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Images of Hechenu: Ethnohistorical Notes on a Northern Sierra Mewuk Village

JAMES GARY MANIERY AND DWIGHT DUTSCHKE

Anthropologists C. Hart Merriam and Samuel A. Barrett photodocumented the Northern Sierra Mewuk village of Hechenu in the first decade of the twentieth century. More than half a century after Euro-American miners played havoc with the hills and the traditional lifeways of the native people, these photographs record the extraordinary tenacity of the Mewuk culture. Although Hechenu no longer exists, these images and the memories they evoke in the people who once saw the village leave a record of this important, sparsely studied period of Northern Sierra Mewuk culture history.

The village of Hechenu is one of twenty-two Northern Sierra Mewuk ethnographic localities identified in the anthropological literature and field notes. Sierra Mewuk territory has been linguistically divided into three groups: Northern, Central, and Southern (figure 1). Northern Mewuk territory included portions of the Cosumnes, Mokelumne, and Calaveras river drainages.

James Gary Maniery, a principal of PAR Environmental Service, Inc., in Sacramento, California, has conducted ethnohistorical research with the Sierra Mewuk for ten years. Dwight A. Dutschke (Mewuk) is Native American heritage coordinator for the California Office of Historic Preservation and a former chairman of the board of directors of the Amador Tribal Council. A version of this paper was presented at the Eighth Annual California Indian Conference, 16–18 October 1992, at the University of California, Berkeley.

The Sierra Mewuk territory was relatively unaffected by early nineteenth-century explorers such as Jedediah Smith and members of the Hudson's Bay Company. Beginning in 1848, however, California gold fever brought a tremendous influx of miners into the more remote mountainous regions of the Sierra Nevada foothills. Mewuk fishing, collecting, and dwelling areas were infringed upon and often destroyed by these campaigns.

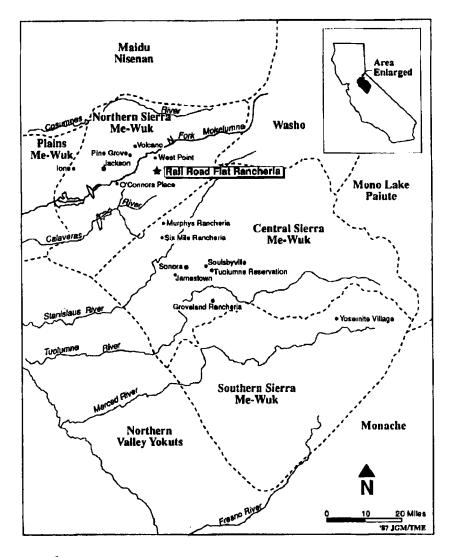


FIGURE 1.

Roughly five decades after Euro-American incursion into what had been relatively pristine Native American land, Mewuk communities were still surviving in the foothill regions of California's Motherlode. Contrary to popular perception, the people carried on traditional subsistence practices to the extent possible. Ceremonial roundhouses were erected that incorporated Euro-American techniques and architectural elements (e.g., a small window). Although, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mewuk were adept at incorporating Euro-American lifeways, it is clear from anthropologists' field notes and publications that they preserved their language and continued to practice their ceremonies, particularly during annual Big Time.

The Northern Sierra Mewuk village of Hechenu was one of several sites where traditional Mewuk ceremonies were performed on an annual basis during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Our research has identified several Mewuk who reside in the Motherlode communities of the central Sierra Nevada and who remember Hechenu (or Rail Road Flat Rancheria) as an important place. One consultant, Ruren Domingo, was present at a ceremony held there in 1906, when he was ten years old. He remembered "guys" (anthropologists) who came around taking pictures.

In our research of post-1900 Northern Mewuk villages, we assembled forty-one black-and-white photographs taken of Rail Road Flat Rancheria during the first decade of the twentieth century. These photographs were used during oral interviews with Ruren Domingo and other Mewuk. They assisted the ethnographer during the oral interview process and helped Domingo to remember his visit to Hechenu in 1906. A number of these unique photographs are published in this article, which focuses on the historic collection of photographs and the photographers themselves. We present some locational data on the village, a glimpse into the genealogy of the people who lived there, and oral interview data, but our intention is to spotlight the photographs and the anthropologists responsible for taking them.

Hechenu was visited by ethnographers as early as 1902; the photographs compiled in this paper were taken in 1905, 1906, and 1908. The prints, which were obtained during the senior author's 1983–84 research of this Mewuk group,³ are archived in the C. Hart Merriam photographic collection at the Bancroft Library and in the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology; both repositories are located at the University of California, Berkeley.

The collection is a result of the efforts of C. Hart Merriam and Samuel A. Barrett. In the early 1900s, Merriam and Barrett independently visited many Sierra Nevada foothill towns and Indian settlements, including Rail Road Flat, a town established in 1849. Barrett's work with the Mewuk was conducted as part of the ethnological and archaeological survey of California sponsored by the University of California through the support of Phoebe Hearst and under the direction of Alfred Kroeber. During this period of time, Kroeber led efforts to conduct ethnological work with as many California Indian groups as could be studied feasibly. They were, in the eyes of Kroeber and his students, rapidly acculturating to Euro-American lifestyles.

Merriam was not a trained ethnographer when he entered California ethnological studies; he was best known as a naturalist. At age fifty-five, he received funding for life so he could do research of his choosing; a trust was established for him by Mrs. Harriman and administered by the Smithsonian Institution. Merriam published hundreds of biological papers, as compared to only twenty-nine papers, articles, or books devoted to Native Americans. The large majority of his work with California Indians remains unpublished and is in the form of field notes, rough manuscripts, and notes archived at the Bancroft Library and the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Many of the photographs of Rail Road Flat taken by Merriam and Barrett have never been exhibited or published in a group. In fact, it is estimated that only nine (20 percent) of the forty-one photographs that are filed in the Bancroft Library and the Hearst Museum have appeared in anthropological journals and other publications. We hope that California ethnographers and ethnohistorians will benefit from being made aware of this collection, especially in their comparative studies of material culture, Native American architecture, acculturation, and technology. The photographic collection is already benefiting the local Mewuk Indian community; it is available through the California State Park system, Chaw-sé Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park, located near Jackson, California.

Our research into the historical developments at Rail Road Flat stemmed primarily from ethnographic studies with a Mewuk elder living in West Point, California.⁸ This man talked about his childhood home at Six Mile Rancheria near Angels Camp and also introduced the senior author to another Mewuk elder living outside Sonora. This second man shared his memories about his home in Murphys in the early 1900s. Both of these men were familiar with the central Sierra region in general and rural mining communities such as Rail Road Flat in particular, and both conveyed their memories of attending Big Time at the roundhouse at Rail Road Flat.⁹

In 1983–84, additional ethnographic/ethnohistoric information was obtained through a large-scale cultural resources investigation of portions of the North Fork Mokelumne River within the territory attributed to the Northern Mewuk. During this project, other Mewuk provided more specific information about Rail Road Flat. Through these discussions, it became clear that Rail Road Flat was an important place that many Mewuk remembered. These people especially remembered Pedro O'Connor, the headman, who was a leader among the Mewuk people from the early 1900s until his death in 1942.¹⁰

In 1988, based on the archival and oral interview data that were collected as part of the North Fork Mokelumne River study, the authors published a short article about Pedro O'Connor's home on the river—a place he moved to from Rail Road Flat. Learning more about the link between Rail Road Flat and O'Connor's last home on the river inspired continued interest in the history of Rail Road Flat.¹¹

Research on the Rail Road Flat Rancheria and other Sierra Mewuk enclaves has been an ongoing mission. Our intent is to compile the scattered notes and photographs housed in various archives, as well as the oral history and folklore recounted in various Mewuk communities. Although more work remains to be done in compiling the ethnohistorical picture of the Sierra Mewuk, the collection of black-and-white photographs presented here represents a step forward in providing these data to a larger audience.

Several alleged locations of Rail Road Flat Rancheria are indicated in figure 2. No verified archaeological remnants of the settlement have been located, and published articles and oral interview data indicate there are disagreements among researchers about the precise location of the village. For example, a 1956 article by Ruby Taylor stated that a large roundhouse was still standing in 1925; it was located above town at "School House Flat." In a visit to the area in August 1983, Ruren Domingo recalled being at the roundhouse during a Big Time. He pointed out a location he thought was the site of the rancheria, but the area had changed so much that he was unsure. Domingo emphasized that it looked different to him.

A second location was examined near an old barn located along the main road to the town of Rail Road Flat. It was here that Domingo confidently recalled that the roundhouse sat on a hill from which one could easily see the old barn. He also mentioned that approximately one-quarter of a mile from the entrance to the roundhouse, over a hill, was the town of Rail Road Flat. A non-Indian octogenarian consultant recalled that the roundhouse was located where a modern trailer park currently exists; she said that the old barn and the roundhouse were very close to one another. This consultant was born in Rail Road Flat in 1901 and lived there until 1918. Unfortunately, she could identify only the general location of the Mewuk rancheria because of changes in roads and development of the area over the last eighty years.¹³

Ruren Domingo also remembered details about the roundhouse. He said that, during the hand game, Rail Road Flat people sat on the southwest side of the roundhouse and competed with the Groveland people (who sat opposite them). Domingo was inside the crowded roundhouse, where "there were about 500 people...," many of whom came from Groveland and attended the Big Time in 1906. The hand game lasted all night and was played for money. Domingo watched the handgame while sitting on pine needles; there were no benches to sit on. He also played outside and recalled that dances were held once in the afternoon and again at night.

Domingo contrasted Murphys Rancheria, where he was living in 1906 (see figure 1), to Rail Road Flat. He remembered that the roundhouse door at Rail Road Flat faced Blue Mountain. It did not have any windows like the one at Murphys, but there was a central fire pit. No cooking took place inside when he was there in 1906. While he recalled the foot drum, he did not specify its location within the roundhouse.

The genealogical record shows that a variety of Mewuk families resided at Rail Road Flat Rancheria during historic times. It was typical at the turn of the century for Mewuk families or individuals to move from one location to another on a somewhat regular basis in order to find work. During the early 1900s, many Mewuk men worked as ranch hands and Mewuk women worked as domestics. The jobs allowed the Mewuk to earn money for their subsistence needs; at times, it also allowed them to pursue more traditional subsistence practices.

While employed on large ranches, extended families would reside in a single place, forming the basis of small villages. People

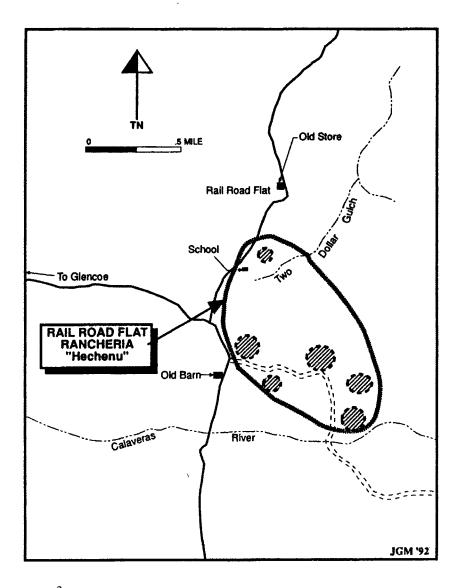


FIGURE 2.

would live at one place and move seasonally, following the crops or herding cattle or sheep. The same seasonal locations often would be used each year. Because of this fluid situation, it is hard to determine when a village began or ended or what factors resulted in a village being created or disbanded. Sometimes it was

as simple as the land changing owners. Today, there are a number of Mewuk who continue to reside on lands and in groups established in this fashion.

Although no attempt has yet been made to piece together a complete genealogy for Rail Road Flat Rancheria, census records, oral interview data, and unpublished literature give valuable insight into who actually lived at the rancheria during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 14 This information indicates that, as early as 1849, at least one Native American person was born in Rail Road Flat. People continued to be born there during the next two decades. In 1880, a woman by the name of Mealy, age sixty, lived near Taylor's store; this is probably not, however, the location of the historic rancheria visited by Merriam and Barrett in 1905 and 1906. Although the 1900 census provides no useful information, by 1902 people were living at the historic settlement. Hudson's, 15 Merriam's, 16 and Barrett's 17 unpublished field notes, Merriam's 1955 and 1957 publications¹⁸ (to name a few), and Barrett's and Gifford's manuscript on Mewuk material culture published in 1933 all discuss the village. 19 The 1910 federal census indicates that at least four people lived at Rail Road Flat: Mattie George, age 61; Johnny Jeff, age 38; Sally Charley, age 63; and Sarah (last name unknown), age 47. Although these people resided at the rancheria, none of their parents claimed the village as their birthplace. The 1910 census, however, records two families, the Eaphs and the Fishers, who originally came from the village. Further scrutiny of the genealogical data suggests that earlier generations, possibly related to the Eaphs, may have been at Rail Road Flat in the 1860s and possibly prior to the Gold Rush.

Oral interview data suggest that the rancheria at Rail Road Flat did not exist past circa 1925 or 1930; the special Indian census of 1928–33, however, lists eleven Indians living in Rail Road Flat.²⁰ Specifically, two families were living at the historic settlement: the Carsoners and the Herzers. In fact, Leula Herzer was born there in 1897, suggesting a long-term residency by the Herzer family.²¹

Although incomplete, the genealogical data and other material provided in this paper have the potential to contribute valuable information to the local community (both Mewuk and non-Mewuk) about the community's heritage. Resource specialists and anthropologists are accustomed to gathering information, opinions, and data for technical reports from Native American communities. Some forms of research data, however—particularly memory-provoking photography—are potentially benefi-

cial to informant and informed alike. In a time when members of the Native American community are working to retain and expand their cultural heritage, the materials that were archived during the early part of this century are important tools that, whenever possible, should be made available to the communities from which they were derived. When Barrett, Merriam, Hudson, and others visited these areas, they were interested in determining what cultural traditions had been retained. Today, it is important to know and encourage those aspects of the culture that are being maintained. It is a critical and exciting time. We see the publication of this photographic collection as an opportunity to give something back to the Mewuk community. The photographs remind elders of activities and events in Native American history, and, from these memories, new stories are told.

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

Ten of the forty-one black-and-white photographs taken of Rail Road Flat Rancheria by Merriam and Barrett are presented in the appendix. Merriam actually took more photographs at the rancheria than did Barrett (29 versus 13). Nine of the photographs have appeared in publications by these two men or by other investigators later (table 1). The photographs were shot between 1905 and 1908; neither man apparently visited Rail Road Flat in 1907. The captions used in the *Description* column of table 1 are those written by the photographers when they dropped off the negatives at the then Lowie Museum of Anthropology for developing. Gene Prince, photographic curator at the museum, noted that, although Barrett and Gifford always wrote on their negatives, they were not always careful. We caution the reader, therefore, that there may be some discrepancies in the labeling of the Rail Road Flat photographs.

Year	ar Merriam.b	Barrett	b Barrett ^c Photographer's Description	Published	Source
100,	,			Tes NO	ì
1905	×	•	woman using wooden tongs to remove stones from fire;	×	» ب
			man sitting underneath manzanita brush shelter is		
			probably old Pedro		
1905	×	•	acorn leaching spot	×	
3 1905	•	×	a less elaborate form of acorn cache receptacle	×	
₩	×	•	bark structure at Rail Road Flat	×	
•	×	•	brush arbor at Ha-cha-nah	×	
•	×	•	acorn granaries built against base of pine tree		9
_	1		man (Pedro?) standing in front of acorn leaching spot	÷	
_	ı	×	old Pedro handling hot rocks with wooden tongs	×	4
1906		×	old Pedro illustrating dropping of hot rocks from wooden tongs	×	
			into the basket of acorn mush		
1906		×	a nearer view of the acorn leaching	×	
1906		×	handling hot cooking stones with the wooden tongs	×	N
1906		×	old Pedro at the leaching ground	×	
1906	•	×	old Pedro at the leaching and cooking ground, illustrating	×	
			the stirring of mush with a paddle		
1906	,	×	acorn leaching area with fire pit in foreground and leaching	×	
			spot to right of manzanita brush shelter in background		
1906	•	×	dance house at Rail Road Flat	×	
1906		×	dwelling houses at Rail Road Flat	×	
1906		×	entrance to conical slab acorn grinding and storage house	×	8
1906	•	×	detailed photograph of acorn caches at Rail Road Flat	×	2,3
190 1906	×	•	woman and child at Ha-cha-nah	×	
1906	×	,	woman at Ha-cha-nah	×	
$\overline{}$	×	•	preparation of acorn mush, Ha-cha-nah; October 1908	×	
_	×	•	preparation of acorn mush, Ha-cha-nah; October 1908	×	
	•	•			

Note: Shaded areas indicate published photographs that are also included in the present article. C.H. Merriam Collection (Bancroft Library, U.C. Berkeley)

Actual photographs taken by C.H. Merriam total approximately 29; 10 photos exhibited S.A. Barrett (Hearst Museum)

Photograph taken by S.A. Barrett and discussed by C. Hart Merriam (Merriam 1955:50) One additional print of leaching area appears in Merriam 1955: plate 17a.

Potal of five prints, each showing close-up of woman and child (woman identified as Rosie George). A variation of this photograph is published in Bates, 1984.

'Total of four prints of elderly woman in front of her house (woman identified as Mattie George); same woman, different view, published in

Merriam, 1966, I: 155: plate 19a.

Sources:

1. Bates 1984

2. Barrett, S.A. and E.W. Gifford 1933

4. Maniery and Dutschke 1989 3. Conrotto, E. 1973

5. Merriam, C. Hart 1967, I

6. Merriam, C. Hart 1966, III

7. Merriam, C. Hart 1955 8. Merriam, C. Hart 1918

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several Native American people assisted us in the preparation of this article. They are Ruren Domingo; Virginia Jeff; Nick Villa; Tony Darrow; Manual Jeff; Dora Mata; William (Bill) Franklin; and Epphie Shadd. All of you are thanked equally. We also would like to acknowledge the help over the years from the following scholars and institutions: Craig Bates, curator of ethnography, National Park Service, Yosemite National Park; Frank Norick, curator, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley; Judith Marvin, Foothill Resources, Ltd.; Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Calaveras County Museum and Archives, San Andreas; Old Timers Museum, Murphys. The staff of PAR Environmental Services, Inc., including Claire Warshaw, graphics; Deanna Kiser, technical assistance; Gail Miller, word processing; Grace Ziesing, editor; and Mary L. Maniery are especially thanked. We also appreciate the comments provided by three anonymous reviewers through the American Indian Culture and Research Journal.

The essay is dedicated in memory of Ruren Domingo (1896–1991).

APPENDIX

- Photo 1. Man (Pedro?) standing in front of acorn leaching spot.
- Photo 2. Old Pedro at the leaching and cooking ground, illustrating the stirring of mush with a paddle (Barrett 1906). Courtesy of Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 3. Woman using wooden tongs to remove stones from fire; man sitting underneath manzanita brush shelter probably is Old Pedro (Merriam 1905). Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 4. Preparation of acorn mush, Ha-cha-nah, October (Merriam 1908). Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 5. Dance house at Rail Road Flat (Barrett 1906). Courtesy of Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 6. A less elaborate form of acorn cache... receptacle (Barrett 1905). Courtesy of Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 7. Dwellings at Rail Road Flat (Barrett 1906). Courtesy of Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 8. Detailed photograph of acorn caches at Rail Road Flat (Barrett 1906). Courtesy of Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 9. Woman and child at Ha-cha-nah (Merriam 1906). Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Photo 10. Woman at Ha-cha-nah (Merriam 1906). Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



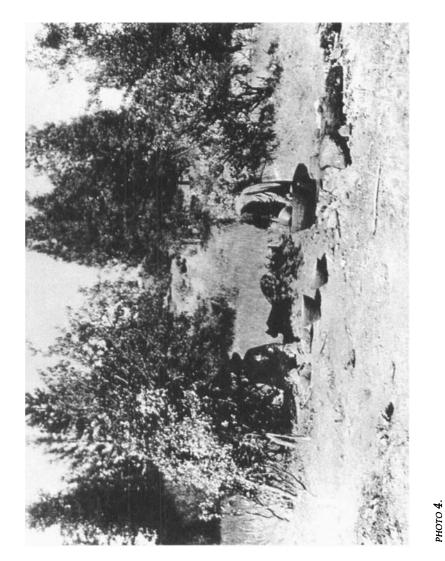
рното 1.

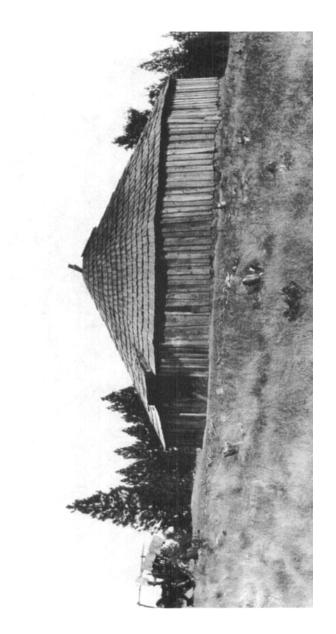


рното 2.



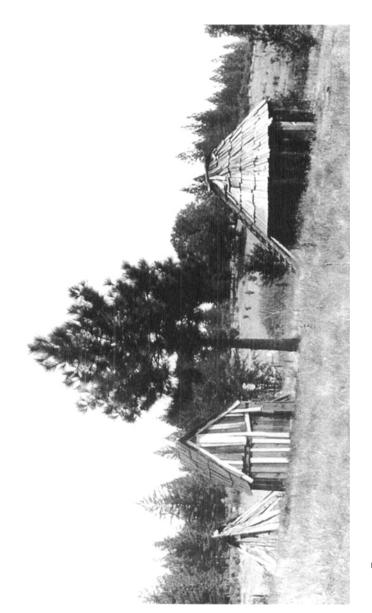
РНОТО 3.



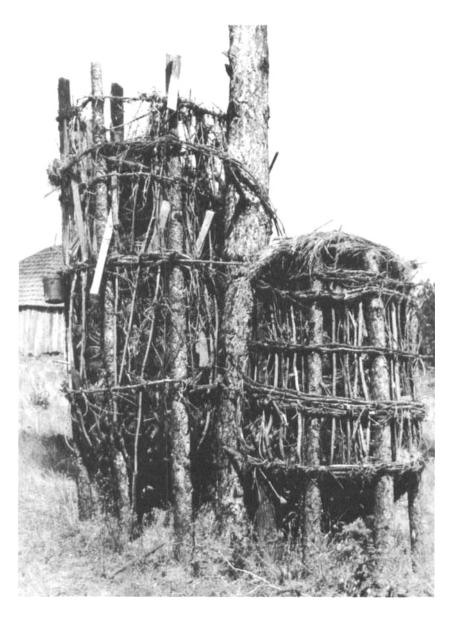




₽НОТО **6**.



РНОТО 7.



рното 8.



рното 9.



рното 10.

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 - 6. Merriam, Studies of California Indians.

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