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Miwok Dancers of 1856: Stereographic Images from Sonora, California

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FIVE stereographic views of Miwok people (Figs. 1-5) made in Sonora, California, during the 1850s are apparently the earliest photographic representations of Sierra Miwok people, and perhaps the earliest such images of any Indian people in northern California. Primarily showing individuals in ceremonial regalia, these photographs provide us with an unparalleled view of California Indians at the end of the Gold Rush period in the Mother Lode region of the Sierra Nevada.

Stereoscopic images were being produced in San Francisco as early as 1853 and shortly thereafter were available in outlying areas such as Sacramento and Marysville (Palmquist 1979: 90). The first firm date for the production of stereoscopic views in Sonora is 1856, when the Rulofson and Co. advertisement in the *Miners and Business Mens's Directory* [sic] boasted

We have invented our own plan for taking STEREOTYPES, and they cannot be equaled elsewhere. We have as large and well arranged lights, as good instruments, and as fine material as the world can produce. Call and see us. Prices reduced! [Heckendorn and Wilson 1856: 47].

But W. H. Rulofson may have opened his studio in Sonora as early as 1850, and by moving it quickly saved it from Sonora's disastrous fire of 1852. Rulofson eventually sold the studio to Daniel Sewell, who in turn sold it to the Thomas Wells family.

The stereographs under discussion were made by Rulofson during the 1856-1860 period.¹ Carrie Inch Segerstrom, descendant of the Burden family which arrived in Sonora in 1854, was a playmate of the Sewell girls, and knew both the Sewells and the Wellses as a child and young woman. It is thought that she acquired the images from the Sewells, rather than from Rulofson. The duplicates of three of the stereographs suggest that the images were commercially produced by Rulofson, and were part of the inventory he sold to Sewell. Carrie Segerstrom's son, the late Donald I. Segerstrom, inherited the stereographs as part of the family collection of historic photographs, books, and other materials dealing with the Mother Lode region, which he carefully maintained. His wife, Mrs. Mary Etta Segerstrom, continues to maintain this fine collection, and has provided background information on the collection (1982-1983). It is through her courtesy that the National Park Service, Yosemite National Park, was able to make copy negatives of the pieces and to present them here.

The stereographs bear no markings indicating the identification of the dancers or photographer, and as such we must rely on the identification provided by the Segerstrom collection. Although neither native dancers nor mid-19th century photographs were necessarily sessile, the identification of the dancers as Sierra Miwok appears to be accurate. The regalia combinations do not match with descriptions of such dress for the people

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Fig. 1. Miwok man, Sonora, California, ca. 1856-1860. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Etta Segerstrom. This and the following four images are each one side of the stereographic views made by Rulofson & Co., a Sonora, California, photographic firm. Copy negatives and prints by Michael Dixon, National Park Service, Yosemite National Park.



Fig. 2. A group of Miwok dancers, Sonora, California, ca. 1856-1860. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Etta Segerstrom.



Fig. 3. Two Miwok dancers, Sonora, California, ca. 1856-1860. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Etta Segerstrom.



Fig. 4. Miwok dancers, Sonora, California, ca. 1856-1860. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Etta Segerstrom.



Fig. 5. Miwok dancers on Washington Street, Sonora, California, ca. 1856-1860. Note that these dancers also appear in Fig. 4. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Etta Segerstrom.

south or east of the Miwok, nor are the specific styles of the flicker-quill bands and arrangements of certain regalia like those of the Maidu or other north-central California groups who use similar items. While details of the regalia of the more westerly groups, including the Costanoan, Bay Miwok, and Plains Miwok, are barely known (Bates 1982), the extant information for these people provides similarities only in general styles, rather than in specific details.

The five images, three of which are in duplicate, show Miwok people dressed in an array of ceremonial regalia. The images are quite varied, and some of the individuals appear in more than one of the views. A search of published materials regarding Miwok dances, unpublished field notes in several archival collections, and conversations since 1968 with Miwok people knowledgeable about ceremonial regalia have been used in an attempt to gain insight concerning the kinds of dances for which the individuals in the photographs are dressed. With few exceptions (cf. Gifford 1917, 1955; Merriam 1955), most available accounts give little detail on Miwok ceremonial dance regalia (cf. Barrett and Gifford 1933; Dixon 1903; Hudson 1899-1902; Kroeber 1925; Levy 1978; Maniery 1982).

Miwok ceremony undoubtedly underwent considerable change between the 1850s and the turn of the century, when ethnographers began collecting data on Miwok dances and when the oldest people now living participated in or saw dances taking place. Some documentation of changes in Miwok dances and regalia has been collected, and suggests dances and possibly also regalia were adopted from other groups on occasion. Certain dances were introduced to the Central Miwok as early as the 1850s by *Chiplichu* from Contra Costa County (Gifford 1926: 400-401, 1927: 230, 1955: 301), others were derived from native peoples near Pleasanton (Gifford 1926:

401-402, 1927: 230, 1955: 307). Still others spread from the Southern Maidu (Nisenan) at Colfax via the Northern Miwok to the Central Miwok (Gifford 1955: 317), while among the Miwok at Ione the patterns for certain ceremonial regalia, and presumably the ceremonies in which to use it, were purchased from Plains Miwok people at Lockford (Aginsky 1943: 457). In addition to such changes, the consolidation of individual tribelets into single settlements after the disruption of the Gold Rush period (Levy 1978: 410) must have altered at least some Miwok ceremonial practices. Such upheaval of cultural patterns was evident in the fall of 1906 when C. Hart Merriam attended the annual mourning ceremony held at the Northern Miwok village at Railroad Flat, where the dancers wore only parts of the regalia needed in the Kal-la-ah dance. "They complained that they should have had complete feather suits, but did not possess them" (Merriam 1955: 58). In a 1905 letter to C. C. Willoughby of the Peabody Museum, collector Grace Nicholson (personal communication to C. C. Willoughby 1905) related similar evidence of change in Miwok dance regalia secured at the Northern Miwok village of West Point:

As I have it from El Capitan, who is over 50 years of age, the dance had become obsolete, having been done away with for many years. There were a few old men still living who knew it. So Capt. Eph some 6 or 7 years ago got the old men to teach the young men, Capt. Eph included, the then almost forgotten dance, and also the making of the dance suit. One old man knew how to make the net, only one understood the weaving in of the feathers, and so among them they reconstructed the old time dress and revived the dances. It would be an absolute impossibility to get an old outfit, and in fact there was only this one complete suit in the possession of the few living members of the tribe . . .²

An additional factor contributing to the lack of knowledge about Miwok dance regalia

is the belief that it is endowed with supernatural power and only certain individuals are able to handle these objects. This, coupled with the practice of destroying dance regalia upon the death of the owner (Gifford 1926: 406), could easily have accounted for younger persons not having knowledge of the manufacture of such objects, as they may have only seen them in use and never actually handled them. The continuing importance of these practices is illustrated by a recent incident. In the late 1920s Mattie Jim, who late in life married Miwok doctor and dancer Pedro O'Connor, died. Pedro O'Connor reportedly did not bury her flicker-quill headbands with her, but saved them and gave them to his next wife, Lily. This break with tradition was considered so serious that into the 1980s Mattie's granddaughters, who held great respect for Pedro as a traditional healer and dancer, made no attempt to conceal their bitterness toward him for this transgression, although he had died in 1942 (Mary Cox, personal communications 1968-1976; Alice Pruitt, personal communications 1971-1981). The importance these relatives accorded dance regalia suggests not only its sanctity, but also its scarcity and value due to the lack of individuals trained in the nuances of its manufacture.

Period accounts provide us with little additional information about Miwok dances. One, however, gives us a tantalizing description of Miwok people dancing in the streets of Sonora between 1860 and 1868.

I must have been very young when the Digger Indians used to come into town and dance before the house. They wore high feather headdresses and had grotesque stripes painted on their chests, and would grunt and dance and whistle through long reeds until we threw down some dimes [Marston 1928: 249].

This description could readily apply to the persons seen in Figs. 2 and 3. Dancing in

the streets for money is substantiated for Central Miwok people in Sonora and Jamestown, where the Central Miwok performed the *Helikna* dance for money given by whites (Gifford 1955: 305). During the 1800s in nearby Columbia "... local Miwok Indians, adorned in feathers, shells, beads and body paint attracted spectators as they whistled and danced on the streets. A leader accompanied them with chants and rattles, while Miwok women circulated among the curious bystanders hoping for a contribution" (Dyer 1981: 43). The scene of the Miwok dancers in the street in Fig. 5, and their subsequent image taken inside the studio in Fig. 4, appears to suggest that at least these images, if not the others, are of Miwok people who were performing dances in the streets of Sonora.

A careful study of the dancers in the images reveals little that completely agrees with descriptions of individual Miwok dance regalia for particular dances, although the elements of regalia common to many Miwok dances—such as feather capes worn on the back, flicker-quill headbands, and headnets—are present. The few clues for what may be regalia for specific dances are as follows: Some dancers in Figs. 4 and 5, each painted with differing patterns of white paint and carrying bows and arrows, may be dressed for the Central Miwok version of the *Kalea* dance (Gifford 1955: 280). The rifle carried by one dancer may have been a replacement for the more traditional bow and arrows carried by the others. Persons in the front row in Fig. 2 could well be *woochi*, clowns who often wore necklaces of bird heads or skin (Gifford 1955: 270). The bird head held by the figure on the left in Fig. 2 may be the stuffed crane head held in the clown dance (Gifford 1955: 289). One dancer, second from the right in Fig. 4 and fourth from the right in Fig. 5, wears the flicker-quill headband over the top of the head as in the *Kilaki* and *Tula* dances (Gifford 1955: 285-286) as well as in the *Hewey* dance

among some of the Northern Miwok people at Ione (Bill Franklin, personal communication 1969).

While other pieces of regalia worn by the dancers can be identified, their use in so many Miwok dances precludes their assignment to specific ceremonial performances. One interesting feature, heretofore not reported for Miwok dance regalia, is present in the views. Thus, the two persons in the right rear of Fig. 5 and the right rear dancer in Fig. 4 hold Chinese feather dusters, apparently replacing the Miwok *makki* or feather wand. Such use of Chinese-manufactured dusters has been reported in other areas. Among the Blackfoot they are occasionally tied to the front of the "straight up" style of war bonnet (Dixon 1913: 79; Hungry Wolf 1975: 81, 1977: 209, 314, 315) and among at least one Pomo group, at Clear Lake, three dusters constitute the "horns" on the back of the bighead headpiece. Other non-Miwok items include a ceramic doll with cloth dress, suspended, for some unknown reason, on the chest of the man third from the right in the rear row of Fig. 4.

Identification of the species of bird feathers used in the regalia is difficult. The flicker-quill headbands worn by the male dancers appear to be of the tail, rather than wing, feathers of the common flicker (*Colaptes auratus*). This suggests that the Central Miwok people may, like the Northern Miwok at Railroad Flat, have reserved the use of tail-feather bands for male performers, while female dancers wore those of wing feathers (Mary Cox and Alice Pruitt, personal communication 1969). In Fig. 2, the man seated right of center has what appear to be mature red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) tail feathers on the uppermost portion of his feather cape, indicating a precise arrangement of feathers on the cape. The man seated next to him and the man behind him to the left evidently wear headpieces with the long cen-

ter tail feathers of the magpie (*Pica* sp.), probably lashed to quill extensions. This particular variant of the magpie headpiece was favored by Yokuts, Western Mono, and Owens Valley Paiute peoples in the late historic period. The large feather topknots worn by the three men in the right rear of Fig. 2 have white feather pendants attached with string, a style not recorded elsewhere for the Miwok or other groups using this style of topknot.

Other elements of Miwok culture, recorded in the literature but not often in photographic images or in collections, are evident. The reflexed sinew-backed bows all have a section of the bowstring wrapped with what must be beaver or otter fur, used to deaden the twang of the bowstring (Barrett and Gifford 1933: 215-216). Similar bows are rare in ethnographic collections, and no extant examples display these fur wrappings (Bates 1978). Quivers in the images appear to be of two types. One, the regular hunting quiver with the arrows protruding through the mouth of the cased fox skin, is carried by the man fourth from the right in Fig. 4 and fifth from the left in Fig. 5. The other style, most prominently displayed by the individuals in Fig. 2 (left center) and Fig. 3 (on the left) is remarkably similar in style to a quiver in the Lowie Museum of Anthropology (Fig. 6). This quiver came from a large collection originally located in Jackson, California, in Northern Miwok territory, and was associated with a reflex sinew-backed bow and arrows of the Miwok type. Although an identical mate is not described in the literature, it may be related to the ornamented hunting quivers mentioned by Barrett and Gifford (1933: 219) or it could have been used solely in dancing, much as were the ornamented dancing quivers of the Maidu and Patwin.

Other features, such as the handkerchief tied on the head of the man carrying the fox-skin quiver in Figs. 4 and 5, confirms the use of this cloth to replace a native-made

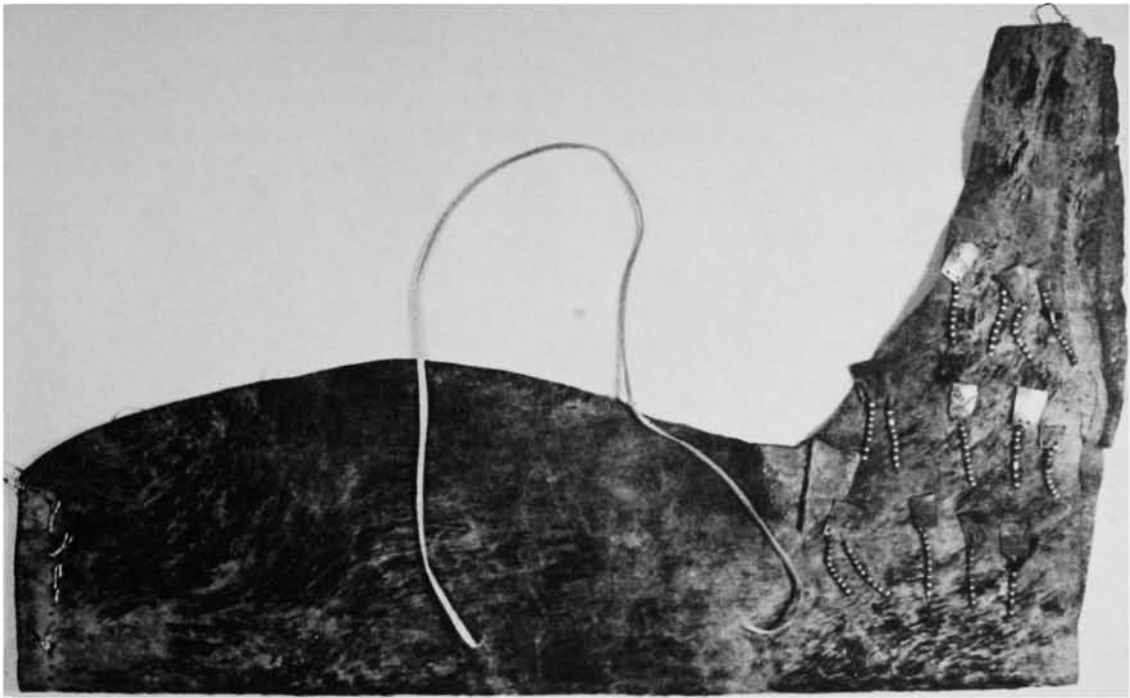


Fig. 6. Quiver, attributed to the Sierra Miwok. Unidentified animal skin, cotton thread, red wool cloth, black and white 4/0 Italian glass seed beads, large opaque white glass paste beads and green-centered, brick red exterior variants of the *cornaline d'Alep* glass beads, abalone shell ornaments. From the Blair Memorial Collection of Jackson, California. Cat. No. 1-71849. Courtesy of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.

headnet in dance regalia (John Kelly, personal communication 1968). Handkerchiefs have also been used in the same fashion by Miwok men while at work into the first third of the present century (Mrs. Dorothy Stanley, personal communication 1983; cf. also Fig. 7). Spanish-speaking Californians of the early 19th century favored wearing cloth bandanas on their heads (Colton 1948: 14; Wilkes 1958: 101), and by 1849 former Mission Indians living in Sonora, California, were wearing this same item of apparel (Perkins 1964: 106). Whether the Miwok replaced their headnet with the cloth bandana or emulated the Spanish-Californian style, is uncertain. Other elements of non-Miwok clothing include the collarless, loose-fitting shirt and loose-fitting pants of the man in Fig. 1,

common attire for Miwok men even in the 1870s. The puffy, drop-seam sleeves of the woman's dress in Fig. 2 are most reminiscent of dresses whose popularity soared in the period from 1835 to 1845, although the lack of detail in the view frustrates a more definite identification. Similar dresses were popular among Southern Miwok women at least through the 1870s (Wells 1982: 24-28).

Although we do not know what event or events led to the taking of these photographs, Miwok ceremonial regalia since that time may have changed so drastically that the performers' functions cannot be recognized today. The apparent incongruity of their dress may be based upon their dressing for dances held to entertain non-Miwok audiences for which, as with certain Maidu people, they may have



Fig. 7. Pedro O'Connor, Northern Miwok, 1906, Railroad Flat, California. Note the bandana tied covering his head. Photograph by S. A. Barrett, Negative No. 15-2716. Courtesy of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.

changed parts of their regalia to neutralize its sanctity (Bates and Bibby 1980: 63). While we will probably never know for just what dances these Miwok people dressed, the images remain a remarkable record of the Miwok people in the middle of the last century.

NOTES

1. There appears to have been some doubt in the late Mr. Segerstrom's opinion as to just when the images were made. When he donated a copy print of two of the images to the National Park Service, Yosemite National Park, in 1951 (Cat. Nos. 13,523 and 13,525) he identified them as 1856, and it was this date that was used when these two images were published by Bates (1978: Plates 1 and 2). In an article written by Mr. Segerstrom shortly before his death in 1973, he used one of the images and labeled it as "A group of Miwoks in Ceremonial dress, taken at the Wells Studio, Sonora, California 1858-1860" (Segerstrom 1973). When the image was published as an accompaniment to Stoddart's *Annals of Tuolumne County* (1963: 122) it was labeled "Typical California Indians of the Gold Rush Period." Hence the exact date of the images is unclear, and I have listed it as ca. 1856-1860.

2. The letter is on file at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., as Accession File Number 64513-21.

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