

# Homes Of First Americans

Development of House-Building on Continent Will Be Shown in Unique Exhibit at Panama Fair



ONE OF the most interesting features of the coming Panama Fair is to be an exhibit illustrating the evolution of house building in America. Aboriginal architecture in particular will furnish the theme. For one should realize that house building as an art had attained a high development in the New World many centuries before the landing of Columbus. Indeed, thousands of years before Columbus was born the idea of the apartment-house had found in America a concrete expression far beyond anything known in the Old World; and, within the geographical limits of what is now the United States there were types of dwellings not surpassed in size or architectural workmanship by anything in Europe.

Even at the present time we find in this country certain types of houses, very ancient by origin, which are not known anywhere else in the world. There are, for example, the curious basket dwellings of the Wichita Indians; the huge beehive structures erected for domiciliary purposes by the Mohi and Zuni of the Southwest; and, by no means least remarkable, the houses of the Alaskan Eskimo, which are an adaptation of the idea of the fireless cooker, for keeping people warm in the winter time.

Miniature models of the various kinds of houses to be shown at the Panama Exposition are being prepared under the direction of expert ethnologists. From these reproductions will be made in full size, and, if the thing can be managed, people representing the tribes accustomed to inhabit the dwellings will be engaged to occupy them. Thus the visitor at the fair will be enabled to see, almost at a glance, the manner of living adopted by primitive folk all the way from the Arctic Circle to Patagonia. Even the lake dwellers of Venezuela will be on view.

It is a fact rather odd, by the way, that the last-named people, as found today in that part of America, exactly reproduce the mode of existence pursued by the prehistoric lake dwellers of Switzerland, who flourished perhaps 100,000 years ago. Their houses (poles tied together and thatched with grass) are erected on platforms supported on piles far out in the shallow water of lagoons. Leading an amphibious life, they spend a large part of their time in dug-out canoes, deriving a subsistence from fishing chiefly.

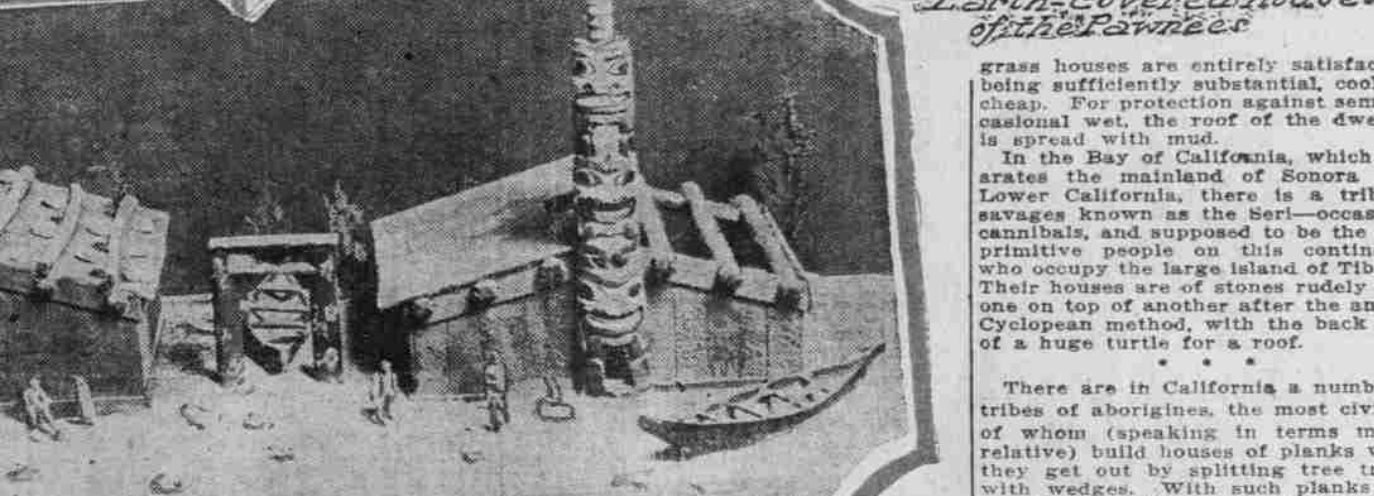
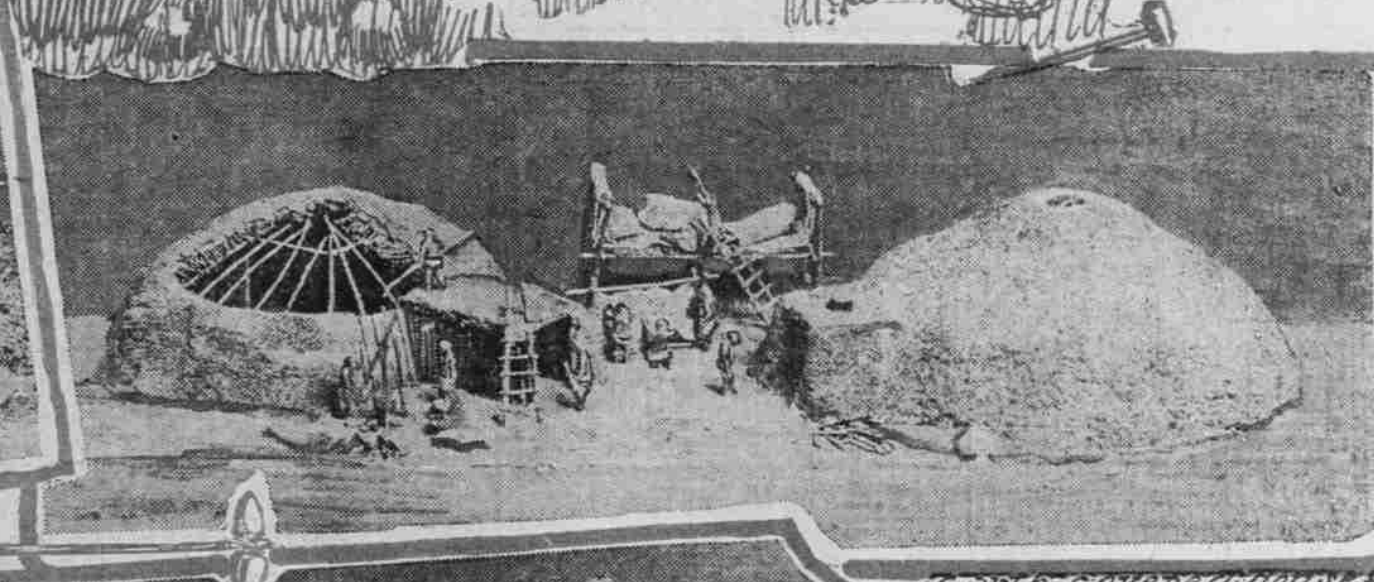
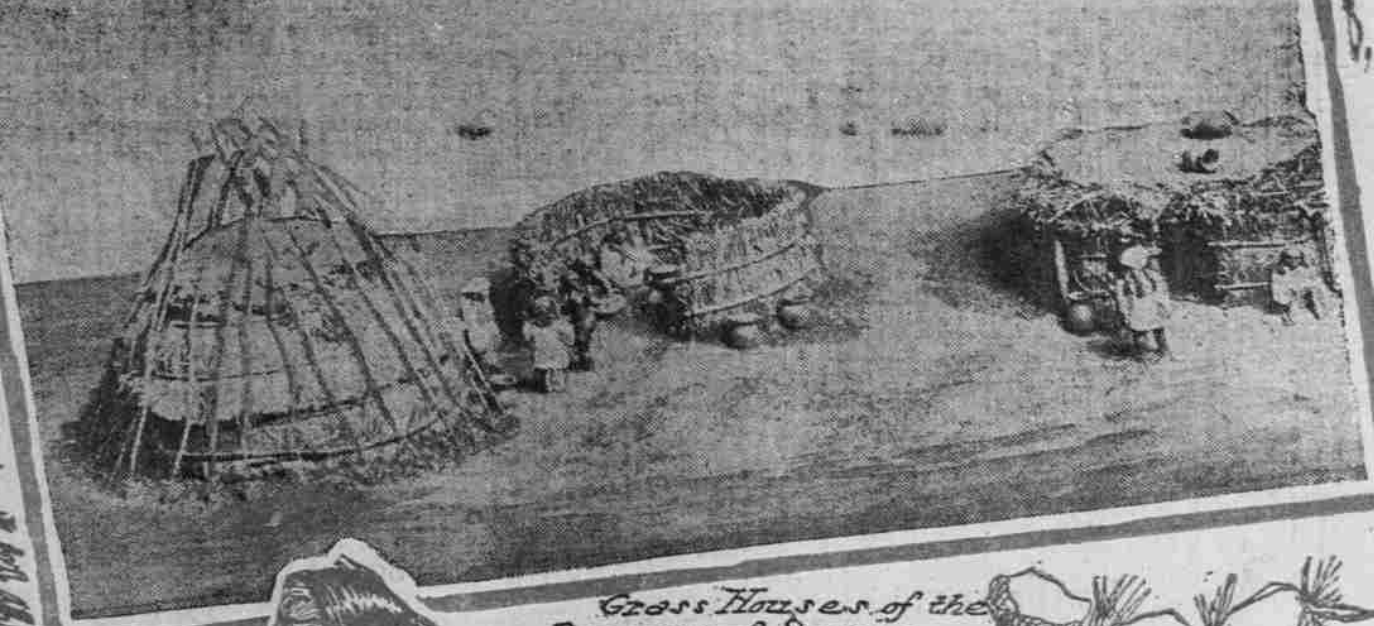
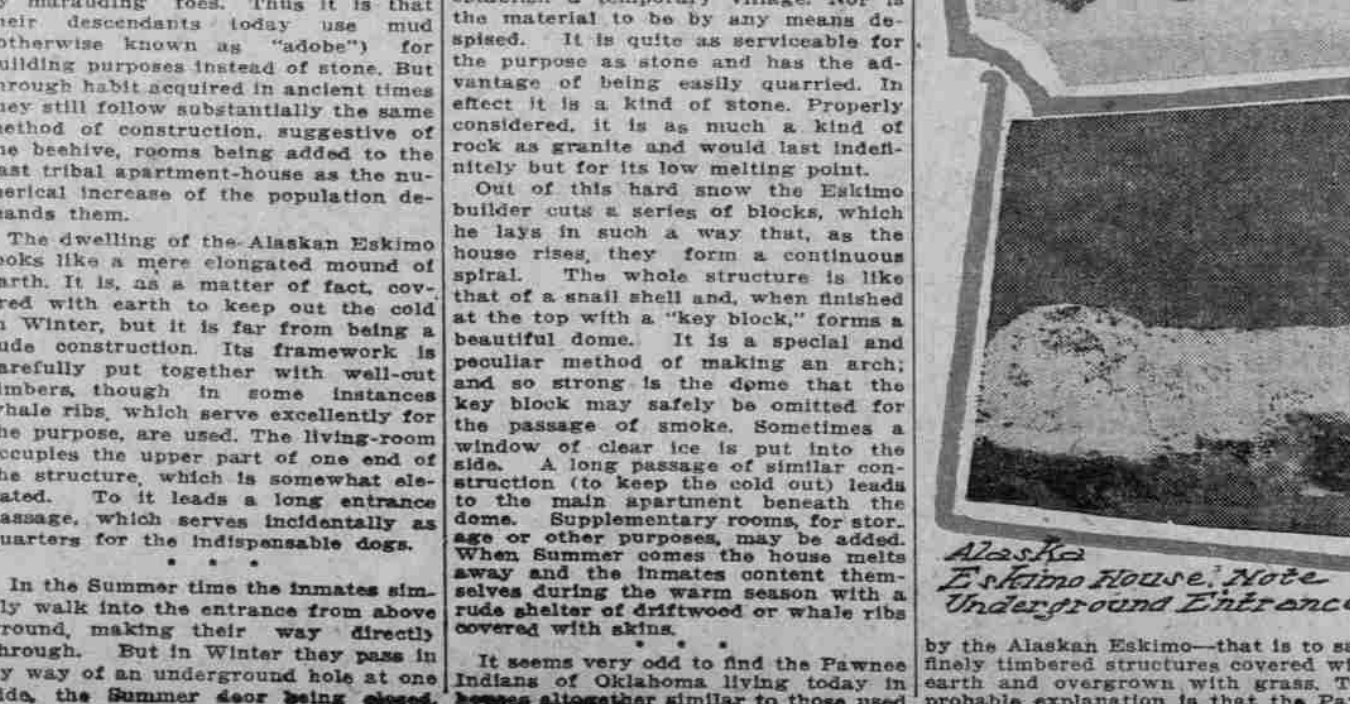
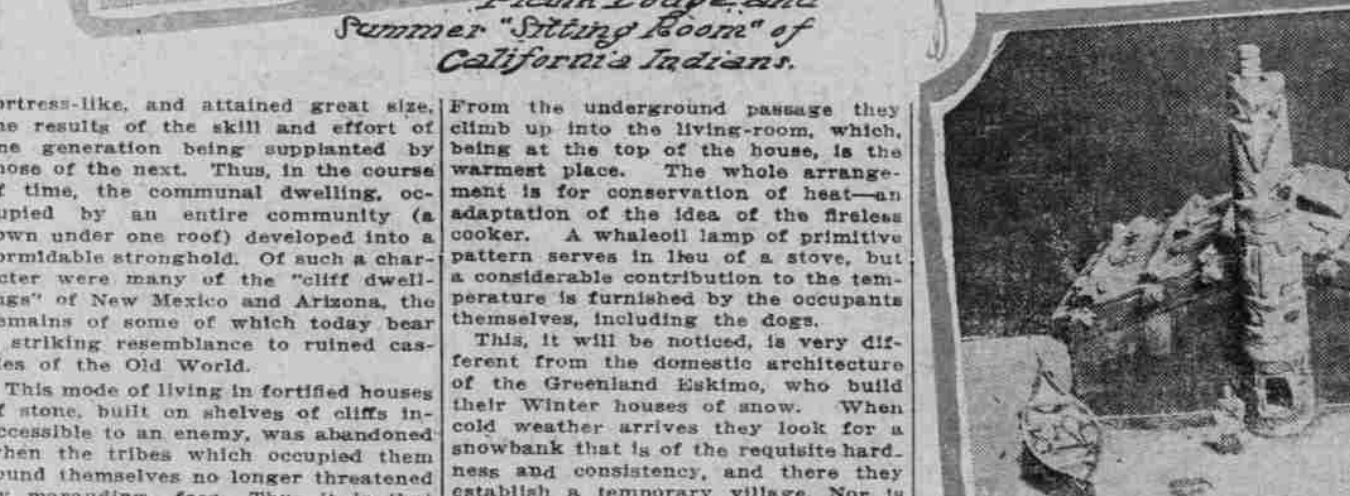
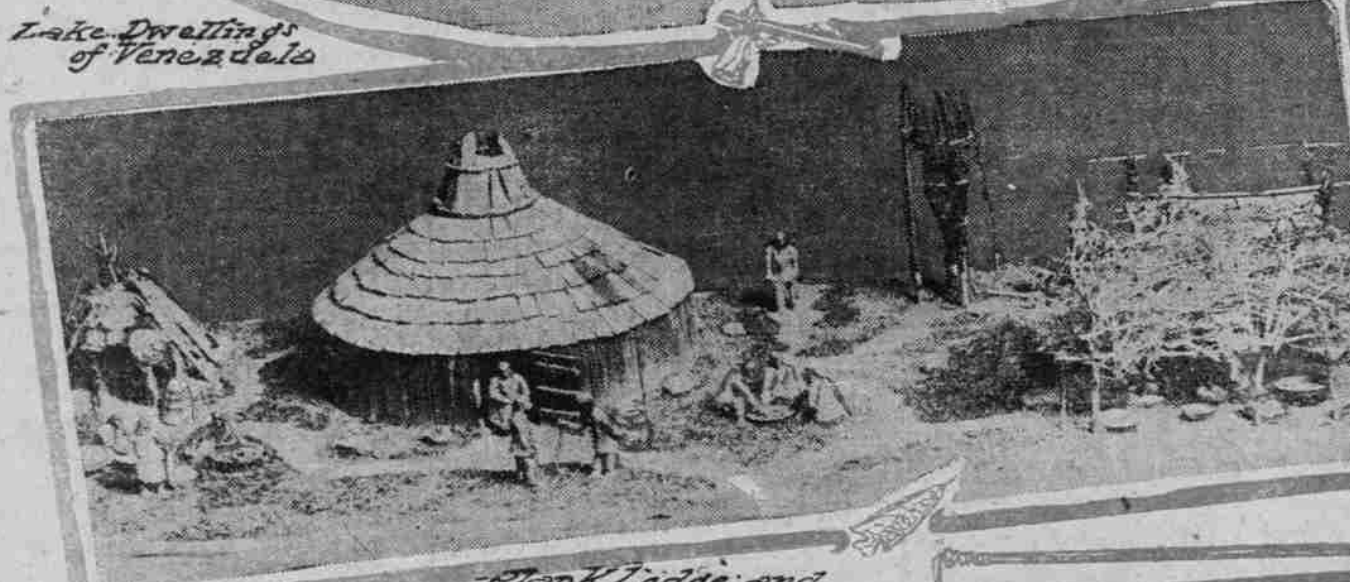
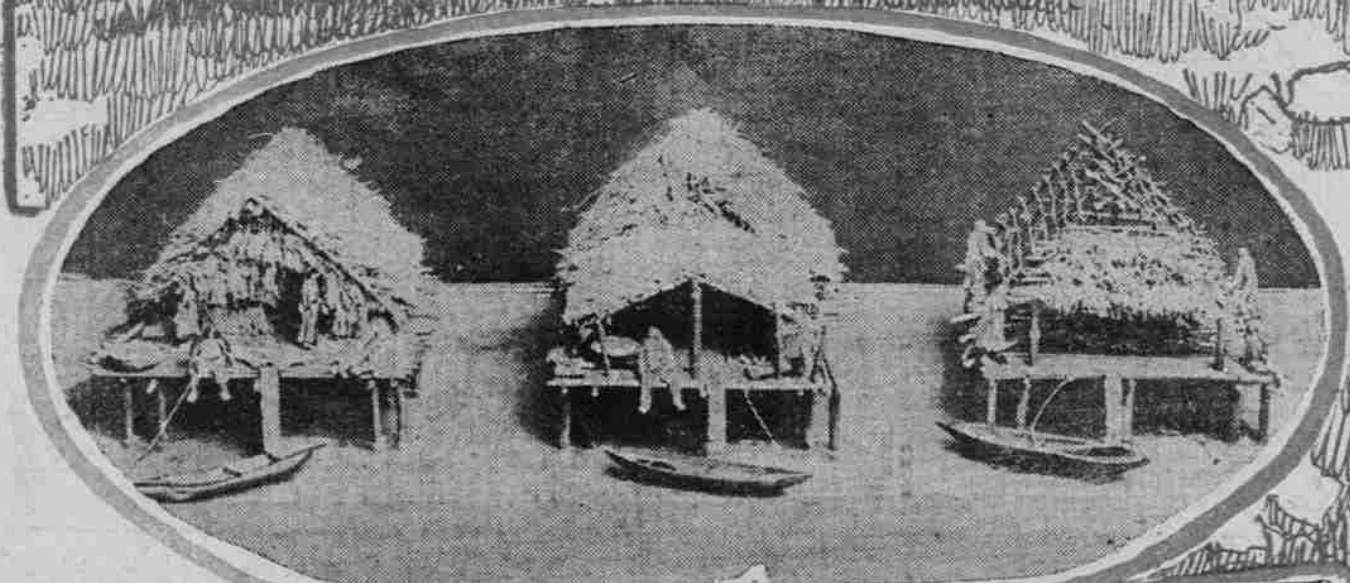
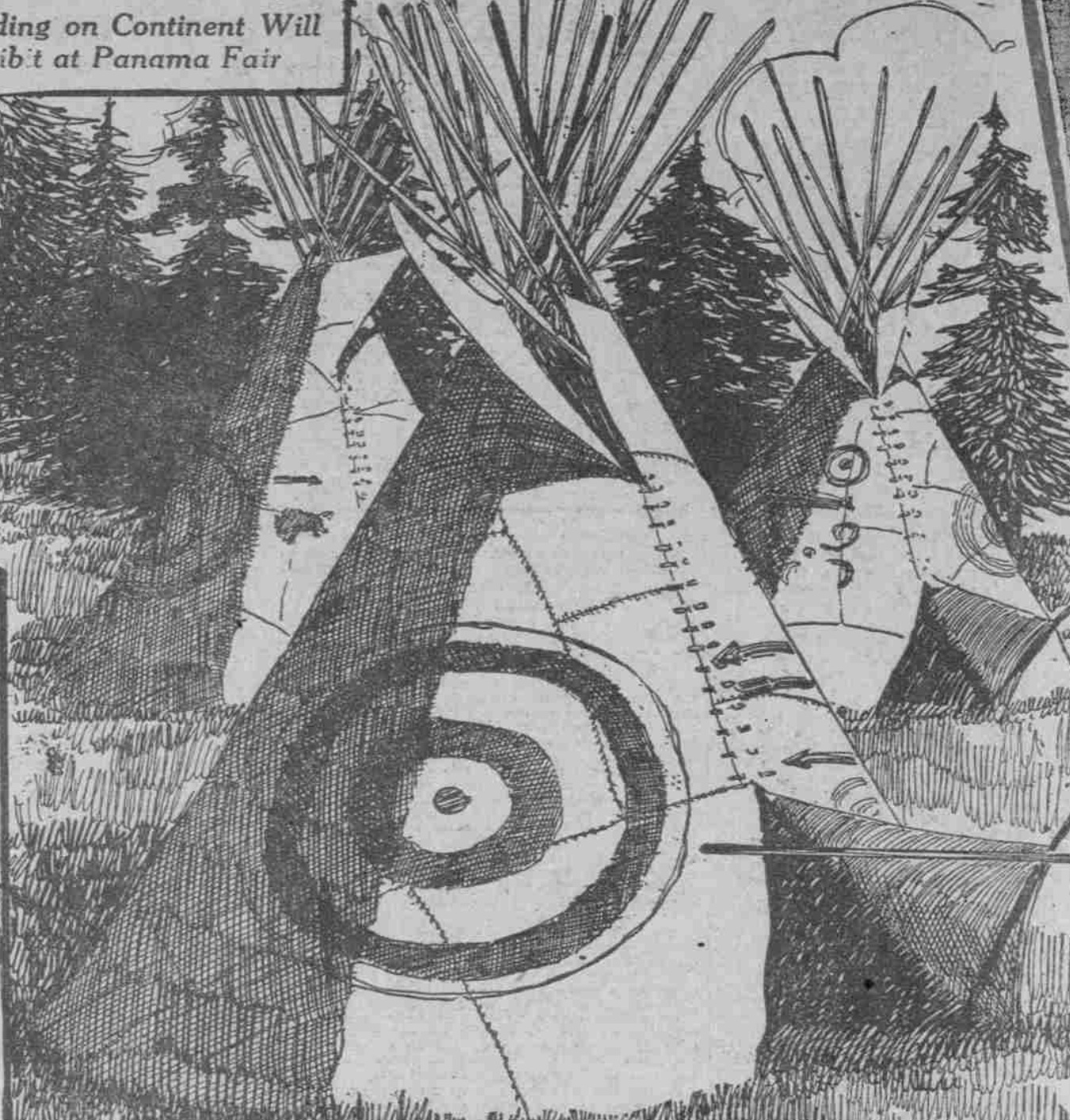
The most remarkable development of this aquatic civilization is found in the vast lakelike lagoon of Maracaibo, and it was the curious water towns there discovered which caused the early Spanish explorers to call the country Venezuela, or Little Venice.

Domestic architecture is necessarily influenced mainly by environment; that is to say, by climate and particularly by the character of obtainable building materials. Our modern cities are built of such materials, in the way of stone or what not, as are most readily at hand. The Indians of the Northwest Coast, dwelling in a region of immense forests of yellow cedar, occupy wooden dwellings, huge in size and of massive construction, which mark the highest aboriginal American achievement in house building. These are, in fact, apartment houses, a single building, sometimes affording accommodations for as many as 250 persons.

Such a house may be the home of an entire clan. Through the middle of it runs a hallway 200 feet or more in length, off which rooms open as upon a hotel corridor. Over the whole is an attic, and holes in the roof provide means for the escape of smoke. Each room is the living quarters of a family, and has its own fireplace. The front of the structure is adorned by an enormous pole, called a "totem pole," which is the trunk of a mighty cedar, carved with representations of various mythologic animals. This pole is an hereditary emblem, reciting the history and traditions of the clan. Through the lower part of it opens the front door of the house.

Now, it is easy to believe that these people, if they had lived in a stone environment, would have rivaled the ancient Mexicans and Peruvians in their architecture. How tremendous must have been the labor, with primitive tools of getting the huge tree-trunks out of the forest, hewing the planks, posts and beams, carving the great totem poles, and erecting the massive buildings! Usually the front of the house is covered with mythologic paintings; for these aborigines are exceedingly clever artists. In early days they built fortified towns of wood, but these have passed away.

The character of building materials necessarily has an important bearing upon the permanence of architecture. Wood decays, and the structures erected by the clever and industrious Indians of the Northwest Coast, massive as they are, do not endure for any great length of time. On the other hand, the ancestors of the Zuni and Mohi, in the Southwest, with no wood for building purposes, but unlimited quantities of stone ready at hand, put up apartment houses of quite a different type, which were able to withstand the wear and tear of centuries. These buildings of hewn stone were



Grass Houses of the Papagos of Sonora

Lake Dwellings of Venezuela

Plank Lodge, and Summer "Sitting Room" of California Indians

Earth-covered houses of the Pawnees

Houses of Northwest Coast Indians

Alaskan Eskimo House, Note Underground Entrance For Winter

by the Alaskan Eskimo—that is to say, finely timbered structures covered with earth and overgrown with grass. The probable explanation is that the Pawnees came anciently from Alaska; their traditions point to origin in the Far North. Although of primitive appearance, as viewed by the casual eye,

grass houses are entirely satisfactory, being sufficiently substantial, cool and cheap. For protection against semi-occasional wet, the roof of the dwelling is spread with mud.

In the Bay of California, which separates the mainland of Sonora from Lower California, there is a tribe of savages known as the Seri—occasional cannibals, and supposed to be the most primitive people on this continent—who occupy the large island of Tiburón. Their houses are of stones rudely piled one on top of another after the ancient Cyclopean method, with the back shell of a huge turtle for a roof.

There are in California a number of tribes of aborigines, the most civilized of whom (speaking in terms merely relative) build houses of planks which they get out by splitting tree trunks with wedges. With such planks they construct dwellings of circular shape, well roofed, which they use for sleeping purposes. But their sitting-rooms (so to call them) are rude, imaginable structures of a few poles with boughs of trees on top to keep off the sun. Near by the house there is always an arrangement of long, thin poles set up in such a way as to form a huge basket, for the reception of the family store of acorns—this being the household granary.

But it is the Wichita Indians, of Kansas and Oklahoma, who have found the queerest use for baskets. They live in them. The houses of these people are nothing in the world but huge baskets turned upside down, the frame made in coiled fashion, like a snail shell being covered with straw tied on in bunches. Close at hand there is always a platform erected on poles (for safety from dogs), which is used for the drying and curing of meat or other provender.

It is proposed at the Panama Exposition to represent the evolution of architecture on the American continent, not through the medium of archeology, but by offering to view the various types of primitive dwellings as they exist today—these, as will be understood, being survivals from earlier epochs, and affording a picturesque as well as instructive idea of the modes of living adopted by remote ancestors of the peoples concerned.

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