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Life on the River: The Archaeology of an Ancient Native American Culture

William R. Hildebrandt and Michael J. Darcangelo
Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2008, 120 pages, 3 tables and
65 figures, \$13.95 (paper). ISBN 978-1-59714-086-7.

Reviewed by Glenn Farris

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Archaeologists find really interesting stuff. The public is fascinated by the idea of archaeological finds. However, all too often, the reportage of these finds is as dry as a Great Basin rock shelter. Therefore, it is a real gift to the lovers of California history and archaeology to have a book come along that sparks life into an in-depth site report. This one deals with a village of the Wintu people living in the northern Sacramento Valley between Redding and Red Bluff. The story touches on its prehistoric background, but also ties it to a watershed event—the great malarial epidemic of 1833—that devastated the once-burgeoning population of the Central Valley.

Crucial data (derived from a range of archaeological techniques ranging from trenching and augering methods to refinements in the analysis of artifacts and ecofacts) are presented along with explanations of the science behind these techniques that are keyed to a non-professional audience. In fact, the notable lack of footnoting and referencing of materials points clearly to the popular rather than the strictly professional nature of the report. While undoubtedly meant to keep the story flowing, the lack of citations can be frustrating to the reader who would like to follow up on a particular statement.

The book is composed of six chapters. The first is an introductory chapter that puts the reader in the scene of an archaeological dig at a site known as CA-SHA-1043, but also by the modern Wintu name *Kum Bay Xerel* (or “Shady Oak Village,” a name suggested by the relief provided by nature from the 110° heat experienced during the project). How the archaeologists came to the site, how they obtained the cooperation of the landowner and of the local Wintu Indian descendants, and what compromises they had to make during the course of the project, are all outlined in this opening to the story.

The second chapter, *The Distant Past*, provides a useful overview of the more than 8,000-year-old occupation of this area of northern California, the earliest three segments of which are known to archaeologists mainly by the distinctive patterns of settlement and artifacts that differentiated them in the archaeological record. Through descriptions of what are termed the Borax Lake Pattern (8,000–5,000 B.P.), the Squaw Creek Pattern (5,000–3,000 B.P.), and the Whiskeytown Pattern (4,000–1,500 B.P.) on the basis of the archaeological type-sites for each, we are introduced to the deep history of the area. The Shasta Pattern (post 1,500 B.P.) brings us into the mid-nineteenth century and to the current peoples living in the area, the Wintu, a group that spoke a language belonging to the Penutian language family. Discussions of dating techniques as well as of linguistic studies illuminate the reasoning that informs the archaeological hypotheses about the deep historic changes that affected the Native American inhabitants of the northern Sacramento Valley.

The ethnographic record comes to bear in the third chapter, which deals with the ancestors of the present-day Wintu people who still call this area home. Drawing heavily upon research work carried out by cultural anthropologist Cora DuBois, linguists Alice Shepherd, Harvey Pitkin, and Ken Whisler, and ethnohistorian Helen McCarthy with knowledgeable Wintu consultants Carrie Dixon, Joe Charles, Ellen Silverthorn, and Grace McKibbin, we are introduced to a body of knowledge on the lifeways of the most recent Indian inhabitants of the area. This information was enhanced by contemporary Wintu monitors and visitors to the site during the course of the excavations.

The fourth chapter describes the excavation itself and the finds made in the course of it. Noting that early in the project a major burial ground was identified and set aside in a protected area provided by landowner Dave Abbott, we then learn that an enigmatic second burial area located right in the midst of the village was also found. Due to the fact that this cemetery could not be avoided by the development, full-scale data recovery was undertaken in consultation with the most likely descendant, Kelli Hayward, tribal chair Gene Malone, and Native American monitors Carol Sinclair and Lori Light. Making sense of the multi-level cemetery required great care in excavating and interpreting the finds. Earlier burials were revealed that followed traditional

interment practices. Ample evidence of conflict was apparent in the numerous blunt trauma wounds present in various skeletons. A very dramatic find in the midst of this cemetery, and one that suggested a single catastrophic event, involved a sizable group of skeletal remains in a mass grave. Due to the presence of trade items typical of those carried by Hudson's Bay trapping parties, the most reasonable assumption was that this mass grave was tied to the devastating epidemic of 1833.

Beyond the burial site, there is a plethora of interesting data on such classic artifacts as projectile points, fishing paraphernalia, and bone tools, but there are also some intriguing observations by Eric Wohlgenuth about the floral remains that were found; these include early indications that a European-introduced plant, *filaree*, made it into the northern Sacramento Valley at a time predating the European occupation of California, possibly through the agency of such sixteenth-century visitors to northern California's coast as Francis Drake (1579) or Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeño (1595).

The discovery of the mass burial and the historic-period artifacts leads to the fifth chapter, a study of the written accounts of the John Work party of Hudson's Bay Company trappers that came down from Fort Vancouver in 1832 to hunt beaver. The detailed journal kept by Work described the large and populous villages encountered on the way south. After spending the winter, spring, and summer in Central California, the expedition started on their return trip north. On the way, they were dismayed to find that many of the teeming villages they had seen a half year earlier were now charnel houses filled with

the skeletal remains of people evidently killed by disease rather than warfare. About the same time, an American expedition of mountain men led by Ewing Young passed through the area and also noted the devastation. Other visitors to the Sacramento valley, such as English captain Edward Belcher (in 1837) and members of the American Wilkes Expedition (in 1841, not the year after the HBC party's passing as stated on page 83), further remarked on the number of skeletons lying unburied that were still to be seen many years after the 1833 event.

The final chapter sums up the evidence, archaeological, ethnographic, and historical, that points to the importance of the site in bearing witness to the long generations of Wintu people and their antecedents who lived at the site, but also to the tragic end met by its inhabitants when cultures collided. This book will no doubt be popular with the reading public, as well as with archaeologists and historians, who will find this evidence of the 1833 epidemic compelling both for the intrinsic story and for the data retrieved through careful archaeological recovery. The excellent illustrations provided by Tammara Norton add a great deal to the story related by Bill Hildebrandt and Michael Darcangelo. Although the book makes for a quick read, it is packed with important information, and it should be welcomed by the archaeological community as a fine example of how to get our information out to a broader audience that we very much need to address. It seems very appropriate that Heyday Press is the vehicle chosen to broadcast this fine example of cooperation between archaeologists and the Indian community.



