

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This module examines one element of California Native American culture, that of *games*, from the time of contact through the present. The artifacts contained in the outreach trunk offer a tangible connection to traditional pastimes and competitions—some of which continue to be played today, while the ethnohistorical documents included in the eGuide open an authoritative and authentic window on the social and cultural politics of the past, helping us to see how history shapes and conditions contemporary circumstances, policies, and events.

Hispanic settlement of California began in 1769. Historical records show that more than 300,000 Indians lived in California at that time. Native Americans on the California coasts were often forced to work and live in missions or moved there because of disease and loss of traditional resources, such as land. The numerous pathogens brought by the Europeans decimated the Native American population and by 1821, only 200,000 Indians survived in California.

Missionaries actively sought to change many aspects of Native American culture. In fact, the mission system introduced the first of many programs and policies of assimilation to which California Indians would be subjected over the course of several centuries. The Catholic padres considered certain Native California social and cultural activities to be vices, including some of their games. Yet many traditional games were based on skills children would need as adults and emphasized stories and cultural traditions important to tribal histories and futures. For instance, games that were more physically-oriented helped children develop dexterity, endurance, and good sportsmanship skills. Other games played by adults helped to reduce stress and competition within groups, especially over long winter months. The impact of the California mission system led to the disappearance of many customs, though others were retained or revived in modern times.

Gold was first discovered in 1848 and white settlers soon poured into California to stake their claims in the gold country. Miners and others settled on the land that Native California bands and tribes had called home for centuries. Native American populations had already begun to decline, but the Gold Rush led to thousands of murders due to greed and ignorance. The building and use of the railroad also played a part in the disruption of Native American culture. Because of the loss of land, and subsequent loss of resources, many tribes had to seek other economic means. Selling goods—like baskets and other hand-crafted items (such as the Mojave dolls in this outreach trunk)—to collectors and travelers provided Native peoples a marginal means of subsistence.

Between 1851 and 1852, the U.S. negotiated 18 treaties with more than 100 California Indian groups, guaranteeing them economic aid and reservation lands consisting of more than eight million acres. However, under pressure from the newly-formed California State Legislature the U.S. Congress refused to ratify the treaties. California Indians were driven off their lands and sent to live on military-style reservations. According to the 1900 census, the state's Native population had by that time been reduced to around

16,000. War, genocide, and disenfranchisement from ancestral lands were largely to blame. During this period, the United States government enforced a policy of allotment and assimilation (based on the Dawes Act of 1887), which divided up Native American land and sought to incorporate Native people into White America. Native children were forced to live in government-run boarding schools, where they were forbidden to dress as they were accustomed or to speak their own languages; many lost their cultural traditions entirely through this process of “Americanization.” For instance, instead of traditional stick and guessing games, they were taught to play football and tag. While this latter example is meant to help elementary school children grasp the concept of social and cultural change, it is important to realize that it cannot fairly represent the depth of cultural loss nor the traumatic after-effects caused by this separation from family, culture and tradition. Boarding schools had profound and lasting implications. Many Native people lost the very basis of their Indian identities, resulting in social alienation that, in its most extreme forms, led to depression, alcoholism, and suicide. While it is true that not all boarding school children suffered these affects, a great many did. For this reason, the Native peoples who lived through this era are often referred to as the “Lost Generation.”

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress enacted the Indian Reorganization Act (25 U.S.C. 461), or IRA, with the hope of restoring the economic life of Indians. Further allotment of land was prohibited under this act, which also attempted to strengthen the role of tribal organization. By the mid-20th century, approximately 61 small reservations and rancherias, totaling approximately 7,500 acres of land (though much of it was barren and worthless for farming or traditional subsistence), had been set aside for Native California bands. However, in 1953, another federal policy was enacted which encouraged Native Americans to leave their reservations to pursue an urban life. In California this led to the Rancheria Act of 1958. This act terminated the federal trust responsibilities to 38 California tribes, which meant that the State stopped providing any of the services promised by the federal government to those tribes.* Following a long-established pattern, the land once owned by Native Americans rapidly passed into non-Native ownership.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a public movement towards the revitalization of Native culture began as many Native peoples sought to revitalize or relearn those customs that had been denied them and were nearly lost through forced assimilation. Bear Dance celebrations (sacred ceremonies) were held during this period and traditional games and gambling were important components of these ceremonies. In recent times, the legalization of tribal casinos on reservations lands has provided a tremendous economic means for Native peoples. Many tribes are able to use gaming revenues to improve their communities by funding community health and education programs. Gambling, as a form of game, has been a part of Native American culture since long before European settlers arrived, and today it provides Native groups with an opportunity to improve and strengthen the economic foundation necessary for self-governance. Many California tribes can now turn their attention to cultural revitalization and preservation. Native museums, cultural centers, health facilities and educational programs are helping to undo the negative legacy left by centuries of forced assimilation.

* In 1983, the “Tillie Hardwick Ruling” issued by the U.S. District Court won the re-instatement of some tribes that had been illegally terminated under the Rancheria Act, but other groups have yet to gain federal acknowledgment and the right to self-determination that it brings.)