

# **The Yokuts Indians**

by Mary Ann Brensel

## **CHILDHOOD**

New parents carefully watched their tiny babies to make sure they stayed warm and dry. Usually a baby was strapped into a cradle and tied to the mother's back so she could have the baby with her while she worked.

Children were taught good behavior, traditions, and tribal rules from the time they were babies. Young children were punished lightly, but older children were punished more if they did not follow the rules.

Fathers made their sons small bows and arrows so the boys could improve their hunting skills. They practiced shooting at frogs or chipmunks. When a boy killed his first animal, he was not allowed to touch or eat it. Others carried the animal home, and the people in the village cooked and ate it. This tradition taught boys that they should always share food with the tribe.

Mothers taught their daughters how to cook and make baskets. When girls played together, they sometimes played with dolls made of tules or had contests to see who could make a basket the fastest.

## **BASKETRY**

Yokuts women made beautiful baskets of all shapes and sizes. Baskets were used for gathering and storing food, for carrying babies, and even for hauling water. Some baskets were so tightly woven that not a drop of water would leak from them. The Yokuts women wove interesting designs into the baskets. The design used most often was the rattlesnake pattern. Sometimes they also wove designs of quail, geese, trees, the sun, the moon, and the stars into baskets. The most often used colors were black, white, tan, and red.

The baskets were made from coiled tule reeds that grew near rivers and lakes. The Yokuts women could only use reeds that were no more than one year old because older reeds would not bend as well. The women began by digging up tule roots with a pointed digging stick. Then they split the roots into three different pieces equal in size and length. Next they scraped the root splits smooth. The shorter lengths were twisted together to start the coil for the basket.

Once the coil was long enough, the coiling process continued until the sides were built up as high as needed. Some of the different baskets the Yokuts women made were berry-gathering baskets, burden baskets, and ceremonial baskets.

The berry-gathering basket was a small basket. It was only five inches wide and eight to nine inches deep. It had a buckskin handle to make it easier to carry. It hung around the neck and usually rested on the woman's back. When it was not berry picking season, the basket hung in the house to hold odds and ends.

The burden basket was used for gathering acorns and other materials. It was shaped like a cone and was about three feet long and two feet across the mouth of the basket. This sturdy basket could hold up to 150 pounds of acorns. It attached to the woman's headband and was carried on her back when it was full.

One of the ceremonial baskets the Yokuts women made was the Rattlesnake basket. These baskets were filled with rattlesnakes and used during the Rattlesnake Dance in the spring.

## **GAMES**

Yokuts adults and children liked to play many different games. One favorite game was called the hand game. Each team started with a row of 10-12 sticks. One team passed two small sticks behind them – one was black and one was white. Then all the members of the team held their hands in front of them. The other team had to guess which person was hiding the black stick in his hand. If they guessed right, they got to keep the other team's stick. The game was over when one team had all of the other team's sticks.

Shinny was another game the Yokuts liked to play. They used a ball made of an oak burl that was about the size of a tennis ball. They placed the ball on a small mound in the middle of the field. Then each team tried to get the ball into their own goal by hitting it with sticks. It was a very rough game.

A game that the men and older boys liked to play was the pole and hoop game. The purpose of the game was to improve their hunting skills. Two people rolled a hoop back and forth between themselves. As the hoop rolled by, men

and boys on the side tried to throw their poles through the hoop. Sometimes the game was played with spears.

One of the favorite games played by the Yokuts children was called Bear. One child was the bear, and the other children ran from him. When someone was tagged, that person became a bear and helped tag other people. This continued until all the children had been tagged. The last child tagged was the bear for the next game.

## **MUSIC & DANCE**

Singing and dancing were important parts of the Yokuts' everyday life. They changed songs when they played games. Women sang to their babies while they worked. The men sang and danced when they performed ceremonial dances such as the Rainmaking Ceremony and the Rattlesnake Dance. During the Rainmaking Ceremony, the rainmaker wore a feathered skirt and headdress. He painted his body black and decorated himself with white feathers. He danced around a fire and burned herbs as he sang his magic songs.

The Rattlesnake Dance was performed in the spring. The Yokuts hoped it would keep them safe from rattlesnakes as they collected seeds and berries during the summer. They would not kill a rattlesnake because they believed that it was the helper of the Keeper of the Hereafter. The Yokuts believed that the rattlesnake's business was to spy on them and report anyone who broke the rules of the tribe.

The Yokuts used very few musical instruments. The most popular rhythm instrument was the clapper. Rattles were also used as rhythm instruments. Yokuts used few, if any, drums. They beat two sticks together or beat on a log with a stick to keep time.