

**Primary Source for *Friendly Fire***

**From *The Shirley Letters*  
*from the California Mines, 1851-1852***

by Louisa Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe

Among the most perceptive of the observers of the scene in the 1850s was Mrs. Louisa Clappe whose delightful letters to her sister were published in 1854-1855 as *The Shirley Letters* and are still in print. Her observations of the Native Americans, probably Maidu-speaking peoples of the Feather River area, are particularly instructive of the way prejudice influenced even the most acute reporters on the scene. Here is a passage in her first letter:

On Monday the eighth of September (1851) . . . we passed one place where a number of Indian women were gathering flower-seeds, which, mixed with pounded acorns and grasshoppers, forms the bread of these miserable people. The idea, and the really ingenious mode of carrying it out, struck me as so singular, that I cannot forbear attempting a description. These poor creatures were entirely naked with the exception of a quantity of grass bound round the waist and covering the thighs midway to the knees perhaps. Each one carried two brown baskets, (which I have since been told are made of a species of osier) woven with a neatness which is absolutely marvelous, when one considers that they are the handiwork of such degraded wretches. Shaped like a cone, they are about six feet in circumference at the opening, and I should judge them to be nearly three feet in depth. It is evident by the grace and care with which they handle them that they are exceedingly light. . . .

One of these queer baskets is suspended from the back and is kept in place by a thong of leather passing across the forehead. The other they carry in the right hand, and wave over the flower seeds, first to the right and back again to the left alternately, as they walk slowly along, with a motion as regular and monotonous as that of a mower. When they have collected a handful of seeds, they pour them into the basket behind, and continue this work until they have filled the latter with their strange harvest. The seeds thus gathered are carried to their rancherias and stowed away with great care for winter use. It was, to me, very interesting to watch their regular motion, they

seemed so exactly to keep time with each other; and with their dark shining skins, beautiful limbs and lithe forms, they were by no means the least picturesque feature of the landscape.

The most telling feature of this passage is the chasm between the vivid, sympathetic description of these women and the gratuitous, judgmental adjectives she thoughtlessly imports to demean her subjects.

How are these people “miserable”? Their dress seems to be appropriately light for a September day in the Sierra foothills. I wince to imagine how Dame Shirley herself, dressed and bound as a proper middle-class woman of 1851, must have been suffering in the heat. The movements of the native women are described as economical and graceful and so one can guess that they are being carried out with pleasure. The group's movements are coordinated, but there seems to be nothing forced about this either, so it is likely that there is further pleasure gained from the cooperative spirit of the food gathering.

By what evidence are we to believe that these are “poor creatures”? We see them doing something that is both useful and beautiful in its carrying out. There is not a shred of evidence that they are suffering either mentally or bodily.

If we subtract her terms “miserable people,” “poor creatures,” and “degraded wretches,” there remains no way we could reach these judgements based upon the evidence that Dame Shirley so carefully presents.

Aside from the scantiness of their costume (which white women will mimic a hundred years later with their shorts) what right does Dame Shirley have to call them “degraded?” The evidence is all to the contrary. They are comfortable, they are graceful, they are useful, they are enjoying themselves while pursuing an important task, they have mastered the difficult and aesthetic craft of making strong, easily carried baskets that are “exceedingly light.”

From: Clappe, Louisa Amelia Knapp Smith, 1852, *The Shirley Letters from the California Mines, 1851-1852*, New York, Knopf, 1949.