California Commemorates Native Inhabitants
State Officials Install Revised Plaque Acknowledging Valley's Original Tribes

By MICHELLE LOCKE
.c The Associated Press

COVELO, Calif. - For decades, the state landmark declaring that California's majestic Round Valley was discovered by white settlers in 1854 was like salt on a wound to valley tribes.

Indians, after all, had lived in the region for centuries before settlers showed up. Also missing from the plaque was any reference to the tide of Indian deaths and cultural destruction unleashed by the "discovery."

This year, state officials installed a revised plaque acknowledging the valley's original inhabitants and explaining what happened to them.

To some, it was a signal victory in a long-running campaign to set the record straight on California's still largely secret history - the forces, both accidental and deliberate, that swept away all but a handful of the state's native inhabitants.

"The way I feel is the way the East Berliners felt when the wall started getting knocked down," said Round Valley tribal council member Ernie Merrifield. "It's a sense of new freedom and the key word is truth."

Driven from the land that sustained them, decimated by unfamiliar diseases, California Indians were hunted to near-extinction during the Gold Rush. Estimated in 1769 at 300,000, only 15,000 remained by the 1900 census. Almost 95 percent of the original population had vanished.

"Californians are unaware, generally, that our forebears committed themselves to the literal extermination of the California Indian people," says James J. Rawls of Diablo Valley College, who has written several books about California history.

Confronting that past isn't easy.

Elsewhere in the West, the question of historical perspective has been tackled. In Montana, the historic battle where the 7th Cavalry was defeated was characterized as Custer's Last Stand and portrayed for decades as the site of a tragic U.S. loss rather than a resounding Indian victory.

The battlefield was named for Lt. Col. George Custer, and the only memorial was to the men who fought and died with him. But after years of effort by American Indians, the site was renamed the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, and construction has begun on an Indian memorial.

It took Round Valley tribes four decades to get the wording on their plaque changed; clashes over historic symbols elsewhere have also led to protracted battles.

A statue of early San Jose Mayor Thomas Fallon has been stowed in an Oakland warehouse for more than a decade after protests from Mexican-Americans that it represented American imperialism. The Fallon statue is expected to be installed in San Jose this summer now that other new monuments are in place, recognizing the area's Latino, Spanish and Indian leaders.

In San Francisco, statues of Juan Bautista de Anza, who led the first group of settlers from Mexico to San Francisco, and King Carlos III, who supported the United States during the Revolutionary War, sit in a warehouse, banished from public display because of controversy over their association with colonialism.

A compromise was reached on a third San Francisco statue, the Pioneer Monument, which stands near the main library.

The century-old statue raised objections in the 1990s because it portrays an Indian in a subservient position to a Spanish missionary and cowboy.

The Catholic church and the Spanish consul objected to initial efforts to write a plaque explaining the history of American Indians, complaining it singled them out unfairly to blame for the Indians' demise. The plaque was eventually reworded to detail other factors as well.

The compromise didn't satisfy everyone; some American Indians wanted the statue mothballed.

Rawls, who worked on the plaque wording, thinks old symbols should be put in accurate context, but not swept away entirely.

"We all know if we're ignorant of the past, we're condemned to repeat it. We homo sapiens need to be reminded of our capacity for evil just as we need to be reminded of our capacity for good."

In Round Valley, a breathtaking bowl of fir-lined mountains about 150 miles north of San Francisco, the original plaque was hated by reservation residents from the day it went up in 1959.

People threw paint at it, wrote "LIES" across it and even shot bullets at it.

But until recently, no one expected to change it.

"It's just like the attitude was, 'You can't fight City Hall,'" said Merrifield.

Two years ago, the state Office of Historic Preservation began holding community

meetings and reviewing proposals for new language.

Descendants of the original settlers liked the plaque the way it was. Indians and other whites, including some with family histories of being run out of the valley by some of the original pioneers, wanted it changed.

There were some state-brokered compromises. Indians wanted "genocide," to reflect how their numbers were ravaged by disease, malnutrition and attacks. "The state mellowed that out and toned it down to 'conflict,'" said Merrifield.

The final wording acknowledges the Yuki Indians as the original inhabitants of the valley and points out that after conflict with European settlers in the 1850s, the region was declared a reservation and a number of other tribes were forced onto the land. In 1864, the government reduced reservation land by four-fifths.

On a sunny afternoon this spring, about 200 people gathered on Inspiration Point under a bright blue sky to dedicate the new marker.

"Forgiving is not forgetting," Round Valley tribe member Cora Lee Simmons said. "It's just letting go of the hurt."