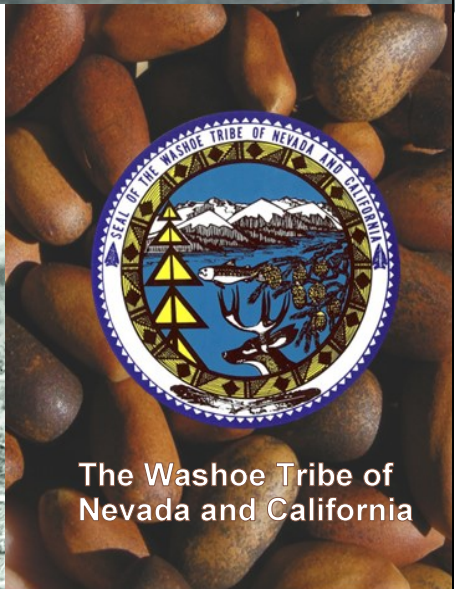


# WA SHE SHU: “The Washoe People” Past and Present



The Washoe Tribe of  
Nevada and California

## Hunga mi' heshi! (Hello!)

Thank you for your interest in the Washoe Tribe.

People who live or travel within Washoe ancestral territory know little to nothing about the past and present of the people and the land. We feel that it is vitally important for all residents and visitors to understand the depth of Washoe history as well as the current status of our sovereign tribal nation. This knowledge will help to form a more respectful and complete understanding of Lake Tahoe and the area surrounding it. The Washoe request that you assist in preserving this environment to benefit future generations.

This booklet summarizes historical and current information about the tribe. We hope that it serves as an interesting, informative, and useful welcome to our ancestral territory.

Washiw is the original name with various other spellings and the name means "the people".

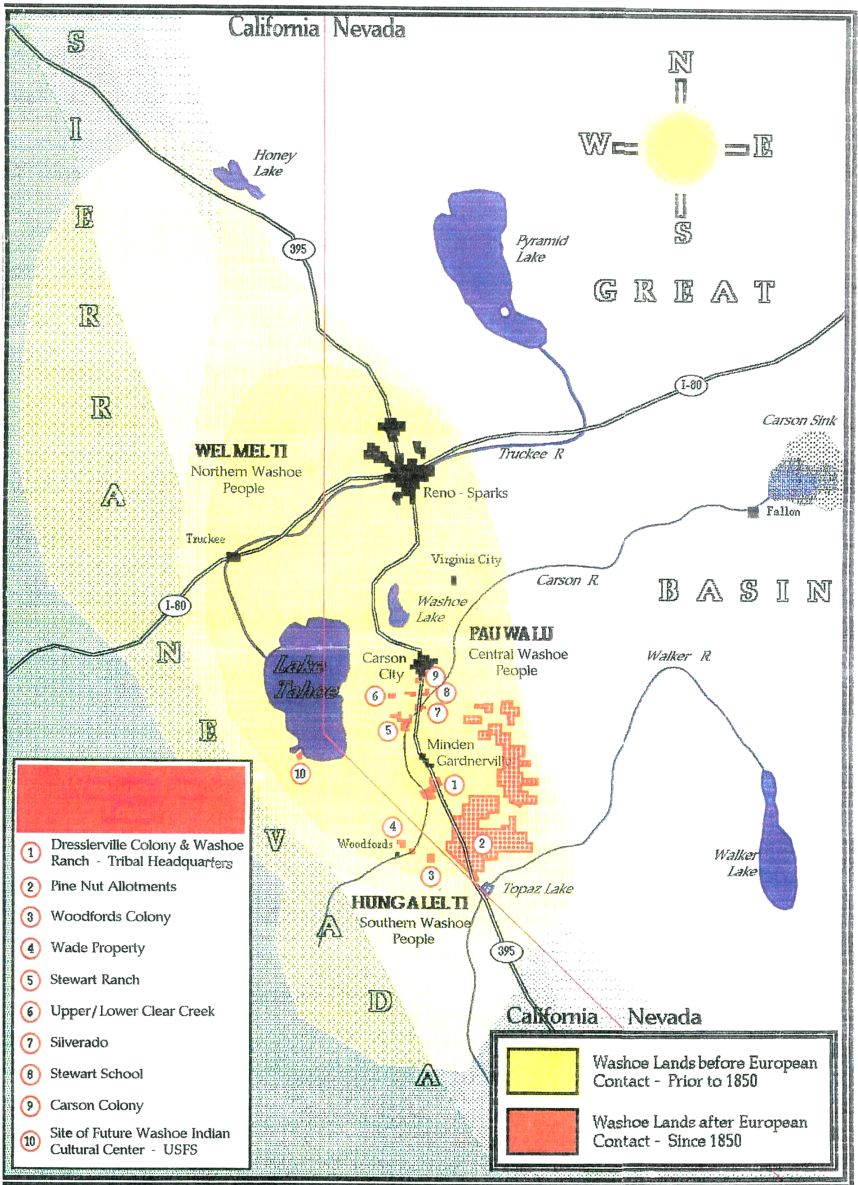
Sincerely,  
Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California



**Cover Images:** Top– De ek Wadapush "Cave Rock"  
Bottom Left– Young Washoe boy with rabbit skin blanket and eagle feather headdress. Bottom Right- Piñon Pine nuts, with the Official Seal of the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California. mage to the Left: Eagle feather  
**Borders:** Black, red, yellow, and white have symbolic meaning to the Washoe.

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# WASHOE LANDS

Present And Pre-European Contact Lands Of The Washoe Indian Tribe Of Nevada And California

## **DIT' EH HU (THE TERRITORY)**

***“The Maker of All Things was counting out seeds that were to become the different tribes. He counted them out on a big winnowing tray in equal numbers. West Wind, the mischievous wind, watched until the Maker had divided the seeds into equal piles on the basket. Then he blew a gust of wind that scattered the seeds to east. Most of the seeds that were to have been the Washoe people were blown away. That is why the Washoe are fewer in number than other tribes.” As retold by Jo Ann Nevers; Tribal Elder***

The Washoe are the original inhabitants of Da ow aga (Lake Tahoe) and all the lands surrounding it. Tahoe is a mispronunciation of *Da ow*, meaning “lake”. Washoe ancestral territory consists of a nuclear area with Lake Tahoe at its heart, and a peripheral area that was frequently shared with neighboring tribes. The Paiute and Shoshone live to the east and the Maidu and Miwok to the west. The nucleus of the ancestral territory is bordered on the west by the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the east by the Pine Nut and Virginia ranges, and stretch north to Honey Lake and south to Sonora Pass. The territory takes part of two very distinct ecosystems: the western arid Great Basin region of Nevada, and the forested Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. The variability in climate, geography, and altitude within the territory allowed it to provide a great diversity of foods and other materials essential to life. “As the traditions explain, the Washoe did not travel to this area from another place. They were here in the beginning and have always lived here... Each cave, stream, lake or prominent geographical feature is named and has stories associated to it.” (Nevers, 1976, p. 3)

***“The health of the land and the health of the people are tied together, and what happens to the land also happens to the people. When the land suffers so too are the people.”***  
**- A. Brian Wallace, Former Chairman of the Washoe Tribe**



## **WAGAYAY (THE LANGUAGE)**

*“The language, culture and the people cannot be separated. The language is the identity of the Washoe People.” Steven James, Tribal Elder*

The Washoe language is unique and unrelated to those spoken by any neighboring tribe. For many years linguists believed Washoe was of a language group with only this single representative in the world. After further investigation, the Washoe language is now seen as a distinct branch of the Hokan language group. Speakers of other Hokan languages are widely dispersed in North America, and extreme diversity between each Hokan language suggests many thousands of years in which they developed without contact with each other. Some people believe that the Hokan speakers are the oldest Californian populations and that as other peoples invaded the west coast they were dispersed leaving only isolated groups.

## **WA SHE SHU (THE PEOPLE)**

Washoe, or Washo as most of the people prefer, was derived from Wa she shu. After contact with colonists, changed or altered many things in Washoe history including the tribal name. It is estimated that the traditional Washoe population was more or less 3,000, but it is difficult to know.

To understand the Washoe you need to understand the environment in which they live. Washoe have always been a part of the land and environment, so every aspect of their lives is influenced by the land. The Washoe believe the land, language and people are connected and are intrinsically intertwined.

## **The Family**

Family is the core of the Washoe because these are the people that lived and worked together and relied on each other. In the past, families are recorded as rarely fewer than five individuals and only occasionally exceeding twelve in size.



A group of Washoe eating lunch at Dressler Ranch on their way on foot from Alpine County to Gardnerville, early 1900s.

A family was often a married couple and their children, but there were no distinct rules about how marriages and families should be formed and households were regularly made up of the parents, the couple's siblings and their children, or non-blood related friends. Generally, a family was distinguished by whoever lived together in the *galis dungal* (winter house) during the winter months.

Winter camps were usually composed of four to ten family groups living a short distance from each other in their separate *galis dungal*. These family groups often moved together throughout the year. The Washoe practiced sporadic leadership, so at times each group had an informal leader that was usually known for his or her wisdom, generosity, and truthfulness. He or she may possess special powers to dream of when and where there was a large presence of rabbit, antelope and other game, including the spawning of the fish, and would assume the role of "Rabbit Boss" or "Antelope Boss" to coordinate and advise communal hunts.



## Regional Groups

The Washoe were traditionally divided into three groups, the northerners or *Wel mel ti*, the *Pau wa lu* who lived in the Carson Valley in the east, and the *Hung a lel ti* who lived in the south. These three groups each spoke a slightly different yet distinct variant of the Washoe language. These groups came together throughout the year for special events and gatherings. Individual families, groups, or regional groups, came together at certain times to participate in hunting drives, war, and special ceremonies. During their yearly gathering at Lake Tahoe, each of the three regional groups camped at their family campsites at the lake; the northerners on the north shore, the easterners on the east shore, and so on. A person might switch from the group that they were born into to a group from another side of the lake. There were often cross-group marriages, sometimes even between the Paiute and the California tribes. This said, it was very advantageous that a person continued living in the area where she or he grew up because it took an intimate knowledge of the land to be able to find and harvest all the plant food and medicines, and to be a successful hunter year after year. After moving to a new place, even the best gatherer or hunter would know only as much about the place as a younger more inexperienced person. Gathering and hunting successfully were as much about being familiar with the cycles and patterns in the land as they were about having practiced skills.

## TRADITIONS and SPECIAL POWERS

It is difficult to separate the sacred from the everyday life of the Washoe. The Washoe see every aspect of the environment as sentient beings that are deserving of respect and cooperation if humans are to survive. The Earth, its terrain, its waters, in short all the living and non-living things are considered to be sacred.

**Traditions and beliefs described in the past tense in the following sections are still widely practiced and observed by the Washoe today.**

### **Hunting Traditions**

An animal was never hunted for “sport” and plants were never gathered unless they were going to be used. No parts of the animals were wasted, and enough individuals of a species were always left to reproduce. Before they hunted, the hunters performed a sacred ritual. When they killed an animal, the hunter prayed to the Maker and asked for forgiveness for taking a life. They thanked the Maker before




Washoe petroglyph of a hunter and a bighorn sheep.

they ate, and they showed their appreciation by leaving some food for the Maker. Special celebrations with dance and prayer offerings were held before the first fish was taken from the annual spawning, before the annual “rabbit drives”, and at the time of the pine nut harvests.

### **Healers**

Washoe healers were women or men that had special powers to cure illnesses of the body or mind. They were conduits to the supernatural world. If a person was sick or had feelings like guilt, they could seek help from



healers that would use their powers to ask the Maker and other spirit beings to cure the ailment. Healers used sacred objects such as eagle feathers and cocoon rattles to assist in ceremonies. They accompanied the hunters during communal hunts to provide mystic powers over the prey, and also went along during warfare to provide healing to injured warriors and use powers over the enemy. A healer did not choose or inherit his or her position, but was summoned by a spirit through persistent dreams and eventually cannot ignore their call to power. Sometimes powers were used with malicious intent by a misguided healer, but generally healers were highly regarded in Washoe society.

## **Elders**

Elders in the tribe also had special status and wisdom that they accumulated as they grew older. They were the keepers of the fire, and they taught the Washoe traditions that they had learned from their grandparents. For this reason the old ones were treated with great respect. No one ever passed by an elder without saying something, and during a feast elders are always fed before anyone else.

## **Legend Creatures**

Washoe legends tell of several creatures that have special powers and lived in the Washoe territory. “Water Babies” inhabited all bodies of water, and are very powerful, sometimes causing illness or death to a person, but could also be a good omen. Washoe healers visited the sacred Cave Rock where Water Babies lived, to consult with them, bring offerings of respect, and to renew powers. There was also a man-eating giant that lived in another cave near Cave Rock that preyed on people that were neglecting their duty. There was a giant man-eating bird named *Ong* that nested in the middle of Lake Tahoe. *Ong* was so large and so powerful that his wing beats could bend the trees when he flew near shore.

The legend tells that one day a Washoe man was snatched up by *Ong* and taken to his nest. Luckily, the Washoe was not eaten right away because *Ong* had another person to eat. The Washoe watched the giant bird eat and noticed that it closed its eyes to chew. The Washoe got an



Ong the monster bird of Lake Tahoe. By Richard Servilican

idea. Every time the bird closed its eyes he threw several arrowheads into its open mouth. By nightfall *Ong* was very sick. A storm raged through the night, but by morning the monster was dead. The Washoe plucked out one of its massive feathers and used it as a boat to reach the shore. The Washoe say that *Ong*'s nest remains in Lake Tahoe submerged out of sight.

## Birth

The event of a birth was cause for celebration. The child was welcomed to the Washoe world. Female relatives and female friends attended to the mother. When the baby was born, the parents restrained from eating meat or salt. The family gave gifts to people in the community.

About a month after the birth the family held a “baby feast”. During this ceremony the mother bathed herself and had her child’s hair cut. The child was now placed in a cradleboard where it would rest from now until it was big enough to walk. Washoe infants were fitted with sage brush bark diapers that were softened by rubbing between hands and thrown away when soiled. The approved disciplinary technique for children is described by the Washoe as, “...tell them to behave and speak kindly to them”.

## Death

Any death was very sorrowful and there was a period of mourning after the burial or cremation. If a person died inside a house the family would leave the house or burn it and make a new house in a different place. Female relatives cut their hair to show their grief. All of the person’s belongings were either burned or buried with them. It was said that a rainstorm would come soon after a death and wipe away all the tracks to return everything to the way the Maker intended it to be.


## Marriage

In the past almost all marriages were arranged. Gift exchanges took place and the engagement would last for a year. During this time the parents watched the couple very carefully. Several variations of marriage customs took place.

One account is that after the engagement period was over the parents allowed the couple to live together



Molly Dressler and her child in a Bikus (cradle board). 1900's.



becoming married. Another account is of a custom where the couple danced side by side and a rabbit skin blanket was draped over their shoulders, whereby they became one in marriage. The Washoe traditionally practiced bilateral descent and bilocal residence, meaning that there was no set rule or preference about which of the married couple's family they would live with. Property was passed down through both the mother and the father.

### **Girls' Rite-of-passage**

One of the most important ceremonies was the "girls' dance", the celebration of when a girl became a woman. This ceremony is still practiced today as it has been for thousands of years. Gifts were thrown into the crowd who attended. At the end of four days of ritual, she was recognized as an adult. Feasting took place.

### **Boys' Rite-of-passage**

A boy became a man when he killed his first full-grown buck. From an early age his father, uncles and grandfather taught him the ways of hunting. The hunter is required to follow traditions that insure good hunting and unselfish sharing of the harvest.

### **Intertribal Relations**

Relations with other tribes bordering Washoe territory were mostly about tolerance and mutual understanding. Sometimes events lead to tensions and warfare. It was beneficial to both sides to keep their distance, but they also needed to maintain a relationship to exchange trade goods. Inter marriages with adjoining tribes occurred when relations were good.

## THE FOUR SEASONS

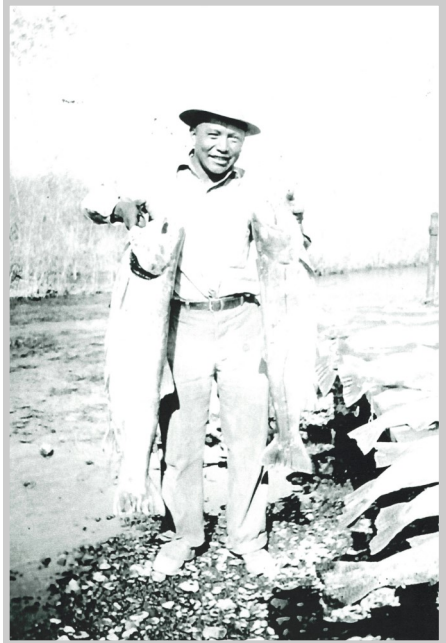
### Am shuk (Spring)

Springtime is the beginning of the yearly cycle. The final winter months leading up to the first warm days were the most difficult. During this time the food supplies from last years harvest were dwindling and the fish, game, and early spring plants were not yet available in large quantities.


For months the Washoe lived off of pine nut flour, seeds, dried meat, and some fresh fish and meat when available. The first much needed vegetable harvests in the early spring were of bulb plants and early grasses. As soon as the weather permitted, the young adults would begin making the trip to the shores of *Da ow aga* (Lake Tahoe).

Eventually, the majority of the tribe would make its way to the sacred lake for a large gathering. At these gatherings people would socialize, play a variety of games, and hold competitions such as races and archery. At the lake there were several different types of fish that could be caught and eaten or dried for later use. Increasing amounts of spring plants were harvested.

In early June, thousands of several different kinds of fish began to swim out of the deep lake in order to spawn. There were so many fish that the people waded into the water with baskets and tossed the fish onto shore to be cleaned, and placed on racks to dry. At the height of the spawning



Teddy James, Truckee River, 1922



fishing continued into the night by torchlight. The fires created just enough light to reflect off the silvery back of the fish so the people could keep working. The runs lasted for about two weeks, in which large amounts of fish were eaten and prepared for use later in the year. Large fresh fish were wrapped in sunflower leaves and placed under the coals and smaller fish were cooked in coarsely woven baskets with coals or hot rocks. Fish were dried or smoked to decrease drying time, add flavor and keep insects away. Dried fish was eaten as a kind of jerky, boiled, or pounded and added to other foods.

Along with the fish, the shores of Lake Tahoe offered several types of berries, wild rhubarb, cat tail seeds, tiger lily seeds, sunflower seeds, wild onions, wild mustard, wild spinach, wild potatoes and sweet potatoes, tule root, wild turnips, wild celery, and countless other edible and medicinal plants. Many plants became ripe for only a week or a few days, so accurate information about the location and habits of plants was necessary to Washoe life. The Washoe understood the growth cycles of plants, the effects of weather on growth, and also had intimate knowledge of soils and specific growing conditions. This type of knowledge was passed from generation to generation through legends and day-to-day experiences.

### **Ci' gah bet (Summer)**

*Gadu* (summer houses) were constructed with materials that were plentiful in the area where they were built. If the house was on a river bank then willow might be used. A *Gadu* was often more of a windbreak than a closed structure.

As summer progressed, snow continued to melt at higher elevations. When the fish runs ended at Lake Tahoe, families dispersed into the mountain country where there were numerous smaller alpine lakes. Here, fish and other game such as mountain quail were bountiful for the time. Fishermen built platforms over the water and used spears

made of willow with bone points, nets or traps made of willow or woven plant fibers, and bone hooks to catch fish at varying depths in the water. Sometimes temporary dams or diversions were built to access hidden fish, and when water was low in the fall, fish could even be caught by hand. The



Gadu (warm weather house).

fish remained abundant year after year because the Washoe were mindful not to deplete the populations or disrupt nature's reproductive cycles. They often caught only the male fish and left most of the females to spawn.

## **O' osh (Fall)**

During the fall mountain whitefish started their spawning and Washoe were able to harvest the fall spawning runs before the deep snows of winter came. Washoe began to focus on the plant harvesting that would feed them through the winter months. At this point the families living in the mountains began to move back down to the valleys east of the Sierras. A few groups headed west to the Sierra foothills to wait for the ripening of the Black Oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) acorns and to trade with the Californian Indians. They sometimes went as far as the Pacific Ocean to collect shells. Some of these families would not return to the east side before the snow, and would either winter alone or join a Miwok village for the season. The families that had descended to the Great Basin now began gathering and saving grass seeds as the plants gradually ripened.

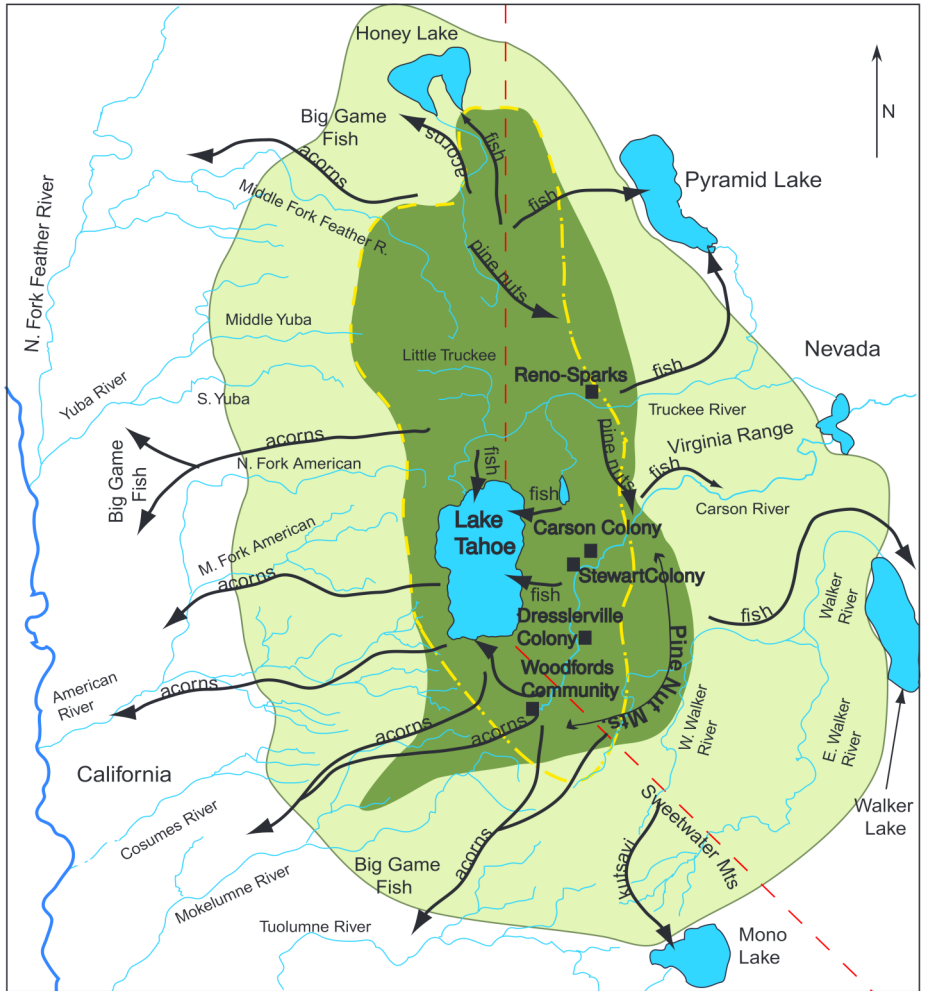
The culmination of the gathering season was the *tah gum* (Piñon Pine nut, *Pinus monophylla*) harvest. When the nuts were ripe, all the people were called for a special ceremony, called the *goom sa bye*. A runner was sent with a knotted buckskin rope to all the separate camps. Each knot represented one day, the number of knots meant there were that many days until the ceremony would begin. People congregated at the designated place and the celebration lasted for four or five days.




Washoe women equipped with burden baskets and other tools for the *tah gum* harvest.

They prayed and gave thanks to the Maker, danced, played games and shared large amounts of food with each other. Usually the harvest lasted for a month to six weeks. A long pole with a curved tip was used to knock down the cones, that were then carried in burden baskets back to the camp where they were prepared for storage for the winter.

# Map of Washoe Territory and Trade Routes



- Primary Subsistence and Settlement Area shown in HNAI
- Modern Day Washoe Communities
- Area claimed in ICC Claims Case No. 288
- Secondary Resource Area Determined by Deward E. Walker, Jr.



Pine nuts and acorns were stored for the winter in caves, rock structures, and pits lined with stones or grass. Pine nuts were roasted so that their sweet oily flesh would not become rancid. Acorns were sprinkled with water so that their outer shells could be removed and their insides were dried in the sun. Shelled pine nuts, the dried acorns, and other seeds were pounded into fine flours using mortars and pestles. The acorn flour was leached of its tannins and bitter taste. The flours could be made into mush or soup, and biscuits were made by dipping cooked flour into cold water.

Fall was also time for the best hunting because the animals were healthy and fattened from the plentiful summer. A large variety of game animals were found in Washoe territory, including: rabbits, squirrels, marmots, sagehens, quail, waterfowl, deer, antelope and big horn sheep. Small mammals were hunted with dogs, traditionally the Washoe's only domestic animal.

Just after the pine nut harvests it was time for the rabbit drives. The Washoe would gather in the flatlands east of the Sierra for a special rabbit ceremony where they prayed and danced to thank the Maker for food and a plentiful supply of rabbits. Hundreds of rabbits were herded by a long line of people walking in one direction. A tall net woven from the fibers of sage brush (*Artemisia tridentata*) and Indian Hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*) formed a blockade that the fleeing rabbits became entangled in. People would wait behind the net, to untangle the rabbits and club them. Every family owned an individual net and several nets were combined for the drive. There were always enough rabbits for all of the people. Some rabbit were purposefully left in the nets and under bushes for the old or the ill.

The rabbit meat was roasted, boiled and eaten in great quantities and also dried on racks to be saved for the winter. No parts of the rabbits were wasted. In the winter dried meat would be ground and added to nut or seed flour to make soup or mush. The skins were also a very

important resource for the Washoe. The fresh pelts were cut into stripes and woven together on a frame. They made large rabbit skin blankets that doubled as both bedding and a cloak against the cold of the winter.

Another important source of meat and skins was the Mule Deer. Washoe hunters would either set up blinds near a watering hole, or would employ several stalking methods that sometimes involved imitating animal sounds such as the cry of a faun in distress, or wearing a disguise of a stuffed deer head with the skin attached and draped over



A Washoe hunter wearing a rabbit skin blanket and snowshoes. By Richard Servilican

the shoulders. The hunters used bows strengthened with sinew, and arrows made from straight branches of the wild rose bush with obsidian points.

If there were enough deer in an area, sometimes “deer drives” were employed in a similar manner as “rabbit drives” with a few of the best hunters waiting at the end rather than a net.

Antelope were also hunted in this manner, but with a large corral built to hold several animals. A large herd could be trapped to feed many people. There were special ceremonies to thank the Maker before the first antelope from the corral was killed. The hunter that climbed the high mountains to kill a big horn sheep was revered as a good hunter because they are difficult animals to hunt.

Grasshoppers were gathered early in the mornings while the insects were still slow from the cold night. They were roasted and eaten as a crunchy treat. Several other insect foods were eaten when available such as caterpillars, bee larvae, and honey.

### **Galis (Winter)**

In the winter little food could be gathered and the Washoe ate mostly what they had stored earlier in the year. Sometimes ice on lakes or streams would be broken and fish could be caught with a bone hook.

*Galis dungal* (winter houses) took considerably longer to build than the summer house. Winter houses were conical shaped. They contained a sturdy frame in which several layers of bark, poles and brush and animal hides created insulation from the cold.



Above: galis dungal (winter house).  
Right: Rabbit skin blankets.



A fire was built inside in a pit in the center of the house. An opening was left in the roof for the smoke to escape. A large pile of fire wood, sometimes taller than the house itself, was gathered and stacked next to the dwelling. The door always faced to the east to receive the first light of the day. Winter camps were often located close to one of the many hot springs that occur in a chain on the east side of the Sierra Mountains.

During the long winter months the Washoe would sit around the fire and tell stories and pass on knowledge and traditions. Winter was a time for building and repairing tools such as hunting and fishing devices and clothing.


The Washoe wove several types of baskets. Throughout the year they gathered the materials that they needed and stored them in coils. Some baskets were tightly woven for cooking or holding water. Others were loosely woven and used for sifting seeds and nuts. Burden baskets

had a moderately tight weave and were in a conical shape. Some baskets were specially made for holding babies. *Himu* (willow) is the main material used in basketry. Fern roots soaked in dark mud were used for creating dark patterns, and



Examples of Washoe basketry.

red bud was collected to make red patterns. A thin piece of bone was used to puncture the holes during the weaving process. Each basket maker created the unique designs woven into their baskets.



Some designs were passed from generation to generation and held symbols of traditional stories. Others were unique to each basket maker and could not be copied.

Washoe clothing was mostly made of buckskin. They wore moccasins or sandals. In the winter they kept warm with a rabbit skin blanket and snowshoes so as not to sink into deep snow. The Washoe tattooed themselves with familial marks on their faces and arms using acorn juice and burnt rabbit brush mixed with water.

### **CONTACT WITH THE IMMIGRANTS**

The Washoe had heard about the new intruders before they ever saw one. As the Spanish invaded the California coast to establish missions and convert Indians to Catholicism, the Washoe began to make fewer and fewer trips to the west coast until eventually those trips stopped altogether. Neighboring tribes that escaped into hiding in the high mountains probably warned the Washoe about the invaders. Although White historians have concluded that the Spanish never entered Washoe territory, the Washoe have told stories about them for generations, and some Washoe words, including names for relatively new additions to the Washoe world, like horse, cow, and money, are similar to the Spanish terms.

In any case, when the first white fur traders and surveyors began to enter Washoe territory the Indians approached the newcomers with caution. They preferred to observe the intruders from a distance. The first written record of non-Indians in Washoe Land were fur trappers in 1826; they may have met the Washoe, but left no description of the encounter.

The first written description of the Washoe was by John Charles Fremont in 1844, who was leading a government surveying expedition. Fremont described the Washoe as being cautious of being close to them, but in time when he showed no aggression, the Washoe came forward and gave him handfuls of pine nuts, the highest

form of hospitality the Washoe could offer a visitor. Fremont described struggling through deep snow and being impressed by the Washoe's skill with snowshoes. The Washoe willingly shared their knowledge of the land and eventually guided Fremont to a safe passage to California.

As more and more colonizers began infiltrating Washoe land, it was not long before relations grew hostile. The summer of 1844, just a few months after Fremont had passed through, a group of trappers left record of having shot and killed five Indians (either Washoe or Paiute) for having taken traps and perhaps horses. The Indians probably took those things in order to discourage the trappers from entering their land. After the deaths, the trappers searched the area, but not surprisingly found no more Indians. Most westward-migrating settlers had been conditioned by their experiences passing through the country of aggressively defensive tribes of the Great Plains and saw no distinction between different tribes. They expected the Washoe to be violent and dangerous and projected these characteristics upon them.



The Washoe saw the wagon trains. By Richard Servilican.



## **DONNER PARTY**

In 1846, the Washoe noticed the famed Donner party wagon train because they had never seen wagons before. The Washoe describe seeing the wagons and wondering if they were a “monster snake”. In route to California, the Donner party reached the Sierras late in the year and got trapped in snow for a particularly harsh winter. The Washoe checked in with the stranded travelers a few times and brought them food when they could. Even so, in the face of suffering and starvation, the Donner Party resorted to cannibalism. When the Washoe witnessed them eating each other they were shocked and frightened. Although the Washoe faced hard times every winter and death by starvation sometimes occurred, they were never cannibalistic. Stories about the situation, some gruesome and some sympathetic, were told for many generations and are said to add to the general mistrust of the white people.

## **DESTRUCTION OF THE LAND**

In 1848, gold was “discovered” in California, and although until then most of the Washoe had never seen white people, or had previously avoided them, this soon became impossible. The wagon trains came by the hundreds, and because most of the wagon trails had previously been Indian trails, encounters were numerous. Most of the new people were just passing through, but by 1849 several began to establish seasonal trading posts in Washoe territory. By 1851, year-round trading posts were established, and colonizers became permanent residents on Washoe land. The settlers often chose to live on some of the most fertile gathering areas that the Washoe depended upon.

A few years after gold was found in California, silver was “discovered” in the Great Basin and the “Comstock Bonanza” lured many miners that had passed through back into Washoe territory.

The Euro-American perspective viewed land and its




Steam wagon train loaded with lumber in Verdi, NV, 1890's.

resources as objects of frontier opportunity and exploitation. In a short time the colonizers had overused the pine nuts, seeds, game and fish that the Washoe had lived harmoniously with for thousands of years. By 1851, Indian Agent Jacob Holeman recommended that the government sign a treaty with the Washoe and wrote, "...the Indians having been driven from their lands, and their hunting ground destroyed without compensation therefore – they are in many instances reduced to a state of suffering bordering on starvation." (Nevers, 1976, p. 49) All this happened in less than ten years after Fremont had passed through Washoe territory.

Settlers and miners cut down trees, including the sacred Piñon Pine to build buildings, support mine shafts, and even burn as fuel. The Piñon Pine woodlands that had once provided the Washoe, other tribes, and all the animals with more than enough nuts became barren hillsides.

In 1859, Indian agent Frederick Dodge suggested removing the Washoe to two reservations, one at Pyramid Lake, and another at Walker Lake. Because the reservations were intended to be shared by the Washoe and the Paiute, it soon became apparent that this was impossible. Not only did the two tribes speak entirely different languages, but



historically they had not always been friendly and trouble would no doubt arise if they were forced to live in close quarters.

Furthermore, the Washoe intended to live on the land where the Maker had created them, and they resisted all attempts to be relocated. Numerous formal requests from Indian agents were made for a separate reservation for the Washoe, but the government ignored them all. By 1865, there were no stretches of unoccupied land large enough within traditional Washoe territory to form one reservation, so an agent made a recommendation that two separate 360 acre parcels be set aside for the Washoe.

The following year in 1866, a new agent destroyed any hope of this happening when he sent a letter to his authorities that stated, "There is no suitable place for a reservation in the bounds of their territory, and, in view of their rapidly diminishing numbers and the diseases to which they are subjected, none is required." (Nevers, 1976, p. 54) This man wrongly believed that in time the Washoe would disappear.

Between 1871 and 1877 several more requests for a reservation for the Washoe were made by agents, but again they were not heard. The government made no attempt to secure rights for the Washoe or to stop the destruction of the lands by the colonial culture.

Settler's livestock grazed the land intensely and grasses that had once provided the Washoe with seed were trampled and eaten. Commercial fishing was practiced on every stream and lake in the area and it was not long before the fish were depleted. At the height of the fishing, 70,000 pounds of fish were being sent from Lake Tahoe to Reno, Carson City, and Virginia City. Of course the Washoe were blamed for the depletion of fish and there were several attempts by the colonizers to stop the Washoe from fishing, but the Washoe banded together and restrictions were relaxed. Even so, there were no longer enough fish for the Washoe to subsist on. Sage hens that used to "cover the hills like snow" were killed off by sport hunting as well.

## CHANGING LIFESTYLES

Although most of their traditional resources were destroyed in a short time, the Washoe were used to adapting to what their environment provided for them so they began to change under the pressures of colonization. Many settled near white towns and took jobs on ranches and in white homes to make some money. Some hunted and fished and sold their catch to fancy restaurants. They began to wear white people's clothes. Women wore long dresses, aprons, shawls, and head scarves. Men wore brightly colored shirts and jeans. They continued gathering together to speak their language, play games, and observe sacred ceremonies like those of the pine nut harvest, rabbit drives, and girls' dance.

During these difficult years of transition, several Washoe leaders emerged to speak in behalf of the tribe. In April of 1880, Captain Jim, Captain Pete, and Captain Walker called a meeting to prepare a petition to the government asking it to stop the destruction of the land. The petition described that the Washoe depended on game, fish, and pine nuts in the area that were now settled by colonizers, and that this meant that the Washoe were now dependent on the charity of colonizers for subsistence. They demanded that the destruction of Washoe property be stopped, and that suitable compensation be made for the damages already done.

A month later, another petition signed by ninety-three Douglas County residents asked the government to, "take provision for their general welfare" because, "...the Washoe tribe have always been reasonable and quiet, never molesting the white people except for the applications of food since their subsistence is destroyed." (Nevers, 1976, p. 57)

As described by historian L. Bravo (1991), "White observers have frequently criticized the Indians both for asking, which they called begging, and for not growing their own food. But to ask of the person who had something to share it, was a universal Indian custom. Furthermore, the food was being produced on land which, in the Washoe



Captain Jim "Gumalonga"



Captain Pete

mind, was theirs to use, therefore giving them every right to share in it. As for growing gardens, the Washoe were still basically hunters and gatherers and the mobility required for these pursuits conflicts with the continuous care needed for gardening." (p. 11)

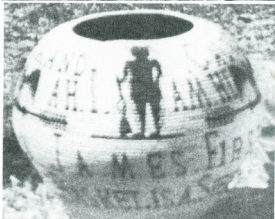
In April 1892, with help from donations made by settlers that resided in Carson Valley, Captain Jim and Dick Bender (serving as a translator), went to Washington to deliver another petition, along with letters to the president and the congressmen of California and Nevada, and a petition signed by 33 pupils from the Indian school praying that the Great Father (President Harrison) will consider the matter well. After spending thirteen days in the capital, and reportedly having spoken with the president, the men returned home believing that their requests would be heard.

A short time later, they were disappointed to learn what the government had decided. They were offered some land in Humboldt Valley, which is in Paiute territory, and were given \$1,000 to be distributed by the Superintendent of the Indian school to the "old, feeble, and infirm". The Washoe did not want to move to Paiute territory, and it is reported that they received little if any of the \$1,000 dollars.

In 1914, the Washoe sent another petition to the President; this one was accompanied by a special basket as a gift to be kept in the White House. Again, they received nothing substantial in return.

The weaving on the basket read as follows:


***“Nevada and California  
Sara, I am his daughter, Captain James,  
first chief of the Washoe Tribe  
This basket is a special curio, 1913”***



Above: Captain Pete Mayo and Sara Mayo with the basket that was sent to the White House accompanied by a petition asking for the protection of Washoe territory. 1914.

### **Washoe Indian Allotments**

Under the requirements of the General Allotment Act of 1887 each individual Washoe finally did begin to receive some land, but it was not until 1893 that allotments were made to the Washoe, and most of the land proved to be



virtually worthless. The Washoe claimed the pine nut hills and the area around Lake Tahoe as their ancestral homeland, but because the foreigners had already settled in great numbers around the lake, they were offered the simple choice to accept the pine nut allotments or take nothing at all. Although none of the sites were suitable for homes and few had water rights, the Washoe took them because the sites had the sacred Piñon Pines that still provided the food that sustained the Washoe through winter.

Some Washoe received allotment lands in California, in Alpine County and in the north around the Sierra Valley and Doyle. Although allotments were legally supposed to be 160 acres, some that the Washoe received were only 120 because settlers already claimed to own adjacent springs and other water rights. The government appointed a special allotting agent that did not even inspect the allotments. Sections of land were given out directly from the office, and it turned out that most of the lots did not have mature trees on them or were completely without trees because they had recently been used for timber.

The borders of these allotments were not clearly marked, and even when they were the Washoe continued to have problems with colonizers that frequently disregarded boundaries.

Reports that whites were trying to gain control over Washoe timber and were illegally using the land to graze their animals were made by Indian Agents to the government several times, but the problem continued even after laws were passed against it.


## Boarding School

The Stewart Indian School opened in 1890 and occupied 240 acres south of Carson City. Washoe, Paiute, and Shoshone children were forced to attend. Euro-American culture was taught to the children, who spent half of the day in the classroom learning English and mathematics, and the rest of the day receiving vocational training that often involved nothing more than doing work that needed to maintain the school. Since the Indian boarding schools were under control of the War Department, the schools were run in a strict military style and focused on assimilation.

Children as young as five years old were often rounded up and taken from their families while neither the children nor the parents knew what was happening. When they arrived at the school they were forced to wear a uniform and to cut their hair.



Boys in the Carson Indian School workshop.



They were punished if they spoke their own languages. The children had a difficult time adjusting to the new strict environment and tried to run away. They were almost always caught and brought back. Parents objected to having their children go to the schools because they often became out of touch with their own culture and many of them never came home at all. There were high death rates at the schools due to epidemics of diseases such as influenza, small pox and cholera. Nearly all of the children reported suffering various amounts of psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

In later years the school was reported to have improved. Girls learned how to be a woman in white society and were trained in “home economics” and nursing. Boys were trained in vocations usually designated for working class white men like plumbing, carpentry, mechanics, and electrical work. Many graduates of the Stewart Indian School continued their education at other institutions, and several became prominent citizens in their communities by using the skills they had learned to help their people.

### **Basketry as Art**

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Washoe became famous for their skills in basketry. Colonizers saw the intricate tightly woven baskets that had previously been used for cooking or holding water, and began valuing them as a high form of art. Several Washoe women emerged as outstanding basket makers, including Maggie Mayo James, Tillie Snooks, Lena Frank and perhaps the most famous being Dat So La Lee.



Dat So La Lee with some of her prized baskets.

Dat So La Lee was born in 1835, and may have met Fremont when he first passed through Washoe land in 1844. In 1871, she met Abram Cohn, a shopkeeper who she approached with a small basket for sale. He and his wife Amy recognized that she was highly skilled and decided to build a house for her and support her so that she could concentrate on making baskets.

They worked out a deal that she would make baskets only for them, and for this reason no tribal member possesses one of her baskets today. In 1919 Cohn took Dat So La Lee on several trips to show her work and make her famous. She did not enjoy these expositions of her techniques because it is Washoe tradition to only teach members of your family. In modern times her baskets have been priced at \$1,000,000.

During her lifetime they sold for thousands, also a high sum by the standard of the time. Samples of her work can be seen at the Smithsonian, Nevada State Historical Society Museum in Reno, the Nevada State Museum in Carson City, and the Marion Steinbach Indian Basket Museum in Tahoe City, among others.



Three of Dat So La Lee's baskets complete with palm print as a certificate of authenticity.


## Citizenship

It took many years before the Washoe were considered citizens under law. This officially happened in 1924 when all Native Americans in the United States pledged their allegiance to the US government. Before then Indians were expected to show their allegiance to the country by fighting in the First World War.

Even though they had no homes and no reservation, and were denied many other conveniences of citizenship, Indians were expected to fight in the US army. An Indian Agent wrote to the Washoe saying that Indians that did not fight were “pro-German”. Justifiably, many Washoe did not want to fight, but some did join the war.

## Tribal Land

Despite some local opposition, land was finally purchased for the Washoe in 1917. Two tracts of land were purchased near Carson City that totaled 156.33 acres. This became Carson Indian Colony.



Shortly after this purchase the government received 40 acres of land south of Gardnerville from the Dressler family, to indefinitely be held in trust for the Washoe, now known as the Dresslerville Colony. An additional 20 acres were acquired for the Washoe and other landless Indians of Nevada, called the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. Most of the lands purchased for the Washoe were rocky and had poor soil, but the people moved onto these areas and built the best homes that they could. Many were one room shacks without electricity and running water. Eventually, the government built larger four-room houses.

Under the Indian Reorganization Act, between 1938 and 1940, the Washoe acquired 95 acres in the Carson Valley that became known as Washoe Ranch. Finally the Washoe had agricultural land where they could raise animals and food.

In 1951 the Washoe filed a claim to the Indian Claims Commission for their lands and resources that had been lost. The legal proceedings lasted nearly twenty years, and the Washoe received their claim only in 1970. The government had significantly reduced the area that the Washoe had designated as their ancestral homeland, and so the final settlement was five million dollars, which “scarcely constitutes even a token compensation for the appropriation of an ancient territory and its resources which today comprise one of the richest and most attractive areas in the American West.” (Nevers, 1976, p. 91)

Also in 1970, a special act of congress granted 80 acres in Alpine County, California to Washoe that had lived there. This is now known as the Woodfords Community. In more recent years the tribe has been acquiring lands within their ancestral territory including, Frank Parcel, Lady’s Canyon, Babbit Peak, Uhalde Parcel, Wade Parcels, Olympic Valley, Incline Parcel, Upper and Lower Clear Creek Parcels. Some of the lands have been set aside as conservation and cultural lands for the Washoe.



## **Challenges of Reservation Life**

After settling on their newly returned land, the Washoe found it difficult to adapt to reservation life. They were traditionally a free roaming people that were now restricted and confined to boundaries and were under constant monitoring by Indian Agents that pressured them to renounce their ancient customs in favor of colonial ways of living. The superintendent of the Reno Agency attacked several traditional practices, including the girl's passage to womanhood. Ironically the practices that he targeted as "heathen" and "immoral" like giving gifts were similarly practiced at Euro-American birthdays and marriages.

Another superintendent announced that traditional games that involved exchanging money were not permitted on government lands or Indian reservations, but he made no proclamations prohibiting similar games played by colonizers such as poker. Government officials went as far as to prohibit the use of traditional Washoe medicine.

## **Peyotism**

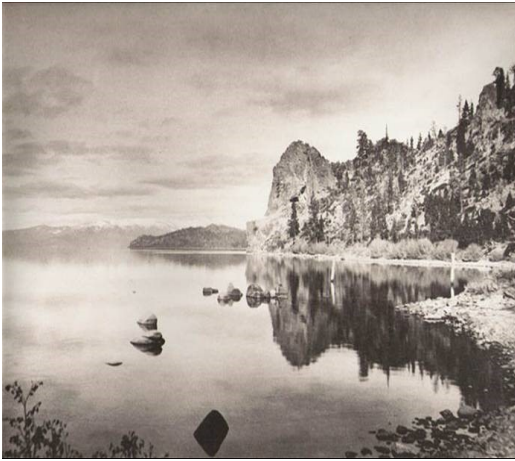
In 1936, a new native religion called Peyotism, now known as the Native American Church, helped some Washoe cope with the changes brought by the settlers. A man by the name of Ben Lancaster, who was half Washoe, brought Peyotism to Washoe Country. The religion encouraged charity and honesty and prohibited drinking of alcoholic beverages. Although Peyotism is no longer widely accepted, numerous tribal members continue to practice the way of life.

## **Religion**

Religion is a term used in colonial ideology and it doesn't fit into the Washoe way of life. Although, over the years some Washoe people have adopted various religions.

## De ek Wadapush (Cave Rock)

Since the beginning of history, *De ek Wadapush* “rock standing grey” (Cave Rock), a prominent physical feature on the shore of Lake Tahoe, has been revered as a sacred place to be respected and avoided by all people except for Washoe healers seeking spiritual renewal. It is believed that Cave Rock is also an important place for the



Cave Rock

“Water Babies”, so it is a place that can not be tampered with without experiencing retaliation from the powerful creatures. The Washoe were highly disturbed and saddened by the construction of a tunnel going through Cave Rock using dynamite blasts in 1931. They likened it to entering a Christian Church

and bombing it, but most non-Indian people didn't understand the similarities. In 1951 a second tunnel was blasted. During both phases of construction flooding occurred in the Carson Valley that was attributed to angered Water Babies.

Thankfully, another project that was proposed during the building of the second tunnel was never realized. Local Pastors had began initiating plans and acquiring funds to build a “Cave Rock Shrine” that consisted of an illuminated cross at the apex of the rock that would be seen from any point on the lake's shore, and a “natural amphitheater” carved into the concave of the rock. The Washoe wrote several petitions to stop the project and to have the rock dedicated to the Indian peoples of the state of Nevada instead.

It is unclear how the project was stopped, but it seems that the church allocated funds to other causes.

Cave Rock came under increasing threat in the 1990's when rock-climbers began frequenting it as a highly desired climbing site. Regardless of the Washoe's protest, climbers defaced the rock with bolts and other climbing implements, graffiti, and even filled in the cave's floor with cement. The Washoe wrote petitions to have the climbing stopped. Despite strong opposition by the climbing community, the US Forest Service upheld a ban on climbing at Cave Rock in 2008. Remediation work on Cave Rock was completed in 2009; tribal elders are pleased to know repair of the injuries to De ek Wadapush has happened. The site has enjoyed more respect and protection since its nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

## Tribal Government



Washoe Tribal Government seal.

Under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the Washoe began to form a tribal government. They called themselves the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California and adopted a constitution and laws. In 1936 the first tribal council was formed. In 1937 they were issued a corporate charter and recognized as a formally organized tribe. In 1966 Tribal

Council re-organized to include a nine member council from Carson, Dresslerville, and Woodfords communities, one from Reno-Sparks Colony, and two off-reservation delegates. In 1990 the council was extended to twelve members to include the newly added Stewart Community.

To be officially considered a Washoe tribal member the blood quantum is one-quarter. There are approximately 1,550 official tribal members. One third of tribal members



reside off reservation, a large population within their ancestral territory, and another in the San Francisco Bay area.

### **Tribal Programs**

The tribe has programs that encourage the preservation of Washoe culture and traditions including: social services, education, senior centers and more.

The Tribal Historic Preservation Office / Cultural Resources Office “Washiw Guwah” provides cultural oversight but also provides instruction on culture.

The Language Program instructs language in the Washoe communities and the Head Start schools provide instruction to Washoe and non-Washoe children ages 3-5. While the Education Department collaborates with public schools and offers scholarships to Washoe students.

The Washoe health clinic offers medical, dental and behavioral services and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a Washoe program providing service to six counties in California and two counties in Nevada.

The Washoe Police have jurisdiction over all Washoe Tribally owned lands.

Over the years the Washoe have organized groups that promote traditional well being, respect, and generosity in the people. As a way of further promoting Washoe culture, the Tribal Government has enacted laws that allow special hunting and fishing privileges to Washoe people that are making and using traditional hunting and fishing devices.

The Washoe Development Corporation is a Federally Chartered Corporation wholly owned by the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California. Formed by Tribal Council Resolution in 2006, the WDC Board of Directors has the purpose of operating tribally owned commercial businesses; providing job opportunities for Tribal members; and utilizing Tribal resources to enhance economic development and provide financial sustainability.



## **Tribal Businesses**

Meeks Bay Resort, Meeks Bay, CA:

MICA Chevron Station, Carson City, NV:

Wa She Shu Travel Plaza, Gardnerville, NV:

Carson Smoke Shop, Carson City, NV:

Washoe Ranch Operations.

**Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO)** is the tribal equivalent to the State Historic Preservation Offices. The THPO mission is to protect, preserve and promote Washoe Culture. The THPO has jurisdiction over all Washoe tribally owned lands and maintains consultation with federal, state, and local agencies in the protection of over 10,000 square miles of ancestral territory that covers two states, 15 counties, seven national forests and four BLM districts.

## **Washoe Events**

Currently, the Washoe hold several events where traditional craftsmanship, skills, and cultural information are celebrated and shared.

- **Wa she shu it deh:** Last weekend in July at Camp Richardson, South Lake Tahoe, California
- **Lak LeI Be:** Last weekend in October at Carson Colony, Carson City, Nevada
- **Earth Day:** The event is held at a different Washoe Community every year in April during Earth Day Week
- **Washoe Picnic:** Held every year in August
- **Washoe Elders Cultural Dinner**
- **Culture Camp:** Held in the summer in Alpine County, CA
- **Goom sa bye:** Pine Nut Festival, early Autumn
- **Traditional hunting and fishing:** closed to the public



## **WASHOE NAMES AND PLACES**

Welmelti– Northerners

Tanalelti-Westerners

Hungalelti-Southerners

Powalu-Easterners

Da ow aga - “edge of lake” - Lake Tahoe

A' waku da ow - Pyramid Lake

Watahshemu – Carson River

Welganuk – Truckee Meadows

Wegi Behezing (Welmelti)– Donner Lake-Da toshut (pauwalu)

A' waku wa'ta - Truckee River at Pyramid Lake

Dewbeyumewe – Truckee River at Tahoe City

De ek wadapush - Cave Rock

Tsalee tosh - Emerald Bay

Mutsim yagada det deyi - Sierra Valley

## **OTHER RESOURCES**

The following museums have exhibits that include some aspects of Washoe history:

Nevada Historical Society and Research Library (Reno, NV),

Nevada State Museum (Carson City, NV),

Carson Valley Museum and Cultural Center (Gardnerville, NV),

Nevada Discovery Museum for Kids (Reno, NV),

Nevada Museum of Art (Reno, NV),

Emigrant Trail Museum (Truckee, CA),

Gate Keepers Museum/Marion Steinbach Indian Basket Museum (Tahoe City, CA),

Baldwin Museum (South Lake Tahoe).

A self-guided cell phone tour is available for the Stewart Indian School in Carson City, NV. Brochures are available at the Nevada Indian Commission Office. (775) 687-8333.



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Please consider making a tax exempt donation to  
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<https://washoetribe.us/CulturalFund>

For more information contact the  
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sources Office (THPO/CRO).  
(775) 265-8600