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Round Valley Indians around 1858. Photo from *Genocide and Vendetta*

The Dark Legacy of Nome Cult

by Jeff Elliott

On a fine morning in mid-May, 1854, Frank Asbil found his destiny.

A month earlier he had left his home in Bodega, searching for a passage to connect the riverboat town of Petaluma to Weaverville. Such a trail would literally be worth gold; from there, supplies could be shipped to California's gold mines. Instead, he found himself gazing down upon the valley of the Ukumno'm people, the traditional winter home for about 11,000 Yuki. A Mendocino County history tells what happened next: "The party saddled their horses and rode over into the valley and had a fight with the Indians, killing about forty of them in their camp."

And so America introduced itself to Round Valley.

Asbil abandoned his quest and became a Round Valley rancher, soon followed by other whites. As in hundreds of similar regions, the invaders settled into a low-key guerilla war with Native people. But less than a year later, events far away in the nation's capitol would change the Valley forever.

California, it seems, urgently needed a Northern California Indian reservation. Whites were pouring into the Bay Area and redwood countryside, but the nearest reservation was far away in the upper Sacramento Valley. "This leaves out and entirely unprovided for the entire coast from the bay of San Francisco to the country of the Klamath, where there are a large number of Indians scattered over a vast extent of country which is now rapidly settling," California's superintendent of Indian affairs wrote in 1855.

California's first governor called for a "war of extinction" against the Indians A new reservation was clearly essential. Not that other solutions hadn't been tried; in his inaugural address to the legislature, California's first governor called for a "war of extinction" against the Indians, and said their complete destruction was "the inevitable destiny of the Race." In that same year of 1850, the state budgeted over a million dollars to reimburse Indian-hating whites who wanted to organize "private military forays."

But wholesale genocide isn't so easy. Searching for a place to warehouse Northern California Indians, Indian agent Simmon P. Storms visited Round Valley. "I think that in the valley and in the mountains around are at least 5,000 Indians and that the valley can be made to support 20,000 or more," Storms wrote. "It is the best place for Indians I ever saw. I did not see a sick Indian or one affected with the venereal..."

Leaving the area, Storms encountered several parties of whites heading for the valley to homestead. No matter, wrote Storm; once the reservation is established, "they will probably go elsewhere." The U.S. Government officially claimed a portion of the valley in June, 1856, naming the reservation "[Nome Cult](#)."

The reservation became a convenient place to dump Natives when whites ran out of bullets or the nerve to murder. One administrator later wrote: "...in 1856, the first expedition by the whites against the Indians was made, and has continued ever since...there were so many of these expeditions that I cannot recollect the number; the result was that we would kill on an average, 50 or 60 Indians on a trip and take some prisoners, which we always took to the reserve..."

It was legal to arrest native people "on the complaint of any resident citizen" A great exodus began as the people were driven out of their homelands, reaching at least as far south as Sonoma County. Starting around 1857, horse-riding whites with bullwhips -- either local militia or vigilantes, there being at the time only a breath of difference between the two -- forced entire villages to walk to Nome Cult, a torturous passage remembered as "The Death March." Pomo elder Grant Smith recalls his grandmother's tale: "They herded them like cattle, like animals. Old people couldn't make it, couldn't keep up and died on the road. [When I was a boy] they talked about it, they would talk about what happened on the road and they would cry, go all to pieces. It was misery, it was hardship. It was death."

The Death March is one of those whispered family tales of horror, little spoken of. One account was told to a Pomo woman by her great-grandfather: an old woman unable to keep the pace begged to be buried there on the trailside, her favorite basket at her side. Another record was passed on by an elder, who remembered that mothers killed their own babies rather than see them die a slow death on the March.

But Sonoma State University professor Ed Castillo thinks some of the people came voluntarily. They saw the reservation as a refugee camp, a place where they could be safe from the increasing threat of white violence by vigilantes.

"Vigilante groups drove Indians out of their communities," says Castillo. "It was absolute chaos in California; it wasn't until the end of the Civil War that authorities regained control. It's one thing for the army to drive them out, but another when local people get together to do it. There is no evidence whatsoever that the army drove them to these reservations."

Also significant is an 1850 California law that made it legal to arrest native people "on the complaint of any resident citizen" and hired out to the top bidder for four months. Later amendments authorized indenturing the children of the people until they were 25 years old. These laws were not revoked until 1867.

But at Round Valley, conditions were even worse than at home. They competed not with the whites for food, but with animals. Rationed only six ears of corn daily, they tried using traditional gathering methods, but were often chased off land now owned by whites. In the Round Valley history "Genocide and Vendetta," an eyewitness account appears: "I saw a man driving some squaws from a clover field inside the reservation; they were picking clover or digging roots; he said he would be damned if he would allow them to [do this], as he wanted it for hay."

Other horrors threatened. There were few white women in the region, and many young Native women were raped. Two years after the reservation was established, twenty percent of the people were found to have venereal disease. Also common was kidnapping of their children who were highly esteemed as house-servants, regularly fetching \$50 for a child who could cook, and up to \$100 for a "likely young girl." The reservation provided white slave-traders with a ready supply of merchandise.

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Throughout the next years, the situation festered. Many Natives fled the reservation preferring to live in the wild, even at the risk of being hunted like animals. New arrivals took their place, as more people were displaced from their own villages by ever-advancing whites.

Conflict again flared in 1870, when President Grant proposed the entire valley be dedicated as a reservation. Angry whites protested by tearing down the reservation fences so that their cattle and pigs would destroy Indian crops. Although Congress expanded the reservation to more than 100,000 acres, the Indians saw little benefit. Restricted to 5,000 acres in the undesirable northern end of the valley, most of their land was illegally occupied by white ranchers.

This same period saw renewed attempts to "civilize the savages." Under the leadership of Methodist minister John L. Burchard, the reservation became like a military post, with Natives required to obtain signed passes to leave. Any Indian found off the reservation could be forcibly returned. This kept them under watchful missionary eyes and unable to contact family members keeping the traditional ways.

In the winter of 1874-75, a Congressman visited the reservation and reported the conditions dismal. He accused Burchard of whipping and starving the Natives, now more than 60 percent of them suffering from Advanced Syphilis.

Through the end of the century, outrages continued. Rape and murder were not uncommon. Wealthy cattlemen grazed their herds on Indian land without permission or payment; despite decades of federal attempts to reclaim the land, the last trespasser wasn't evicted until 1909.

In 1937, the valley was **Columbia University** student Amelia Susman visited in 1937 and wrote of the conditions there. The turn-of-the-century Dawes Act promised reservation land would be divided up and given to individual Indians, but this, too, worked against the Native people. Lots were only ten acres (five acres for a married woman) -- too small for anything but truck farming, which required equipment, credit, and lots of market savvy. Susman found many of the Indians leasing their land to whites. But as always, there was a Catch-22 for the Indians: the whites set the price of the rent.

as segregated as the Deep South

She also found the valley as segregated as the Deep South. Reporting that whites made no secret of their claims to superiority, they told her racist tales of drunken Indians involved in "cutting scrapes." There was no mingling of the two cultures; like in the South, whites only spoke well of Indians when they were servants.

Today you can still visit Inspiration Point, shortly beyond the tiny village of Dos Rios. From this mountain pass, Frank Asbil is believed to have first gazed upon the peaceful valley. To commemorate this event, the state of California has placed a bronze plaque. That plaque is pocked with bullet holes. A

fitting commentary on all that followed, turning so much paradise into so much hell.

Much of this background is drawn from **Genocide and Vendetta**, an excellent history of Round Valley. We recommend these [books](#) for further reading.

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