62. Wintoon Indians

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(The following brief description of certain aspects of the life of the group now known as the Wintu is taken from Dr. Merriam's journal, dated July 19, 1903. The story of the finding of the "Indian maiden" in Samwel Cave reproduced here was subsequently published in more detail by J. C. Merriam in an article titled The Cave of the Magic Pool. Scribner's Magazine 82:264-272, 1927. Ed.)

Dr. John C. Merriam and I spent the day along McCloud River collecting many species of brush and talking with the Indians, from whom I obtained a valuable vocabulary of 350 words, including the names of more than 100 animals and plants. The Indians here belong to the Wintoon tribe. They are drying salmon on rough frames by the river and many Indians from neighboring places (all Wintoon) have temporary brush shelter camps here by the river, in addition to those who live here permanently.

For 8 or 10 miles above Baird scattered families of Wintoon live along the river—but all told there are only a few of them.

Just now those at Baird are reinforced by several families from the upper Sacramento (from the villages near Baird Spur) who have come here to lay in their winter supply of salmon and are camped in rough brush shelters on both sides of the river at the bend below the Fish Hatchery. The largest camp is on the broad pebble beach on the west side. At all the camps they have erected rough frames on which the red split bodies of salmon are drying. They dry also large quantities of salmon eggs, called Poop.

They cook a great many salmon by boiling, lay them in broad scoop-shape openwork baskets called on or ahn, and pick out the meat, which they place on leaves or cloth on the ground, in the sun, to dry. While it is drying an old woman usually sits by with a switch (a branch with leaves at the end) to keep the flies away. As it dries it is broken up with the fingers into almost a saw-dust-like powder. Large quantities of this dry boiled salmon powder are stored in baskets for winter, besides the raw dried fish and their eggs.

With the abundance of fish, deer, acorns and pinenuts (P. sabiniana) the Wintoon Indians still find food enough without much difficulty—in which respect they are far better off than the remaining bands of most of the California tribes.

Along the McCloud River the crop of black acorns (Q. californica) is a failure this year, but there are some acorns on the white and

live oaks (Q. garryana and Q. chrysolepis), and plenty on the scrub oak (Q. breweri), which abounds on the dry slopes between here and the Sacramento. On these same hills garryana in scrub form and heavily laden with acorns abounds in great profusion.

The Indians make both soup (or mush) and bread of acorns. Pine nuts they eat raw and roasted, but do not appear to cook.

They used to make skirts for the women of strings of the seeds of the Digger pine, strung on sinew from a belt of ornamented buck-skin; breechclouts were made of bark of new growth or terminal branches of maple (Acer macrophyllum).

On top of a dry hill on the west side of the river about 3/4 of a mile above Baird I found a most interesting old Indian home, now inhabited by a poor old woman who must be in the neighborhood of a hundred years old. It occupies a bare place on the top of the hill and is surrounded by pines and oaks, so it cannot be seen from across the river or from any direction. At the south foot of the hill, only a short distance away is a fine cold stream.

The abode consists of a large brush-fence enclosure containing a rough slab-and-bark house with flat roof, and a canopy or open brush-covered shelter.

The ancient dame who presides over this relic of the past is very thin and skinny and has her chin and cheeks tattooed—as have most of the Wintoon women. In some the tattooing is very elaborate.

This old woman was wonderfully graceful and pathetic as she tried to tell us of the good olden time when the Wintoon people held this picturesque and beautiful valley in undisturbed possession. When I first surprised her she was sitting in the shade, making a rough open-work burden basket (on-kop-py) of twigs of green aromatic sumac (Rhus trilobata) with the bark left on and the leaves still adhering to the tips of the rods.

She had also a number of old baskets, which Dr. J. C. Merriam and I purchased from her. The one she was most reluctant to part with was her mortar basket (kow-e) in which (resting on a flat stone) she pounds her acorns. I paid her double price for this, as I wanted it badly. It is a very old one and has a burn on one side near the top.

The floor of the house at this old camp is one of undisturbed earth. In the conical huts of slab and bark on the east side of the river the floor is excavated three or four feet. Besides these I saw the frame of a small sweat house where water is thrown on hot stones to convert it into steam. These sweathouses used to be covered with deer skins; they are now commonly covered with blankets when in use and left bare between times.

I saw no ceremonial house near Baird, but found the excavated oval depression where one once stood, 13 or 14 miles north of Baird, on the east side of the river.

Most of the Wintoon now live in log cabins in winter and camp under brush shelters in summer.

The Wintoon do not make coiled baskets—only twined. The coarse open-work burden basket (Ahn-kop-pe) is made of rods, peeled or unpeeled, of Rhus trilobata or [some other unidentified plant].

The papoose baskets ('Klul) are made of rods of hazel (Corylus californicus).

The cooking baskets and bowls (pul-ok, Kol'-um, tel'-lek and dow's-up) are made of roots (sek) of Digger and Ponderosa pines (P. sabiniana and ponderosa) woven over vertical slender rods of willow (Salix sp.), ornamented with overlaid materials of which the following are most usual: black stems of maiden hair fern (Adiantum); white or yellowish white split leaves of Xerophyllum (which does not grow here but which they get from Indians of Trinity County); Salmon-red (or orange red), the two parallel strips from inside the Woodwardia fern, dyed usually by chewed inner bark of tree alders (the Woodwardia being passed through the mouth while the chewing is going on); reddish brown, slender split twigs of red-bud (Cercis) with the bark on (gathered after the fall rains when the bark is red). Besides these, quills of porcupines are used (and used to be in olden times) particularly for the finest hats and best bowl baskets (choke-mouth). The quills are dyed yellow with the root of the Oregon grape (Berberis pinnata) and also with a weed common here (Datisca glomerata), called Klup-'tchoos.

They use the red tail feathers of the Flicker (Colaptes cafer collaris) for headdresses and belts for ceremonial occasions, and heads of the California woodpecker (Melanerpes formicivorous bairdi) also for choice belts. One was buried here with a boy this spring. John C. Merriam saw it last year.

The Wintoon have no superstition about a god or gods, but speak of a spirit they call Ses or 'Kless, which might be called the devil, which they say usually does harm, but sometimes does one a good service.

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John C. Merriam did not return with me from up the river this morning (July 23) but came back tonight. He stayed to explore a very deep pit in the cave [Samwel Cave] now being worked by his assistant Furlong.

The Indians had told us that about 65 years ago two or three young women entered this cave for the purpose of washing their

hands and faces in a subterranean stream, which was believed to bring them good luck. They were groping about in the dark, holding hands, when one suddenly fell into a deep pit and disappeared. The other could not pull her out and she fell. She was heard to strike once and then to fall heavily on the bottom, from which the Indians inferred she had struck a shelf on the way down. After she fell she made no noise and they knew she was dead. Other Indians came and lowered a cord and said the hole was about 80 feet deep. Up to a few days ago this hole was never re-discovered and Furlong and John Merriam did not believe in its existence, for the holes or wells in which they were working were not so deep. But a day or two ago Furlong sent word down to J. C. Merriam that he had found the deep hole and wanted a lot more rope and candles. So yesterday J. C. M. and I took up a lot of candles and 100 feet of rope. This morning J. C. M. and Furlong went to the cave (after I had started back, for I could not stay as I had too much to do to get ready to leave tomorrow) and went down to the bottom of the deep well. They found it actually 75 feet deep and at the bottom found the complete skeleton of a woman—so the story is substantiated. On the way down the rope touched a projecting shelf—where the squaw struck on her way to eternity.