

The Mattole

by Gordon Bussell, Hupa/Betol

The Mattole language is similar to the Hupa language that is spoken today. However, it is even closer to the White Mountain Apache spoken today. Mattole is part of the De'ne language group spoken by tribes throughout most of Canada, Alaska, and a large portion of the western United States, with language relatives such as the Navajo. In fact, almost half of all Native speakers today are part of this language body.

Before contact, the Mattoles were as many as 8,000, with low estimates of 4,000. By 1910 only ten full-bloods were left. One was my grandmother. She was one of two babies that survived a massacre of an entire village. But that is another life story.

The Mattoles were all close to their neighbor tribes. To the north of them were the Bear River people, and to the south and east were the Sinkiyone. All of them are a part of the same language body, so all could communicate easily.

Mattole men had tattoos on their forearms, which was used to measure Indian money (dentalium). This was in common with all the tribes of this area.

Their housing was of many styles. They had beach huts built above high-tide line made of driftwood, to allow cover as they fished or gathered along the ocean. They also had permanent homes made of redwood, similar to the Hupa and Yurok houses built today. In this group of permanent homes was a big house called the Indian church. Each village would have one of these. There also were several styles of sweat houses that the men lived in. One was similar to the ones built by the ocean, another was part of the permanent houses and was similar to the ones built in Hoopa. Another was for the mountains, which was made of willow and covered; this one was mobile. There was another house which was used in the gathering season which was similar to a tipi, covered with either bark or elkhides. There was another house which was temporary, built for the women on their moon.

From this you can see that the Mattole society was anything but simple, for it had both structure and leadership. For each village had a leader who was chosen from within their own. They also had a spiritual leader. This could be one and the same person, but more commonly was not.

The Mattole diet was very diverse as they had abundant ocean, river, and inland food sources. They wove baskets and nets to catch eels and fish, and made some to hold items that they gathered. They used wild iris, bear grass, hazel, willow, and others. They also traded with many of the inland tribes. One of their trade items could be salt or ocean foods, seaweed, or whatever else was desired by inland tribes.

Many plants were of medicinal usage or were part of their diet. They had wild celery,

potatoes, and a large variety of teas. Access to abundant wood for gathering allowed the men to carve many wooden items such as tools, deep redwood boats for the ocean, and hunting and fishing items.

They traded for obsidian from the inland tribes, as well as for made items out of chert.

What I have given here is only a brief overview of parts of the life of my people. From this I hope some understanding of us, and good, will come toward the Mattole and other Native tribes.

Note: Gordon Bussell is a specialist in the languages of his people. He lives in Hoopa. He had much more to say and, I hope, will be seen in these pages again.