

PATWIN HOUSES

BY

W. C. MCKERN

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INTRODUCTION

The underground house of the Central culture area of California adheres to a general type over a comparatively large territory. Interesting and important differences in detail existed, however, not only between the house types representative of culture centers, but also between houses of distinctive usage within a given village. This has been duly illustrated by various authors,¹ but not to the extent of rendering any additional data void of interest.

The following paper is based upon information obtained from Tom Odock, chief of a Patwin rancheria situated about six miles north of the city of Colusa, California. The author became acquainted with the material here submitted during the months of June and July, 1917.

The data are patently incomplete. The informant could not remember many important names and details of technique. Nor could he be expected to give accurate estimates of dimensions. It was impossible to interview other informants in regard to this missing information as no other individual of sufficient age and memory is to be found at this rancheria who originally belonged to the cultural center which this paper describes.

I obtained additional data, however, by measuring three house pits found at a deserted village site two miles north of the rancheria. Two of these pits were those of dwelling houses; the other was that of a ceremonial dance house.

The area influenced by the house types herein described includes a strip of territory west of the Sacramento river, extending from Princeton, Colusa county, to a point several miles south of the city of Colusa. As all the villages mentioned by my informant bordered the river, the depth to which this cultural area extended inland is unknown.

¹ Stephen Powers, *The Tribes of California*, *Contr. N. Am. Ethn.*, III, 1877; R. B. Dixon, *The Northern Maidu*, *Bull. Am. Nat. Hist.*, xvii, 1905; S. A. Barrett, *Pomo Buildings*, *Holmes Anniversary Volume*, 1916; A. L. Kroeber, *The Indians of California* (in press as a bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology).

This area has been divided between the Wintun Central and Southeastern dialectic provinces.² The native information that I obtained here and in neighboring provinces, however, points to this area as a cultural if not linguistic unit, and likewise as an important center of cultural distribution. The term pa'twin, the common term used by these Indians in reference to themselves, is therefore applied for the sake of accuracy to the group treated in this paper.

Translations of native terms are designated by =; derivations by <.³

PERMANENT HOUSES

Patwin places of abode fall into two large classes, permanent houses and temporary structures.

Permanent houses were situated in groups at centers of convenience, easily protected and reasonably close to sources of such essential supplies as water, fish, and vegetable products. Such a group of houses constituted a village (di'hi).

GENERAL FEATURES

Relative positions within the village.—There were four types of houses, differing with the purposes for which they were constructed: (1) the dwelling house, (2) the sudatory house, (3) the menstrual house, and (4) the ceremonial dance house.

In general, the dwelling house had no particular placing relative to the position of other houses in the village. There were no streets or lanes as such to influence its position. Any space within the village limits, offering sufficient room, was considered a suitable building site. The one exception to this generality was that the chief's house always stood in the approximate center of the village.

The ceremonial dance house was situated on either the northern or southern outskirts of the village, usually from twenty to thirty paces from the other houses.

The sudatory house stood either east or west of the ceremonial dance house, its one door always facing the dance house.

The menstrual house held a position as far removed from the ceremonial dance house as possible. This rule placed it in either the northern or southern outskirts of the village.

² Map showing Native Tribes, Groups, Dialects, and Families of California in 1770, Department of Anthropology, University of California, 1920.

³ For phonetic descriptions, see my paper, Functional Families of the Patwin, present series, XIII, no. 7.

Features common to all houses.—All houses followed a general plan of structure, though the detail of respective types differed substantially.

An elliptical pit, nearly circular, with a level floor and perpendicular walls, constituted the foundation or floor for the house. This pit was from three to four feet in depth and varied greatly in width in the different types described below.

A retaining wall of brush thatch-work held in place the earth walls of the pit. The material used in this thatch-work was wormwood brush (genus *Artemisia*), called *kəti'*. This was sustained in its upright position by stakes driven into the dirt floor perpendicularly at intervals of from five to eight feet, serving to press the thatch-work firmly against the earth wall. These retaining stakes (*yaiwə't*) were tightly bound to the thatch-work with grapevine creepers (*kap*).

Although house pits primitively were never more than four feet in depth, retaining walls invariably were from five to six feet in height. The effect resulting from this was an apparent pit-depth of five or six feet where the true depth was considerably less. The dirt removed from the pit was banked about the outside of the protruding rim of the retaining wall.

The common type of doorway (*pəs*) consisted of a passage, about three feet in width and of varied but gradual degrees of slope, cutting through the wall and connecting the floor of the pit with the exterior land surface. The length of this passageway varied even in the same type of house, and is said to have been an unimportant detail. Passageways were lined by a continued protraction of the retaining wall, exteriorly banked with earth. A roofing of short cross-sticks, wormwood brush, and earth, deposited in the order named, covered the passageway. When finished, it had an inner opening about six feet high and an outer opening from three to five feet high.

From two to eleven substantial oak posts, forked at the top, were set up in post holes placed at proportionate intervals on the floor space. These house posts were generally called *to'u*.

The superstructure consisted of four elements, (1) the stringers, (2) the rafters, (3) the thatch reinforcing, and (4) the earth surfacing.

By stringers are meant strong oak laterals extending from top to top of the house posts, their ends resting in the culminating forks and fastened there with grapevine creepers. They were called *po'bi*.

Rafters were long poles, usually of willow or cottonwood, radiating from the crest of the superstructure to the edge of the house pit. Each rafter was placed with its smallest diameter at the top of the structure and its largest at the base. At the crest, where crossing the stringers and where crossing the retaining wall, the rafters were tied firmly in place with grapevine creepers. The tops of the rafters were overlapped and bound in a cluster. Where the center post was present, two sets of rafters were used, one radiating from the top of the center post to a circling line of stringers, another completing the arch from the stringers to the summit of the pit walls. This broken arrangement of rafters had the effect of arching the interior of the roof, due to the relative heights of the center post, the stringers, and the retaining wall (see figure 1). The native name for the rafters was wa'yi. The maximum interval between them was from four to five feet. Cottonwood and willow brush was laid transversely across these rafters to a considerable thickness. Although I have called this element the thatch reinforcing, the informant expressed uncertainty as to whether it constituted true thatch-work or merely a layer of brush.

The whole house from top to base was finally covered with an earth surfacing, a foot or more in thickness, packed down smoothly with the hands and feet of many workers.

An aperture, approximately square, was left near the crest of the superstructure to furnish an escape for smoke. This smoke hole (*é'i'ta*) was about two feet across. It was usually left open but might be covered in inclement weather with an ordinary tule mat (see page 166), fastened in place by means of small wooden pegs driven into the earth surfacing.

This type of house is said to have had the double advantage of being cool in summer and warm in winter.

Building methods.—The building of a house called forth the combined efforts of as large a number of helpers as could be engaged. Those houses used commonly by the entire village, the ceremonial dance house, the sudatory house, and the menstrual house, were jointly constructed by every available man, woman, and child in the village. Dwelling houses were built with the assistance of all the paternal relatives of the builder or builders. Since the dwelling house was a communal abode, sheltering from two to four household units, several men would engage their paternal relatives to assist in the construction of one house. Such services were not compulsory.

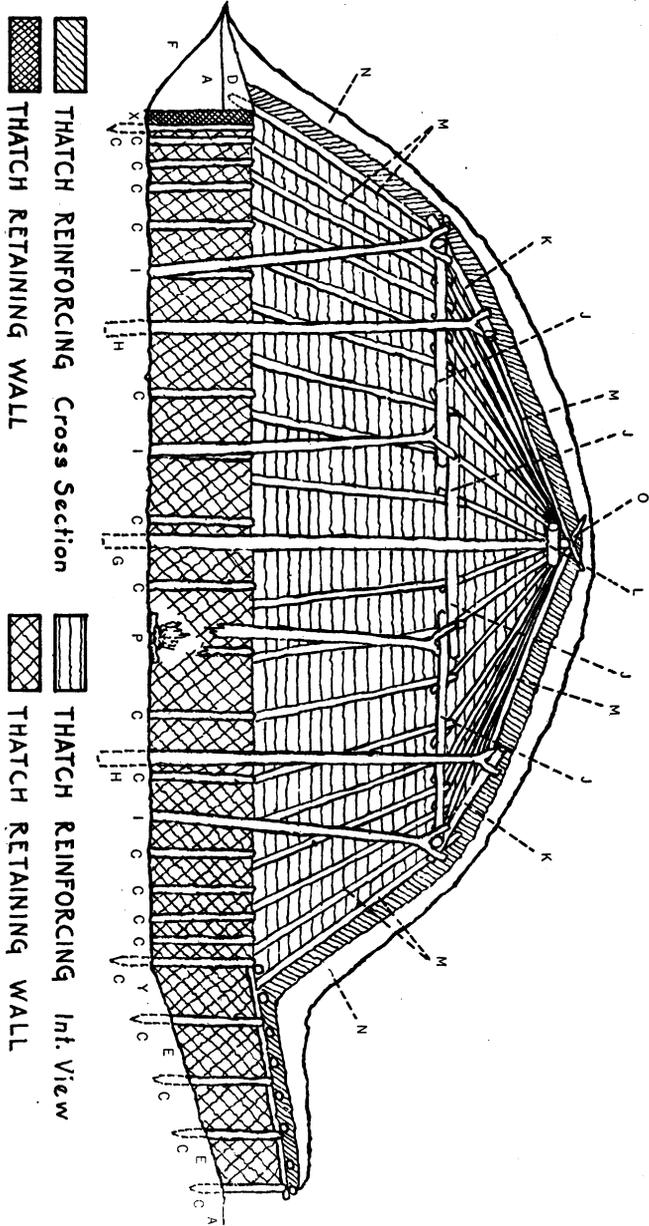


Figure 1. Vertical cross-section of the dance house. A. Exterior ground level. B. Retaining wall posts, *yaiw'e'r*. D. Artificial embankment on exterior exposure of retaining wall. E. Sloping floor of main entrance. F. *Sloping floor of back entrance*. G. Center house post, *se'ku*. H. Front and rear perpendicular house posts, *to'u*. I. Four house posts on the north side, *to'u*. J. Stringers on north side of house, *pa'bi*. K. Stringers arching east and west ends of house, *pa'bi*. L. Shoulders at near-top of center post. M. Rafters, *wa'yi*. N. Cross-section of earth surfacing. O. Clustered and tied ends of upper elements of rafters. P. Fireplace. Q-Y. Floor level of pit.

The individual who was solicited to help usually complied from pressure of custom, providing some element of superimportance did not logically hinder. Thus, one undergoing the restriction of taboo (sáno), as in the case of a woman in menstrual confinement, would be excused from these duties.

Before digging the pit, wormwood, willow and cottonwood brush, and grapevine creepers in adequate quantities were gathered and brought to the building site by the women and children. The men at the same time cut and assembled the necessary posts, stringers, rafters, and stakes. The primitive tools and methods used in the cutting down of the large posts and stringers, often more than one foot in diameter, have been forgotten. An opinion was expressed, however, that an elkhorn wedge was the sturdiest implement used.

Early one morning after the gathering of materials had been completed, one and all began the digging of the house pit. The earth was loosened with sharp sticks, carried out in baskets, and dumped just outside the pit rim. Later this earth would be piled up against the exposed outer side of the retaining wall. Digging sticks were called t'ok. The baskets used as earth carriers are said to have been old food baskets (ok), rendered useless in their original capacity through wear.

When the pit had been completed the men dug post holes in the dirt floor and set up the house posts. If the house was to have a center post, that was the first to be erected. These posts were fixed firmly in place by tamping the filling at the base with the bare feet.

Meanwhile the women began the construction of the retaining wall, the children bringing the necessary materials into the pit. The stringers and rafters were placed and tied by the able-bodied men, and all hands joined to the extent of their individual abilities in the placing of rafters, thatch reinforcing, and earth surfacing. The earth for the surfacing, carried in baskets, was usually obtained from outside the village limits. This was avowedly done with the intent of keeping the village free from unsightly holes and uneven surfaces.

A house is said to have been built in one day, provided the materials had been gathered together on previous days. The completing of the structure was celebrated by a feast given by the interested households for the benefit of all those who had assisted. This feast, like other feasts given on various occasions, was called bahaiya'pai.

THE DWELLING HOUSE

The dwelling house was called *qe'we*. The maximum diameter of the dwelling house pit is said to have averaged thirty feet. The two pits examined by the author measured respectively 18 by 22 feet and 23 by 28 feet. These data, though suggestive of a considerable variation in the size of dwelling houses, are much too meager to allow for conclusive generalizations. The filled condition of these pits prevented the determining of their former depth. The true depth is described as having been about 4 feet; the apparent depth, 6 feet.

Six house posts were set roughly equidistant from one another, forming a nearly circular ellipse about the floor center, and approximately halfway between the floor center and the walls. These posts were practically of equal height and leaned slightly away from the perpendicular toward the walls. One post stood directly before the door on the east side, one stood on the west side directly opposite the first post. The other posts took their positions relatively. The house posts supported six connecting stringers. Posts and stringers, with the earth breasting of the exterior side of the retaining wall, served as a foundation for the superstructure of rafters, thatch reinforcing, and earth surfacing.

One doorway, facing either east or west, served as entrance and exit.

The fireplace (*po*), was situated in the exact center of the floor, equidistant from all house posts. The smoke hole was on the central south side of the roof, about six feet below the point of highest elevation.

Each of the several households sharing a *qe'we* occupied and held exclusive right to a definite part of the house. Such a division was bounded by imaginary straight lines radiating from the fireplace to the retaining wall. Each household cooked on its own side of the fireplace with its own separate equipment of cooking utensils, and ate separately. All households shared, however, the use of the mill (*čobo'k*). This mill consisted of an oak or cottonwood log from four to five feet in length, leveled on the top and bottom, offering a maximum thickness of one foot. The mortar cavity was placed near the center of the upper surface, its size and depth depending upon the amount of usage it had experienced. The common type of pestle used was simply a hard smooth stone, suitably shaped by natural agencies.

All other furnishings and household effects were owned and used exclusively by respective household groups or individuals within the group.

The most prominent article among the house furnishings was the bed scaffold (*ta'wai*). Its exact structure has been forgotten. It was, however, a rectangular frame, raised six feet from the ground by four corner posts. Cross-pieces of wood, tied to the framework, served as supporting slats. On this slatting was placed a bedding of green willow leaves, covered with tule mats six feet in width by seven or eight feet in length. Occasionally a bearskin rug furnished additional covering. In every house there were as many beds as there were adults, each placed with its longest dimension parallel to the radius of the floor circle. The outer end of the scaffold was attached to the retaining wall. One always slept with one's head toward the fire.

Individual seats in the *qe'we* consisted of rectangular tule mats each about six feet by four feet. All tule mats were called *satu't*. These mats were made from two varieties of tule, one circular and the other triangular in cross-section. The technique consisted of a close warp of tule bound together by a sparse twined woof of native hemp string (*ka'li*). Mats of similar technique, from other parts of California, have been adequately described by S. A. Barrett.⁴

Household utensils, such as apparatus for basket-making, meal sifters, and workbaskets, were hung on the wall at the angle between the wall and the superstructure. Articles of clothing or ornamentation and other personal effects were suspended from the sides of the houseposts.

A considerable amount of household property was kept, not inside the *qe'we*, but on a rack, constructed of sticks, placed close to the house just outside and to the left of the doorway. No description worth recording can be given of it. On it were placed all cooking and eating utensils such as cooking and eating baskets and mush stirrers, and all effects for gathering food and supplies, such as burden baskets, seed baskets, and seed beaters.

⁴ *The Material Culture of the Klamath Lake and Modoc Indians of Northeastern California and Southern Oregon*, present series, v, pls. 23, 24, 25, 1910.

THE SUDATORY HOUSE

Young men before marriage, and older men at times, slept in the sudatory house. Its principal use however was that of a sweat-house. A number of men would gather in the house, close the entrance and smoke hole with mats, and sweat around a hot fire. When the heat became almost unbearable, they would open the door and run from the house to the river for a short swim.⁵ This practice was called ča'poho.

The sudatory house (čapa'qewε), was, in point of structure, a qε'wε built on a large pattern. The maximum diameter of the pit is said to have been from forty to fifty feet. Other dimensions, aside from the depth of the pit and the size of the doorway, were increased proportionately. The single doorway was normal in all particulars.

THE MENSTRUAL HOUSE

Customarily women during menstruation or childbirth spent a period of time in confinement in a menstrual house (qu'la). This house is described as having a pit three feet in depth and twenty feet in diameter at its greatest length. Two house posts, from eight to ten feet apart, stood in such a position as to equally share the weight of the superstructure. These two posts and the single doorway followed an east and west alignment. From a single stringer, supported by the house posts, rafters radiated to the top of the retaining wall where the interval between them was about four feet. The remainder of the superstructure was as in other houses. The door invariably faced eastward. The fireplace lay equidistant between and in alignment with the house posts. The smoke hole held its usual place on the south central side of the housetop. The nomenclature for all house parts was identical with that of the qε'wε.

There were no permanent elements of furniture or equipment in the qu'la.

THE CEREMONIAL DANCE HOUSE

All ceremonial dances were held in a large house called hut. This was the largest house in the village. The true pit was from four to five feet in depth. The pit measured by the author was forty feet wide and fifty feet long.

⁵ A. L. Kroeber, *The Indians of California* (in press as a Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology).

Eleven upright posts supported the superstructure. Of these a center post (*se'ktu* = chief) stood in the center of the pit. In line with this post and the two opposite doorways stood two end posts, each equidistant between the center post and the wall. Four side posts stood on each side at equal intervals, forming opposing arcs between the center post and the wall. The space between these side posts and the wall was from seven to eight feet across. The center and end posts were perpendicular; the side posts inclined slightly toward the wall. Side posts were all of equal height. Accurate heights can not be given, but the center post is described as being from one-fifth to one-fourth higher than the side posts, and the end posts as intermediate in height between these two. The length of the center post was about half that of the house pit, measured from doorway to doorway.

Side posts and end posts supported a connecting line of stringers circling the center post. At each end above the doorways this line of stringers was bent upward in gable formation, due to the difference in the relative heights of the end posts, on the one hand, and the side posts, on the other (see fig. 2).

Rafters radiated from the top of the center post across the stringers to the retaining wall as previously described. Four short heavy pieces of wood, stoutly tied end to end to form a square, surrounded and were solidly fastened to the near top of the center post a few inches below its otherwise characterless summit. This shoulder supported the superior ends of the rafters just below the point where they were clustered and tied. The remainder of the superstructure was identical with that of other houses.

A peculiar feature of the hut was its two doorways. The main entrance to the east agreed with the general type of passageway described above. It was called *pu'inabepes* (< *pu'i* = east, *pes* = doorway). All spectators used this door for entrance and exit. The performers, also, after donning their ceremonial dresses outside, entered the hut by way of this door and left by the same door after dancing. The second doorway was on the west end of the house, directly opposite the *pu'inabepes*. It was called *noino'ibepes* (< *no'i* = west, *pes* = doorway). This entrance was merely a rectangular break in the retaining wall, six feet high by three feet wide, through which a steep unprotected incline led to the exterior level of the ground. By way of this door, the performers, when not in costume, entered to take their places in the audience, or left to re-attire themselves for the next dance.

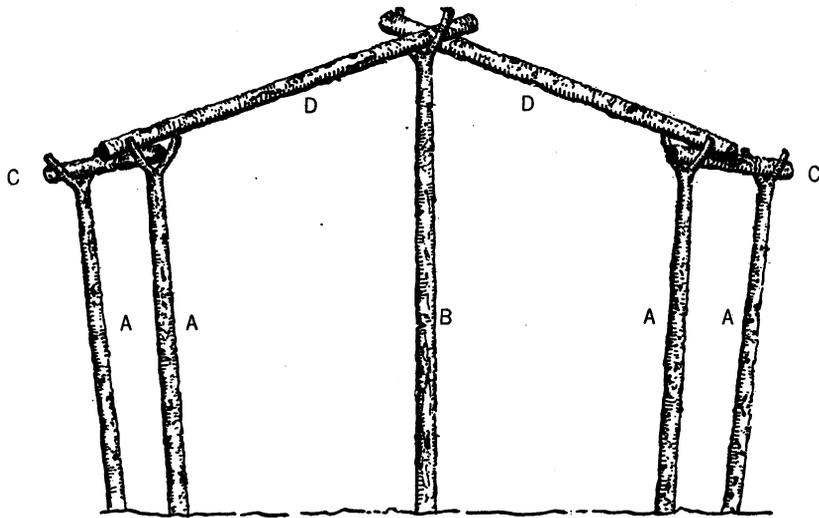


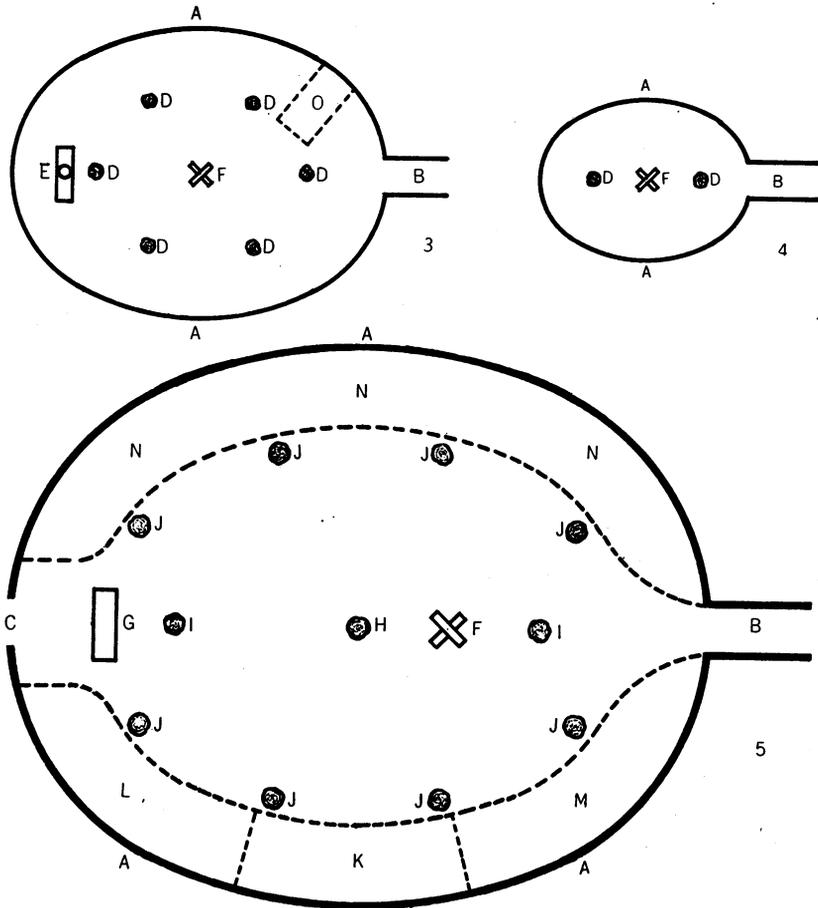
Figure 2. Stringer connections between end posts and side posts of ceremonial dance house.

- A. Side house posts.
- B. An end house post.
- C. Stringers connecting side house posts.
- D. Stringers connecting end house posts with extreme eastern or western pair of side house posts.

The ceremonial drum, a peeled and hollowed sycamore log, some six or seven feet in length and said to have had at times a diameter of two feet, held a position in the hut relatively the same as that of the mortar in the *qe'wε*. It lay at the west end of the pit, intermediate between the western doorway and the westernmost of the two end house posts. Its greatest dimension extended north and south. It was held in place by four stakes driven, two on each side, near the drum ends. This drum was commonly called *ho'lwa*, but in the *he'si* dance, the principal ceremony of an esoteric society bearing the same name as the dance, this identical drum was called *hwa'la*.

The fireplace lay east of the center post intermediate between it and the most eastern of the two house posts. The smoke hole, unlike that of any other house, was situated on the north central side of the housetop about six feet below the crest.

During a ceremony the space between the retaining wall and the outer circle of house posts was well carpeted with small green willow boughs, furnishing a soft clean area on which to sit or recline. This sitting circle was called *ha'mla* (= sitting place).



Figures 3-5. Ground plans of Patwin houses: (3) dwelling house; (4) menstrual house; (5) ceremonial dance house.

- A. Pit wall.
- B. Entrance, pes.
- C. West entrance, noino'ibepes.
- D. House posts.
- E. Mill, *óbo'k*.
- F. Fireplace.
- G. Drum, *ho'lwa, hwa'la*.
- H. Center post.
- I. End posts.
- J. Side posts.
- K. *ha'mla* reserved for chief's family.
- L. *ha'mla* reserved for ceremonial participants.
- M. *ha'mla* reserved for *he'hetu* entertainers.
- N. *ha'mla* reserved for non-participants.
- O. Bed scaffold, *ta'wai*.

There was a definite seating arrangement in the hut. The entire northern half of the hamla, from door to door, was reserved for the non-participating element, the audience. Families sat together, a certain paternal group being assigned to a definite place in the semi-circle. A space in the center of the southern half of the hamla was reserved for the village chief, his family, and his distinguished guests. To the chief's left, extending to the western doorway, the seating space was reserved for ceremonial officials, dancers, drummers, and ceremonial singers. A group of singers, whose part it was to entertain the audience between dances, sat to the right of the chief close to the eastern doorway.

All house parts not expressly named above shared the nomenclature of those of other houses.

TEMPORARY DWELLING STRUCTURES

During seasons of food gathering the entire community might be engaged in some occupation necessitating a continued absence from the village for a considerable length of time. Such occupations included the gathering of acorns and wild blackberries, and the catching and drying of sturgeon, salmon, and other smaller fish. The places where these supplies were to be obtained in greatest quantity varied from year to year. For this reason the village moved to the local centers of supply in season, taking with them the necessary equipment for work and livelihood. A period of time extending from midsummer well into the fall season was in this manner spent away from the village by the majority of its inhabitants.

During this period of absence from the permanent dwelling houses, temporary dwelling sheds were roughly constructed and used at the various camping grounds. These sheds served as sufficient shelters from sun and summer rains. Their building involved so small an amount of time and labor that no loss was felt at deserting them after a short sojourn.

Such sheds consisted of complexes of the following element: a low, flat, rectangular brush roof, supported by four corner posts, without walls or wall substitutes. Any available materials were used in their construction. A large family, remaining in one place for an appreciable length of time, would add now and again new elements to the original structure, each element like the first. The difficulty experienced in readily obtaining long strong stringers is given as the cause preventing the building of one large shed.