

A Historic Indian Community at Victorville, California

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ALTHOUGH there is ample archaeological evidence to indicate that the desert area in and around Victorville, San Bernardino County, California, was occupied by prehistoric peoples (e.g., Smith 1955, 1958, 1963; Steele 1976), a significant gap exists in the ethnographic record. Occasional remarks in scattered reports (Kroeber 1925; Strong 1929; Manners 1974; Steele 1976) lead one to the conclusion that any indigenous peoples had vanished long before the time of written records. However, research initiated recently by the author shows otherwise. By a careful examination of archival resources, including census reports, J. P. Harrington's (1986) fieldnotes, the Nicholson papers (at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California), numerous museum collection records, newspaper accounts, and interviews with native informants and knowledgeable "old-timers," a picture of a late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century Indian community is beginning to develop.

Information for this paper was gathered by the author during the course of research involving tribal/cultural identification of baskets in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History documented as having come from Victorville.

IMPORTANCE OF THE REGION

The locality referred to as the Upper Narrows on the Mojave River at Victorville (Fig. 1) has long been held as a place of primary importance as a source of water for the native inhabitants and for early explorers and travellers. Originating in the San

Bernardino Mountains, the Mojave River flows underground for most of its length, but due to special geological substrata the water is forced to the surface at the Narrows and remains the year around.

Over the centuries, nearly all the trails traversing the desert region between the Colorado River and coastal southern California have included this important watering place (Casebier 1975). Prehistoric peoples first used what is now called the Mojave Indian Trail for the movement of trade goods between California and the Southwest. Early Spanish explorers including Pedro Fages and Fray Francisco Garcés utilized this route, opening the way for merchant caravans between Santa Fe and Los Angeles, and soon it became known as the Old Spanish Trail. American explorers Jedediah Smith and John C. Frémont likewise chose this route for their travels across the desert. By the mid-nineteenth century, the heavy influx of Mormon settlers passing through the region had added yet another name to the literature--the Mormon Trail.

As a result of all this activity, Indian/white relations over the span of only a few decades had gone from friendly cooperation to open hostility over rights to the water and use of the land. According to diaries kept by early Spanish explorers, the various Indian groups inhabiting the desert region had assisted them in their travels, but increasing contact brought trouble (Weinman-Roberts 1980). White exploitation of limited desert resources had strained relationships, while the establishment of ranches and lum-

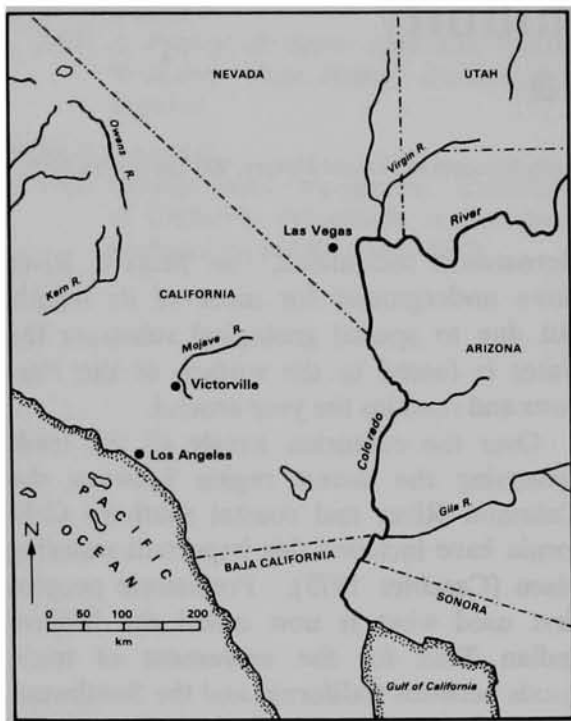


Fig. 1. Location of Victorville.

ber mills in the San Bernardino Mountains encroached on traditional Indian hunting and foraging lands.

Increasing Indian/white skirmishes led to the murder by Indians of three white ranch hands at the Los Flores Ranch in 1866. The whites retaliated in 1867 and massacred a large group of Indians at Chimney Rock on the desert floor. Thus, the ranks of the Chemehuevi, Vanyume, Serrano, and Paiute, traditional inhabitants of this part of the desert, were thoroughly decimated and the Indian "problem" solved (Smith 1958). However, this "solution" by early white settlers is where the anthropological problem begins.

DOCUMENTATION AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RECORD

Up to this point in the historic accounts concerning Victorville and the western Mojave Desert, Indians were considered a part (albeit minor) of the area's history (Beattie

and Beattie 1939). But after the Chimney Rock Massacre, there are virtually no more references, as if the Indians, once subjugated, had ceased to exist.

Likewise, the anthropological literature does nothing to shed light on the situation. Published ethnographic reports (Benedict 1924; Kroeber 1925; Strong 1929; Johnston 1965; Miller and Miller 1967; Smith and Simpson 1969) contain few, if any, specific references to the Indian population of Victorville.

An examination of the pertinent fieldnotes of anthropologists E. W. Gifford and T. T. Waterman at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, failed to produce any evidence that they had visited or reported on Victorville. Additionally, Maurice Zigmond's (personal communication 1986) own fieldwork, as well as the unpublished field notes of T. D. McCown and S. C. Cappannari (in Zigmond's possession) indicated that none of them had ever included Victorville in their research. The fieldnotes of John P. Harrington (1986) for the area reveal his having visited Victorville in the late 1940s. Although many members of the Indian community had died, he gathered significant amounts of data from survivors, and these hold promise for future investigation.

When examination of firsthand field observations failed to produce substantive evidence of a Victorville Indian settlement, less "conventional" sources were sought. By utilizing a combination of Federal Census Reports, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History (LACMNH) collection records and correspondence, the fieldnotes and records kept by turn-of-the-century basket collector and dealer Grace Nicholson, local newspaper accounts, court records, state prison records, and numerous interviews with available native informants, as well as the recollections of knowledgeable Victorville

"old-timers" and compiled local genealogies, an outline of an Indian community in Victorville roughly spanning the years 1890 to 1955 was assembled.

THE VICTORVILLE INDIAN COMMUNITY

The discovery of mineral resources, the establishment of farms and ranches, and the building of the railroad led to the founding of the town of Victor in 1890 (Upland Savings and Loan Association 1973). Concerning this early settlement, only two Federal census reports were available for this study: 1900 and 1910. (The 1890 census was destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and all censuses from 1920 on are sealed, according to Federal privacy law, for 72 years from the date of enumeration.) However, these two extant sources reveal a booming white population and a separate enumeration for the Indian population.

In 1900 a total of 44 Indians were listed for Victor Township: 15 men, 11 women, and 18 male and female children under the age of 18. The total age range was from infants of only a few months to one woman who was 80 years of age. However, most heads of households were in their twenties, thirties, and forties.

Culturally, 37 were listed as "Pi Ute," three as "Chimawaya," and four had no tribe listed. In all cases, these persons and their parents were identified as having been born in California.

Only the occupations of the men were listed. These were "farm laborer," "day laborer," "ranchero," and "stock herder." The sole exception to this was a 60-year-old widow (Susie) listed as the head of the house, with two sons, and her occupation was given as "Indian basket weaver."

All 44 Indians lived in "moveable" dwellings, owning the structures but not the land

on which they stood. None had any formal education; most could not read or write English, and only a few could speak it.

One recognizable name in the 1900 census (p. 330) is "Willie Boy" (b. 1881, a Paiute farm laborer who spoke some English). This may be the infamous Willie Boy who kidnapped Lolita, murdered her father, Mike Boniface, and, in his attempts to escape capture, killed the girl and subsequently committed suicide. Although little was known about him, he was reported to have moved from Twenty Nine Palms to Victorville after his parents died (no date) (Lawton 1960). According to Lawton, Willie Boy was born (no date) near Pahrump, Nevada, and was a member of the Las Vegas band of Southern Paiute. Although the census data give his age as 19 years in 1900, his birthplace was said to have been in California. This discrepancy could indicate another person of the same name or a mistake by the enumerator.

There is, however, further evidence to doubt the complete accuracy of the census. A careful examination of the figures reveals discrepancies between several birth dates and the age at last birthday:

"Salio, Elario b. 1876 age 26"

"Salio, Hosepa b. 1878 age 18"

Also, not every Indian living in Victorville was included in the census. Correspondence (Waters 1946) quite definitely stated that Mrs. Henrietta Cole (who, with her husband, owned the Verde Ranch at Victorville) assembled a collection of Indian baskets from 1890 to 1906 made by Indians living on or near the ranch. One specific weaver mentioned was Maria Chapula, whose name does not appear in the Federal Census for 1900.

In 1905 and 1906, Bureau of Indian Affairs agent C. E. Kelsey undertook to compile a census of California Indians not living on reservations (Kelsey 1971). Al-

Table 1
SUMMARY OF CENSUS DATA

	1900 Federal Census	1906 Kelsey Census	1910 Federal Census	1928-1933 B.I.A. Census
Men	5	4	4	2
Women	11	3	3	3
Children under 18	18	5 (ages uncertain)	0	2
Total Listed	44	12	7	7
TRIBE				
Chemehuevi	3			(no tribal affiliations given)
Paiute	37		4	
Serrano			1	
Shoshonean		12		
Tehachapi			2	
No affiliation given	4			

though he concentrated heavily on northern California, there is a listing (Kelsey 1971:41) for Victor (with an erroneous placement in Kern County) enumerating 12 Indians comprising three families with children and one solitary man (Table 1).

By the 13th Federal Census in 1910, the trend toward a smaller Indian population continued, with only seven people, all adults, listed. All continued to live in aboriginal dwellings; did not own the land; neither spoke, read, nor wrote English; and worked as laborers. Although the numbers are reduced, the tribes represented are more varied (Table 1).

The last currently available census (U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs 1933) was taken in California between 1928 and 1933. Not nearly as detailed as the previous censuses, it is merely an alphabetical listing of names, birth dates, and addresses. A search revealed a total of seven people (see Table 1 for breakdown) giving their address as "General Delivery Victorville."

Taken on their own, these are only cold statistics, not living human beings. A closer look at trends in these figures plus material from other sources can make these seemingly impersonal numbers come alive and tell a

story, so to speak.

Only one name appears in all four enumerations (albeit with slightly different spellings):

"Elario Salio"

"Hilario" (no last name)

"Elsiro Serio"

"Elario Selaya"

His birth date ranges from 1876 to 1884. In 1900 he had been married to his wife Hosepa for 5 years and was the father of two small children. By 1910, however, he had remarried to a Tehachapi woman named Maggie. At last, in 1928 no wife was listed, but two other Selayas appear (Joseph, age 7, and Richard, age 3), presumably his sons.

The Waters (1946) correspondence from the mid-1940s concerning Victorville weavers gives a bit clearer picture of the turn-of-the-century community. Maria Chapula, according to the Waters letters, was born on (or near) the Verde Ranch and spent all her life there. With Maria in her life as a basket weaver were her mother, Sola (or Lola) Old; her aunt, Susie Higgins; and a good friend, Annie Brown, from Tehachapi, who visited frequently. The women were all expert weavers as shown by the examples of their work in LACMNH collections (Fig. 2).

Table 2
KNOWN NAMES AND DATES FOR INDIANS IN VICTORVILLE^a

	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960
Boniface, Jim; b. 1840		X						
Mary; b. 1840		X						
Jeff; b. 1880		X						
Annie; b. 1891		X						
Brown, Annie	[1890-----1910]							
Bruce, Ed; b.1893			X					
wife				1912-13				
Bruce, George; b.1865		X						
Georgia; b. 1872		[1900-----1913]						
Haulapi; b. 1891		X						
Clara; b. 1893		X						
Stephen; b. 1897		X						
Willie Boy; b. 1881		X						
Chapula, Manuel; b. 1850			[1910-----1932]					
Maria; b. 1856	[1856-----1960]							
Cottonwood, Juan; b.1870		[1900-1906]						
Fegundo, Filippe; b.1870		X						
Marie; b. 1882		X						
Higgins, Susie; b. 1840	[1890-----1923]							
Dick; b. 1885		X						
Cha ati; b. 1880		X						
Holmes, Frank; b. 1876		[1900-----1916]						
Annie; b. 1886		[1900-----1937]						
Johnson, Juan; b. 1872		[1900-----1933]						
Kitty; b. 1884		[1900-----1933]						
Johnson, Charley; b. 1883		X						
Nancy; b. 1883				1924				
Manuel, John; b. 1866		X						
Mary; b. 1875		X						
Victoria; b. 1890		X						
Old, Sola	[1890-----1906]							
Pacheco, Joe; b. 1870		X						
Anna; b. 1873		X						
Cootie; b. 1888		X						
no name (male); b. 1890		X						
Henry; b. 1892		X						
no name (male); b. 1900		X						
Salio (Serio), Elario; b; 1876 to 1884		[1900-----1933]						
Salio, Hosepa; b. 1878		X						
Frankie; b. 1895		X						
Cuchillo; b. 1897		X						
Maggie; b. 1885			X					
Joseph; b. 1919					1933			
Richard; b. 1924					1933			
Snyder, Mary; b. 1858					1933			
Waterman, Jim; b. 1855		X						
mother; b. 1820		X						
NO LAST NAMES KNOWN:								
Albert; b. 1894		X						
Bill; b. 1892		X						
Charley; b. 1888		X						
Charley; b. 1860		X						
Mary; b. 1860		X						
Charley Jr.; b. 1880		X						
John			1906					
wife			1906					
child			1906					
Marmie				[1913-1919]				
Pete; b. 1865		X						
Willie; b. 1891		X						

^a Data compiled from all sources available. X = a single mention in a census report.



Fig. 2. Sampling of baskets made by Victorville weavers showing range of shapes, sizes, materials, and designs. Photo by Don Meyer.

By 1906, corroboration of the existence of these women and their work comes from Pasadena dealer and collector Grace Nicholson. Her search for Indian artifacts of all types led her up and down California, with occasional forays farther afield. Basketry was clearly her preference, and her meticulous notebooks, ledgers, and correspondence contain abundant information.

In Nicholson's field notes for 1907 are sketches of six baskets with the makers' names given as: "Victorville Maria" and "Kittie Johnson." At the top of another page is a notation reading "Annie Brown, Victorville. Best weaver." In all, Nicholson appears to have collected 20 baskets in Victorville by these weavers and perhaps others.

At the turn of the century, Walter W. Richardson moved to Victorville with his brother, eventually married (Ruby), and opened a dry goods store. According to an extant ledger book in the family, Ruby Richardson bought and/or traded merchan-

dise for baskets from 1907 to 1924. Indian names (10 in all) are recorded in it very simply only as "Susie," "Marie," or "Monroe Brown's wife," but these entries continue the documentation of the Indian community's activities (Jean Durfee, personal communication 1985).

Prior to 1923, no specific reference was made to the exact location of the Indians in Victorville except in the instance of Maria Chapula living on or near the Verde Ranch. Again, Richardson family records are helpful. Figure 3 documents the existence of the "Indian Village Feb. 19, 1923." While 1900 and 1910 censuses indicate the Indians lived in "moveable" and "aboriginal" dwellings, this photo shows both wooden frame buildings and brush huts. The easily recognizable rock outcropping at the Upper Narrows is seen in the left center of Figure 3.

A second photo from the Richardson family collection (Fig. 4) shows a close-up of "Old Susie" in front of her hut. This is



Fig. 3. "Indian Village Feb. 19, 1923." Photo courtesy of Jean Durfee.



Fig. 4. "Old Susie Feb. 5, 1923." Close-up of Susie Higgins seated in front of her house in Victorville. Exterior of hut is covered with discarded cloth cement sacks from the Southwestern Portland Cement Company established in Victorville in 1917. Photo courtesy of Jean Durfee.

Susie, the Indian basket weaver from the 1900 Federal Census and the aunt of Maria Chapula. Close examination reveals the use

of cloth sacks, from the Southwestern Portland Cement Works in Victorville, as an exterior covering of her hut.

NEWSPAPER REPORTS

Although not always completely reliable, newspaper accounts have augmented this project by adding human interest value.

Maria Chapula was the subject of two lengthy newspaper articles (Barry 1958; Anonymous 1960) as she neared death and began achieving local notoriety by her longevity. From all evidence gathered to date (Federal Census Report 1910; U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs 1933; personal death certificate; obituary), she appears to have been 104 years old at her death in 1960. Both articles recalled a colorful, but often painful, history of her life and home on the hill overlooking the Upper Narrows (this location correlates with Richardson family recollections). Having long outlived any of her contemporaries, she apparently survived by doing domestic work for local families. During World War II, she was severely beaten by a soldier in an attempted robbery at her home.

One last recollection of her was provided by David Baxter (personal communication 1986). As a child living at 10th and D Streets in the early 1950s, Baxter recalled Maria as an extremely elderly and feeble woman to whom his father (a lumberyard owner) used to give firewood.

By the mid 1950s she was too infirm to care for herself, and in 1958 suffered a severe stroke. She had held what was left of the Indian village by "squatter's rights," and upon her death on July 10, 1960, it reverted to the Appleton Land, Water, and Power Company.

While the name of her husband, Manuel Chapula, is documented only in the 1910 Federal Census and in newspaper accounts about Maria, he appears to have figured prominently in "colorful" stories related by older Victorville residents. Historical reminiscences (Local Historical Research Class

1963) suggest that he was at least peripherally involved in the Indian/white skirmishes of the late 1860s, culminating in the previously mentioned Chimney Rock Massacre. (The 1910 Federal Census listed his age at 60 years, so theoretically he was old enough to have participated, although no Indian names are mentioned in the historical accounts.)

Local oral history holds that Manuel Chapula returned home one day in 1912 or 1913 to find a man attacking Maria. In his rage, Manuel killed him and subsequently was tried, convicted, and sentenced to San Quentin State Prison. Surviving trial records (Superior Court, County of San Bernardino, State of California vs. Manuel Chapolia [sic], 1917), and newspaper accounts (Anonymous 1916, 1917), do not mention any attack on Maria but do report the murder of Frank Holmes on December 18, 1916, by an intoxicated Manuel Chapula, and his brief trial followed by a sentence of life imprisonment. In 1932 he contracted tuberculosis and was released to return to Victorville, where he died on November 14 of that year. Both he and Maria are buried in Victor Valley Memorial Park on land that probably was part of the original Indian village.

IN PERSPECTIVE

Although far from complete, it is clear from the evidence gathered to date that a community of Indians did exist at Victorville with at least one person surviving until relatively recently. The limited documentation shows a dwindling population living in poverty and without much positive interaction with the larger Victorville population.

All of the census reports singled the Indians out from the white population, and in many instances the enumerators wasted no time getting complete names, substituting instead "no name Indian."

The Indians were considered fair game for local jokesters. Once Manuel Chapula was purposely intoxicated by the locals and his long hair shaved by them into a "+" pattern (Ellsworth Sylvester, personal communication 1986).

The often-used derogatory quote about "the only good Injun . . ." was applied derisively to Manuel Chapula by Frank Talmadge, an early Victorville resident and veteran of the Indian/white skirmishes of the 1860s:

That other tribes and other chiefs, too, knew that Talmadge always contended "The only good Indian is a dead one" was a "much bad white man" is borne out by tales told of another old chief named Chipuli [sic], whom somehow had survived the many Indian campaigns. Years later when Frank was in Victorville, old Chipuli [sic] saw him coming down the street, his old Masonic emblem which crested his walking stick flashing in the sunlight. The (elderly, too) Indian chief recognized Mr. Talmadge sufficiently afar that he crossed over to the other side of the street rather than take chances of being too near his enemy, although Indian wars were long out of order" [Drake 1949:71-72].

Perhaps not all of these stories are true, but the fact that they are still a part of local oral history confirms the negative attitude toward the Indians.

CULTURAL QUESTION

A major outstanding question yet to be answered by this research and by previous work (Kroeber 1925; Strong 1929; Harrington 1986) is the question of the cultural origin of the Victorville Indian community. The evidence examined for this paper presents a very confusing, and often conflicting, account of the actual tribal affiliations of these people. Future research will focus on

an attempt to clarify these affiliations using the corpus of several dozen documented baskets made by Victorville weavers. The baskets will be closely examined for such diagnostic traits as materials, techniques, shapes, and designs and then compared with documented baskets from the Chemehuevi, Serrano, and Kawaiisu. It is anticipated that this approach, combined with promising data from interviews conducted by Harrington (1986), will provide some answers to the question of the cultural affiliation(s) of the Indians of this little-known region.

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