

Yurok Canoes

<http://www.redwoodvisitor.org/showrecord.asp?id=487>

Canoes now are built by Yurok people using modern tools, but in traditional style. Before they had modern tools, dug-out canoes were built with equal skill, but much more laboriously using sharpened stone tools and fire. Consequently, each canoe had great value and could be used only by persons who could be trusted to exercise ability, care, and judgment.

The Yurok built canoes of several sizes. The ones at Sumeg village are small, approximately the size that would have been used on the Klamath River. The Yurok also built some much larger, ocean-going canoes. There is a replica of a larger canoe at the Redwood Information Center in Orick, 15 miles north of Patrick's Point State Park.

<http://www.tidepool.com/toadeye/boats.html>

Since the Klamath River runs through the heart of Yurok lands, it is the most primary source of food for the people living along the river. The boats made by the Yuroks were used for traveling as well as fishing and transporting goods along the banks of the Klamath. In order for a dugout canoe to be carved, several men (usually family members) would select a redwood tree of the proper diameter for the size of boat they wished to carve. The tree was also selected by the number of limbs (knots) and the straightness of the grain. Once the selection was made the tree was felled and an offering was left for the creator for the taking of the tree. The offering was usually an item that was considered a valuable to a family member, such as a deer hide, dance materials or shells. After the log was cut to the proper length it was floated down the river to the location where it was to be carved.

Carving was done using adz made of steel or elk horn, and after the initial shape was roughed out the center was burned out using chips from the shaping process. Burning the center reduced the amount of labor required to carve the boat and also to season the wood. Burning was closely monitored so as not to burn through the sides or bottom of the boat and to keep the fire from getting too hot, causing the boat to dry and crack. Family members and friends all worked to build a boat and occasionally more than one boat was carved at a time. Men who helped carve the boat were repaid for their labor in the form of shells, food, skins or other items considered valuable. It takes many months to create a single boat and each boat has a heart and a set of lungs because the Yuroks believe that each boat is a living being and the tree that it was made from still lives within the boat.

The size of the boat was determined before the carving began. Most boats were between twelve and fifteen feet long and two or three feet wide depending on the length. Early travelers have documented seeing boats between fifteen and twenty feet long but were mostly for ocean use, hunting sea lions and shells/shellfish. When the boat was not in use it was stored upside down in a shaded area and covered with brush to keep it from drying and cracking. If cracks appeared in the boat they were sealed with pine tar (pitch), which kept it from leaking. Early anthropologists who traveled the Pacific Northwest studying different tribes stated that the Yurok boat was the finest they had ever come across and that neighboring tribes would sacrifice many valuable belongings to obtain one of these boats.

When a boat was no longer able to float safely is taken to an area near the river where a large hole was dug and the boat was buried. The boat was buried based on the simple fact that a single piece of redwood can sprout a new tree. So the next time you see a thousand year old redwood tree growing along the banks of the Klamath River it may have sprouted from a Yurok dugout canoe.

More info & Photos:

http://www.geocities.com/bigorrin/yurok_kids.htm

<http://www.ncidc.org/photos/gallery1/85s3.htm>

http://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/collections/kroeber_1.html

<http://www.nativeamericancaucus.com/history.shtml>

<http://www.boat-info.com/27/american-indian-dugout-canoes.html>