69. Making Acorn Bread

Elizabeth Grinnell

[The following account is reprinted from The Youth's Companion, Vol. 66-67, p. 559, Nov. 2, 1893. It is a full circumstantial description of acorn preparation among the Southern Sierra Miwok of Yosemite Valley. The reader may wish to compare this account with two by C. Hart Merriam (Studies of California Indians, Univ. Calif. Press, 1955, pp. 50-51, 61-63). Two more general studies of the same subject have been written by C. Hart Merriam ("The Acorn as a Possibly Neglected Source of Food," National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 34, pp. 129-138, 1918) and E. W. Gifford ("Californian Balanophagy" in Essays in Anthropology Presented to A. L. Kroeber, Univ. Calif. Press, 1936, pp. 87-98)].

While visiting the Yosemite Valley of California not long ago we camped a hundred feet from the Merced River, with an Indian village between us and Sentinel Rock. The village huts were of boughs and brush, constructed much like the huts of the Penobscot Indians as I saw them many years ago. The villagers are a band of the Digger Indians, whose right in the valley no one questions. They are indeed a feature of the valley itself, and are protected, like the game.

In customs they are much as they always have been, but their wardrobe is replenished from time to time by the discarded garments of tourists, so that in this particular they are quite civilized, or would be if they wore more clothing. In summer they are willing to part with the greater portion, and so escape the burdens of fashion.

They subsist on the abundant trout of the Merced, manzanita berries, and the never-failing acorn. The acorns are stored in great baskets or bins, built around strong poles about fifteen feet in length.

The pole is firmly planted in the ground; then armfuls of cured rushes are brought, and the bin begun three feet from the earth. This space between the ground and the bin is for safety against rats and squirrels. From the point of beginning the basket rounds outward until it becomes five feet in diameter, and is then carried to a height of ten feet or more, where it is left unfinished, with the rushes projecting some distance above the last web.

When acorns ripen, they are spread in the sun to cure for a few days, and then poured into the granaries. When a bin is full, the projecting reeds are brought together over the whole and fastened. More reeds are adjusted to form a complete watershed, as well as shelter, and the harvest is garnered.

About a week after we had pitched our camp we were disturbed early in the morning by an unusual stir. Women were bustling about. The men went away to the brush, and after a while returned with loads of wood, dried leaves and twigs, which they deposited on the river-bank, and then disappeared for the day, probably trouting down the stream.

The women opened one of the acorn bins, which would hold perhaps fifty bushels, took out several baskets full, and carefully covered the bin. They then squatted on the ground, and the day's work of bread-making began.

Every little acorn was shelled by the teeth of these patient folk. Each nut received two turns, or a bite and a twist, and the meat came out intact. The strong, white teeth of these women might well be the envy of our own people, who dare not even crack a filbert or a peanut between their brittle grinders.

When the kernels were all out they were roasted on hot stones, removed one at a time with a little stick, and gathered, thus partially cooked, into baskets. This roasting took several hours, and was the most tedious part of the day's labor.

There was no lounging or gossiping, as one might expect who happened to know something about "sewing circles" among civilized women. Every one was diligent, and there was no visible shirking or selfish preference.

When the roasting was done the acorns were carried to the mills to be made into meal. These mills are mortars chiselled true and even in the solid granite rocks. The acorns were thrown into the mill and reduced to fineness by the motion of round stones.

As the grinding went on, the coarser meal came to the top. This was scooped off into fine basket sieves, and sifted, the bran to be again pounded into the mortar. When the whole was of uniform consistency, it was poured into a great basket and carried down to the river. Enough water was added to it to make a thin batter, which was stirred with wooden paddles.

On the beach was silvery sand in abundance, clean and pure. Some of the women knelt down, and scooped small basins in the sand, heaping up regular sides for strength, and smoothing out the inside. When the basins were finished, tufts of pine-needles were spread over the bottom to prevent the sand from being disturbed. Then the batter was poured in. Immediately the pine tufts rose to the surface and were skimmed off.

The mixture then began to "settle." When the water had all filtered into the sand more pine needles were laid in, and more water poured on, until the process had been repeated three times. The purpose of this process was to rid the batter of the poisonous, bitter principle of the acorns, leaving only the nutritious, amber-colored flour.

While this was going on, other women had kindled a fire, and heated upon it several stones the size of a child's head, to a white heat.

Then began the separating of the inferior from the superior flour. There were three grades--the coarser, which was on the surface of the reservoir; the bottom or leavings which was next to the sand filter; and between these two, the clean, fine sort.

With the edges of the two hands, the top of the meal was scraped off into a basket, into which hot water was poured and rapidly stirred. The agitation caused the meal to separate from the sand, and it was turned off, leaving the residue of debris in the bottom. This operation, repeated three times, left a clean, coarse material for "mush."

Instead of setting the mush into the stove, the stove was put into the mush. When the big basket was half-full of the acorn flour, several hot stones were thrown in. The mixture began to boil. Then dexterity, strength and skill were essential, for the stones must be constantly moved about with two strong sticks, in the hands of the alert attendant.

How she perspired, leaning low over the hissing, thickening mass! The "kneading" of light bread by our American housewives on the cool, floured "cake board" would seem like child's play in comparison. Occasionally a stone, exhausted of its heat, was lifted out by the two sticks and replaced by a hotter one.

At the woman's side was a basket of cold water, into which she dipped her hand while she poised a stone against the edge of the mush pot, and deftly, with two strokes, divested it of the batter. She determined the exact moment when the mush was "done" by its adhesiveness. When it dropped from the stones of itself, leaving them bare and clean, it was properly cooked.

The bushel basket of boiling porridge was then lifted to the back of a woman in waiting, where it was secured by a cloth which encircled its brim and passed around the forehead of the carrier. She bore it to camp, ready for succeeding breakfasts.

It is eaten without salt or sugar, and washed down with cold water. these Indians drink neither beer nor coffee.

Now the first layer of meal in the filtering reservoir has been disposed of, and we hasten to the next or middle portion. This was scooped out by the hooked fingers, placed in a basket, and set to one side.

There was now nothing left in the basin but the lining coat of flour. This was peeled off with its adhering sand, and treated to several generous washings and drainings, similar to the first batch. When it was ready for the porridge pot, there was supposed to be no trace of grit in the whole basket. This was cooked by hot stones as was the first, and sent to camp as second quality.

All this has been but incidental to the making of the real bread. That best, middle meal, which had been set to one side in a basket, was then made into a thicker batter than for mush, and was consequently harder to stir. It was cooked for a long time, and with great labor in agitating the hot stones.

When the bread was ready to be made into loaves, the women took off a portion of their clothes and waded a little way into the river, where was an eddy, but no current. Here, with the same paddles which had stirred the mush, they scooped a hole in the bottom sand under water, and banked up the sides just high enough to allow the play of the eddy over the brim.

Small baskets were then filled with the boiling dough and taken to the pool, where they were plunged again and again into the cold water. A little shaking from side to side, as the baskets came dripping to the surface, together with the rapid cooling, caused the bread to loosen from the baskets in free, ball-like masses.

At the right minute the baskets were inverted, and the "loaves" slipped out into the pool, where they could bob about without the least danger of floating down stream.

There were a great many of these loaves, each resembling in appearance and texture a rubber ball, and they had about the same taste to my palate. They were of the size of a baker's ten-cent loaf, hard and heavy, of a light amber color. After they had remained in the river two or three hours they were perfectly cold, and ready to "keep."

By this time the sun was setting and the men could be seen coming home to supper. The loaves were fished out of the water and carried to the camps in baskets, where they were deposited on the summer scaffoldings about the huts, to be drawn upon as needed, until the next baking-day should come around in about three weeks.

The Indians of this coast seem to gain from their acorn bread something of the strength and longevity of the oak, for they are said to attain the greatest age of any known people. It is said that many live beyond the term of one hundred years, while some attain the great age of one hundred and forty years, falling at last to the ground like an oak leaf, withered and dry.