

SIERRA-FOOTHILL



25th Anniversary Article: A village Within the McKenzie Table Mountain

Preserve This Article Contributed by Allen Beck

It is midwinter in the village nestled below Table Mountain. The location is ideal for a large village: reliable water, gentle slopes, warm sun, abundant resources. Well over 100 mortars grace the granite bedrock and boulders, mortars in which acorns, berries and seeds were pounded. These lower foothills were home to Yokuts (meaning People) tribes. The Dumna tribe lived on the San Joaquin River near Millerton. The Kechayi were the next tribe upriver and one source indicates they also lived in valleys to the south. Another Yokuts tribe, the Gashowu, lived away from the river along the dry creeks of Fresno County.

The village sits at the interface of the Kechayi and the Gashowu, on the watershed of Little Dry Creek and an easy walk, by native standards, through a gap in the Table to the salmon rich river. The Gashowu and Kechayi were important to each other. Yokuts tribes and their uphill neighbors, the Mono, often intermarried, enjoyed each other's celebrations and shared resources. Exact boundaries probably were not as important then as now.

It is winter. Spring and early summer brought seeds and greens, berries and plentiful salmon. The harvest of acorns, pine nuts and the smaller salmon run occurred in late summer and fall. These were the times of intertribal gatherings, singing, dancing, gambling and ceremony. The winter was a time of reliance on stored foods. Acorns were the major staple, and the blue oak (*Quercus douglasii*) surrounding the village generally provided a plentiful crop. A tasty acorn from the black oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) was received from Mono people. Acorns were retrieved from granaries, pounded into flour, leached of its bitterness, and cooked into gruel and bread. The stores of acorns had to be protected from weather and from rodents, birds and bears. The nuts of the foothill pine (*Pinus sabiniana*), seeds of many plants, and dried berries and salmon were also stored.

Buckeye (*Aesculus californica*) nuts from the surrounding hills were also harvested but required special leaching and are not nearly as tasty. They were more important in years when acorn yield was low. However, the buckeye tree was extremely important to all people of California; it was the source of fire. Its use in fire drills was especially important at this time of year.

Winter was a time to stay close to these fires. A time for women to use the materials that they gathered the previous seasons, deergrass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), white root (*Carex barbarae*) and redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) to weave their fine baskets. It was a time for men to fashion and rework obsidian acquired from the Mono into arrowheads and various cutting and scrapping tools; a time to repair their bows of juniper and cedar, also from people to the east. It was a time for children to listen to skilled orators who moved through the villages and spoke well into the night of the adventures of the very first people, the animals of power. It was a time to be close to family, a time to stay close to the village.