UC Merced Journal of California Anthropology, The

Title Andrew A. Forbes - Photographs of the Owens Valley Paiute

Permalink https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7k3917hd

Journal Journal of California Anthropology, The, 2(1)

Author Bosak, Jon

Publication Date 1975-07-01

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org

Andrew A. Forbes – Photographs of the Owens Valley Paiute

JON BOSAK Photography Editor

HIS article presents 16 previously unpublished¹ photographs of the Owens Valley Paiute, taken between 1903 and 1916, together with some comments on the images and the man who made them. Their publication at this time is the result of a communication from William Marvin Mason, Curator of History at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and a Contributing Editor to the *Journal*, which informed us of the existence of an extensive collection of photographs, including some of California Indians, taken by A. A. Forbes of Bishop, California. With rare exceptions, the photographs in this collection have never been published.

The photographs which appear here comprise a representative sample of Forbes' work among the Owens Valley Paiute and were assembled for this purpose by Mr. Mason. We have chosen to reproduce them, not to illustrate some substantive article analyzing an aspect of Paiute culture, but simply to show some pictures of the Paiutes themselves that have not been seen before, and to remind ourselves, perhaps, of the human reality underlying the historical discourse, to see in a few detailed glimpses how photographs can convey the spirit of an actual time and place as fragmentary mirrors of the past.

For photographs such as these are not only *about* a time and place, they are of it; in

this sense, they are artifacts themselves, as all photographs are, mappings of reality onto itself by our contrivance. By their nature they can tell us about the way these people looked and lived with far more certainty than a verbal description that is partly a reconstruction in retrospect, just as a fossil dinosaur trackthat is, a point-for-point mapping of the bottom of the foot onto the surface of the mud-tells us more certainly the shape of the foot than any amount of logical reconstruction. Information of this sort is fragmentary but certain. Barring purposeful distortion on the part of the photographer, pictures such as these are primary sources for any study of the people they represent, fossil reflections, as it were, of the people themselves.

Little is known about the man who crafted these images beyond the facts set forth below. Excepting a few stray deductions based on the *Illustrated Catalogue of Forbes Studio, Bishop, Inyo County, California*, published about 1912 to 1914 and presently in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum, this information was assembled almost entirely from a short biography originally written by Forbes' wife and added to later by various members of the family. This was supplied by his son, J. McLaren Forbes of Reno, Nevada. Following the biography is a brief commentary on the pictures.

BIOGRAPHY OF ANDREW FORBES

Andrew Alexander Forbes (his friends called him "Andy") was born April 21, 1862 in Ottowa Township, Waukesha County, Wisconsin, the son of James McLaren Forbes and Lucinda Parmelia Sanders and the fifth of eight children. The Forbes family made a trip from Wisconsin to California via the Isthmus of Panama in 1867, then returned to the Midwest in 1868 to settle near Sioux City, Iowa. In 1878, they moved to Bazine, Ness County, Kansas. Here they bought range land and did well as stockmen until the grasshopper hordes and big blizzards of 1888 and 1890 destroyed the feed and livestock. Except for one son, John, who owned a store in Bazine, the family moved to southern California in 1890, first settling near Wildomar, in Riverside County, and then in Santa Ana.

Sometime during the decade between 1878 and 1888, while helping his family as a cowboy on the range, Andrew Forbes took up photography. Little is known of his life during this time or how he attained his photographic training. We do know that he and one of his brothers were present at the opening of the "Cherokee Strip" in Oklahoma, and that he took a series of reportedly excellent photographs of the "Opening Run" when, on April 22, 1889, some 20,000 homesteaders crossed the border of what was then "Indian Territory" in a wild dash for free land. After he had taken the pictures, Andrew and his brother loaded the equipment in their wagon and joined the run.

The photographs of the "Opening Run," now at the University of Oklahoma, mark a turning point in Forbes' career. For the rest of his life, though his cowboy skills never left him, he made his living from photography.

For several years, beginning about 1890, Forbes worked as an itinerant photographer, traveling from town to town by team and wagon. As he wandered slowly westward—



Fig. 1. Andrew Alexander Forbes. This portrait was apparently taken by Forbes himself, using a bulb release. Photograph courtesy of J. McLaren Forbes.

from Oklahoma to Dodge City and then up and down the eastern slope of the Rockies he stopped in small towns and took pictures of the local town and Chamber of Commerce groups, the schools and schoolchildren, and all "points of interest" until he had accumulated enough money to move on. Listed in his Bishop studio catalogue are pictures of cowboys—roping steers, branding horses, attending a funeral—and of cattle and buffalo herds which can be attributed to this period.

In 1898, Forbes arrived in California, having traveled across New Mexico and Arizona. Over the years, he had gathered a remarkable collection of Indian photographs, taken mainly in Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and in northern Arizona. According to the studio catalogue, these include representatives of the Cheyenne, Apache, Navajo, "Moqui" (Hopi), "Pueblo," and Supai.

For a few years, Forbes made his headquarters with his parents and sisters in Santa Ana, California. During this time, he took pictures throughout southern California and north at least to Hollister and the San Joaquin Valley. His subjects included communities and landscapes, Death Valley, the New Idria mercury mine, and fur trappers, among others.

About 1902-certainly after 1900 and before 1904-Forbes established a studio in Bishop, California, in the then-verdant Owens Valley. It was while he owned and operated the "Forbes Studio" that he married Mary Rozette Prutzman, a young businesswoman, who soon took over the business details of the studio. They had one son, J. McLaren Forbes.

During the 14 years in which Forbes operated the studio, the Indians of the area regularly came to him to have their pictures taken. Because of the friendly relationships thus established, Forbes was able to take not only hundreds of studio portraits, but also photographs of the Indians in their encampments in the Owens Valley, Yosemite, and elsewhere. The photographs relating to the Owens Valley Paiute that are reproduced in this article were taken during this period. Besides the Paiute, other California Indians photographed by Forbes include representatives of the "Petrara," the Luiseño, and the "Yosemite" (Western Mono, Miwok, and/or Yokuts).

Occasional sidetrips from Bishop took Forbes to southern California, where he photographed the development of orange-growing communities, the missions, and the early industrial growth of the region, including the building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. The financial mainstay of the studio, however, was the sale to tourists of Forbes' scenic views of the Owens Valley and the country around it, the Sierras, Mt. Whitney, Yosemite, and the San Joaquin Valley. Landscape photography was his "first love," and it was his passion for this form, together with his years of experience as a stockman, that enabled him to pack the bulky, delicate equipment of his day, on animals specially trained to carry it, across the roadless wilderness. There were times, when he came to the end of the horse trail, that he packed more than half his weight in photographic gear on his back in order to reach a vantage point for the exact view he wished to record.

Forbes closed the studio in 1916 for family health reasons and moved to southern California in search of a new location, but he never found another place suitable to the establishment of the kind of studio he had in Bishop. He died in 1921, a friendly and well-liked man remembered as an active member of the Odd Fellows Lodge and a participant in community and church groups and local plays.

COMMENTARY ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The anthropological significance of the Forbes photographs is obvious from an examination of those reproduced here, a small sample of the more than 1200 negatives of all types of subjects in the Forbes collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. Their value to us rests primarily on three qualities: the subject matter (when it fits our field of inquiry), the high technical quality of the photographs themselves, and a certain "artlessness" in their manner of presentation.

The technical quality of the photographs, their sharpness and richness of tonality (much of which, unfortunately, is lost in a halftone reproduction), is due to several factors. First, the limited equipment of Forbes' day-large cameras, usually taking 8 x 10 inch negatives, and slow, color-blind glass plates-imposed a careful manner of working on anyone using them. And the limitations of these materials were all in the direction of unwieldiness and



Fig. 2. Taking 150 mi. of Sierras From Summit White Mts. The turntable upon which the panoramic Circuit camera rotated is visible between the camera and the tripod. This picture was probably taken by Mrs. Forbes, who often accompanied her husband on his summer pack trips. Photograph courtesy of J. McLaren Forbes.

difficulty of use, not lack of image quality. In that respect, the quality delivered by an 8×10 view camera and glass plates, properly used, has rarely been excelled by easier methods.

A second and equally important factor was Forbes' seriousness of purpose, as evident in his technique as it was in the doggedness with which he pursued some of his scenic subjects. Furthermore, he was interested in technique for its own sake; it is remembered that he experimented with all the photographic media at his disposal, even attempting aerial photography by suspending the camera from a series of large kites (J. McLaren Forbes, personal communication). His scenic panoramas were in themselves technical tours de force, since the elongated panoramic format necessitated special techniques and a special camera, larger and heavier than even the 8 x 10 (see Fig. 2). One view taken with this "Circuit" camera pictured, according to the studio catalogue, 250 miles of the Sierra Nevadas in 13 sections; the print, when assembled, measured 10 inches by 32 feet.

Of primary interest is the fact that the

technical quality resulting from the combination of these factors carried over to his pictures of Indians, particularly to those of their encampments. For instance, several small objects which appear in Figs. 14-16 but are difficult to identify with the unaided eye are clearly revealed when a 10x magnifier is used in examining the original prints. Through the magnifier one can see the twining of the baskets, the weave of the cloth, the botanical details of the tules used to thatch the houses. It is a sad fact that much of the anthropological field photography done with today's vastly superior lenses and films is inferior to what Forbes was doing 70 years ago, deficient in the very quality, detail, that constitutes its reason for being-the more so since, after all, this subject matter was peripheral to Forbes' photographic interests and is central to our own.

Forbes was not unique, however, in his search for technical excellence. During the first part of this century, other talented photographers, both amateur and professional, devoted at least part of their work to picturing the Indians of the Southwest.² Probably the two best known examples are Edward S. Curtis of Seattle and Adam Clark Vroman of Pasadena, the former a professional photographer who made a massive compilation of exquisitely produced gravures of the Indians of North America the crowning achievement of his career,³ the latter a bookseller and gifted amateur who was similarly inspired to record the Indians of the Southwest. While their styles differed considerably, both were markedly influenced by the romanticism and ideality, largely borrowed from academic painting, that shaped the vision of most of their photographic contemporaries. This tradition found expression in the selection of subjects, in their posing, and in the selection, arrangement, and treatment of backgrounds. Although both took photographs which attempted to show the Indians in their environment-and often succeeded in doing so artistically-it is clear that the surroundings were generally manipulated to fit the idea that the photographer had brought to the situation, and that if this idea could not be incorporated, then the situation was not of interest. As Vroman wrote in Photo Era Magazine in 1901:

One trouble is lack of background. If you take the time to improvise one, the subject may change his mind and your time is wasted [Newhall *in* Mahood 1972:13].

The result of these tendencies was the production of very beautiful images which, however, often convey very little information. Forbes' work, by contrast, offers a more nearly "straight" record of the subjects pictured, judging from the prints which are reproduced in this article. Although his studio work is certainly reminiscent of styles borrowed from classical painting (Figs. 6-10), the photographs of Indian encampments (Figs. 14-16), while pleasingly composed, demonstrate an essential absence of the "artistic" drive to simplify the visual situation, to eliminate the "distracting details" of foreground and background that convey, to our eyes, information regarding habitat, acculturation, and native technology.

There are several reasons for this difference in style between Forbes and his contemporaries. Most obvious, of course, is the fact that to Curtis and Vroman the Indians were a project suffused with nobility, the last of a dying race, and, to Curtis at least, symbols of man in sacred relationship with nature, expressions of "a rich legacy deeply spiritual in essence," as one of his latter-day editors puts it (Brown 1972:7). To Forbes, on the other hand, the Indians were customers, neighbors, friends, and very much alive-people who would gather to sit and socialize on the edge of the boardwalk in front of his studio in Bishop. No less important, however, are the facts of Forbes' physical isolation from the artistic conventions of the cities and his untutored cowboy background, which combined to keep him relatively unrestricted by the photographic canons of the time.

The unmannered style of Forbes' photographs is actually closer to that of the Indian photographers of a generation before him, such as William S. Soule and John K. Hillers, than to that of his contemporaries. (Soule photographed the Kiowa, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Comanche, among others, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, from 1869 to 1874. Hillers accompanied John Wesley Powell on his explorations down the Colorado River from 1871 to 1873 and took stereoscopic photographs of the Ute and Southern Paiute in Utah, Nevada, and Northern Arizona.) But even these straightforward pioneers were prone to ethnocentric aberrations of taste; Steward (1939:4), commenting on Hillers' work, prefaces his discussion with the following caveat:

Caution ... is necessary in interpreting the pictures. Not only are many of the Indians obviously posed in artificial stances, but art seems often to have outweighed realism in the selection of objects represented. Thus, a woman in semidress may indicate Powells' and Hillers' idea of photographic art rather than actual use of garments. Poses with bows, baskets, and other objects may also misrepresent their actual use.

In fairness it should be said that none of the photographers discussed here used equipment suited to taking "candid" photographs, and that posing of some kind was dictated by the long exposures used to make the image. (The blurred form seen in Fig. 15 shows the effect of failing to pose the subject.)⁴ Even so, there is no reason to suspect that Forbes arranged his Indian subjects in garments entirely inappropriate to the situation, as did Hillers, or as reconstructions of a partly imagined past, as did Curtis. Rather, like Soule (see Belous and Weinstein 1969), Forbes crafted the closest thing to a straight record of the situations he found away from his studio as was possible at the time; and, also like Soule, the studio portraits that form the bulk of his Indian work are comparatively honest, direct, and "artless" within the context of tightly conventionalized nineteenth-century photographic portraiture.

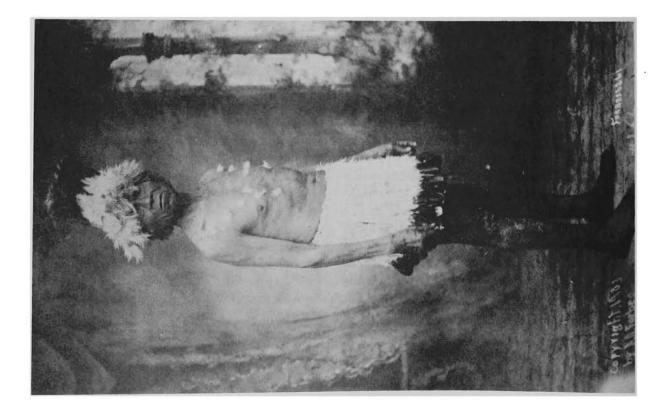
It is interesting to note in passing that, although Forbes' photographs might well have been judged artistically deficient by critics of his era—had they been aware of them—there is, nevertheless, art in many of these pictures when they are considered from a modern photographic viewpoint. How much of this was a product of conscious decision is an open question. In the picture of the Paiute school at Big Pine (Fig. 13), for instance, the arrangement of light and shade is such as to direct attention to the walls of the building, and particularly to the fence in the foreground, while throwing the figures of children and teacher into vague shadow. Whether this was a comment on the situation or an accident of light is something that must await further research into Forbes' life, work, and intentions.

For Andrew Forbes remains essentially an unknown. Biographical data are scarce, and references to Forbes in the photohistorical literature are nonexistent. His photographs have appeared in print perhaps three times in the 54 years since his death.⁵ At least one of his photographs-a head-and-shoulders shot of Captain John (Fig. 3)-is in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution but is not credited to him.⁶ And the photographs themselves, in the form of boxes of uncatalogued glass plates, are practically inaccessible at present. It is hoped that further research into this pioneer photographer of the Southwest will clear up some of the questions about him and make his photographs accessible to scholars and the public.

The captions to the photographs which follow have been composed throughout with reference to Steward's *Ethnography of the Owens Valley Paiute* (1933). The pictures illustrate many concepts offered by Steward in his ethnography and may serve, in a sense, as a photographic supplement to that work. They were not unknown to Steward, since he reproduced one Forbes photograph (showing the house of Fig. 15) in the ethnography (1933:Pl. 3c), and we may conclude that he used others in the course of its preparation.

The titles of photographs, when they appear in the captions below, are taken directly from the original plates or from the Forbes studio catalogue.

Riverside, California



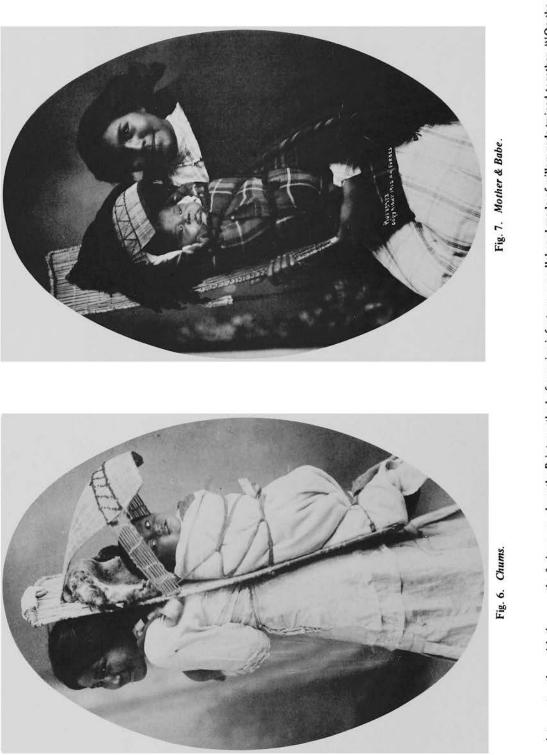
John Spencer was head man in Bishop until 1905 or 1906. The head man was responsible for the organization of the "fandango," or aneither by himself or by others. Here Captain John is shown in the Capt. John – last Chief of the Piutes – in war costume. "Captain" nual dance festival, at which was frequently performed the so-called "war dance," totsolioidu, 'special dance,' which might be danced regalia of this dance. Similar regalia are described by Steward as consisting of a circle of eagle down, twisted into a rope around a "crown" of magpie tail feathers and short redwing blackbird and turkey feathers, and a kilt made of hanging strands of eagle down, each tipped with hawk and magpie feathers. Instead of the necklace described by Steward (1933:321), which was made of hawk, magpie, and flicker feathers, Captain John is wearing what one source describes as tufts of cotton stuck on with pine pitch (Ray in Inyo County Board of Supervisors 1966:14). Fig. 3.

"Tradition connected the dance with the south, saying a visitor from South Fork [of Kern River], perhaps Tübatulabal, called Paiyote by some, danced it in return for entertainment given him. Perhaps it is of recent though pre-Caucasian origin The dancer's faces were painted red; their bodies, white, yellow, red, and dark gray The musicians sang an 'introduction,' shaking split-stick rattles. The dancers joined the 'chorus' and performed individually' (Steward 1933:321-322). This photograph is reproduced from a print made from a copy negative of indeterminate origin. The reproductions which follow are of prints made from the original glass plates and appear courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

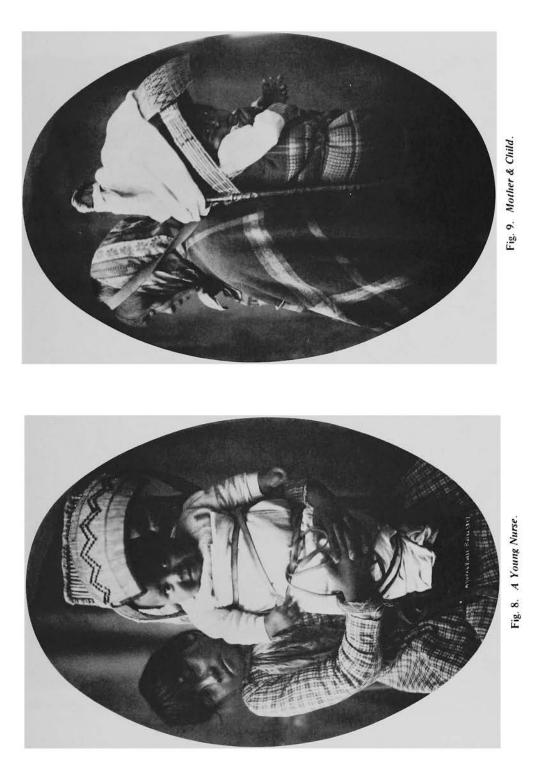


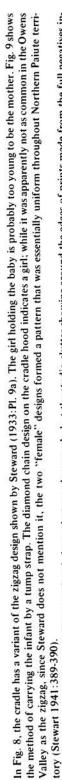
- Fig. 4. Stonewall Jackson, Piute Interpreter.

Fig. 5. Capt. Dave Nunama, Chief of Piutes. The badge on the right reads "Chief of Police." The medal on the left is of the type given to certain Indian "leaders," or individuals whom the government wished to make leaders, by the "Indian Department." These were often represented as coming directly from the current President, and usually bore his likeness.



These pictures, together with those on the facing page, show the Paiute method of carrying infants on a cradleboard made of willow rods twined together. "|On the sixth morning after birth] the baby, heretofore kept in an old basket, was bathed by the nurse and put on a cradle, hup^a, woven since birth by either grandmother. A zigzag across the hood indicated a girl; a row of diagonal bars, a boy. Otherwise babies of both sexes were treated alike. A few months later the grandmother provided a larger cradle Women often had eight or ten children, many dying in infancy" (Steward 1933:290). In Fig. 6, the yarn design on the cradle hood indicates a male infant; the woman is presumably the mother, but she could be a sister. Fig. 7 shows the zigzag (female) pattern.





(There is no evidence that Forbes printed these photographs as ovals; but the studio clutter showing around the edges of prints made from the full negatives in-dicates that he intended to crop them considerably. It is this implication which has been followed here.)

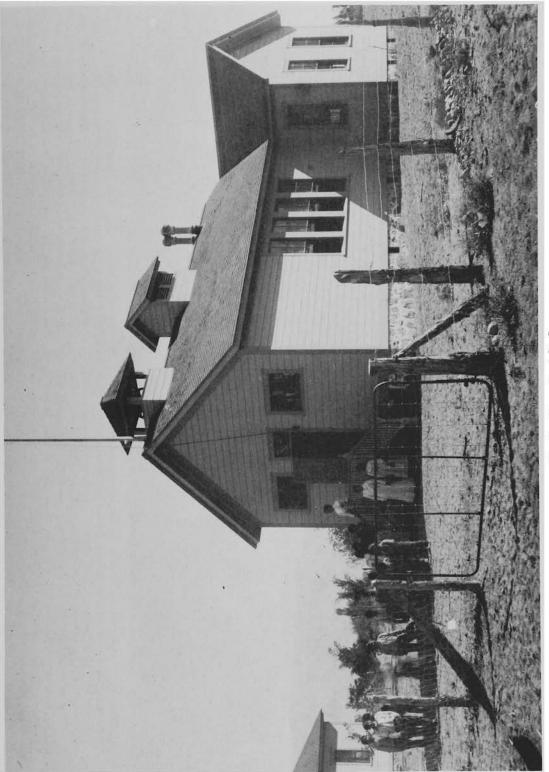


Fig. 10. Hot Lunch at All Hours. A boy, according to Steward's classification of cradle hood designs. The printed title at the bottom suggests that this photograph was popular, or expected to be, with the studio's tourist trade.



Fig. 11. *Piutes* (four unidentified women). The seated women wear necklaces made primarily of glass beads, the one on the left wearing pendants in addition. The women wear their hair in the traditional Paiute manner, hanging loose from a part in the middle. As in all of these photographs, due to the color-blind or orthochromatic materials used to make them, many of the darker-looking pieces of cloth, beads, basket designs, etc. were actually light red or even yellow, while the lighter-looking items may have been blue or green.





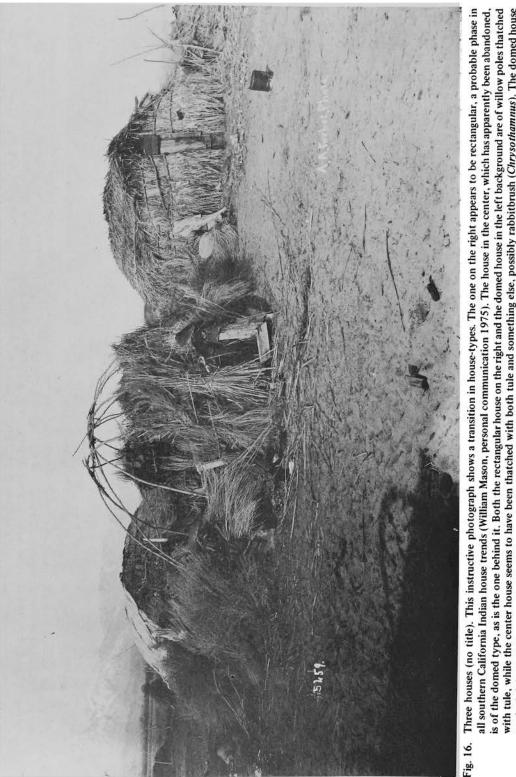


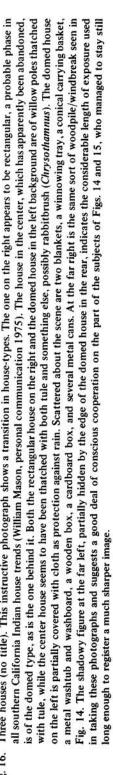
made of willow (Salix) or similar material, was used for carrying wood and other large articles. A coiled cooking basket rests against the house, just above Piute "Nobe." Conical Paiute winter house (siwanopi, 'house of straw,' from novi, 'house' [Mono Lake], hence "nobe") thatched with tule (Scirpus). Coarse cloth is used around the smoke-hole at the top to help keep rain out, while some finer-woven fabric, probably canvas, is used as a door covering (shown here in the "open" position). These items are, of course, non-indigenous; the "door" was originally made of tule, waidava (Chenopodium), or skins. Other non-indigenous items include the commercially finished wood planks used in framing the doorway, a few inches of which can be seen poking out from under the cloth at the top of the door; several metal washbasins or pans and what appears to be a milk can resting on the pile of brush at left, just to the left of the man; an upturned iron skillet lying on the ground to the right of the doorway, close to the house; and the tooled leather strap (presumably an old harness strap) used to make the tump strap of the typical conical open twined carrying basket leaning up against the house at the far right. This type of basket, the skillet, and an oval, open twined winnowing tray, used for parching seeds with live coals or for winnowing pinenuts and other large seeds (see Fig. 20), rests on the pile of brush against the left edge of the house, directly in front of, and partially obscuring, the figure of the man. Just below this, in front of the door, is a milling stone. The object on the ground to the left of the carrying basket appears to be made of rabbitskin. Fig. 14.



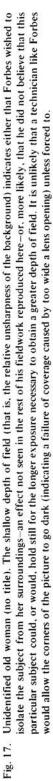


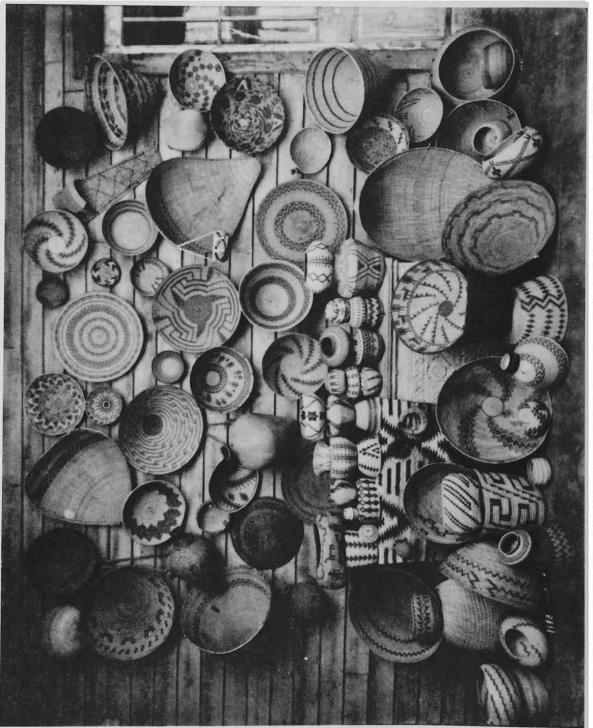
pile of firewood is shown at the left, like that shown in Fig. 14 (which, however, probably also served as a windbreak). As in Figs. 14 and 16, this is a winter settlement, showing the larger, sturdier shelters appropriate to the more settled phase of the ancient hunting and gathering culture. In the background, to entrance. Rocks can be seen holding down the bottom of the dropcloth, closing the doorway. Typically, a single family occupied a house this size; and here we see the family, including the child (a boy), carried by tump strap, and the dog (visible in the background, just to the left of the cradle hood). A small the right of the house, is what appears to be either a dump or the remains of a former campground.













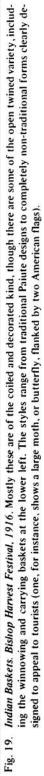




Fig. 20. The Winnower. A woman winnows pinenuts (piñon, Pinus monophylla) with an open twined winnowing tray. Two other trays are on the ground before her, together with a gunny sack full of pinenuts, which were an important subsistence item of the Owens Valley Paiute. The nuts were eaten whole, boiled or roasted; as a flour, dry; as a paste of water and flour: or as a soup or mush.

NOTES

1. During the preparation of this article, it was believed that none of the 18 Paiute photographs reproduced here had previously been published. Shortly before this issue went to press, however, it was learned that two of these images—Figs. 11 and 16—appeared in Inyo County Board of Supervisors (1966:4, 14), although they were not credited to Forbes, but to the private collections from which they had been obtained.

2. An example of the work of a contemporary of Forbes', Frederick Monsen, appears on page 78 of this issue.

3. An example of Curtis' work appears on the front cover of Vol. 1, No. 1 of the *Journal* (Spring 1974) and on page 6 of that issue.

4. It is not that primitive forms of "candid" equipment were unavailable to Forbes, Curtis, and Vroman. In fact, folding roll-film cameras were common beginning in the 1890s, and the first portable reflex camera, the Graflex, became available during the time Forbes operated his studio. They avoided this approach partly through a desire for highest technical quality and partly because it was inevitably associated with the legions of tourist-amateurs and their excesses. A sometimes informative, sometimes amusing, sometimes grotesque example of early "candid" photography of California Indians may be found in James (1917).

5. Andrew Forbes' son, J. McLaren Forbes, recalls that some of his photographs of the "Opening Run" were published by Oklahoma newspapers as part of the observances of the event's 50th anniversary, and remembers hearing that some were once published in *National Geographic* but not credited to him, though this is no more than hearsay.

6. This photograph was recently seen circulating with

a traveling exhibit of photographs of the North American Indian assembled by the Smithsonian Institution.

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