

The Native American Collection of the Clarke Historical Museum

The Clarke Museum is considered to hold the largest and best collections of material from northwestern Californian Tribes to be found anywhere in the world. We are proud to be able to preserve this heritage and to educate the public about these ancient cultures that continue to be a vibrant part of our community today.

Tribes and Early Life:

A look at the map of California tribes shows a particularly large number concentrated in what today is Humboldt County. So many groups were able to live a non-nomadic life in this area because of the abundant resources. The many rivers provided salmon, eel and other fish while shellfish were available along the coast. Hunting was good, and abundant oak trees provided acorns, the dietary staple. The people selectively managed their environment through pruning, weeding and controlled burning to improve the habitat for game and increase the yield of plants used for food and basket making.

The tribes of Humboldt County moved into the area in waves of people over the last several thousand years. They spoke very different languages but through social contacts, trade, intermarriage and a common environment they came to share similar cultures. There was little warfare among the tribes; disputes were often settled through compensation. Local tribes were not ruled by chiefs; instead decisions were made collectively by village elders. The arrival of Euro-American settlers after 1850 disrupted the life of the native peoples. Deliberate killings, removals and the introduction of unfamiliar diseases decimated local tribes. Nonetheless, five tribes remain active in the area: the Wiyot around Humboldt Bay, the Yurok (the largest tribe in California) along the north coast and Lower Klamath, the Hupa whose Trinity River reservation is California's largest, the Tolowa in the Crescent City area, and the Karuk on the Upper Klamath.

Spirituality:

The traditional belief among local Native Americans is that the creator placed them here at the beginning of time and charged them with maintaining the prosperity and harmony of the world. This was done through prayer, proper living and ceremony. All things in nature and items created from nature were imbued with spirit, and all human activities had some spiritual aspect. Prayers accompanied collecting and hunting, while baskets, canoes and other objects were made while praying and were intended to be beautiful to honor the creator. Ceremonies such as the White Deerskin Dance and the Jump Dance are still held in order to renew the world and reestablish balance. Among the tribes, the shamans or medicine people were often women.

Basketry:

As with most California tribes, the people of this area made baskets, rather than pottery. Our local basketry is considered some of the finest in the world. Baskets woven tightly enough to hold water were used for cooking by stirring hot rocks in the basket until the water boiled. Baby carrying baskets were light and practical, and basketry eel traps were used for fishing. Basketry hats for both men and women were a distinctive feature of local tribes. Hats can be distinguished from baskets because they have designs on the rounded part, the top of the hat, as well as the sides. Baskets were also used for eating, for holding trinkets, for hoppers, for storage and later to sell to settlers and tourists. Many distinctive designs appear on local baskets in a number of variations. Baskets made in this area use a technique that interweaves sticks and roots while overlaying patterns of grasses, ferns, roots and porcupine quills.

Tools:

Arrowheads, chisels, axe heads, spear points, knives, mortars, and pestles as well as other tools and weapons were made from stone. Chipping small flakes off a stone nodule produced sharp edges while patient grinding produced tougher more durable tools. Obsidian, a natural volcanic glass, was particularly prized for practical and ceremonial tools and was traded from tribes to the east in exchange for sea shells and other coastal items. Bone and antler were also used for some tools, and fishing nets were woven using the fibers of wild irises. In cooking, women used wooden stirring paddles carved for them by male family members. Spoons carved from wood or horn were used by men while women used mussel shells as spoons. Dentalia shells from British Columbia were used locally as money and could be worn as jewelry or kept in carved purses of elk horn.

Canoes:

Most villages were located along rivers, and canoes were vital for fishing and transportation. Redwood, since it is particularly buoyant and resistant to bugs and rot, was considered the best canoe making wood, and tribes that lived in the coastal redwood zone specialized in canoe making, trading their products to inland tribes. Using controlled fire and tools of bones and antler, logs were patiently carved and given features acknowledging their spiritual status as living and respected beings. A Yurok redwood canoe is a feature of the Clarke collection.

Houses:

Houses were permanent sturdy dwellings often made of planks taken from living trees. Grape vines lashed the planks together. Near the coast, was redwood, inland it was cedar. Houses were built partly underground to be cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. Doors were small and round to discourage the entry of wild animals and bad weather, the living area was the lower portion, which is around a fire circle. The surrounding upper area was used for storage. The roofs could be removed and the house pit used for ceremonial dances. Villages also had "sweat houses" where men underwent purification ceremonies and also where men and older boys often slept, as women and children slept in the larger Plank house. A scale model of a redwood dwelling house is featured in the museum.

Museum Exhibits:

Nealis Hall was added to the Clarke Museum in 1979 exclusively to house the outstanding Native American collection. Many exhibits change frequently so that items can be rotated between storage and public view. The Becker collection of baskets and regalia and the Hover collection of Karuk baskets are permanently on view. Frequently, some non-local Native American items are exhibited to provide a contrast with distinctive local styles. An attempt is also made to exhibit work of contemporary local Native American artists and craftspeople. The Museum continues to add to its collection of local Native American material in order to expand the public's understanding and appreciation of this old and ongoing culture. Donations are welcome.

Native American Culture is a fundamental part of Humboldt County's heritage. It is also a vital part of our community. There are currently over 14,000 Native American in Humboldt County. The Clarke Museum is proud to preserve and present the heritage of local Native American people.