overflow which follows in the wake of air-cooling installations, swimming pools, and motels.

What would an air view have revealed in the days of the gold rush? The same lines of black ants moving in the same westerly direction over the same passes, on horseback, and in covered

wagons drawn by oxen, traveling more slowly than today's immigrants but with the same doggedness as these later ones, heading in part for the same centers, in part stopping in the hill country where ranches, mining camps, and saw and grist mills were scattered along streams and in the forests.

Hovering over the same land, but continuing our flight back in time, we view another trek, this one on foot or on mule and horseback, coming up from the south, northward along the rim of the sea. The time is the 'seventies of the eighteenth century, and the travelers, Spaniards pushing out of Mexico, keeping a sharp eye for a sheltered and sunny and likely spot for mission, rancheria, or presidio as they move slowly on.

If we take a last backward flight in time, the Spaniard is no longer seen. This is the time before his coming; the golden land belongs wholly and undisputedly to its native sons and daughters. No lines of black ants move over the high passes or come up from the south in this view. Indeed, we must fly low to see the narrow trails meandering beside a stream, or across country to an oak flat, or up into the hills. At first there seem to be neither houses nor people, but presently a frame with surf fish strung on it to dry on a sunny beach, a clearing in the trees, a thin blue wisp of smoke from a wood fire, serve to guide the eyes to the weathered roof of a low redwood house, to an earth-covered circular house, to a thatched house, to a brush shelter. We see an old woman tending the fire outside a house, a man spearing fish beside a stream, a half-grown boy paddling downstream in a dugout canoe. A young woman, her baby in a basket carrier on her back, gathers wild iris on a hillside; a hunter brings down a deer with bow and arrow. These people step noiselessly over the ground, barefoot or in soft deerskin moccasins, and their naked or near-naked copper-colored bodies blend in semicamouflage against the colors of the earth. Such clothes as they wear, a skirt of shredded bark, a buckskin breechclout, an occasional fur or feather cape, also blend into the natural background. Their

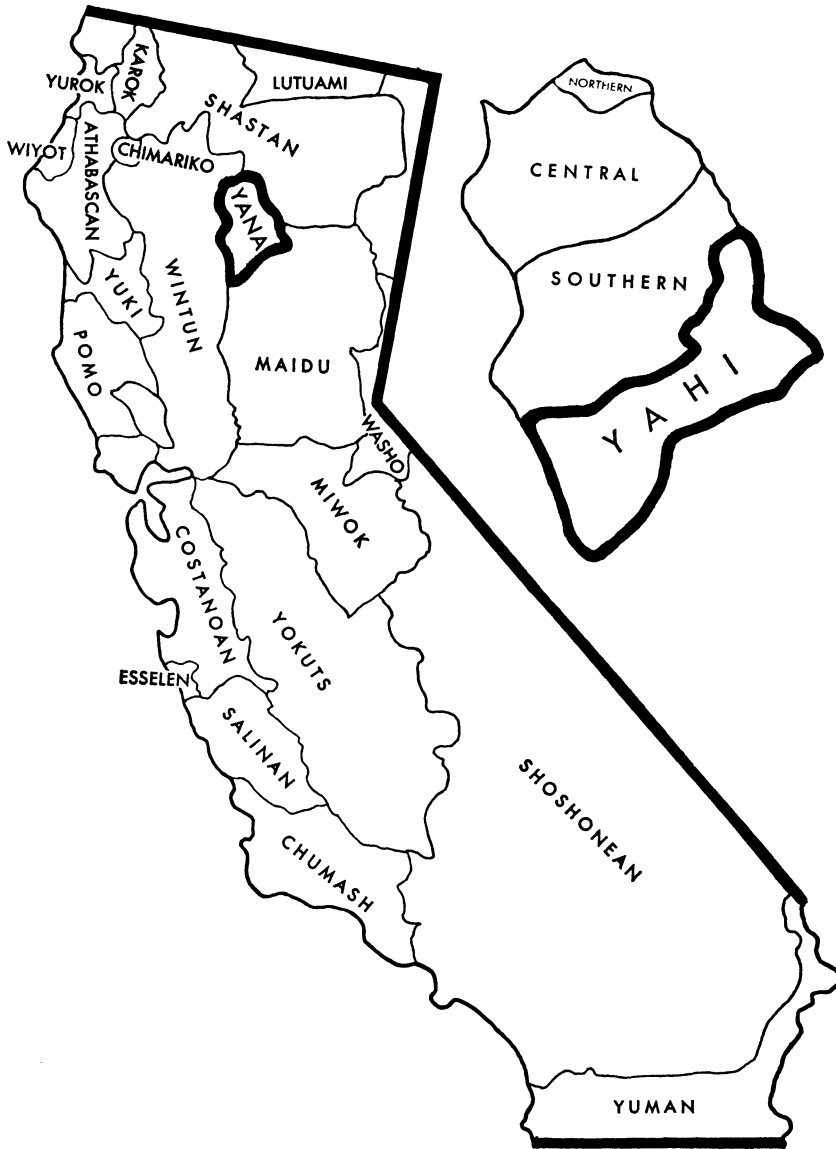
voices, whether in ordinary conversation, or in song or prayer or mourning cry, are light-toned, neither harsh nor loud.

The high mountains are empty. But people are living in the hills as far up as oak trees grow and wherever manzanita and other berries are abundant, and wherever there are deer; along fish-filled streams; and where a river flows into the sea; and on the desert. Even so unlikely a place as Death Valley has men who call it home.

Back on the ground and again in the twentieth century, we turn to maps and estimates and reports to learn something more of these ancestral peoples whom we have glimpsed distantly through time.

We have seen that they lived on parts of the land which modern men do not find habitable or attractive, although at no place were their numbers large. The population of Indian California was small: over the whole of the state there were probably no more than a hundred and fifty thousand people, perhaps as many as two hundred and fifty thousand. (In 1860, ten years after the beginning of the gold rush, the white population of the state was already three hundred and ninety thousand.) There are, to be sure, estimates of the pre-conquest population of California which run higher, but the archaeological remains from village and burial sites point to numbers close to those given here. There is no evidence, as there is in the Southwest, in Mexico, in Yucatan of the Mayas, that a once much more numerous people suffered disaster and decimation. Nor do the histories, legends, myths, or stories of any California Indians speak of ancient wholesale famine as do the old as well as the modern chronicles of China and India.

These one or two hundred and fifty thousand native people constituted twenty-one known nationalities, or small nations, which were in turn further separated into subnationalities, and these again into tribes or tribelets to a total number of more than two hundred and fifty—exactly how many more can never be known because of the obliteration in modern times of whole



INDIAN CALIFORNIA

Inset shows the Yana territory with the Yahi lands in the far south.

peoples and cultures by Spaniard and Anglo-Saxon alike without record of tribal name or affiliation. Many of these subgroups were of course few in number and inhabited only a small area. Their numbers were almost unbelievably small beside the territorial and population figures for modern nations, but they were nonetheless true nations in their stubbornly individual and boundaried separateness and distinctiveness one from another.

One of these nationalities was the Yana. There were probably no more than three thousand of Ishi's people, perhaps only two thousand,—not many to constitute a nation to be sure, but more people than live today along the favorite streams and on the village sites of the ancient Yana. And few in number as they were, even by California standards, the Yana followed the current pattern of culture fragmentation in being further sub-subdivided into four groups: Northern, Central, Southern, and Yahi (Ishi's group), each with its own geographic boundaries, its own dialect, and its own set of specializations and peculiarities of custom.

There were and are, for the whole of Indian North America, six great linguistic superfamilies, each made up of numbers of separate stocks or families of speech. Each family usually consists of several languages which differ so much one from another that their common origin can be determined only by comparative linguistics study; the superfamilies are even more varied than the large Indo-European stock or family with its Romance and Germanic and Slavic and Hindi divisions. Of the six superfamilies, five were represented in California, and contained among them twenty-one basic languages which were, for the most part, as mutually unintelligible as are German and French; and many of them were even more unlike than these two. But this is not yet the whole of the story, since the twenty-one languages further separated and elaborated themselves into a hundred and thirteen known dialects. These dialects varied, some of them, only so much as New Orleans English from the English of Boston; others so greatly that to know one would not make the other accessible, as with Swedish and German. Only parts of the Sudan and the

island of New Guinea offer so much language variety within comparable areas. Or, to demonstrate the congestion of tongues another way, there are twice as many Indian languages on record as there are counties in California today.

We know that such extreme linguistic differentiation takes time. Spoken language is in a sense always changing, since each speaker of his tongue imprints on it his imperceptibly individual voice and accent and choice or rejection of particular words and usages, but the changing is as drops of water on the stone of fixed grammatical form. Ishi's California must indeed have been an old and long-settled land.

Remains of Dawn Man or of some Dawn-like man, his bones or his stones, are proclaimed from time to time as having been found on the Pacific slope, but if Dawn Man or any of his near relations once lived in California, they have yet to be rediscovered. California's first people so far as is presently known were American Indians, ancestors of today's Indians and in no significant way different from them. And they have been in California a long time; by our standards of mobility and compared with our brief history, immemorably long.

The Yana have probably been in northern California for three or four thousand years. There are those who would double this figure, but in the present state of knowledge three thousand years as a minimum is a tentative, conservative figure arrived at, surprisingly, by way of a recently accepted branch of language study known as glottochronology. Put simply, glottochronology is a study of the rate at which the meaning of words changes, and the inferences to be drawn from such changes. It began with analyses of old and documented languages such as Sanskrit, Anglo-Saxon, or Chinese, comparing the old language in each case with its living descendants, to find the rate of change from cognate to new terms of the same basic meaning. Rates of change studied thus far vary little one from another, and their average, used as the norm of change, is applied to comparisons of pairs of other related languages to find the time which has elapsed

since their separation or first differentiation. A technique for learning the history of a language thus becomes a technique also for learning something of a people's political or culture history.

Yana belongs to the Hokan superfamily, one of the six superfamilies of North America. The glottochronology of Hokan confirms and sharpens other evidence that Hokan-speaking people were old in California. Apparently Ishi's ancestors were occupying wide stretches of the upper Sacramento Valley and its tributaries at a time when there was a single Hokan language. At some time, three or four thousand years ago, this single language fragmented into ten or a dozen separate languages within the same geographical territory and amongst the original speakers of Hokan.

There is no evidence of other people having disputed the territory and its occupation with the ancestral Hokans; it is to be presumed that they lived freely in the open valley, going up into the hills, which to Ishi were a year-round home, only seasonally in the course of following the deer from valley to hills to mountains. There must have been a wide dispersal of Hokan-speakers as part of the drama of change which resulted in the appearance of many new languages within the old Hokan mold. This may well have been the time of the greatest creative florescence of the Yana and other Hokan peoples.

After two or three thousand years, "barbarians" from outside, Wintun or others, who were by then stronger and more numerous than the older population, engaged in one of their own thrusts of history making, invaded Yana country, occupied the richer parts of it, and pushed the smaller, older population back into the hills.

We turn now to archaeology to decipher a curiously half-lit corroboration of this early Yana history. Paynes Cave on Antelope Creek and Kingsley Cave on Mill Creek, both in Ishi's own country, and some smaller village and cemetery sites closeby have been excavated and their bones and tools studied. Charred wood, bone, and other substances from these presumably old and undisturbed sites have been tested and assigned absolute as well as relative dates, within one or two hundred years of exactness,

by measuring their carbon fourteen content against that of recent, similar material. This is a satisfactory dating technique, over long periods, because carbon fourteen is an unstable compound which decomposes at the rate of 50 per cent in fifty-five hundred years. This dating is supplemented by a comparison of styles and any changes in styles over time. Together, the two lines of evidence, which in this case converge reasonably, suggest that the Yana territory of Ishi's lifetime and of the gold rush era had been occupied only occasionally a thousand years ago, but continuously since then. In other words, it would seem to have been not much more than a millennium ago that the Yana surrendered their valley holdings to become truly and wholly a hill people.

But we must leave scientific measurement and historical reconstruction to its specialists, and move on, closer to Ishi's time, realizing meanwhile that it is the scientist and the historian who remind us that the pace of the ancient world was no doubt pedestrian as compared with the modern world with its lightning changes, but that wherever there is life there is change. History was being made by Ishi's ancestors and their enemies as surely as it is today: languages came into being and spread and shrank and died; peoples migrated and made a way of life which was dominant and which then receded. The telescopic view into the old world cannot be made sharp, except perhaps when we hear a momentary echo of old Hokan in Ishi's recorded voice and Yahi speech, or when we hold in our hands an "old-fashioned" stone knife whose style was abandoned for something "new" a thousand years ago. The focus may be fuzzy; it is at least a look at a world in flux and motion, never wholly static; contoured and stereoscopic, never flat; even as our own moving, changing world.

What, then, of the Digger Indians who are supposed to have been the aborigines of California, to have spoken a guttural language, and to have managed barely to maintain a miserable existence by eating the roots which they dug from the unfriendly land with that most generic of tools, the wooden digging stick? Alas, the Diggers are a frontier legend, like the Siwash Indians of the

Northwest, Siwash being a blanket term growing out of a mishearing of the word *sauvage*, the French trappers' designation for Indian. Nor was there a Digger language amongst all the babel of tongues.

There is another frontier legend which dies hard: that the hills and streams and valleys of California yielded a grudging and sorry living to their native sons and daughters. The Spaniards and Mexicans did not so misunderstand the golden land, in part because they were never wholly detached from the soil in thinking or occupation, and in part because California is not unlike much of Mexico and Spain. The Forty-niners, veteran contenders against mountains, high plains, and deserts, were without interest in the land as such, which appeared to them inhospitable, dry, barren. In the course of their continental trek, they had come to look upon food not as something to be grown or harvested, but as meat to be shot on the hoof, and as flour, sugar, coffee, and beans to be carried as part of one's pack and replaced in "Frisco" or Sacramento or at some other urban center.

The legend may have been prolonged in defiance of known fact through inertia, legends easily becoming habits which are hard to break, and through its usefulness in salving a not quite good conscience over the taking of land and lives. If the land was lean and the lives miserable then the wrong done was so much the less, or no wrong at all.

The term Digger continued to be used to refer to Indians other than those one knew. I have heard my grandmother, who came to Amador County to teach school in the early 1850's, and became a rancher's wife there, speak affectionately and correctly of her Miwok Indian neighbors, and disapprovingly of the strange Digger Indians who from time to time used to wander in from a distance asking for work or perhaps only for food. Digger remains to this day a term of derogation, like "nigger."

Digger also defines however crudely and inadequately, one occupation of California Indians which the Forty-niners must have seen over and over again. The Indians did no planting, being

hunters, fishermen, gatherers, and harvesters of grains and seeds and fruits and roots which grew wild in their natural habitat and uncultivated state—diggers if you will. The digging stick was used, customarily in the hands of women who were forever going off into the hills or meadows for maidenhair and sword ferns, for squaw grass and pine root, for redbud and hazel, and for all the stems and plants and grasses which they wanted for making baskets. And the digging stick, as will be seen, helped them in season to get some of the fresh vegetables of which they were fond. Only the aberrant Mohaves and Yumas, who live on the Colorado River, have always been agriculturists of sorts. That is, they planted many of their food stuffs—not like the hard-working and true farmers of the Southwest: the Hopi, Zuni, and Rio Grande pueblo Indians—but like the people of ancient Egypt, by dropping the seeds of corn and beans and squash into the red ooze exposed by the seasonal flooding and retreat of the river, and allowing the crops to grow under the blazing sun with a minimum of attention from the planters. But the Colorado River Indians were different also—and fortunate—in having no Fortyniners.

We have seen that the varied land once supported separate little nations, rather like Greek city states at least in size, in enclaves of inland valley or rough hill-country or woods or desert or along streams or beside the sea. And we have seen that these village states set themselves off further one from another by a growth of language barrier. The peoples differed in physical type, some being broad and stocky with round faces, some slim and tall with high-bridged noses, but none resembled the Plains or woodland Indians. Some lived better than others, and with more leisure; some buried their dead while others practiced cremation. Customs and beliefs varied from tribelet to tribelet, but nonetheless underlying their differences was a certain characteristic “set,” a profile of a life which, broadly speaking, fits all of them and fits no Indians east of the Sierra Nevada. It was anciently a different world, from the crest of the Sierra westward to the

Pacific Ocean, as indeed it continues in oddly telling ways to be different today.

In some part, larger or smaller depending upon how one weighs it, the differences ancient and modern are born of the climate which is Mediterranean and subtropical. For the Indians this meant that during many months of each year outdoor living with only the lightest of shelters was comfortable, and that in most seasons they wore no clothes at all, a little front apron of bark and the ubiquitous brimless round basketry hat satisfying the requirements of modesty for a woman, while a man wore nothing at all except perhaps a deerskin breechclout. The buckskin shirt and leggings to be found to the east were not needed here and did not exist; an ample apron or skirt of buckskin for the women and grass or buckskin sandals with a wildcat or rabbit or feather cloak thrown over the shoulders when it was cold did very well for both men and women and completed their wardrobes except for beads and other ornaments, and ritual and dance regalia.

This was the area where, for whatever reason, basketry design was most elaborated, and the possibilities of baskets as utensils were most exploited to the almost total neglect of wood and pottery. Baskets were used for carrying and for storing all sorts of food and materials; they were the only cooking utensils; and they were the trays, plates, bowls, and mugs of dining. The creative impulse found expression most usually in basketry; also in the intricate fashioning of feather capes and headdresses; and in occasional beautifully wrought obsidian knives made from a single obsidian flake. These knives, two, three, or four feet long and correspondingly heavy, were held to be sacred and reserved for ceremonial use.

The great staple food of the California Indian was acorn flour made into mush or bread. The acorn, of which some half dozen or more edible varieties were recognized, meant to Indians what rice means to Cantonese Chinese, or maize to Mexicans. After acorns came salmon, fresh or dried and in large variety; and after