

Washoe grinding rock tells stories about Tahoe's past

By Kathryn Reed

Despite granite being the predominate rock in the Lake Tahoe Basin, it's not the best hard surface to use for grinding nuts into food because it breaks down and erodes.

This is one reason the Washoe Indians are believed to have had more than their share of gallstones, Darrel Cruz said. Cruz is the tribal historic preservation officer for the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California.

Walking behind Lake Tahoe Community College near Trout Creek is what locals call Indian Rock. It is an Indian grinding rock whose age is unknown. But it's likely the Washoe were using it into the 1950s before white settlers drove them out.



Darrel Cruz of the Washoe Tribe at the grinding rock behind Lake Tahoe Community College.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

The rock is called Lam.

“This is where the women grinded up seeds and food,” Cruz explained. The pounding tool that made the large divots – some 6 inches in diameter and a few inches deep – is a Goommum. The action and end result is what a modern mortar and pestle would produce.

The Bissec was another rock used by the Indians. This was more for grinding and produced the more shallow indentations on the rock. A push-pull action was used.

Women would sit or kneel as they did their work in what was their outdoor kitchen of sorts. Cruz said his grandmother preferred to sit while she worked hour after hour.

This area in the meadow the Washoe call the Mutushahoo Watah. It’s not an exact location, but the general area.

“There would have been a camp site there for a large part of the summer,” Cruz said. “(How long they would stay) all depends on the available resources.”

With this particular spot next to the creek, it would provide fresh water for cooking and a swimming hole for the children. Just like today, bear and coyote would meander through. Snowcapped mountains are in the distance and a forest of trees sets the perimeter.

What’s changed is the surrounding development and occasional horn reverberating from Highway 50.



Indentations

in the granite
are from the
Washoe making
food.

This rock in the middle of the meadow is there for anyone to see – and walk on. The Washoe prefer it not be a jungle gym, but they also know that with so much of their past on land they don't own, it's impossible to protect all facets of their history.

"We have so many of these places scattered all over," Cruz said of rocks like this one.

One day Cruz envisions working with the city and college to create signs explaining the history of the area and the rock in particular.

Until then, he hopes people will understand this slab of granite is more than just a rock to the Washoe people.

Students at LTCC and in Lake Tahoe Unified School District have been the beneficiaries of the rock being a teaching tool. To this the Washoe see no conflict or sense of disrespect.

"I think most of the Washoe people hold places like this as still important to them," Cruz said.