

The Yokuts Indians

by Mary Ann Brensel

TRANSPORTATION

Boats, rafts, and walking were the Yokuts' main forms of transportation. The boats and rafts were made from tules that grew near lakes and rivers. They were able to hold two to four people. The Yokuts made the boats in spring and early summer and built them upside-down. They dried and hardened the poles of the boat over a fire. That made the poles strong and practically waterproof. The boats were sometimes 50 feet long, 10 feet wide, and four feet deep.

FOOD

The Yokuts ate a great variety of food. They had fish, birds, elk, deer, antelope, rabbit, grasses, nuts, berries, and seeds of all kinds. The seeds, nuts, and berries were gathered during spring and summer. Some were eaten fresh, and some were dried and stored for the winter. The Yokuts women were in charge of gathering, preparing, and cooking the food.

The main food of the Yokuts was acorns. Each fall, Yokuts women and children hiked to groves of oak trees in the foothills. They gathered the fallen acorns and put them in burden baskets. The women attached the burden baskets to their headbands and carried the acorns home.

Next they spread the acorns out in the sun to dry. When the acorns were dry, the Yokuts stored them in other baskets, sometimes for months. Later women and children cracked the acorns open with stones to take off the hard shells. Then they used stone bowls and pounding stones called mortars and pestles to grind the "insides" of the acorn into a wet powder called acorn meal. The women dug shallow holes in the ground and then lined them with grape leaves. Next they sifted the meal and put it in the holes. Then they poured boiling water over the meal several times to take the bitterness out. This was called leaching. After the meal was leached, it was left to dry.

As it dried, the meal formed a crust. It was easy to lift this layer from the hole. The women mixed some of this dried meal with water to make dough.

They patted the dough into cakes and put them on hot stones to bake acorn bread.

Yokuts women also made acorn mush with the meal. They mixed it with water and cooked it in tightly woven baskets. The water was heated by dropping red-hot rocks into the baskets. When the water boiled, they stirred the mush constantly so the hot rocks would not burn through the bottom of the basket. Acorn meal is rich and nourishing. The Yokuts people depended on the oak trees to give them acorns every year.

CLOTHING

The Yokuts dressed in very simple clothes. Young children wore nothing at all except in the cold winter months. Then they would put on simple clothes made from rabbit and other animal skins. The women and older girls wore short skirts made out of the hides of deer, antelope, and rabbits. They also wove skirts from nettle, hemp, and milkweed fiber. Sometimes the women wove beads into their skirts or put long feathers around them.

The men wore a breechcloth made from soft deerskin. They tied it around their waist and folded it over in front of them. Each breechcloth was about four feet long. The men painted it with designs that were symbols of the tribe or family.

Both men and women wore narrow headbands to hold their hair away from their faces. The headbands were decorated with seeds and feathers. Necklaces, earrings, and armbands were made of seeds and feathers, too.

In the winter, all the Yokuts wore fur blankets around their shoulders. They used the skins of mountain lions, deer, rabbits, and wild cats to make these warm blankets. Sometimes they made blankets out of feathers from swans, geese, pelicans, and ducks. They only wore these feather blankets when it was pouring down rain. The blankets were held together with a pointed stick or a long feather from a goose, pelican, or swan. They never used a feather from an eagle or a condor because these birds were sacred to them.

The Yokuts went barefoot most of the time. They did not need shoes because they lived in grassy areas and it was only cold in the winter. During very cold weather, they wrapped animal skins around their feet to keep them warm.

SHELTER

In the San Joaquin Valley, the Yokuts built different types of shelters. The permanent pole house was very common. Some were built for just one family. Others were made for up to 10 families. To make a pole house, the Yokuts started by digging a circular hole into the ground for a floor. The circle for a single family was usually 12 to 15 feet across and was dug about two feet into the ground. The framework for the house was made out of poles about two inches thick. The poles were set into the ground around the inside edge of the hole. Then other poles were tied to the standing poles. The tips of the standing poles were pulled together at the top and bent down and tied to poles opposite them. The houses had a circular opening at the top to allow smoke to escape from a fire inside. Each house had a low rectangular door that faced south.

Mats of tules were laid over the pole frame. Water was added to some of the loose dirt that had been dug out to form the floor. Then it was thrown on top of the tule mats and beaten down with sticks. When the mud dried, it formed a tight, strong covering over the tule mats and poles. Over time, wild grasses grew on the houses' mud covering, and they blended into their surroundings. It seemed to early travelers in the San Joaquin Valley that Yokuts came running out of the ground like rabbits from burrows.

The Yokuts also built other types of shelters. The long tule mat-covered community house was the largest. It was sometimes 300 feet long and from the outside looked like a long tent.

Many families might live in the community house. Sometimes the people of an entire village would live together in such a house. The house had a steep roof and straight sides made of poles. Small cut-off branches were left on the poles so they could be used as hooks. Strings of dried meat, acorns, fish, personal belongings, camping equipment, and bows and arrows were hung from them. The north wall of the house was completely covered with several layers of tule mats. The doorways were along the south side. There were no walls inside the house to make rooms, but each family had its own space, its own door, and its own fire circle.

On the Upper Tule River, some Yokuts built their winter houses from poles tied together at the top and covered with tule mats. A hole was left at the top so that smoke could escape. The houses were placed in very straight rows and looked like the teepees of the Plains Indians.

When the Yokuts were traveling or in temporary camps, they built smaller and less permanent houses or shelters. Some were just windbreaks made of brush or tules. Shade roofs were built in the areas where the women cooked food to provide shelter from the weather. They were not permanent shelters but often were used as a sleeping place for families at food-gathering camps. These shelters had domed roofs made of brush and had no walls.

A larger shelter, a grinding booth, was built over large bedrock mortars. The mortars were too heavy and big to move, so the women went there to grind their acorns into meal. The shelter made everyday grinding possible even if there was bad weather.

The Yokuts believed that it was good to wash their bodies. They swam often and bathed in the river, and they built sweat lodges in each village. Only men and boys of the tribe were allowed to go into the sweat lodges. Most sweat lodges were small, so fires quickly heated up the inside. Yokuts tribes who lived in the foothills had sweat lodges that were dome-shaped. Sweat lodges were about 18 feet across and about 8 feet tall in the center. There was no smoke hole, so the smoke left the lodge through the door that was left uncovered. Men and boys sometimes slept in the sweat lodges if their own homes were too crowded.