

The Yokuts Indians

by Mary Ann Brensel

The Yokuts Indians lived in the part of California that we now call the Central Valley. Some of the early settlers called it the *Valle de los Tulares*, which means the *Valley of the Tules*. The valley was given this name because of the tules that grew on the shores of rivers and lakes.

The Yokuts lived in tribes. Each tribe had several villages with about 500 people in each group. Each tribe had a name, a language, and a territory where the people lived. The River Yokuts lived in Tulare County. They had lived in this area for hundreds of years. Tribal government was the same among all the tribes. Each tribe's language was a little different, but tribes could communicate. The Yokuts visited, traded, and married among the different villages.

All tribes lived near water. Streams and rivers were important, especially for hunting and fishing. Animals came to drink water, and that meant more food for the tribe to eat. Also, transportation by boat was often easier than walking long distances.

Yokuts villages and hunting grounds had boundaries, but no fences. Mountains, rivers, and other landmarks usually marked the tribe's boundaries. The size of a tribe's territory had to be large enough to supply food to every person in the tribe.

Most of the Yokuts were friendly and peaceful. They were tall and strong with straight black hair and brown skin. The Yokuts lived a simple life and depended on the land for food, clothes, and shelter.

Yokuts homes were one room like a tent. They were usually made of tules that grew in the swampy areas around Tulare Lake. There was no furniture. People sat and slept on mats on the floor. The kitchen was outside.

Tribal life was similar in each Yokuts village. The men hunted and fished, and the women took care of the children, gathered nuts and seeds, and prepared the food. During their early childhood, the children stayed close to their mothers. When they were older, the boys were taught to hunt by their fathers. The mothers taught their daughters basketry and cooking. Children and adults also

enjoyed playing games. There was so much food available that the people could live easily without working too hard.

The old people in the Yokuts tribe told stories to teach the children the tribe's values and beliefs. Music and dance were an important part of all their celebrations and special occasions. The Lonewis ceremony honored those who had died each year.

The Yokuts used beads as money to trade with other California Indian tribes. They also traded animal skins and baskets. They traveled by foot, raft, or boat to reach these other tribes.

After California became a state in 1850, settlers from other states moved into the area. Settlers from the countries of Germany, Scotland, and Ireland moved here, too. Growth happened so fast that the River Yokuts had no time to prepare.

At first the Yokuts asked the settlers in the Central Valley to leave, but they wouldn't. Some Yokuts fought the settlers, but they still did not leave. Soon the settlers had houses made of wood and bricks. Settlers needed cows and horses for food and transportation. Cows and horses ate up much of the native grasses. Wild animals had less to eat. The Yokuts had less to eat, too.

Settlers put up fences for their cows and horses. Coyotes, foxes, deer, and other wild animals were no longer free to roam. Sometimes settlers killed the wild animals for no reason and wasted the meat.

The Yokuts lost their land and their food supply. The United States government created the Tule River Indian Reservation for the Yokuts to live on. They could no longer hunt or gather acorns anywhere they liked.

Today there are cities and villages where Yokuts hunting grounds once were. Dams stop the rivers that used to flow into Tulare Lake. There are few large wild animals outside the mountains.

About 400,000 people live in Tulare County. Most of them speak English, and many speak Spanish. Some people speak both languages. Sadly, only 78 people in all of California speak the Yokuts language now.