Studies of California Indian tribes by Stephen Powers

Its interesting what pops up on the internet. I saw a story of a Indian orgin story and decided to investigate the story. A book written by Stephen Powers becomes one of the most important studys of California Indians in the 1870's.

Stephen Powers (1840–1904) was an American journalist, ethnographer, and historian of Native American tribes in California. He traveled extensively to study and learn about their cultures, and wrote notable accounts of them. His articles were first published over a series of years in the *Overland Monthly* journal, but collected in *The Tribes of California* (1877) published by the US Geological Survey.

Though he wrote many articles on many of the California Indians the book "Tribes of California" delt only with the natives of the center valleys of California. Between 1871 and 1876, Stephen Powers traveled thousands of miles on foot and horseback through the Northern, Central Coast, and great Central Valley regions of California. Powers become very familiar with the various distinctive Native Californian Indian population groups and tribes. He studied their lives and crafts including: spiritual and religious beliefs and ceremonies; indigenous languages, narratives and mythology; art forms

of basketry, rock art, carvings, pottery and weaving; dwellings and belongings.

He also studied their ways of interacting with plants and animals for food, clothing, medicines, and tools. Powers observed and documented their adaptations to circumstances from a hundred years of homeland invasions by Spanish, Mexican, and European-American immigrants settling on their land, and the resulting consequences.

One of the tribes he studied were the Yokuts here in the central valley, a tribe that we are familiar with today. That is were I found the origin story I had seen on the internet. Orgin stories can be found in almost all native tribes in the United states and they are ancient creatin stories past down for thousands years through their elders. The following story is one example.

The Mountain origin story of the Yo-Kuts

“Once there was a time when there was nothing in the world but water. About the place where Tulare Lake is now, there was a pole standing far up out of the water, and on this pole perched a hawk and a crow. First one of them would sit on the pole awhile, then the other would knock him off and sit on it himself. Thus, they sat on top of the pole

above the waters for many years. At length, they wearied of lonesomeness, and they created the birds that prey on fish such as the kingfisher, eagle, pelican, and others. Among them was a very small duck, which dived down to the bottom of the water, picked its beak full of mud, came up, died, and lay floating on the water. The hawk and the crow then fell to work and gathered from the duck's beak the earth which it had brought up, and commenced making the mountains. They began at the place now known as Ta-hi-cha-pa Pass, and the hawk made the east range while the crow made the west one. Little by little, as they dropped in the earth, these great mountains grew athwart the face of the waters, pushing north. It was a work of many years, but finally they met together at Mount Shasta, and their labors were ended. But, behold, when they compared their mountains, it was found that the crow's was a great deal the larger. Then the hawk said the crow, "How did this happen, you rascal? I warrant you have been stealing some of the earth from my bill, and that is why your mountains are the biggest." It was a fact, and the crow laughed in his

claws. Then the hawk went and got some Indian tobacco and chewed it, and it made him exceedingly wise. So he took hold of the mountains turned them around in a circle, putting his range in place of the crow's; and that is why the Sierra Nevada is larger than the coast range. "

"This legend is of value as showing the aboriginal notions of geography. In explaining the story, the Indian drew in the sand a long eclipse, representing quite accurately the shape of the two ranges; and he had never traveled away from the Kings River."

May 2026 ECV 1852 Meeting

Francis Sullivan

Co Historian