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Cupeño Trail of Tears: Relocation and Urbanization

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The Cupeño of Southern California exemplify forced removal of Indians from their homelands which has resulted in subsequent forced urbanization for many members of the band. My research, based on the oral history of one urban Cupeño family, traces this phenomenon.¹ Tucked into a corner in the light industrial Huntington Park area of Los Angeles is an attractive residential street where four generations of women reside: Anna Dawn, a widowed great-grandmother, her daughter Patricia, Patricia's daughter Tracie, and Tracie's baby daughter McKenna. These women are members of a small "Mission Indian" group, the Cupeño, who probably numbered between 500 and 750 at the time of contact in 1795² and who presently have a population of approximately 800.³

The history of the Dawn family, which has lived in the same area southeast of central Los Angeles for six generations, is quite different from that of the majority of Indians living in this city. At the time of the termination and relocation programs of the Eisenhower administration during the 1950s, which resulted in a massive migration to Los Angeles of Indians from all over the United States, the Dawn family had already been living in the city for three decades. The urbanization of the Dawns, as with other Mission Indian families, is the consequence of sig-

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nificant phenomena in California history: missionization and secularization, the accompanying dislocation from traditional lands, and the conversion from a direct relationship with the land to wage and subsistence labor.

The term *Mission Indians* originally referred to all Indians who lived in the mission establishments or were under the authority of the Franciscan fathers during the Mission period from 1769 to 1834. The term continued to be applied to the descendants of missionized Indians from San Diego to San Francisco. But the term was also applied to groups, including the Cupeño, who lived near the missions in the desert and mountain areas east of the coastal strip. Florence Shipek claims that many Indian groups hate the designation Mission Indian and insist on their band or tribal name.⁴ In contrast, Anna recalls that although her mother told her the family was Cupeño, she also advised her: "Just say you're Mission Indian. That way then everybody won't foul it up. Just say you're a California Mission Indian."⁵

Early in the Mission period, a small number of Cupeño entered Mission San Diego, but the majority were baptized after 1816 at San Luis Rey. Despite these baptisms, unconverted Cupeño resided throughout traditional tribal areas during the entire Mission period.⁶ In early historical and ethnographic literature the Cupeño were referred to as the Agua Caliente, so named by the Spaniards because their village of Cupa was located near the mineral springs now known as Warner Hot Springs in northern San Diego County. Bean and Smith state that the term *Cupeño*, derived from appending *-eño* to *Kupa*, first appeared in the literature in 1906.⁷ However, Charles Lummis, publisher and California Indian rights advocate, used the term in a 1902 article, "The Exiles of Cupa." In this article, published in Lummis' magazine *Out West*, he documented the Cupeño removal from their homelands.

Cupeño oral history regarding the mineral springs was recorded by P.L. Faye in 1921. The narrator, Salvadora Valenzuela, stated: "No one knows when the hot springs that were at our homes were created. It is said that the people arrived knowing about them. The water...came boiling up hot. And the people said, 'It is our water.'"⁸ By 1820, however, dramatic changes had taken place at Cupa. The mineral springs, which had become a health spa for the Spaniards, were now appropriated by the Mexicans as they would be later by the Americans.

Several mission *assistencias* had been built on Indian land, notably San Antonio de Pala, founded in 1816 by Mission San Luis Rey, and Santa Ysabel, founded in 1818 by Mission San Diego. A chapel was built at Warner Springs in an attempt to congregate unconverted Cupeño. This chapel was abandoned after the secularization of the missions. Secularization and the growth of ranchos brought Mexican ranchers into more direct contact with the Cupeño.

Having learned agriculture from the Franciscans, Cupeño now found themselves working for Mexicans in serf-like relationships, as they later would for the Americans. In 1844 Juan José Warner, a naturalized Mexican citizen originally from Connecticut, acquired title to Cupeño homelands, apparently purchasing the land from the grantee José Antonio Pico.⁹ Warner's land grant did not mention Indian residents and referred to the land as "vacant and abandoned."¹⁰ Eyewitness accounts refute this description. Lt. Col. W.H. Emory described the Cupeño at Warner's Ranch as being held "in a kind of serfdom to the master of the Rancheria."¹¹

Eventually the land became the property of John B. Downey, whose family sued in 1893 for the removal of the Indians. With the assistance of Lummis and the Sequoya League, the Cupeño fought the eviction all the way to the United States Supreme Court. On May 13, 1901, the court decided in favor of the Downey family. Following the decision, Lummis argued for the Cupeño, but revealed his own bias regarding "good" Indians in *Out West*: "These are not scalping savages who are being driven out of their immemorial home, but quiet, gentle, hardworking farmers."¹² In a search for land on which to relocate the Cupeño, the federally appointed Warner's Ranch Indian Commission, with Lummis as chair, inspected 250,000 acres of land, working 276 days of eighteen hours each. Finally they decided on "a corner of Pala Valley," twenty-four miles east of Oceanside and twelve miles south of Temecula, already occupied by Diegueño and Luiseño.¹³

During talks with Lummis regarding the impending removal from their homeland, Mrs. Cela Apapas expressed the distress of the Cupeño over what they regarded as their breaking a covenant with the creator which obligated them to care for the land forever:

You ask us to think what place we like next best to this place where we always live. You see that graveyard out there?

There are our fathers and grandfathers. You see that Eagle-Nest Mountain and that Rabbit-Hole Mountain? When God made them, he gave us this place.... How can we go away? If you do not buy this place [for us] we will go into the mountains like quail and die there, the old people and the women and children.¹⁴

Grant Wallace of the *San Francisco Bulletin* filed a story that was reprinted in the July 1903 issue of *Out West*. He reported that three of the "leading irreconcilables" spent nine days riding their " Broncos" to San Bernardino "on a fruitless errand" to bring President Theodore Roosevelt to "intervene." While they were gone "chasing rainbows," a government Indian agent arrived to supervise the eviction.¹⁵

Wallace described the sounds of wailing that came night after night from the homes of the Cupeño. On Tuesday, May 12, 1903, many Cupeño went to the little chapel to pray and then gathered among the unpainted wooden crosses of their ancient burying ground. "The pathetic and forlorn group wailed out their grief over the graves of their fathers." After loading a little food and a few valuables into their buckboard wagons, twenty-five families drove away toward Pala.¹⁶

Jane Hill has recorded Rosinda Nolaquez's memories of the removal:

First they said "Go see your relatives for the last time now." They went to the cemetery. There they wept. Then it was time to move out. Still they did not move. They still stayed there by the gate. And my great-grandmother went running into the mountains. And she said, "Here I will stay, even if I die, even if the coyotes eat me." The people moved out from the cemetery. They were weeping. And then from there they moved us. And they said to them, "Now look behind you, see your homes for the last time." But no one turned around. They did not look back again. They were very angry. And they said, "Tomorrow up there sometime that water will dry up and then you'll learn your lesson."¹⁷

Wallace, who had accompanied the Cupeño to Pala, reported that the Indians' "bitterest complaint" arose from what they perceived as the impossibility of keeping their clothing and bodies clean in the new location. "At Agua Caliente it had been a matter of pride with them to keep their linen spotless, and each person took a bath in the hot springs every day."¹⁸ The

Cupeño refused the first Sunday to attend services in the San Antonio de Pala Mission Chapel, asking the visiting priest, "What kind of God is this who deserts us when we need him most?" Instead of attending mass, they conducted a rabbit hunt.¹⁹

An annual observance of the removal is held at Pala on the first weekend in May. On May 4, 1974 the Cupa Cultural Center was dedicated at Pala. Prominently displayed in the Center is a mural of ceramic tile, created by the former Center director, Antonio "Tanty" Diaz. The mural depicts the "Cupeño Trail of Tears" during their removal from Warner's Hot Springs. Adjacent photo displays document the Cupeño saying goodbye to the graves of their loved ones, loading their buckboards, and moving into "temporary" portable houses at Pala. One photo captures images of sacred stones with initiation ceremony marks which had to be left behind at Warner's Springs. Another is the last photo taken of "old Manuela," who took to the mountains rather than relocate and was never found.²⁰ The exhibits at the Cupa Cultural Center, installed more than seventy years after the removal, indicate that even Lummis underestimated the Cupeños' passionate attachment to place. The priests of Mission San Antonio de Pala have observed that Indians in their parish frequently return to Warner's Springs, some wishing to be buried there.²¹

Anna Dawn remembers her grandfather becoming homesick for the areas around Warner's Springs. Sometimes family members would go looking for him and often "see his car and he'd have it open with his feet hanging out alongside the road...just sitting there, looking. Alone. Just sitting there, you know."²² Anna says: "Now that I'm older I want to go there more. I guess because my mother loved the area so much. That's all she talked about. I love to go there now too and just walk around the area."²³

Following the dislocation from their homelands, the Cupeño had few options other than working for white ranch owners. Anna vividly describes the work of her grandmother on a white-owned ranch near Mesa Grande:

I think she cooked for about twenty-five to thirty men... every morning the same thing, hot biscuits and gravy and ham and bacon and fried potatoes and eggs. Every single morning. It made her feel so good knowing that they liked her cooking.... But she didn't go into baking apple pies and

things...[for lunch and dinner, because of] doing all the housework and everything. She had two big washtubs out in the yard, and she had to carry that water and heat it, [carry] the wood and everything. So she was a real work horse.²⁴

After 1900 many Indians, like Anna's grandmother, who tired of working like serfs on white-owned ranches, eventually migrated to Los Angeles. This urbanization did not immediately bring economic well-being to the family. Anna remembers the poverty of her childhood. Her grandmother made biscuits and gravy if there was nothing else to eat. "A lotta times," Anna remembers, "she didn't have the flour. So we didn't eat, no biscuits or anything."

How has this family coped with forced relocation, urbanization, poverty? A clue to the strength of the Cupeño is found in their profound family connections. In the Cupa Cultural Center, memorials to deceased persons are displayed. Ceramic tiles are inscribed with the names not only of the children and grandchildren of the deceased, but also of grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. One tile reads: "In loving memory of our beloved mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, great-great-grandmother, aunt and great-aunt. We love and miss you dearly."²⁵

Cupeño living in Los Angeles manifest in their narrations similar strong family values. The centrality of the family is dramatic in the stories of the Dawn women. For the Dawns the extended family structure has persisted through six urban generations. Significant non-kin are also considered family. In-laws and friends are welcomed and supported as though they were born into the family. Even divorce has not destroyed the Dawn family integrity. The family has so completely embraced Anna's first husband, George, from whom she was divorced, and Anna's second husband, Dean, that daughter Patricia had both fathers give her away at her wedding. When Dean Dawn died, Patricia says, "My dad, he says he lost his brother when my dad died."²⁶

An indication that the commitment to family will persist is evident in Tracie's stories about "hanging out" with her grandmother. "I'm always bugging her. I love her, that's why." When asked during the interviews how she would raise her own children, Tracie responded that she would ask her mom and grandma to help her raise them.²⁷ This declaration only hints at

the intimate involvement of Anna and Patricia with six-month-old McKenna, who represents the sixth urbanized generation of her family.

The Trail of Tears—which began at Warner’s Springs, led to Pala, and eventually for some Cupeño to Los Angeles—typifies the repeated dislocations of the Native peoples of California. The oral histories of the Dawn women reveal that these dislocations have made formidable demands on the family’s resources. Their narrations also, however, identify strengths which are being passed on to future generations.

NOTES

1. For a more extensive discussion of forced removal leading to urbanization, see my book *From Mission to Metropolis: Cupeño Indian Women in Los Angeles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

2. Lowell Bean and Charles Smith, “Cupeño,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 8, *California*, ed., Robert Heizer (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 589.

3. Pala Indian Reservation Tribal Office telephone conversation with author, December 1995.

4. Florence Shipek, “History of Southern California Mission Indians,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 8, *California*, ed. Robert Heizer (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 610.

5. Diana M. Bahr, *From Mission to Metropolis: Cupeño Indian Women in Los Angeles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 33.

6. Florence Shipek, *Pushed into the Rocks: Southern California Land Tenure, 1769-1986* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 23-24.

7. Bean and Smith, “Cupeño,” 590.

8. Quoted in Jane Hill and Rosinda Nolasquez, ed., *Mulu’Wetam: The First People, Cupeño Oral History and Language* (Banning, CA: Malki Museum Press, 1973), 49a, no. X.

9. Hill and Nolasquez, *Mulu’Wetam*, 1; William D. Strong, *Aboriginal Society in Southern California* (Banning, CA: Malki Museum Press, 1987), 184.

10. Hill and Nolasquez, *Mulu’Wetam*, 1.

11. Charles Lummis, “The Exiles of Cupa,” *Out West* 16, no. 5 (May 1902): 471.

12. Lummis, “The Exiles of Cupa,” 465.

13. Charles Lummis, “Turning a New Leaf,” *Out West*, 18, no. 4 (April 1903): 442-3.

14. Lummis, “The Exiles of Cupa,” 475.

15. Grant Wallace, “The Exiles of Cupa,” *Out West*, 19, no. 1 (July 1903): 31.

16. *Ibid.*, 37. Photos of the removal taken by Charles Lummis are archived at the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.

17. Hill and Nolasquez, *Mulu'Wetam*, 23a, no. IX.
18. Wallace, "The Exiles of Cupa," 39-41.
19. Ibid.
20. Author's field notes.
21. Father Xavier Colleoni, personal interview with the author, San Antonio de Pala Mission rectory, October 18, 1989.
22. Bahr, *From Mission to Metropolis*, 51.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 53.
25. Ibid., 63.
26. Ibid., 84.
27. Ibid., 67-68.