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Victorian Costuming of the Southern Sierra Miwok: 1851-1875

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EXAMINATION of late 19th century Southern Sierra Miwok costuming provides valuable insight into a post-contact Central California culture. Major shifts in clothing style and material are a visible and dynamic indicator of cultural change, sometimes associated with sociopolitical tension (Kroeber 1963: 22), although this point has been argued (Young 1937: 41). In the case of the Yosemite Miwok, the 'tension' created by contact in 1851 resulted in the replacement of buckskin skirts and breech clouts by cloth dresses and pants (Barrett and Gifford 1933: 220; Bureau of Indian Affairs 1951: 1-19; Borlase 1875: 207-211).

Gold mining activities in the Southern Sierra encroached on Miwok land along the Merced River near Mariposa resulting in the desecration of primary hunting, gathering, and encampment grounds (Crampton 1957: 3-8; Anderson, Ellison, and Heizer 1978: 231). The Miwok retaliated against the invasion of miners by attacking a trading post along the Fresno River on December 17, 1850 (Bunnell 1880: 15-16). This attack on the Savage Trading Post prompted Indian Affairs subagent, Adam Johnston, to appeal to the California State Legislature for troops and funds, and by January 24, 1851, the Mariposa Battalion was organized and James Savage elected the leader (Anderson, Ellison, and Heizer 1978: 19).¹ The Battalion pursued the Yosemite Miwok into their homeland after

their chief, Teneya, refused to cooperate with Savage's request to negotiate a treaty with three federal Indian Commissioners (Bunnell 1880: 46).² The pursuit led to the discovery of Yosemite Valley by EuroAmericans on March 25, 1851, and to Teneya's capture in May, 1851. The Yosemite Miwok were then taken to the Fresno River Reservation between the Fresno and Mariposa Rivers, but Teneya and some of his followers escaped in the fall of 1851 and returned to Yosemite Valley (Russell 1947: 36-39, 46).

Before being taken to the Fresno River Reservation, the Yosemite Miwok male wore "a simple breech clout of buckskin which passed between the legs and hung from a buckskin girdle as a short apron at the front and back," while the female wore a "two piece dress," the back apron overlapping the front, both hanging to mid-calf (Barrett and Gifford 1933: 220-221). However, it is doubtful that these coverings were worn at all times, especially during hot weather when individuals did not wear any clothing (Perelot 1981: 146).

As early as 1850, Miwok women along the Merced near present day El Portal were reported to "dress neatly . . . (in) white chemis [sic] with low neck and short sleeves, to which is appended either a red or blue skirt . . . they always look clean" (Crampton 1957: 107). Since women's ready-wear was not available until the late 1870s (Kidwell 1976: 137) and it is unlikely that these women were able to hire seamstresses, it can be assumed

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that these early garments were sewn by their wearers (Crampton 1957: 107). Fashion plates of 1850-1852 illustrate Western European one-piece, day dress at that time as being deeply flounced in the skirt and tight fitting in the bodice, similar in style to a waistcoat, with long "pagoda" sleeves (Fig. 1; Cunningham 1952: 171-174). This suggests that the Miwok clothing described by Crampton was not "anglo cast-off."

In comparing the description of 1850 Southern Sierra Miwok styles to that of the 1850 fashion plates, it is striking to note the

similarity between pre-contact and post-contact Miwok costume style and the dissimilarity between 1850 Miwok style and that of their non-Indian contemporaries. Miwok women in 1850 maintained the pre-contact "skirt-style" that cinched at the waist, merely using a cotton cloth rather than buckskin. The addition of a chemise to their outfit must be considered a direct result of continual contact with non-Indians, as through marriage or employment (Crampton 1957: 107; Phillips 1978: 173). This styling is nevertheless in marked contrast to the voluminous, flounced



Fig. 1. "1852 Daywear." Note the Pagoda style sleeves, corsetted bodice and flounced skirts (Cunnington 1952: 175).

skirts and tight-fitting bodices depicted in the 1850 Godey's Ladies Magazine (1850: 26).

The possible reasons for the change from buckskin to cotton are a matter of speculation. Signators to the 1851 Fresno River Treaty were to be supplied with "one pair of strong pantaloons and one red flannel shirt for each man and boy, one Linsey gown for each woman and girl, 4,000 yards of calico and one thousands yards of brown sheeting, 40 yards of Scotch thread" (Bureau of Indian Affairs 1951: 20). Treaty Commissioner McKee spent \$6,500 in 1850 for "blankets, flannel shirts, calico, saches [sic], shawls and other items," before his arrival in California. All of these items were to be presented to the California Indians as incentive to sign the yet-to-be-negotiated 18 treaties (U. S. Senate 1852: 49). More interesting possibilities for the change from skin to cloth are suggested by the accounts of a Belgian explorer/miner named Perelot. Arriving in Monterey in 1849, Perelot walked from the coast to the Yosemite/Mariposa region, settling between Mariposa and Yosemite in 1851 or 1852. During this time he made the acquaintance of people he termed "the Yosemitees" and, in fact, lived with them for a period in 1853. Perelot (1981: 35-36) describes, "trousers, shirts, hats . . . [an] umbrella . . . good as new" being abandoned on the trail to the mines between Merced and Mariposa and implies that anyone, including Indians, needing new clothing was welcome to take these discarded articles. Perelot then goes on to describe, in several passages, the important role that clothing played in relations between the Southern Sierra Miwok, miners, and local government in the Yosemite region. The following is a conversation between Perelot and the purported chief of the Yosemitees, Scipriano:

My father asks me to tell you Scipriano is on the Tualumne [sic] with the paper allowing the Indians to stay here and to go and get flour from the white men on the banks of

the river in exchange for olo (gold). The acorns and the poison-ivy are for the Indians too On condition the Indian hides [i.e., dresses] he may go wherever he wants, leaving their property to the white men The Indians are also entitled to buy sugar and cloth in exchange for their olo [Perelot 1981: 112].

The following are narratives by Perelot (1981: 137-139) regarding the encounter between Scipriano and the sheriff of Mariposa County:

As soon as I got the Sheriff's letter, I gave Scipriano an appointment for the next day at 5 a.m., requesting him for the occasion, to wear both his shirt and trousers (for quite often he wore only one of these garments).

It was agreed that, to distinguish the good Indians from the bad ones, his braves and squaws should be decently clad, which means they were to wear a shirt reaching down to the knees. While conceding this point, Scipriano had a doubtful look at his own shirt which was not reaching that low; but this did not matter too much, as, on my advice, he was also wearing pants.

Perelot also describes in 1853 a mixture of pre-contact and post-contact clothing styles:

The Indian lives quite naked. If sometimes, he wears a short apron coming down to mid-thigh, it is rather to look smart than for any other reason; for quite often, he does not object to taking it off and lending it to someone. Still, if he does not care for clothes, he loves adorning himself by painting or tatoeing his dark skin in white and blue. This is not general use and it is mainly the young people of both sexes who do so [Perelot 1981: 146].

Soon afterwards I got confirmation of this statement as I saw a party of 30-40 Indians, men and women, walking through camp, carrying various tools and all of them wearing clothes . . . some were wearing a shirt and trousers . . . some only a shirt, and the better if it was long enough; others wore only trousers which, as a rule were too long for them; still they had found a clever way

of wearing them without cutting the bottom of the legs: they just split them from crotch to knee; this way, they could lift them up as high as the armpits, sometimes over the parts the white men want to hide

The Indian women wore any garment they could lay hands on, but of course, never found women's clothes as in these parts of California there were only men. Still, though they wore the same rags as the Indian men, they put them to much better use. The first frock they devised was very simple: it consisted of a big piece of cloth with an opening in the middle to put the head thru; this dress covered them rather well, front and aft, and a piece of rope or string at the waist served as a belt. Soon, they learned to use thread and needle and sewed the sides of the dress to which, later on, sleeves were added [Perelot 1981: 163].

It is interesting to note that Perelot never describes the Miwok as combining buckskin aprons with cotton tops, suggesting that there was a definite division between the wearing of "traditional" Miwok costuming and of Western European costuming.

By the 1870s, there is a marked contrast between Perelot's description of Miwok costuming and the photographs of Miwok people taken by various photographers that visited the Yosemite region. Eadweard Muybridge, a San Francisco photographer, travelled through Yosemite in June, 1872, taking sixteen images of Yosemite Indian life which were published in the Bradley and Rulofson catalogue of 1873 (Palmquist 1979: 101). Four of the Muybridge images are of people; two of these of women, one of men, and the fourth of a mixed group. The photographs illustrate Miwok adaptations of Western European costume that ranges in style period from 1835 to 1868.

"Morning Council on the Merced" (Fig. 2) and "Yosemite Falls, 2,634 Feet High" (Fig. 3) illustrate some differences and similarities between 1872 Yosemite Miwok women's dress and the dress of the Soule family who

were visiting Yosemite in the same month and year. Both photographs depict styling anomalous to fashion plates published for the year 1872 (Fig. 4; Cunnington 1952: 264). As seen in Fig. 4, the fashion feature of the year 1872 was the introduction of the polonaise, "a sort of tight fitting casque, a bodice to which is added a small skirt . . . it falls straight down in front and is draped in the back only" (Cunnington 1952: 264). This feature is not present in either of the photographs (Figs. 2 and 3). The silhouette for the year was "back fullness" and was achieved by the back draping of fabric over a whalebone bustle (Young 1937: 22; J. Severa, personal communication 1982). Again, this feature is lacking in both photographs. The Soules, a prominent Boston family, would certainly have been aware of contemporary 1872 fashion, but are dressed in ca. 1867-1868 skirts that have been shortened and in fitted bodices of the same time period. It appears that the Soule family anticipated the advice given in the 1877 *Tourist's Guide to the Yosemite Valley and Big Tree Groves*:

. . . recommended wear for women [are] woolen dresses of suitable length, color and texture, made in the Bloomer or other similar style [Hutchings 1877: 11].

In 1870, Olive Logan (1954: 24-25) described the prescribed dress for her trip to Yosemite as being the "Bloomer costume":³

I was informed by one of the few ladies who had been to the Valley, whom I met in San Francisco, that it was next to an impossibility to accomplish the journey with out arraying myself in a Bloomer costume. Pardon me, that I recoiled at this. I feel that my charms are not so numerous that I can afford to lessen them by the adoption of this most ungraceful and unbecoming of dresses, but when she assured me that it was almost a necessary precaution against being thrown from the horse ride astride, I saw at once that my time had come, a Bloomer costume I must wear. The dressmaker to whom I applied had made others and needed no

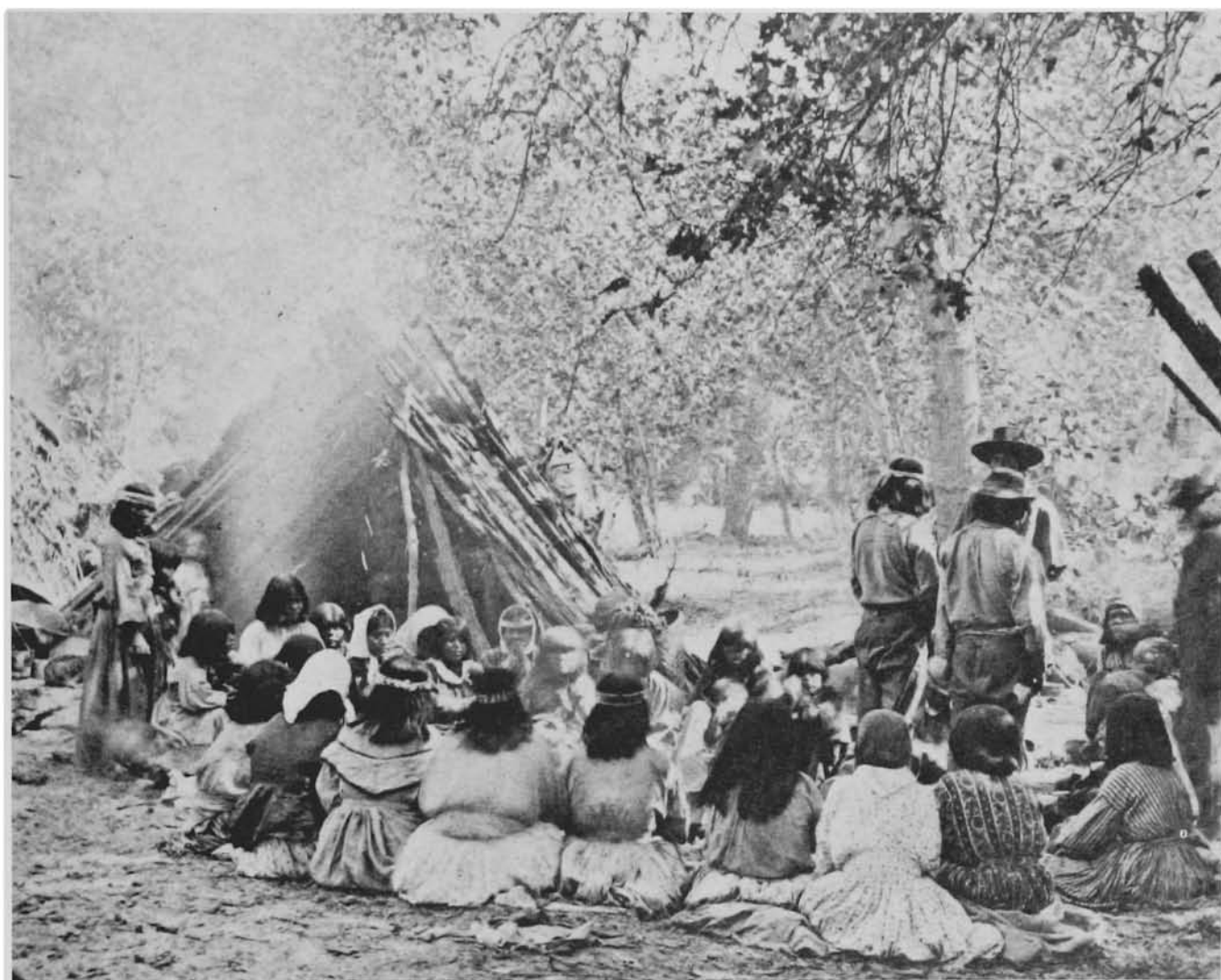


Fig. 2. "Morning Council on the Merced," Yosemite Valley, 1872. Courtesy of the Yosemite National Park Collection. Photograph by Eadweard Muybridge.

instructions when I told her I was going to Yosemite. She carved me out a costume; but pardon me once more if I shrink from the task of describing it. It was simply hideous.

The Yosemite Miwok women of the 1870s also appear to have modified their cloth clothing as illustrated in period photographs. Another Muybridge photo of 1872, "A Group of Mariposa Belles" (Fig. 5), shows modifications of pre-1868 dress styles, including the use of large, front-button openings and bishop sleeves. The two women on the left do not appear to be wearing petticoats, an

important feature of 19th century, non-Indian fashions which even the Soule women adopted. The Miwok women do not appear to be corsetted, another essential to non-Indian fashion. Again, these modifications on non-Indian garments seem to be practical adaptations to the outdoor living environment of the 1870 Miwok woman. Another interesting feature in this photograph are the ages of the costumes. The woman on the far left appears to be wearing an 1845 house dress as indicated by the cap sleeve and low shoulder (Cunnington 1952; J. Severa, personal com-



Fig. 3. "Yosemite Falls, 2,634 Feet High," Yosemite Valley, June 1872. Courtesy of the Yosemite National Park collection. Photograph by M. M. Hazeltine. Left to right: Mrs. Soule, Mr. Ransome, Gertrude Soule, guide, Anne E. Pick.

munication 1982). The woman on the far right wears what appears to be an 1850's house dress, as indicated by the higher shoulder line and skirt shape. In terms of style, therefore, dresses were at least twenty years old when this photograph was taken in 1872. This indicates that the two dresses were modified EuroAmerican cast-offs.

Miwok men seem to have adopted the

essential features of ca. 1870 Western European style: loose-fitting trousers, shirts, and a hat. A comparison of three 1872-1875 photos: "Piute Indian Camp at Mono Lake" (Fig. 6); "Bierstadt's Studio" (Fig. 7); and "1, 2, 3, 4-over" (Fig. 8) show many similarities of dress. All men have hats, trousers, and shirts of similar style and material. The tourists have detachable shirt collars and



Fig. 4. Promenade dress, 1872; Francis I Polonoise of black satin embossed with velvet, trimmed with ostrich feather (Cunnington 1952: 264).



Fig. 5. "Mariposa Belles," Yosemite Valley, 1872. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Photograph by Eadweard Muybridge.

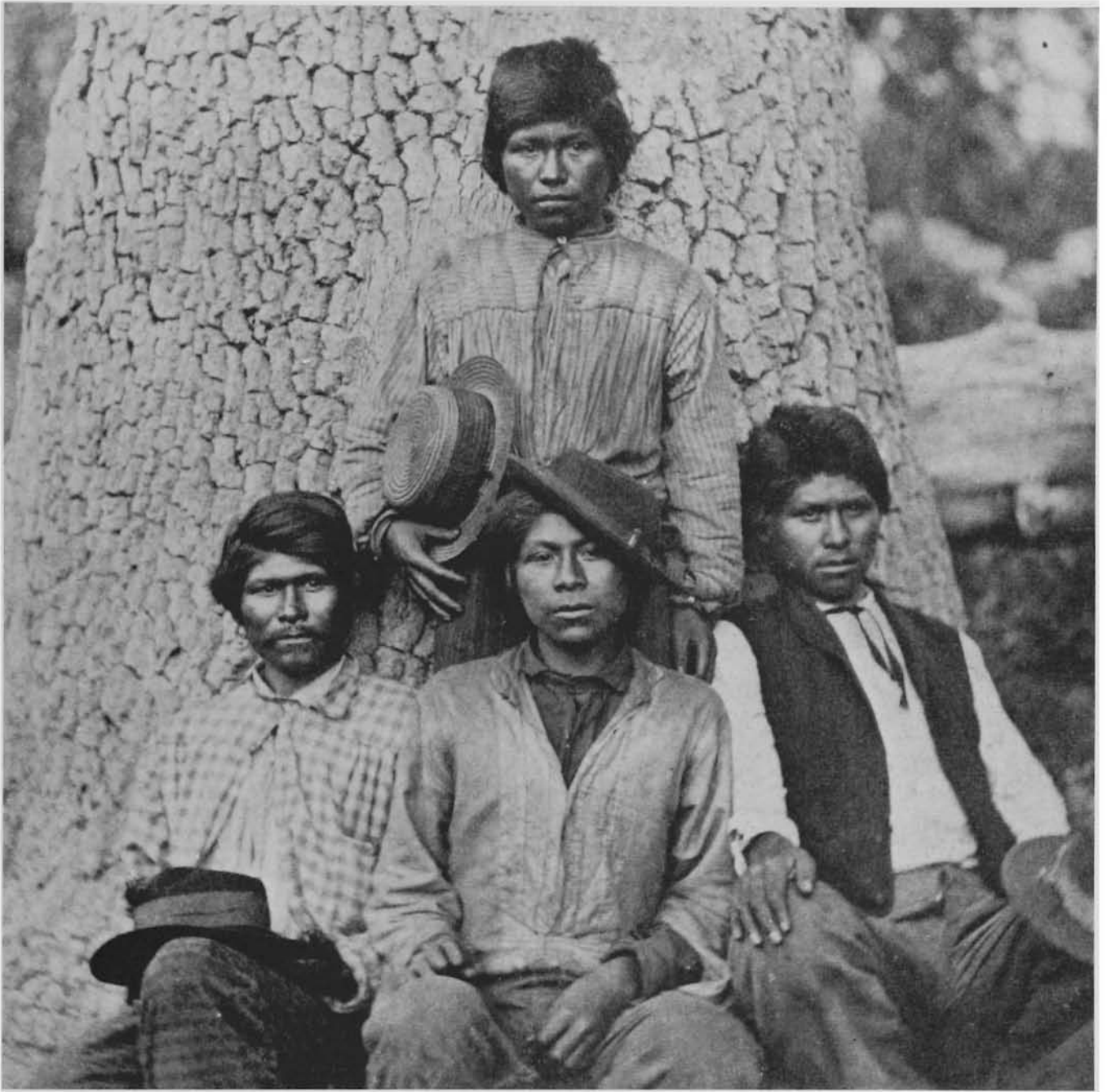


Fig. 6. "Piute Camp at Mono Lake," attributed Yosemite Valley, ca. 1875. Courtesy of the Yosemite National Park Collection. Photograph by M. M. Hazeltine. (The tree in the background is a California Black Oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) and is not found at Mono Lake, but is common on the western side of the Sierra Nevada. Hence, the title appears to be a misnomer.)

jackets and vests with large lapels, compared to the small lapels and collars (or no collars at all) of the Miwok men. However, if one refers back to Mr. Ransome and the guide in the Soule photograph (Fig. 3), it can be noted that their lapels are much narrower than those

in the J. J. Reilly stereo (Fig. 8), perhaps indicating an earlier style.

Another modification on Western European style by Southern Sierra Miwok women was for working dress. It is conceivable that just as the 19th century non-Indians posed for

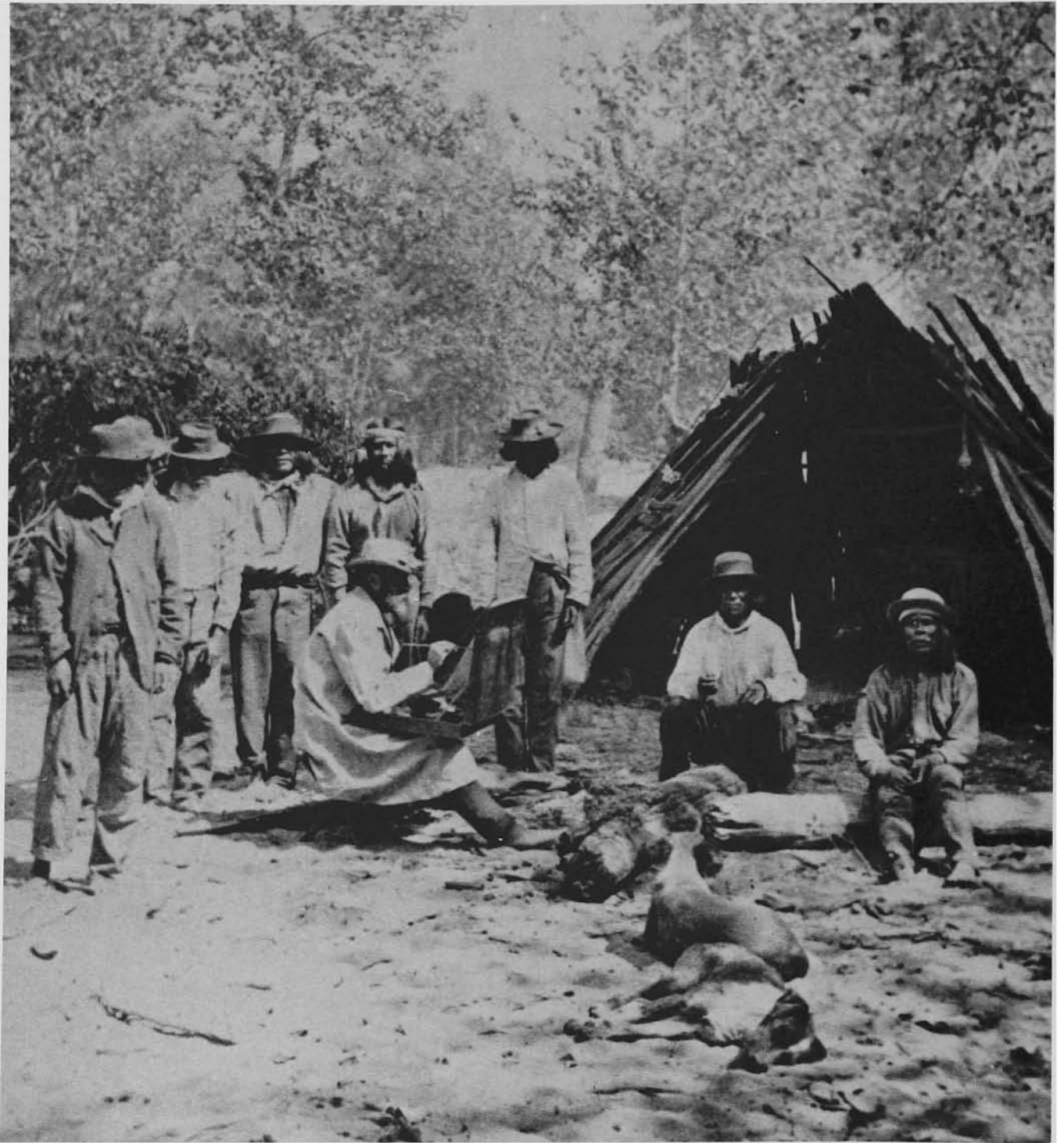


Fig. 7. "Albert Bierstadt's Studio," Yosemite Valley, 1872. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Photograph by Eadweard Muybridge.

portraits dressed in what they considered to be "photogenic attire" so did the 19th century Miwok. Hence, "Piute Squaw, Yosemite Valley" (Fig. 9) and "Making Bread on the

Merced" (Fig. 10), illustrate three styles of work dress. The woman in the Soule portrait (Fig. 9) wears a short sleeved, tight-fitting bodice tucked into a cinched-waist, bell-

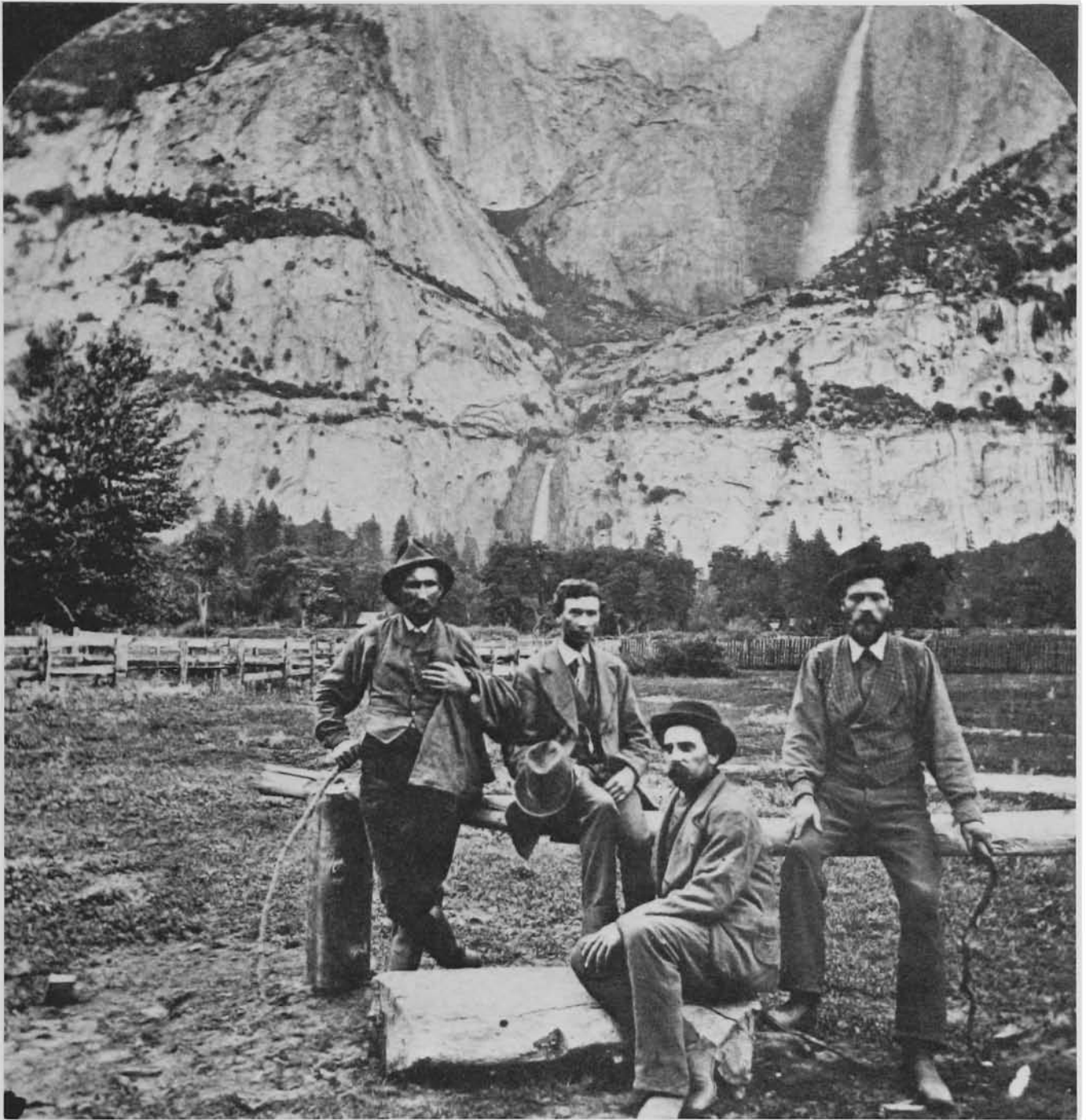


Fig. 8. "1, 2, 3, 4-over," Yosemite Valley, June 7, 1875. Courtesy of the Yosemite National Park Collection. Photograph by J. J. Reilly. Left to right: J. Wilde, G. B. Lumbard, Henry Hart, J. Brusshart.

shaped skirt and back-tie apron. The Muybridge photograph (Fig. 10) shows one woman in a loose-fitting, short-sleeved bodice not tucked in at the waist, and the other woman wearing a loose-fitting bodice, with long "tube" sleeves, the bodice being tucked

in at the waist. Both women appear to be wearing cinched-waist, bell-shaped skirts. The short sleeve especially is anomalous to the Victorian era, yet functional considering the outdoor life and warm summer climate of Yosemite. These work styles are reminiscent



Fig. 9. "Piute Squaw, Yo-Semite Valley," ca. 1875. Courtesy of the California State Library, Sacramento. Photograph by J. P. Soule.

of the descriptions given by Perelot and Eccleston of Miwok women's dress during the early 1850s (Crampton 1957: 107; Perelot 1981: 163). It should also be noted that there are differences between Miwok work dress and Anglo work dress (compare Fig. 5 with Figs. 9 and 10).

The differences between 1853 and 1872

Yosemite Indian dress and the differences and similarities between 1872 Miwok dress and non-Indian dress have far-reaching implications. While the Southern Sierra Miwok were feared and scorned by non-Indian miners and settlers in 1853, by 1875 the attitudes of non-Indian settlers had changed. The Indian people, while by no means considered equal



Fig. 10. "Making Bread on the Merced," Yosemite Valley, 1872. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Photograph by Eadweard Muybridge.

to the white people, were considered part of the "natural wonders" of Yosemite and viewed more as curiosities than as threats (Powers 1877; Hutchings 1876; Cummings

1886: 133-137; Lewis 1882: 72) and often as friends (Godfrey n.d.: 7; Hutchings 1876: 416-418). The early emphasis placed on "decent clothing" by non-Indians as a precon-

dition to peaceful relations with the Indians perhaps facilitated the Miwoks' rapid adoption of Western European clothing. During the 1850s, it was a matter of survival that cloth clothing be worn: in order to buy food and to avoid harassment from non-Indian settlers. Indian women learned to sew cloth and Indian men traded "olo" (gold) for shirts and trousers (Perelot 1981: 163). In many cases, the Miwok acquired cast-off clothing from non-Indian sources (Perelot 1981: 163; Cummings 1886: 133-134; Frémont 1970: 102; Phillips 1978: 173). Possibly, because their dress was acceptable to the non-Indians of Yosemite, by the 1870s they were able to obtain employment with the hotels and other residents in the area (Hutchings 1876: 410; Godfrey n.d.: 6; Phillips 1978: 4, 86). As a result, they were able to afford to buy or obtain food in addition to their traditional food supply of acorns which was being consumed by livestock (Mariposa Gazette 1874: 2) and continue to live in Yosemite. Perhaps, as suggested by Thompson (Cordwell and Schwarz 1979: 321) and implied by Perelot (1981: 36, 137-142), as Indian people "became more and more dependent . . . on cooperation with the white man, the kinds of clothing given by the white men became symbolic items of high status." However, as C. H. Merriam observed (Heizer 1967: 342) during the Southern Sierra Miwok autumn ceremony of October 10, 1910, "the men were naked except for breech cloths and bead-work belts," suggesting that there might have been a holdover of traditional pre-contact dress for ceremonial purposes into the early 20th century. This holdover exemplifies a possible division between traditional pre-contact costuming and Western European costuming first observed by Perelot in 1853 (Perelot 1981: 137, 146) and, later, by others during the 1870s (Phillips 1978: 173). It also demonstrates the important role that both "traditional" and non-traditional clothing

played in 19th century Southern Sierra Miwok society.

NOTES

1. James D. Savage, born in Indianapolis, 1823. Father: Peter Savage. Mother: Doritha Shaunce Savage. Killed by Walter Harvey at Four Creeks, California, on August 16, 1852. Savage was an Indian trader and captain in the Mariposa Battalion, January 24, 1851 - July 1, 1851 (Mitchell 1957: passim).
2. Reddick McKee, Oliver M. Wozencraft, and Stephen Barbour.
3. Bloomers: The lower part of a "rational dress" for women made popular in 1850 by Amelia Jenks Bloomer. The entire costume consisted of a short jacket, a skirt to below the knee, and the bloomers, or loose "Turkish" trousers, gathered at the ankle (Anonymous 1975: 93).

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