

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE IN THE HIGH SIERRA OF CALIFORNIA

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ALONG THE eastern side of the Great Valley of California is the Sierra Nevada, a great mountain chain 500 miles long and 75 wide. The Sierra Nevada has a gradual western slope and an abrupt eastern face fronting the arid Great Basin. The long western side, which contains the main timber belt, was heavily populated in its lower elevations in the pre-Caucasian period. In contrast, the High Sierra above 5000 feet was visited only seasonally by aboriginal groups. The archaeology of this latter zone is little known because it has been assumed that archaeological remains are scanty, and, as a consequence, little work has been carried on. Recent investigations have demonstrated, however, that at some of the seasonal campsites repeated occupation over a long period of time resulted in fairly extensive accumulations of occupational debris.

During the late fall of 1953, exploratory excavations conducted at Vermilion Valley in the High Sierra of Fresno County provided evidence of an extended period of intermittent habitation at an aboriginal camping place.

The Southern California Edison Company currently is constructing a large earth-filled dam across Mono Creek.* The project will result in complete flooding of Vermilion Valley, an area 5 miles long, averaging about 3/4 of a mile across. At the invitation of R. W. Spencer, Manager of the Engineering Department of Southern California Edison Company, William J. Wallace and Edith T. Wallace of the University of Southern California surveyed the area between September 10 and 13, 1953. Of the 5 sites which they recorded, one appeared to merit further investigation, so from October 12 to 18, 1953, Donald W. Lathrap and Jack Nicoll representing the University of Southern

California carried on a limited excavation at the site designated as Vermilion Valley 1. The Southern California Edison Company provided lodging and meals for the field parties. The company personnel also extended many other courtesies which contributed greatly to the success of the trips. The material recovered on the 2 trips forms the basis for this report.

Vermilion Valley, a protected depression, lies some 65 miles east of Fresno and 10 miles west of the crest of the Sierra Nevada. It is a part of the canyon of Mono Creek, one of the major tributaries of the South Fork of the San Joaquin River. The valley is typical of the many U-shaped, glaciated canyons found in the High Sierra. Its level floor, lying between 7500 and 7600 feet elevation, is the alluviated bed of a post-Pleistocene lake impounded by a terminal moraine. The flora is that of the Canadian life zone with the dominant trees: lodgepole pine, *Pinus contorta* var. *murayana* Engelm.; Jeffrey pine, *Pinus ponderosa* var. *jeffreyi* Vasey; and aspen, *Populus tremuloides* Michx. Sierra juniper, *Juniperus occidentalis* Hook., and white fir, *Abies concolor* Lindl. and Gord., occur in lesser numbers. Red fir, *Abies magnifica* Murr., is found at a few moist localities which are protected from the afternoon sun. Since it is in the rain shadow of Kaiser Ridge, Vermilion Valley is somewhat drier than a typical Canadian life zone station, and a small sage, *Artemisia* sp., is the most common shrub in the eastern end of the valley. Deer, black bear, mountain lion, beaver, and coyote are the larger mammals which inhabit the valley. Smaller species, particularly the chipmunk, are also present. Rainbow trout are plentiful in Mono Creek and possibly were even more numerous in prehistoric times.

The Indians inhabiting Vermilion Valley at the time of Caucasian contact probably were Western Mono, but their subdivision cannot be specified with certainty. The Northfork Mono, Yayanchi (Gayton 1948b: 153) can be excluded. E. W. Gifford gives a detailed map showing the extent of Northfork Mono occupation in the High Sierra, and their lands did not extend either south or east of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River (Gifford 1932: 15 and Fig. 1). The inhabitants of Vermilion

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exists in the case of the description of some archaeological Panamint Mountain pottery (Lathrap and Meighan 1951: 21-3), and the ethnographic description of the Owens Valley Paiute pottery (Steward 1933: 266-9).

In the Slick Rock Village report (Fenenga 1952: 343-4) the name "Tulare Plain" has been given to the pottery. Judged from the published description, Tulare Plain, aside from one feature which is assumed to be incorrect, appears in no way different from Owens Valley Brown Ware. By right of first publication (Colton and Hargrave 1937: 19) the name Owens Valley Brown ware has the priority and it is here recommended that the term "Tulare Plain" be discontinued. It is the statement that "Tulare Plain's" walls were thinned by paddle and anvil which seems to be in error. Slick Rock Village lies between the Kern River and Pine Flat area, as noted above. No evidence of the use of paddle and anvil was found in the sherd collections from these two areas. If "Tulare Plain" was thinned by paddle and anvil, it is a localized variant.

In summary, a comparison of the pottery in the University of California Museum of Anthropology from the areas formerly inhabited by the Yokuts, Western Mono, and Owens Valley Paiute, with type specimens of Owens Valley Brown ware, and with descriptions in the literature, indicates that the basic pottery of this entire area is Owens Valley Brown ware. However, when more work has been carried on in this region, and there is a larger sample of whole vessels, rims, and decorated sherds, local variations may become apparent. The Owens Valley area perhaps was the dispersal center of the knowledge of making this ware to the other areas where this pottery is made. It is known that the Paiute intermarried, especially with the Western Mono, their cultural and linguistic kin, and this may have been the mechanism whereby pottery passed from one group to the other. The fact that the Western Mono and the Foothill Yokuts are the westernmost California Indians to make functional pottery vessels and abut to the north and west on peoples without pottery adds support to this hypothesis.

The 6 glass trade beads recovered from the house pit are of interest in that they suggest a terminal date for occupation at the site. There are 4 types represented in the collection:

Globular, with transparent red exterior and opaque white core; 2 specimens, dimensions: length .27 and .24 cm., diameter .39 and .38 cm., perforation .09 and .09 cm.

Subcylindrical, with opaque, red exterior and transparent, dark green core; 2 specimens, dimensions: length .46 and .65 cm., diameter .52 and .73 cm., perforation .19 and .29 cm.

Globular, opaque white; 1 specimen, dimensions: length .28 cm., diameter .38 cm., perforation .08 cm.

Globular, transparent, medium blue; 1 specimen, dimensions: length .25 cm., diameter .35 cm., perforation .05 cm.

The first 3 types are Meighan's types 99, 104, and 184 respectively. The blue seed bead is intermediate between Meighan's types 213 and 200 (Meighan, n.d.). These bead types occur elsewhere, mainly in the Mother Lode region of California, the latest sites in the Sacramento Valley, and the McCloud River area in northern California. They are absent at sites which were under only Spanish or Mexican influence (Meighan, n.d.). These factors indicate a date which is certainly post-1830 and probably post-1848. Furthermore, 2 of these bead types are shared with 2 burials in an historic Yokuts cemetery. These burials have been dated as falling in the 1830-1860 period (Riddell, F. 1951: 8-10, 23-4).

Six fragments of bottle glass were associated with the house pit. Five, probably all from the same bottle, are thin, .1 to .2 cm. thick, and of a greenish-brown color. The remaining piece is of thick, .5 cm., uncolored glass. Its edges are somewhat modified, a condition which suggests that it may have been used as a scraper.

Summary and Conclusions. It is possible that Vermilion Valley 1 is culturally stratified, but a much larger sample of the deeper layers would be necessary to demonstrate this possibility. It is evident that most, if not all of the artifacts from the house pit are derived from the occupation of the house, and that the fill in the pit represents natural wash after the total abandonment of the site rather than subsequent occupation. That artifacts were churned into the sand a short distance below the original excavation of the floor also seems likely.

The cultural remains from Vermilion Valley 1 present a fairly satisfactory picture of the terminal phase of aboriginal occupation in this section of the High Sierra. The house may

Vermilion Valley 1 site