

Nisenan Heritage Day continues for 7th year at Sierra College

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Roxy Peconom practices grinding acorns during the 2014 Nisenan Heritage Day.

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KNOW AND GO:

What: 7th Annual Nisenan Heritage Day, Return of the Salmon Doctor

When: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday

Where: Sierra College, 250 Sierra College Drive, Grass Valley

Who: Nisenan speakers, artisans, basket weavers, and tribal dancers

Admission: Free admission and parking

Information: Email Shelly Covert, shelly@nevadacityrancheria.org or call 530-570-0846

Representatives of the local Nisenan Native American tribe will hold their seventh annual Nisenan Heritage Day this Saturday at Sierra College in Grass Valley, continuing their quest to educate people about their culture while raising awareness of the issues surrounding the local tribe.

The event, titled "Return of the Salmon Doctor," will feature informational speakers, traditional Native American dancers, and master basket weavers, as well as acorn-grinding demonstrations and a pine nut processing station aimed towards giving children a hands-on experience. Members of the California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project will be on hand to provide Indian tacos, other vendors will provide their wares for sale, and there will be informational booths from the project's sponsors.

"It is our flagship event for the year," Shelly Covert, an event organizer, said. "We're really excited about sharing all of this information in one place. People can come shop and we'll have jewelers and artisans showcasing their work. I hope to keep it all very authentic and very local."

An interpretive sign that has yet to be installed will be highlighted during the event, and features a poem as well as a three-dimensional rendering that South Yuba River Citizens League partnered with to complete.

“It’s been a lot of years in the works, where we truly were invisible in the community. We are starting to see that reflection come back. It’s important to get their knowledge into the curriculum to let people know.” Shelly Covert

A 6-foot-tall digital kiosk that the Nevada County library partnered with the Nevada City Rancheria to create, will also be on display at the event.

The kiosk, which has been around for about a year, was designed to be a traveling information center for local schoolchildren to educate themselves on the language, song, basketry, history and territorial boundaries of the Nisenan.

Getting local elders to help with their verbal accounts of tribal boundaries was critical for this effort.

“It is urgent because any second, every piece of it could be gone,” Covert said of the need to record the accounts of aging elders. “If we hadn’t done it right now, it may have been too late.”

Tribal dancers who are direct lineal descendants of the Nisenan’s last traditionally appointed headman, Chief Kelly, will be on hand to showcase their tradition.

“His direct descendants are dancing, and for me that is very magical and special,” Covert said.

SPEAKERS TO DISCUSS NISENAN HISTORY

Speakers at the event include current tribal chairman Richard Johnson, who will be talking about the history of the Nevada City Rancheria, how the rancheria was terminated, and their work throughout the past eight years to get their federal designation back.

Tanis Thorne, who was the head of the Native American Department at UC Irvine, and who has written a book about the Nevada City Rancheria, will also speak and plans to talk about the 1851 California treaties that were hidden from Congress and never ratified.

Other speakers at the event will include Leanne Hinton and Sheri Tatsch, who are linguistics experts who work with endangered languages. Sage LaPena will talk about native plants and ethno-botany. Judith Lowry, a local artist with work on display at the Smithsonian, as well as Tiffany Adams, will speak about the arts and their efforts to bring a Native American club to the Sierra College campus.

“We need a Native American studies class here,” Covert said, who added that Sierra College’s involvement as a third-year sponsor of the event has been an asset in reaching the academic community.

"It is my passion to educate that the Nisenan were their own separate people," Covert said. "It is a responsibility, once people start to see that, that there is a tribe that can self-identify with this place. It's catching fire with the academic community, which really gets me excited."

Covert went on to explain the struggle of the Nisenan.

"It's been a lot of years in the works, where we truly were invisible in the community. We are starting to see that reflection come back. It's important to get their knowledge into the curriculum to let people know," Covert explained. "A lot of the tribe, we still live in fear because we don't have a real place yet, but our momentum seems to be moving forward and it is truly magical to see the self-identity become aware within the tribe."

Part of the reason that self-identity amongst Nisenan has waned over the years includes the incorrect labeling of Nisenan as Maidu.

"Part of the issue is that when looking for local ethnology it is lost in that big mush of that overarching label," Covert said.

"Many of us have been labeled Maidu, before the Maidu designation we were called the Digger," she said, adding that ethnicians and pathologists have been separating distinctly different tribes as they become increasingly involved.

"For me, I heard it from my own grandfather," Covert said. "He said, 'We are not Maidu, we are Nisenan,' which means 'from among us.'"

LOSS OF FEDERAL RECOGNITION

The Nisenan were a federally recognized tribe in 1911 by a Presidential Executive Order signed by Woodrow Wilson, had obtained an allotment of land on Cement Hill in Nevada City in 1887 and lived in the area for thousands of years before that.

In 1964, however, the Nevada City Rancheria, along with the 44 other California rancherias, was terminated by the government. Forty-one of those rancherias were restored, but the Nisenan were one of the three California tribes not to have their land restored and thus their land was sold at auction.

"No other rancheria had ever been denied restoration before, so we were very hopeful," Covert explained of their unsuccessful attempt to have their federal designation restored in court about six months ago.

"Because we are a terminated tribe, we have to go (to) legislation or litigation to be restored," Covert explained.

"We tried litigation, so now legislation is the only path."