

National Archives and Records Administration

Pacific Region

Resources for Teaching History in California

California Indian Acorn Culture

Primary Source Documents

California Indians continued to prepare and consume acorns in their traditional ways well into the 20th century, as documented and photographed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the agency responsible for administering the Federal Government's treaty and trust responsibilities towards Native Americans. The following captioned photographs show aspects of acorn storage and preparation as practiced by Mono and Chuckchansy Indians of Fresno and Madera Counties, California, in about 1923.

Citation: National Archives Record Group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Sacramento Area Office. Coded Records Relating to Programs and Administration, 1910-1958, Box 44, file "Survey of Fresno and Madera Counties, L. D. Creel, ca. 1920," NARA Pacific Region, San Francisco.

1. The acorn now supplies fifty per cent of the bread food of the Indians of Madera and Fresno Counties. Formerly it supplied all of the bread. This photo shows the method of preserving the acorns from the weather and inroad of wild and domestic animals. A wicker basket is woven loosely and placed on the platform above the ground high enough to keep larger animals out of reach. The baskets are filled with acorns in the early Autumn and the thatch is placed over each basket. The supply is drawn out as needed from week to week. Enough acorns are husked, ground and made into mush sufficient to last a family for about ten days. The acorns of the black and white oak are valued the highest, although in times of scarcity those of the water oak and other oaks are used.



2. Old Indian woman preparing acorn meal. The black oak acorn is much richer in fat than that of the white oak and these older Indians grind up the two varieties at the same time and blend the flour. They make a brush from the fiber of a plant called the soap weed which is used for three purposes. They use this brush to brush the flour out of these holes into the baskets and they also use them to wash the baskets after they are used in preparing the mush or soup. No household soap is used in cleansing the baskets. A bulb of the green soap weed is rubbed over the basket as we would use a cake of soap and followed up with this brush which makes a clean job. Also the basket is preserved from wear and tear.



3. Acorn caches of Mrs. Henry Towatt. This cache was built on a platform in the branches of a tree following their old custom of building them very high up. Although the family is one of the most progressive of any I met, the acorn is a matter of regular diet. She told me that the regular Indian diet before the advent of the whites was acorn mush and meat. She gave me an Indian dinner of this mush and canned corn beef. The mush was very palatable and must be very nutritious.



4. Acorn cache of the Mono Indians. Note the acorns showing through the wicker work. From ten to fifteen bushels are sometimes stored in these granaries. Were it not for the acorns these Indians would have a hard time for bread food, as they do not understand how to combine the substitutes with white flour to make satisfactory bread. The food controller of Fresno county allowed the country storekeepers to produce the substitutes to [sic] Indians on account of their using acorns as substitutes for fifty per cent or more of their bread food.



5. This is [a] Chuckachancy [sic] Indian woman preparing acorns for grinding. Some of the acorns may be seen lying on the platform. Removing the hull of the acorn is a slow and difficult operation. The shell is sometimes cracked with a small stone and the hulls picked off but often they are moved by the teeth of the women. This woman was probably seventy-five or -eight years of age, yet she was removing the shells with her teeth which were absolutely perfect.



6. Baskets used in the preparation of mush and bread from the acorn. These Indians are the most expert basket makers now living and their baskets demand high prices. After the acorns are ground into meal a mound of white sand is built about eighteen inches in height for feet in diameter, flattened at the top and hollowed out. A cloth is spread over this, the acorn flour distributed evenly around and covered with small fir boughs. During this time a number of round stones have been heating in a nearby fire. Water is placed in one of the baskets and heated by these stones until moderately hot when the water is poured through these fir boughs onto the meal for the purpose of leaching out the bitter principle contained in the acorn. As soon as this is thoroughly leached the meal is placed in another basket and it is filled with water and boiled by transferring these hot rocks to the basket and reheating them as fast as they are cooled by the mush. This is kept up until it is thoroughly cooked. Enough is cooked to last the family about a week or ten days. The mush is kept in a basket. From meal to meal a portion is dipped out into a smaller basket and reduced to a thin gruel or soup, which is eaten in smaller baskets.



7. Community Mill for grinding acorn meal. This is a large flat granite boulder upon which there are several holes which serve as mortars. The stones noted lying on this boulder and standing up in the holes are used as pestles. As it takes a great deal of time to reduce the acorns to fine meal or flour and all of the work must be done out of doors, a windbreak is built around the boulder from brush and a sort of wickiup is built over it to shield the women from the sun. If these Indian communities could have one or more of the small iron hand mills now upon the market, a great deal of labor would be saved.

