

Nineteenth Century Kitanemuk Ceramic Production

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Abstract

It has long been recognized that prehistoric California pottery production was concentrated in several areas in the southern half of the state. These areas encompassed various groups of Yuman and Takic language affiliation in southern California and peoples in the eastern and southern Sierra regions, including Foothill Yokuts and Tübatulabal and Numic speakers. The Kitanemuk, located just to the south of the southern Sierra ceramic producing region, are not usually associated with pottery making. This notwithstanding, ethnographic testimony collected by John P. Harrington about Kitanemuk ceramic production in historic times suggests that they had also been potters and followed indigenous ceramic traditions, although the development of this industry may have been late. Harrington's information includes a brief description of firing techniques. This is of some interest because ethnohistorical or ethnographic descriptions of Native pottery firing in California are rare, so rare that many contemporary technical analyses of historic California native or introduced plainware production techniques often infer firing methods from the physical properties of ceramic specimens (Bailey 2009; Ginn 2009). This study concludes with a consideration of the origin of Kitanemuk ceramic production.

Harrington's Data

In 1916 and 1917, Bureau of American Ethnology linguist and ethnographer John P. Harrington and his wife Carobeth carried out ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork at the Tejón Ranchería in the Tehachapi Mountains foothills southwest of Tehachapi, Kern County, California (Figure 1).^{1,2} During the course of this research, Harrington recorded information on the fabrication of ceramics from two of his principal Kitanemuk consultants, Magdalena Olivas (Figure 2) and Eugenia Mendez (Figure 3). Both described the local production of clay vessels around the middle of the nineteenth century. The notes recorded by Harrington from the comments of these consultants follow.

From Magdalena Olivas

Made olla of Kawišpk pakwinit ["red clay/mud"]. Got this at Pivuḡatsapea near here. No other ingredients. Baked til red, then used. Called any olla kiwiš [Harrington 1986:III:R.99:Fr.488; Hudson and Blackburn 1987:196].

Olivas further stated that the clay pit was located on the north side of the gulch at Pivuḡatsapea [Harrington 1986:III:R.99:Fr.491].

From Eugenia Mendez

Infs. [Informant's (EM's)] mother used to make ollas de barro [of clay], big ones (put on pot rests) and also smaller ones that just sat on their bottom in fire to warm something in. Called them all kiwiš. Called the clay she made them of pákwinit. Pounded it and made like masa, into strings and made pot. They burnt them all night—several women burning theirs together. Gathered a lot of old dry bones of cattle or horses and a lot of wood (roble [oak] or saus [willow] or any wood) and mixed the bones with the wood as it were—the bones make the fire burn slower and hold the heat—glowing long around the pots. Put pots in any position—even on side, sometimes turning

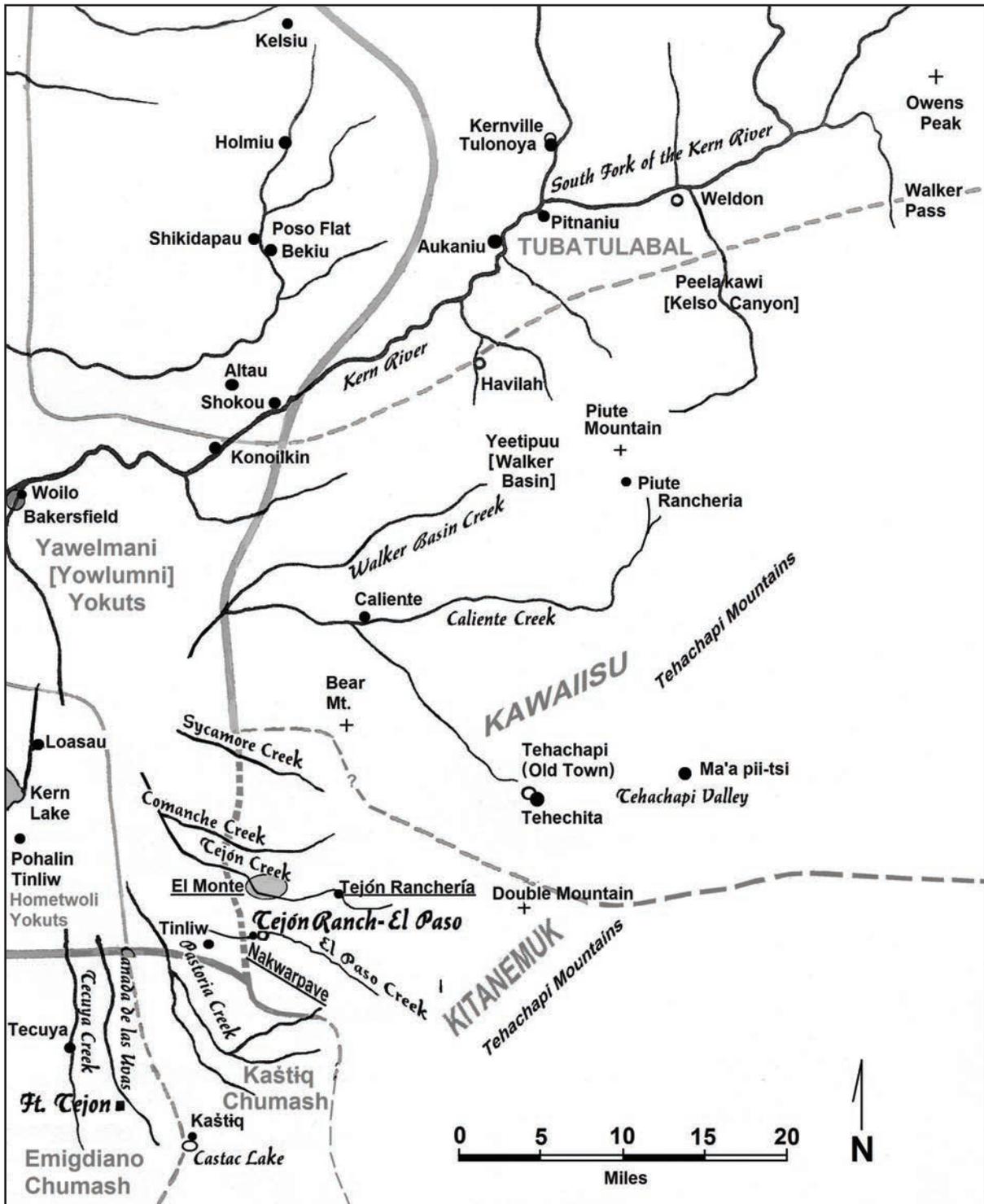


Figure 1. Location of the Kitanemuk and other Native California groups, with modern towns and ethnographic locations. Kitanemuk-speaking communities are underlined (Kroeber 1925).



Figure 2. Magdalena Olivas (center) at Tejón, surrounded by family members. Photograph #91-33573 by John Peabody Harrington (ca. 1916–1917). Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives.

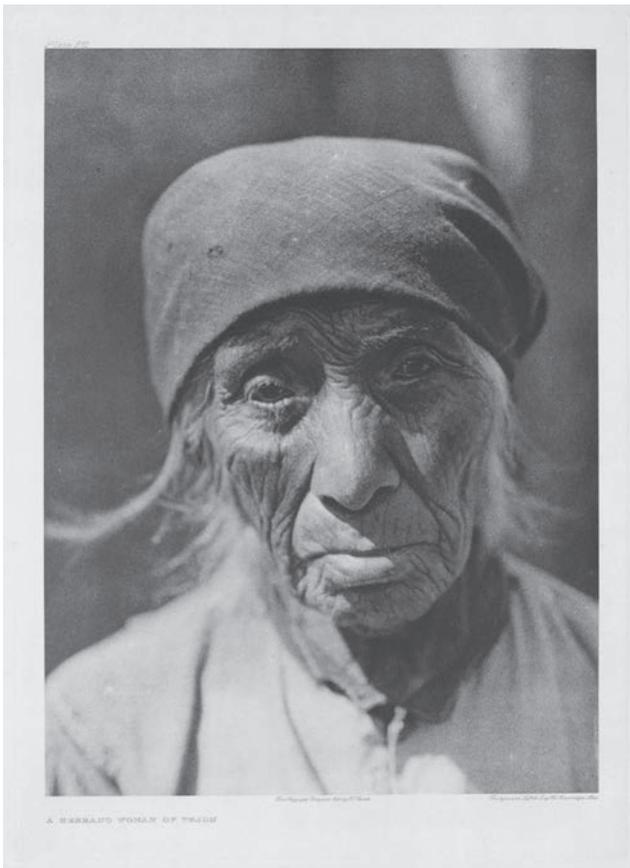


Figure 3. Eugenia Mendez at Tejón. Photograph by Edward S. Curtis (ca. 1924), originally entitled "A Serrano Woman of Tejón." Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

one over and piling brazas [coals] up over and around it. Inf. [EM] never saw this done over on coast—only over here inland. Call stone ollas kiwiš also—on coast they used stone ollas—when Infs. father and mother and Inf. came over here, they left all their [stone?] ollas over there—quien lo va a traer a pie [who is going to bring them on foot] [Harrington 1986:III:R.98:Fr.52–53; Hudson and Blackburn 1987:196–197].

Mendez provided another statement about ceramic production. The term *pilili* below refers to a type of fry cake about 6 inches in diameter (Harrington 1986: III:R.98:Fr.224, R.99:Fr.448). Harrington's note reads:

They took the red clay and pounded it fine (d.q.) and made it like dough, then shaped it like a pilili and made it into a pot shape. Inf[ormant] says nothing about building it out of ropelike form. They let it dry a while. Then they take a stone and rub it all over inside and out with that stone as if scraping it. They then burn it. They gathered horse manure- (Spanish pajoso de caballo). Used horse, not cow manure, because it was better. And piled this up together with cascara [bark] of oak. They thus burn the pots all night, covering them with the bark and manure, I understand, and they turn out a beautiful red color. They get black from use in cooking later. Inf. wishes inf. had one to cook beans in now. They did not have steatite pots over here but inf. saw them on the coast... [Harrington 1986:III:R.99:Fr.489–490; Hudson and Blackburn 1987:197].

Harrington elsewhere recorded an additional comment by Mendez:

kiwiš—olla. Informant has seen the stone ollas on the coast. The Jaminates [Kitanemuk]

called a soapstone olla kiwiš timit ['olla stone']. And kiwiš pakwinit was equivalent to olla de barro [clay pot]. They used to get clay for ollas at Pivunjatsapea. The boys still dig the barro colorado [red clay] there out. Inf. does not know any special quarry pit there. Also below El Paso store, this side of where the road crossed the creek, they got red clay for ollas [Harrington 1986:III:R.99:Fr.490–491; Hudson and Blackburn 1987:197].

The aguaje or spring at *Pivunjatsapea* (or *Pivunjacapea*) was a very famous location in the Tejón region, the spring name providing one nickname for the Kitanemuk people as a whole (Harrington 1986:III:R98:Fr.176). Harrington was told that it was located further down Tejón Creek from the Tejón Ranchería settlement where Eugenia lived in 1916. The second clay site was located on El Paso Creek, just to the southwest of the Tejón Ranchería. Both feral and domesticated cattle and horses would have been common in the region in the 1850s and 1860s.

Kitanemuk Ceramic Production

Despite having recorded the above testimony, Harrington in his 1942 culture element distribution inventory for central California did not indicate that pottery making was either present or absent among the Kitanemuk (Harrington 1942:25). It is not clear whether this was an indication of his uncertainty about the cultural significance of his ceramics data. Harrington's notes regarding historic-era ceramics among the Kitanemuk and other southern California groups, including the Gabrielino and Chumash, are discussed in Hudson and Blackburn (1983:207–209; 1987:195–197). These authors assumed that Kitanemuk ceramic production was a historic innovation. This view was probably related in part to the elements of production technique involving cow and horse detritus described by Mendez. This hinted at a historic

origin for the diffusion of this ceramic technique to the Kitanemuk. Other Californianists who discussed ceramic production in the San Joaquín Valley and southern Sierra region, such as Anna Gayton (1929), had no information to indicate that the Kitanemuk had produced ceramics before or during historic times (see also Kroeber 1925:822–823).

The ultimate origin of the Kitanemuk ceramic production would appear to be native, given the characteristics of the production process, whatever the role may have been of rancho and mission contexts in the diffusion of pre-existing native ceramic production techniques from one group to another. Whether the Kitanemuk industry dates from later mission times (early or middle nineteenth century) or has greater local time depth, the question remains of its native affiliation. That is, there is the issue of its possible association with either southern-eastern Sierra brown wares or with southern California paddle-and-anvil brown wares (Tizon Brown Wares) found further to the south and southeast. Mission era native ceramics recovered at rancho sites in the greater Los Angeles region have often been described as coiled brown wares made with the paddle-and-anvil thinning technique (Evans 1969; Koerper et al. 1978; Koerper and Flint 1978; Frierman 1982:21–33). Harrington (1942:25) noted Gabrielino pottery vessels made in this way. Other ceramics from mission contexts, at Mission San Buenaventura, for example, have been identified as having involved surface scraping only (Gardner 1975:143–147). The paddle-and-anvil technique is associated with late prehistoric pottery made by communities in southern California, including Yuman language groups such as the Ipai or Tipai/Kumeyaay (Diegueño) in San Diego County, as well as the Cahuilla, Serrano, Luiseño, and apparently the Gabrielino/Tongva as well (Rogers 1936; Koerper et al. 1978:43–44,50–51,54). Ceramics from the southern and eastern Sierra areas further north, on the other hand, are often characterized by hand thinning and

surface scraping rather than paddle-and-anvil treatment (Jackson 1990:163).

Firing Technique

The comments on firing by Mendez appear to refer to the placement of the cow bones and oak or willow fuel wood around the pots to be fired, with oak bark and horse dung piled over them. It is not clear whether a shallow pit had been used, as was ethnographically reported for southern California (Gayton 1929; Rogers 1936). Griset (1990:193) noted the use of dung for fuel as a characteristic historic innovation in making paddle-and-anvil Tizon Brown Ware in southern California. Rogers (1936:4–15) described ceramic techniques of the Southern Diegueño in 1928, and he mentioned their occasional use of cow dung as a firing fuel in historic times. He also reported this for the Serrano and for the Kiliwa of Baja California (Rogers 1936:18,29; see also Frierman 1982:23).

Campbell (1999) noted that dung was still used for this purpose by native potters at Santa Catarina in northern Baja California in the 1990s. Hohenthal (2001:166–173) described Tipai (Southern Diegueño) manufacture of paddle-and-anvil pottery in the late 1940s, where dung was used exclusively, heaped under and around the vessels, with additional dung constantly fed to the fire for several hours to maintain high heat.

The Kitanemuk use of the cow bones as an apparent temperature regulation strategy does not appear to have been a commonly reported historic innovation, while the use of oak bark fuel was a common feature of historic pottery firing in southern California and presumably in earlier times as well. The heaping of coals around the pots during firing is interesting, and that would suggest relatively uncontrolled firing conditions. Firing overnight has been reported for other southern California potters as a matter of avoiding windy daytime conditions (Rogers 1936:14).

Historic Kitanemuk Pottery Vessels in Regional Context

In her comments Eugenia Mendez did not associate the manufacture and use of ceramic vessels with “the coast” and with mission or ranch settings in that area, but rather with the Kitanemuk homeland. Mendez was born to a Kitanemuk-speaking mother, probably in the late 1840s or early 1850s, apparently in the Tejón region. She stated to Harrington that her mother’s father had lived at El Monte within the later Tejón Ranch and that her mother had been born at the Tejón as well. She believed that her father had also been born in the Tejón region (Harrington 1986:III:R98:Fr.87). She had lived with her parents in the Camulos/Piru area (“on the coast”) when she was a young child, and later the family lived at Nakwarpavea at the Tejón Ranch in the early 1860s. Mendez was baptized in 1879 with a reported age of 25, but she may actually have been a few years older (John Johnson, personal communication 2010). Her later reported age of 90 in the 1920 U.S. Decennial Census was clearly too old (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1920). Mendez mentioned her family leaving its (probably soapstone) pots, or ollas, at its former residence because of their weight rather than carrying them along. She seems to have been referring to a journey made on foot from Piru/Camulos north to the Tejón region.

There are several clues from the Olivas and Mendez notes that suggest at least the consideration of a possible local native ceramics connection to Foothill Yokuts potters further north or potters of the southern Sierra. The manufacturing technique described for the Kitanemuk vessels appears to have involved coiling that was apparently scraped and burnished with a small stone rather than treatment with the paddle-and-anvil technique. Gayton (1929, 1948a, 1948b) ethnographically documented pottery making among the Wukchumni, Gawia, Yokod, and Yaudanchi Yokuts. From the late 1940s, most Berkeley archaeologists have concluded that the Western Mono, themselves

with strong contacts on both sides of the Sierra Nevada, certainly with the pottery-making Paiute to the east, introduced ceramic technology to their Yokuts neighbors.³ These groups made coiled and scraped or polished brown ware vessels, often of a truncated cone shape. The formation of the base of the vessel was also done by hand and did not involve the use of another object as a base mold, as was sometimes done with southern California Tizon Brown Ware (Gayton 1929:242; Rogers 1936:8; Wallace 1990:72).

Voegelin (1938:34–35) later collected ethnographic information confirming Kroeber’s report of the making of ceramic vessels among the Tübatulabal of the Kern River Valley region, bordering on the Kawaiisu (Kroeber 1925:608, Powers 1981:59). These vessels were also characterized by scraped coiling, rather than the paddle-and-anvil technique, and the truncated cone shape also appears. The ethnographically described foothill Yokuts and Tübatulabal ceramics have been associated by researchers with a generalized brown ware type found in late prehistoric and historic archaeological contexts in the southern and eastern Sierra regions to the east of the southern San Joaquin Valley (Jackson 1990).

The use of a small stone for surface burnishing is mentioned by Griset (1990:191–192) as a historic innovation in the manufacture of Southern California Brown Ware. This technique is mentioned in Mendez’s account. However, it appears that some Yokuts ceramics and southern Sierra ceramics were not only scraped but also burnished in this way, as described, for example, by Gayton (1929:243) and Wallace (1990:173) and depicted by Latta (1977:412). For these areas this feature has not heretofore been treated as a historic innovation.

The Kawaiisu were the immediate northern neighbors of the Kitanemuk, and they frequently intermarried with them. Like the Kitanemuk, they had been noted by Gayton (1929:249) as not producing ceramics.

However, brown ware ceramic sherds have frequently been found in late or surface archaeological contexts in Kawaiisu territory, raising the questions of their relative antiquity and whether these vessels were imported or locally made. Driver (1937:59, 80) interviewed several Kawaiisu consultants in 1935 who indicated that coiled and scraped ceramic vessels had been traditionally associated with this group. Flat-bottomed types of both truncated cone and hemispherical vessels were reported.

Kawaiisu ethnographer Maurice Zigmond acknowledged the presence of potsherds at old settlements but stated that “in all likelihood pottery-making was never an important industry and, in any case, seems to have been abandoned long ago” (Zigmond 1986:401). He did record a Kawaiisu term for clay pot that was not derived from Spanish (Zigmond et al. 1991:246). Theodore McCown was cited by Gayton as having been told by Kawaiisu consultants that they had not made pottery “in ancient times” and that their recent knowledge of it was derived from the northern foothill Yokuts (Gayton 1929:249–250). Such an industry among the Kawaiisu, even if historically very late, would increase the plausibility of similar activity among the Kitanemuk having been linked to a Sierra foothills/southern Sierra regional pattern. The Kitanemuk were politically and culturally closely allied with the Kawaiisu (Harrington 1986:III:R98:Fr.87).

Gayton (1929:247) noted that the foothill Yokuts potters used the term *ki'wic* to refer both to ceramic pots and to the clay from which they were made. We have seen that Olivas and Mendez mentioned the term *kiwiš* as referring to both Kitanemuk clay pots and the stone pots found in coastal southern California. The term had become well established in reference to clay pots in the Kitanemuk language (Anderton 1989:354). A related term was used in several Chumashan languages to refer to stone bowls or ollas, which were widely used by the Chumash in mission times (Wlodarski and Larson 1975; Hudson and Blackburn 1983:201–206;

1987:310; McCawley 1996:136–138). However, the fact that an apparently similar term was also used by the Foothill Yokuts potters to the north to designate both clay and clay vessels possibly reflects a cultural connection between the ceramic industries of these Yokuts groups and that of the historic period Kitanemuk potters.

The linguistic association of stone ollas and cooking pots appears to reflect the idea that ceramic vessels were seen as functional equivalents to stone ollas, rather than as replacements for basketry for cooking and storage. Among the Kitanemuk, ollas were important in the mid-nineteenth century in preparing new types of food associated with animal herding and horticultural production of Mexican and European food crops, beef and beans, for example. However, Native dietary items such as islay (*Prunus ilicifolia*), deer and rabbit meat, and even sometimes acorn porridge had traditionally been prepared in ollas rather than cooking baskets. The association of cooked, mashed islay kernels with ollas or pots was especially prominent (Harrington 1986:III:R98:Fr.192).

Mendez stated that in the middle nineteenth century, ceramic ollas rather than stone ollas were being used in the Kitanemuk community, although stone ollas are mentioned in Kitanemuk mythic tales and were part of the traditional culture. Mendez's comments appear to treat the Kitanemuk ceramic olla as an “inland” substitute or equivalent of the stone bowl types used near the coast. She states that she had not as a child seen ceramics being made or used at places closer to the coast, including Piru/Camulos and Mission San Fernando. This production and use of ceramic vessels at the Kitanemuk settlement at the Tejón was undertaken despite the increasing availability of alternative types of vessels and containers. Harrington's Inezeño Chumash consultant Maria Solares had spent time in the Tejón region in the 1850s. She recalled the use of metal receptacles there at that time (Hudson and Blackburn 1987:196).

Conclusion

Harrington's ethnographic information on historic Kitanemuk ceramics production provides interesting details about vessel preparation and firing. It does, however, leave unresolved questions about both the timing and cultural origin of this innovation. Uncertainties also exist about pottery making and use among the neighboring Kawaiisu to the north. The equivocal ethnographic comments on Kawaiisu ceramics underline the extent to which published ethnographic sources may have obscured our understanding of the spread or innovation of native ceramic technology during the two centuries from AD 1700 to 1900. Ethnographers traditionally had a habit of assigning cultural data to the categories of either "ancient" (traditional) or "modern" (European-influenced), and this has sometimes made it difficult to use their published information to sort out indigenous cultural innovations or borrowings that may have been historically recent. Continued review of unpublished ethnographic field notes such as Harrington's offers the possibility of additional information about ceramic use in recent centuries.

Kitanemuk ceramics manufacture, and perhaps also pottery making by the Kawaiisu, may bear a connection to ethnographically recorded ceramic industries among the Tübatulabal and foothill Yokuts groups, but this tantalizing question remains unresolved. Further archaeological research in the areas occupied by these groups and further work with unpublished ethnographic sources may help to clarify this issue.

End Notes

1. Walsh (1976) discussed Harrington's career and research methods. Johnson and McLendon (1999:167–174) reviewed the history of the Tejón Ranchería community and dated Harrington's fieldwork as beginning in 1916. In Harrington's notes from interviews with

Eugenia Mendez, a date of November 20, 1916, was recorded.

2. Figure 1 is modified from Kroeber (1925), incorporating Harrington's and others' ethnographic data. In the middle nineteenth century the Tejón region was occupied by Kitanemuk and by the neighboring Southern Valley Yokuts, who were not ceramic producers. The communities underlined on our map were occupied by Kitanemuk speakers, but Yokuts may also have been resident at these places at different times after 1850. Members of other ethnic groups also moved in and out of the Tejón region during the later nineteenth century.

3. See Moratto (2013) for an expanded discussion of Yokuts and Western Mono ceramic dating and distribution. Virtually all archaeological information bearing upon the source of prehistoric ceramics in the Sierra Nevada has been obtained from site surveys and excavations completed many years later than the time of Harrington's ethnographic research.

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