

CHAPTER II

The Yokuts

When Pedro Fages first glimpsed the San Joaquin Valley as he crossed through the Tehachapi Mountains, what a sight he must have seen! The mountains of the Sierra presented their snow-capped peaks in a chain continuing for hundreds of miles. Off to the west he would have been able to see the Coast Range in the distance. Before him lay the vast, unbroken expanse of the San Joaquin Valley. The valley floor is carpeted with lush grasses and speckled with wildflowers. Tule elk, antelope, and deer are plentiful and roam freely. Near the rivers and around Tulare Lake waterfowl can be observed in great numbers. Beavers and other small animals carry on their own hunting and fishing activities.

When Pedro Fages arrived, this lush valley was home to two major Indian tribes. These were peaceful people who could live comfortably with the abundance of wildlife, water, and plant varieties which surrounded them. In the southern part of the valley, Fages would have encountered the Yokuts. They occupied the area on the valley floor from the Tehachapis in the south to Stockton in the north. If Fages traveled north from the Fresno River to the Sacramento Valley and into the northern foothills, he would have been among the Miwok.

Since the Yokuts were the Indians who occupied the area around Reedley, attention will now be focused on them. It should be pointed out that another group of Indians, the Monaches, lived in the mountains above Fresno, so Fresno County was occupied by two tribal groups. The two groups had very similar ways of living.

The Yokuts were unique among California Indians because their social structure differed from other tribes. This “tribe” was divided into about 50 smaller tribes, containing 300 to 400 people each. Although all were Yokuts, the tribes differed from each other in language dialect, territory, and name. The languages between the tribes were of different dialects but could be readily understood by members of other groups. Those who were more isolated in the foothills did develop more distinctive language patterns than those who interacted with other groups on a regular basis. The tribe living in the area on the Kings River from below Reedley to Centerville and in the Sanger area were the Wechikit.

These people did not farm in any way but instead acquired their food through hunting and gathering. The men hunted the plentiful wildlife, preferring to hunt in groups. They used various kinds of weapons and strategies. They used bows and arrows, nooses, and traps for elk, antelope, deer, and bears. They developed traps and nets for smaller animals and some birds. Nets and harpoons were used for catching fish. The Indians were creative and skilled hunters. Sometimes bears would be shot at night while eating acorns under a full moon. Waterfowl were sometimes flushed by lighting fires in the underbrush. Decoys were also used in bird hunting.

The acorn was a staple in the Yokuts diet. Since the men did the hunting and fishing, it was the responsibility of the women, children, and elderly to gather the acorns and other plant foods. The acorns had to go through a rather extensive process to remove the poisonous tannins before they were edible. Once they were properly treated, the acorns were ground into flour which was used to make cakes, breads, and cereals.

Other types of food readily available to the valley Indians included roots, nuts, berries, grasses, eggs, and insects. The abundance and variety of foods provided the Yokuts with a good diet and they enjoyed good health. Their food was stored in small granaries outside of each house.

The Yokuts are considered by some authorities to be the best basket makers of all Indians (Nickel, 1961, p. 9). Their baskets were made by both coiling and turning. Some were so well made that they held water. The baskets were made in a great variety of sizes and shapes and some were colorfully patterned. The baskets were useful for cooking, carrying a great variety of foodstuffs, carrying or holding babies, storage, and other purposes.

Since the best food supplies were near the rivers and lakes, the villages developed nearby. The types of buildings constructed varied from one locality to another.

The Indians of the Reedley area lived in elliptical or conical shaped buildings. The buildings were 10 to 20 feet in diameter. They were set into a circular hole dug as much as two feet deep. The elliptical structures were created by placing willow poles upright in a circle around the edges of the dug-out area, then bending the tops over and tying them together to create a half-circle. The frame was then covered with layers of "tules," or grasses, taken from the nearby river or lake. The thick layer of tules was then covered with a layer of dirt. Within a few years, grass would grow over the entire surface.

Some of the foothill Indians changed this design slightly by leaning the poles against a central pole and then tying them together at the top. The conical structures were then covered with cedar bark, pieces of pine, or weeds.

All living structures had two openings, one for the people to enter and exit and one to allow smoke to escape. The floor was covered with thick mats of tules, piled thicker against the walls for sleeping. Very little time was spent inside the houses except for sleeping. All cooking, eating, and socializing was done outside.

The living structures were arranged in rows in villages. The villages also included a sweathouse where the men gathered for recreation and relaxation. Large buildings, sometimes partially dug into the ground and covered with a thatched roof, served as community meeting halls. Another common structure in the valley Indian villages was a shade porch. This was a simple structure consisting mainly of four poles and a flat roof. The roof was covered with brush. This porch was used for cooking and eating as well as other activities and served as protection from the hot valley sun.

The social structure of the Yokuts was unique in that the larger group was composed of 50 or so distinct smaller tribes, as mentioned earlier. At the head of each of the smaller tribes was a hereditary chief who carried out the administrative duties of his tribe. He was assisted by a messenger who helped with communication between the various villages and usually became the next chief. The chief was responsible for punishing wrongdoers, making laws, lending money, and organizing feasts and celebrations.

The chiefs were not necessarily the leaders in times of war between the tribes. Although generally peaceful people, when hostilities would arise a special leader was chosen for his skill as a warrior.

Battles were uncommon between most of the tribes because their quality of life depended on an intricate barter system which had been developed between the various groups.

They exchanged products hard to find in one area for those of another, at times traveling great distances. One group would trade fish for acorns or arrow points or animal skins.

The social customs of the Yokuts placed great importance on commemorating certain events in life. Particularly unusual was the special treatment afforded both parents upon the birth of a child. The mother was forbidden to do any work, even cooking. The father was also required to rest and could not hunt. Since they were forbidden from gathering or preparing their own food, special foods were prepared and brought to them. The period of time they received this special treatment varied from a couple of weeks to several months, depending on the tribe.

When a young man was interested in marrying, he expressed his intentions to the girl's family by making a gift of some special beads. During the first year of marriage he lived with the bride's family. This was made awkward by the fact that he was not permitted to look at or speak directly to the bride's mother during the entire time.

These Indians enjoyed numerous types of recreational activities. They played their own version of football with a wooden ball. Another game, called "Shinney," was comparable to field hockey. Foot racing was popular and competitions were held between the villages. The game of darts was a favorite and everybody enjoyed guessing games. The women played dice games, using nut shells for dice. The Yokuts also held great feasts and dances and enjoyed story-telling.

These were religious people. They marked special occasions with ceremonial prayers. At the time of death, ceremonies were conducted. The bodies were cremated and the ashes buried in the village where the person had been born. The family entered into a month-long period of mourning. To formally conclude the time of mourning, a festival of joy was held.

Due to the moderate climate of the San Joaquin Valley during most of the year, clothing for the Yokuts was simple. The men wore a brief loin cloth made of buckskin. The women wore a simple skirt, also of buckskin. They wore shoes only for long journeys. During the winter a rabbit fur blanket was sometimes worn to protect them from the cold. The children did not bother with clothes at all except in cold weather.

As mentioned in Chapter I, the arrival of the foreigners spelled a painful and amazingly rapid end to the idyllic life of the Indians of the San Joaquin Valley. The changes in lifestyle presented by the foreigners placed heavy demands on food supplies and wildlife. An even greater factor in the destruction of the Indians, however, was the introduction of diseases from which they had no immunity. The old remedies which had proven successful for them in the past were now useless or, in the case of the sweathouse, a fatal mistake. Prior to the arrival of the foreigners, illnesses were often treated by spending time in the sweathouse followed by a swim in the Kings. With the new diseases, such as smallpox and measles, this hot and cold combination was fatal. Venereal disease was also rampant.

Beyond the diseases introduced by the foreigners, their physical treatment of the Indians was also cruel and inhumane. Indians were sometimes kidnapped from their villages, sold into slavery, and often tortured.

The Indians at the missions did not fare well either. Disease took many lives within the compounds. Little concern was shown for providing an adequate diet for the Indians or for allowing them to secure their own food. The Indians who managed to escape from this difficult life and return to the valley brought with them various diseases. A major malaria epidemic in the early 1830s is thought to have been started this way.

Frightened by the diseases which were rapidly decreasing their numbers and angry at the foreigners depleting their food supplies, the Indians became increasingly violent. They were fighting to save the last vestiges of their once peaceful, simple lifestyle. Though the fight was valiant, the effort was futile against the great numbers of foreigners with their sophisticated weapons. The battles of the years 1850-1851 were particularly bloody and destructive. These have become known as the Mariposa Indian Wars.

In April 1851, the Indian leaders and representatives of the federal government met to negotiate a satisfactory treaty for all parties. The document, called "A Treaty of Peace and Friendship," stipulated several conditions for the Indians. They were to stop fighting and relocate to a tract of land to be known as the Fresno River Reservation. Food and clothing would be provided for them. As this new form of life began for the Indians on the reservation, a new problem appeared--easy access to liquor. Many of the Indians then succumbed to the disease of alcoholism. Indians who disobeyed the rules of the reservation or caused dissension were often punished by being auctioned off to the highest bidder as slaves.

The Fresno River Reservation grew extremely crowded as Indians were brought to it from throughout the San Joaquin Valley. Conditions became intolerable and unrest grew. Seeing the seriousness of the problem there and throughout other parts of the valley, the government decided that a major show of force was needed to discourage the rebellious Indians. This helped briefly, but conditions continued to worsen.

Throughout the remainder of the decade the Indians remained subdued, suffering from disease, malnutrition, alcoholism, and idleness. Their numbers dwindled. As new groups were rounded up and brought to the reservation they faced the same deprivation. Finally, in 1859,

the reservation was abandoned. The Indians sought refuge in the foothill and mountain areas. This spelled the end of the reservation period, but it was also the end of any organized Indian social structure in Fresno County. The once proud, peaceful people now scattered, trying to reconcile themselves to the new social order.

This was a sad time in the history of the San Joaquin Valley for the Indians. For others entering the valley for the first time, however, this was a time of great hope and optimism. They saw this as a chance to realize their dreams. These were the new pioneers.