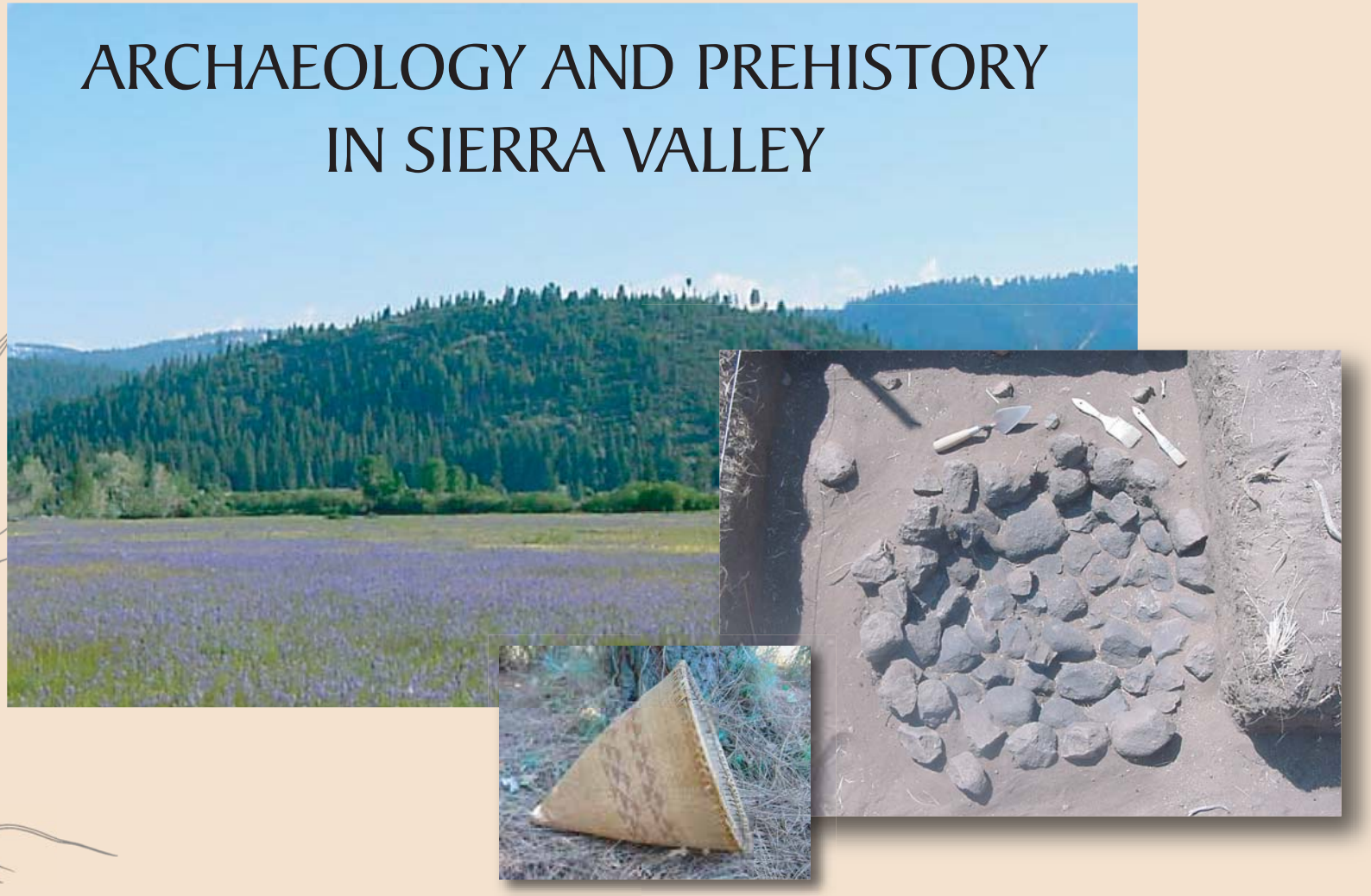
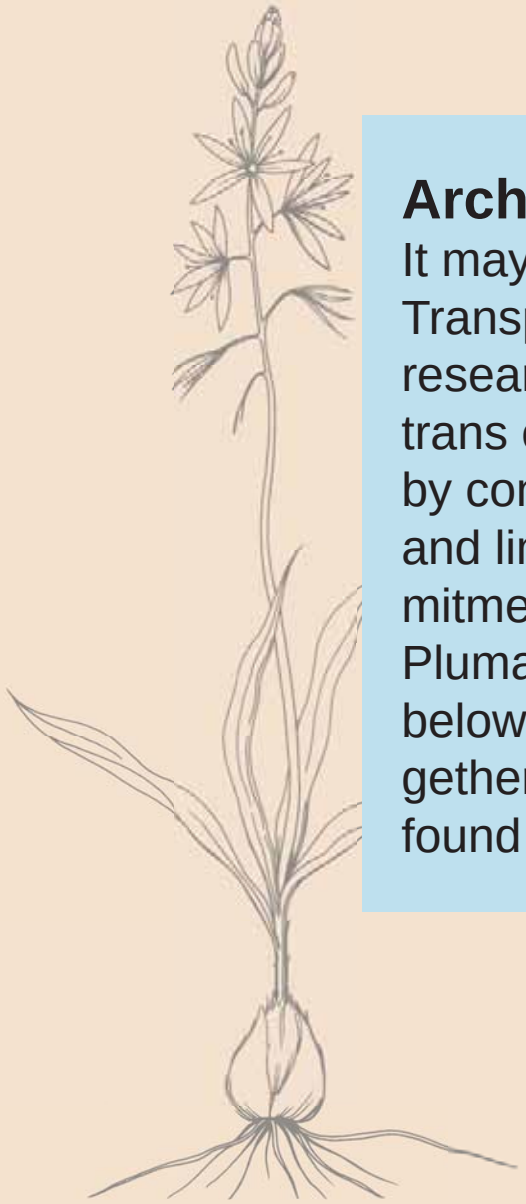
STEP BACK IN TIME!

ARCHAEOLOGY AND PREHISTORY IN SIERRA VALLEY

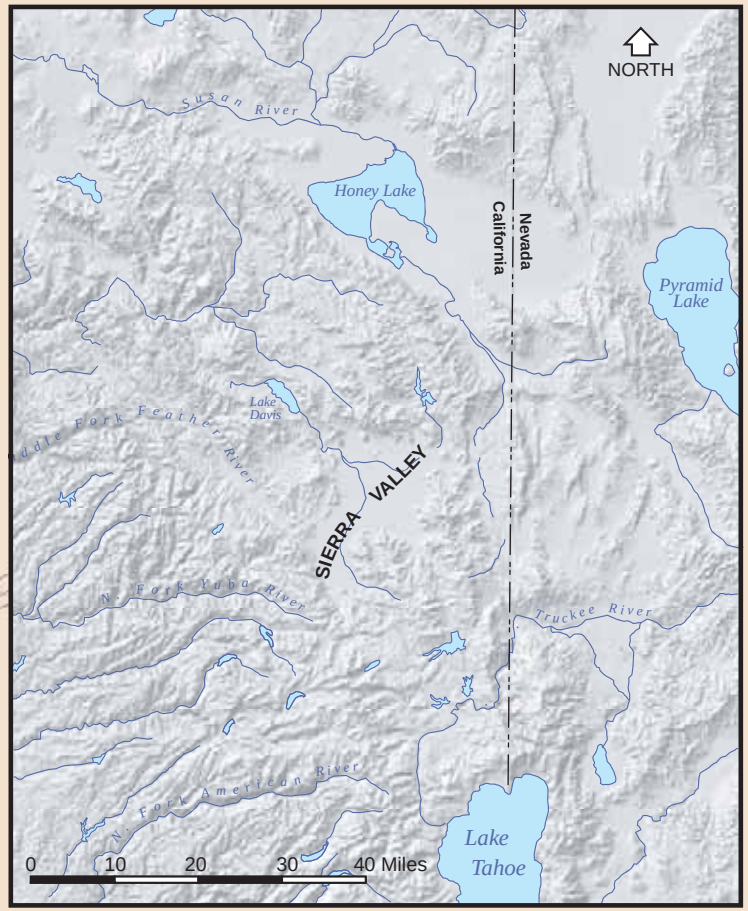




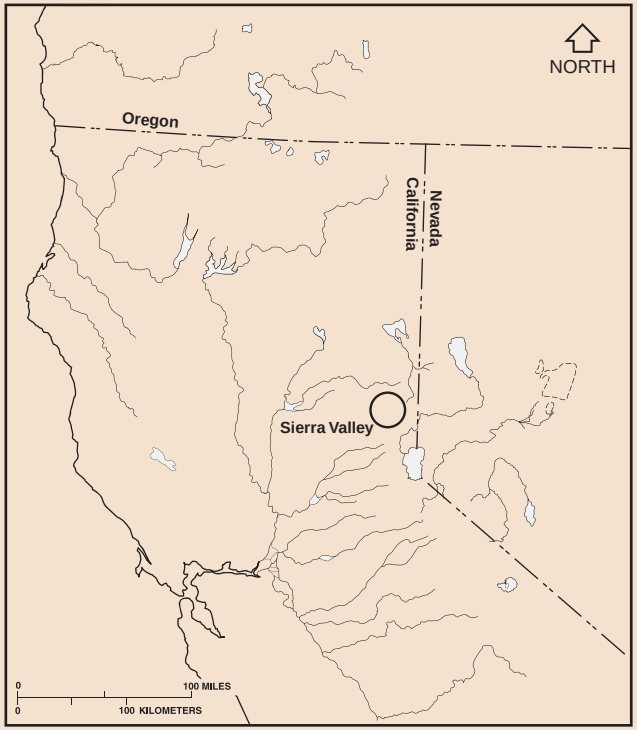
Archaeology and Caltrans

It may come as a surprise to many people, but the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is one of the largest sponsors of archaeological research in California. As part of their environmental planning process, Caltrans considers the effects of their projects on sensitive cultural resources by conducting scientific studies, consulting with the local tribal community, and limiting impacts from highway construction. One example of this commitment was the archaeological study of four sites in Sierra Valley, eastern Plumas County, between 1999 and 2002. As a result of the study, described below, Caltrans and the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California worked together to preserve one of the most important archaeological sites ever found in northern California.

Caltrans



Sierra Valley is located in eastern Plumas County about 30 miles north of Lake Tahoe and about 8 miles from the California/Nevada state line.



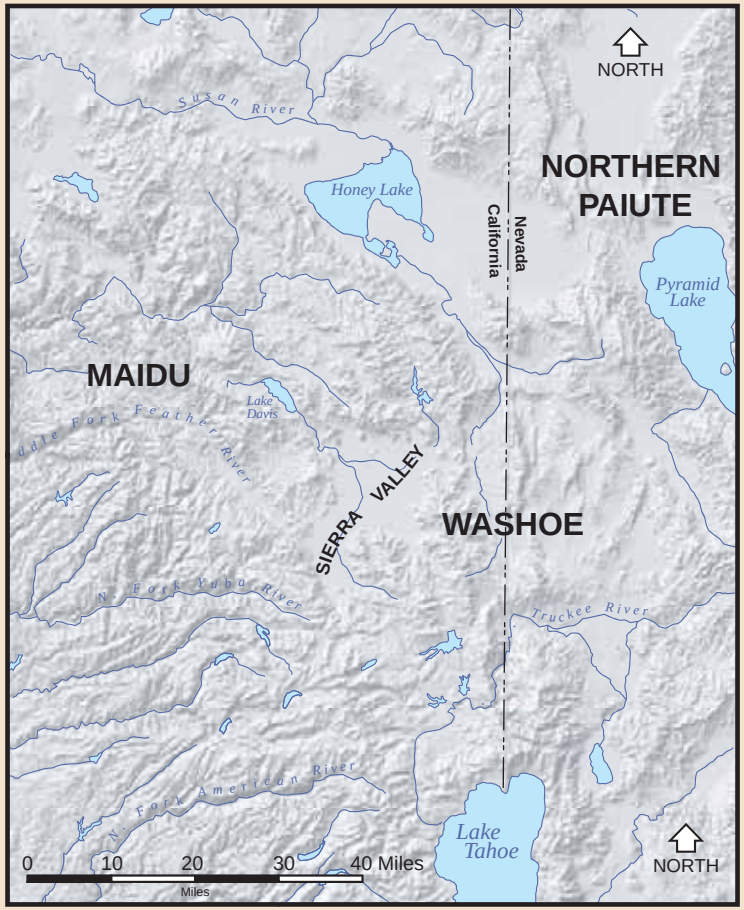
EXCAVATIONS IN SIERRA VALLEY

Caltrans sponsored archaeological research along State Route 70 in Sierra Valley as part of a program to improve that roadway. Archaeologists from Far Western Anthropological Research Group in Davis, California, in cooperation with the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, carried out surveys and excavations at four ancient Native American encampments that lay partially within the Caltrans right-of-way. While all four sites added much to our understanding of the distant past, one in particular would prove to be quite remarkable.

HISTORY OF THE AREA

State Route 70 runs along the northern rim of Sierra Valley and connects the conifer forests of the Sierra and Cascade ranges with the Great Basin via Beckwourth Pass – the lowest pass over the mountains, at 5,221 feet. The modern highway is built on the route of the Beckwourth (or Beckwith) Trail, named for a freed Virginia slave named James Beckwourth, who may have been following an even earlier trail made by native people. The Beckwourth Trail split from the Truckee Route of the California Trail at the confluence of the Truckee River and Steamboat Creek near modern-day Reno, headed north along today's Highway 395, and turned west at Hallelujah Junction to cross over the pass and continue on into Sierra Valley. Its ultimate destination was the town of Quincy and the northern California gold mines.

Long before the gold miners and settlers came to Sierra Valley, however, native people of the Washoe and Maidu tribes hunted deer and collected plants there. The Washoe traveled from the east, from their villages at Reno and Lake Tahoe. The Maidu came from the west, from places near Quincy and Greenville. Sometimes both groups were in the valley at the same time—not always with pleasant results. The modern Washoe and Maidu still tell stories about their clashes with each other, and both groups claim Sierra Valley as part of their ancestral territory.



Traditional Native Territories

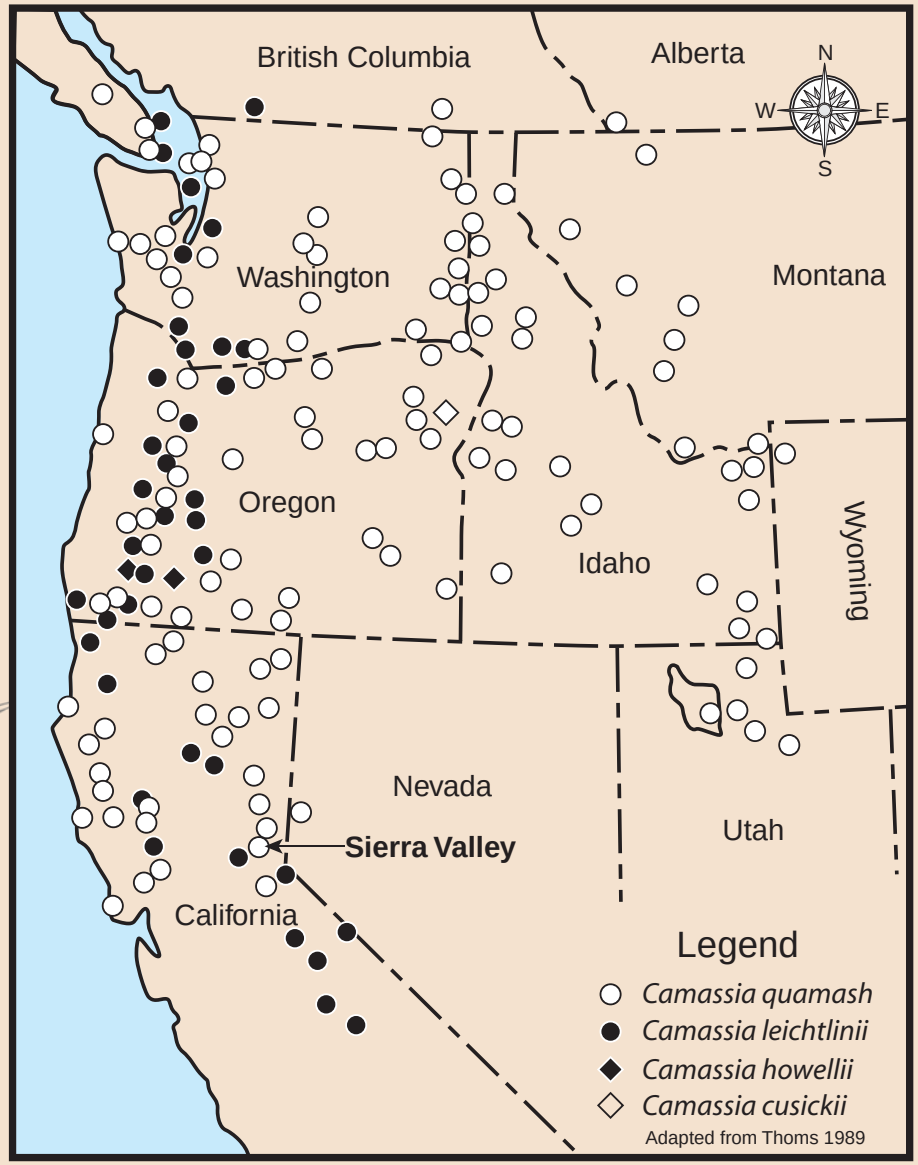
Camas root
Camassia

An important food for many Indian tribes

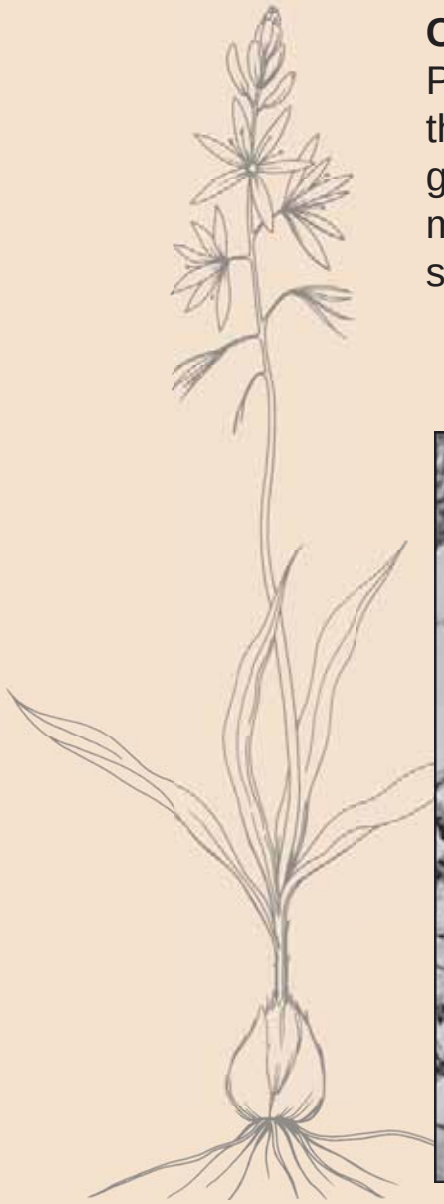
THE ARCHAEOLOGY

Native people have lived in Sierra Valley for at least 5,000 years, attracted by the abundant fresh water and the waterfowl, deer, fish, and other wildlife that were also drawn to the valley. Along with this wildlife, the unique environment supports a variety of plants whose seeds or roots are edible and nutritious. The abundant water also allows a wide variety of food and medicine plants to grow here. The Washoe word for the Beckwourth area — *doʔ ċaʔ ḳilaʔ am* — translates as "medicine-root place."

There is still much we do not know about those earliest inhabitants of Sierra Valley, but we do know that much of the world was hit by severe droughts between about 500 and 1,000 years ago. It was at about this time that the cliff dwellers in the Southwest abandoned their homes, and the great Maya cities in southern Mexico and Guatemala were in decline. At the same time, human populations were larger than ever. This meant that more people had to compete for less food. One way they adapted was to rely more on foods they hadn't really focused on before. In Sierra Valley, that food was camas (also spelled quamash), *Brodiaea*, and other roots and bulbs. Camas root (Latin name *Camassia*) was a staple for many Indian tribes in the Northwest - it was even one of the foods offered to Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition. Only recently have we discovered archaeological evidence that the local tribes used it also.

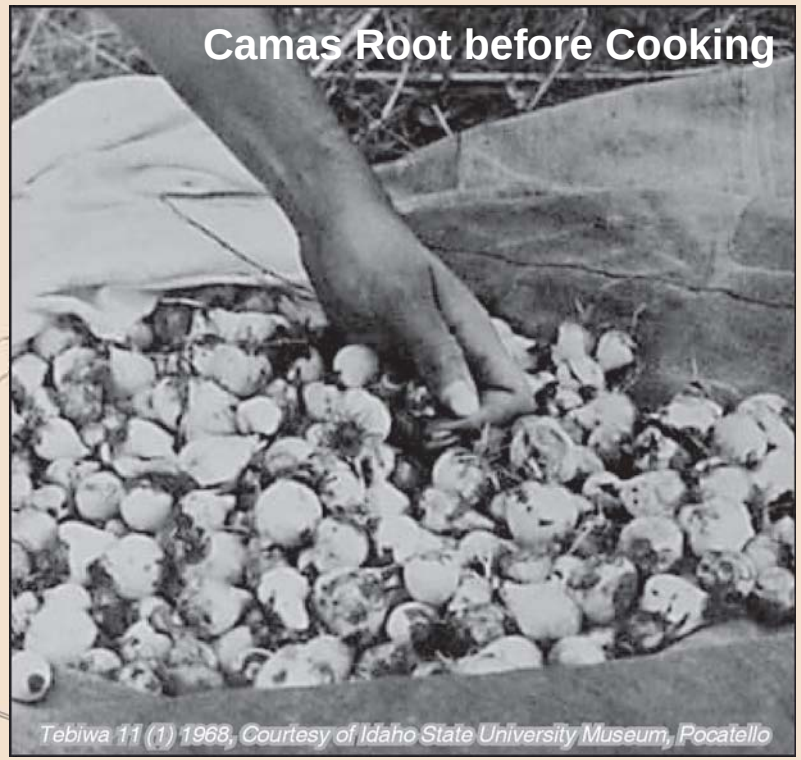


Distribution of Camas in California and the Northwest



CAMAS PROCESSING

Plant bulbs and roots (geophytes) require more time and energy to collect and process than seeds, nuts, or acorns. While those foods ripen every year, are relatively easy to gather, and can be eaten with little or no processing, geophytes are slow to mature and must be dug up and then roasted or baked. Camas, in particular, must be cooked for several hours or even days to break down the indigestible sugars and make them edible.



"Some of these roots seem to possess very active properties; for after supping on them this evening, we were swelled to such a degree as to be scarcely able to breathe for several hours."

Captain William Clark (Lewis and Clark Expedition)
October 5, 1805

To cook the bulbs, native people dig large pits or “ovens” lined with stones. The archaeological remains of these cooking pits are found throughout the Northwest, especially in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, where native people have collected and processed camas for at least 7,000 years. But no camas ovens had ever been reported from as far south as California – until archaeologists found them in Sierra Valley.

Nez Perce People Preparing a Camas Oven in the 1960s

A NATIVE AMERICAN ROCK "OVEN" - *deʔck umbilɨm.* This example from Sierra Valley is nine feet in diameter.

The archaeologists working in Sierra Valley discovered one of the largest clusters of these cooking features ever found in northern California or western Nevada. The carefully constructed features range from about three feet in diameter to nearly 10 feet – the biggest ones probably were communal ovens used to cook large amounts of bulbs for storage or perhaps for a feast. The cluster of ovens in Sierra Valley dates between about 500 and 1,000 years ago, during the severe droughts that caused so much disruption and conflict in many regions. Archaeologists believe that the many stone-lined hearths and ovens in Sierra Valley are evidence of this change. If you visit Sierra Valley in the spring, you can still see carpets of bright-blue camas (*Camassia quamash*) and *Brodiaea* flowers.

Archaeologists Excavating Native American Rock Ovens in Sierra Valley

The location of the archaeological sites dicussed here cannot be disclosed. This is to assure their protection.

There are many State and Federal laws that have been enacted to preserve Native American cultural practices, and to protect our nation's archaeological sites and the valuable information they contain:

Antiquities Act, 1906
Historic Sites Act, 1935
National Historic Preservation Act, 1966
National Environmental Policy Act, 1969
California Environmental Quality Act, 1970
Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act, 1974
American Indian Religious Freedom Act, 1978
Archaeological Resources Protection Act, 1979
Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990

For more information on the culture and history of the Washoe and Maidu visit their tribal websites at:
http://www.washoetribe.us
http://www.maidu.com

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for the California Department of Transportation, District 2, Redding
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