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Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

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Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 27(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Authors

(McQueen) Fleagle, Christine M
Sutton, Mark Q

Publication Date

2007

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A Kawaiisu Healing Cave

CHRISTINE M. (MCQUEEN) FLEAGLE

MARK Q. SUTTON

CSU Bakersfield

During a field trip to the Nettle Spring area in 1994, Andy Greene, a Kawaiisu elder, pointed out a small cave to one of us (MQS) that was located on the side of a hill southeast of Nettle Spring. He said that this cave was where the Kawaiisu people living at the Nettle Spring village site would go when they were ill. There was, however, more to this cave than just a place to go when one was sick. Andy said that the large, bushy plant growing just below the cave had medicinal healing powers; when someone from the village became sick, they would go to the cave, take a piece of the plant, grind it up in the mortars (or cupules) at the site, and use the mixture for healing. Andy noted that the village at Nettle Spring could be seen from the opening of the cave, so that an afflicted individual would not be cut off entirely from the everyday happenings of the village. The following is a brief report on this small cave and on the medicinal plant that Andy identified there. The site is now within Tomo Kahni State Historic Park, and is known as the "Wizard Cave" or simply the "Healing Cave."

THE SETTING

Wizard Cave is located along the western side of Sand Canyon (Fig. 1), which is a north-south drainage in the far southern Sierra Nevada near the interface with the Tehachapi Mountains, at an elevation of 1,370 m. (4,500 ft.). The site lies within a juniper-woodland plant community that includes California juniper (*Juniperus californica*), a number of oak species (*Quercus* spp.), big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), various bunchgrasses (e.g., *Achnatherum hymenoides*), fiddleneck (*Amsinckia* spp.), and beavertail cactus (*Opuntia basilaris*) (Twisselmann 1967).

The Sand Canyon area is within Kawaiisu territory (Zigmond 1986), and it may have been a central area of occupation. At least two large ethnographically known Kawaiisu villages are located in the Sand Canyon area. The first is *Ma'a'puts* (CA-KER-339), located about one mile south of Wizard Cave (see Pruett 1987); the second

is the Nettle Spring site complex, which was investigated by the Archaeological Survey Association (ASA) in the mid-1950s (Price 1954) and by Antelope Valley College (AVC) in the early 1970s. Wizard Cave is one of the many sites identified in association with the Nettle Spring site complex, which includes a main site area (CA-KER-230), a number of smaller sites, and several rock art localities. Investigations at a number of these sites have been reported, including work at small camps (Ptomey 1991; Osborne 1994; Hinshaw and Rubin 1996), rock art localities (Sutton 1981, 1982, 2001; Lee 1999), and a cremation site (Siefkin and Sutton 1995). More recently, archaeologists from the California Department of Parks and Recreation conducted extensive surveys of the area, recording and updating information on many sites during the 1990s as part of the work undertaken at the park (see Dallas 2000).

THE CAVE

Wizard Cave (Fig. 2) was known to both ASA and AVC during their work at Nettle Spring. To the ASA, the cave was known as "39-S-J," and to AVC as a locus of "Ker-21." Neither group actually worked at the cave, but one of us (MQS) visited it in 1970. The cave was first formally recorded in 1980 (Weilder 1980) and was assigned the trinomial CA-KER-1471. In 1995, a number of adjacent sites, including Wizard Cave, were consolidated under a new site number, CA-KER-4445 (P-15-004826). Wizard Cave is now recorded as Feature E within the CA-KER-4445 site. The latest work at Wizard Cave involved a documentation of the rock art by Georgia Lee (1999).

The cave is relatively small, measuring 1.84 m. wide, 1.0 m. high, and about 2.3 m. deep (Fig. 3). It faces north, and provides an unobstructed view of the main habitation site at Nettle Spring (CA-KER-230). It is on the side of a small hill and is a bit difficult to access due to steep rock faces that must be traversed. The floor of the cave has no soil accumulation, so no midden is present. At least 17 small depressions (see Fig. 3) are present in the floor of the cave, and these have been interpreted as cupules (e.g., Lee 1999:36). The cupule depressions vary in size (see Table 1); the largest is 13 cm. in diameter. One cupule depression is donut-shaped, and has a raised center, while another appears to have traces of red pigment. It is possible that other cupule depressions are present but have gone

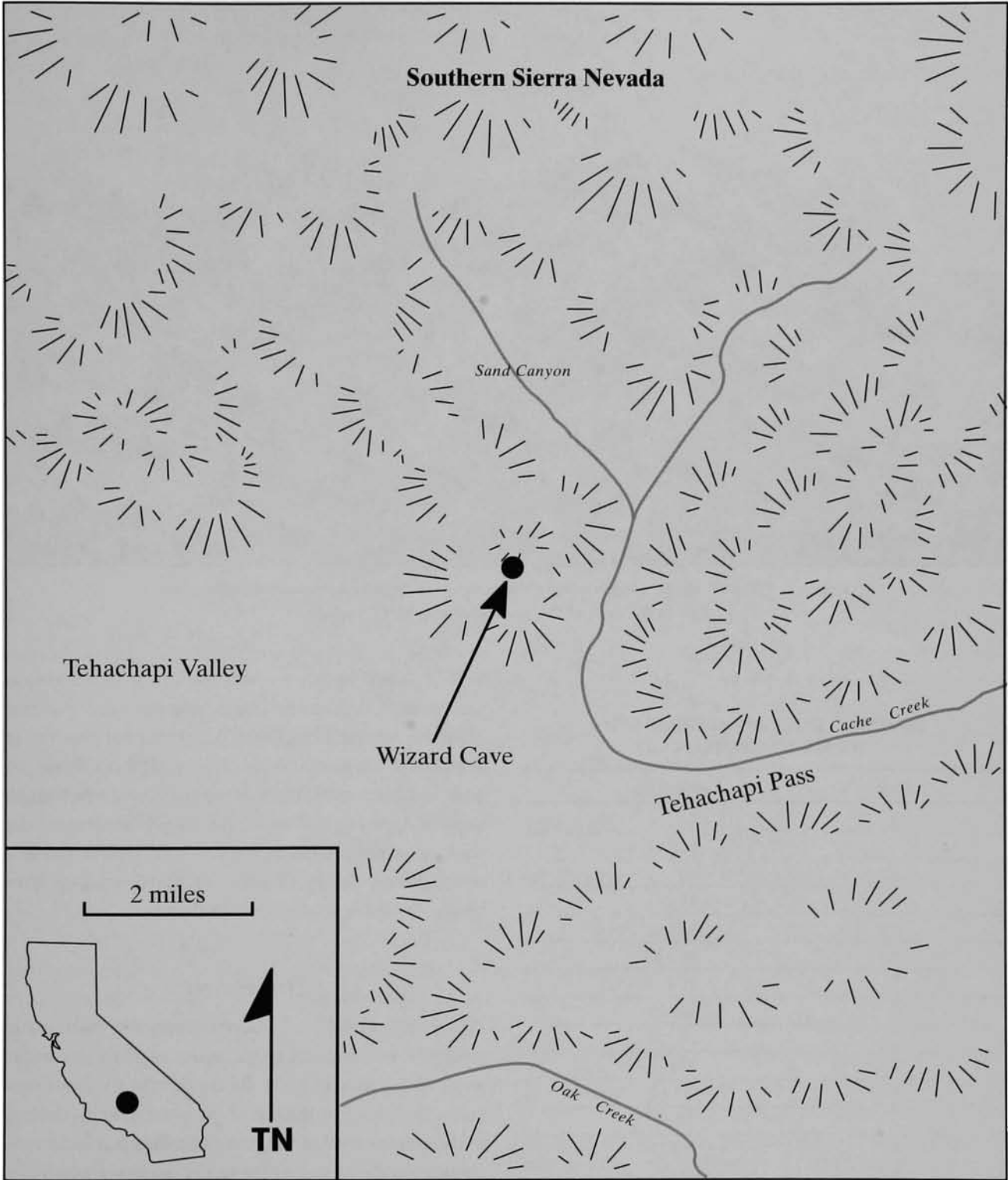


Figure 1. Location of Wizard Cave (CA-KER-4445, Feature E).

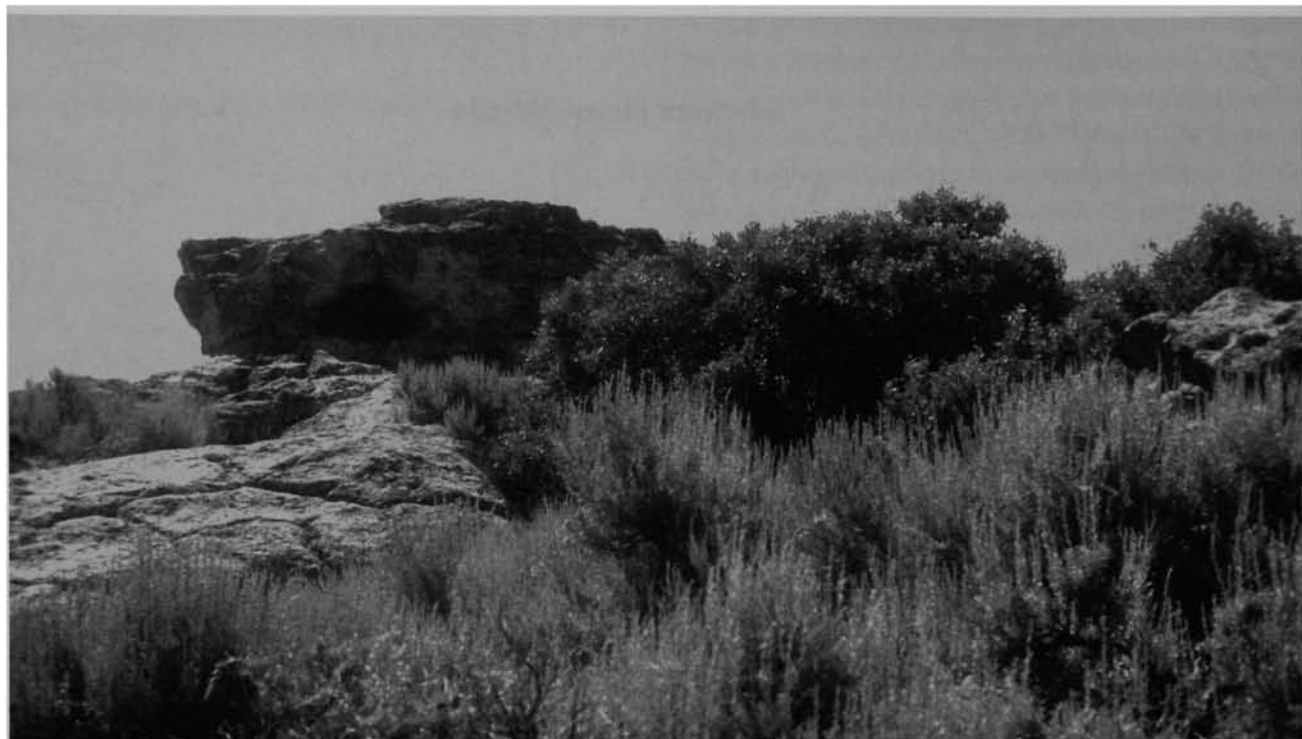


Figure 2. Wizard Cave looking generally south; note the large and prominent bushy plant just to the right of the cave (photo by M. Q. Sutton).

Table 1

**DIMENSIONS OF CUPULES AT WIZARD CAVE
(CA-KER-4445, FEATURE E)**

Cupule	Dimensions (cm.)
A	7.0 x 2.5
B	9.0 x 3.5
C	6.0 x 1.0
D	4.0 x 1.5
E	4.0 x 1.5
F	11.0 x 5.5
G	9.0 x 2.5
H	7.0 x 2.5
I	4.0 x 2.0
J	6.0 x 1.5
K	6.0 x 1.25
L	10.0 x 5.5
M	7.0 x 2.5
N	7.0 x 2.5
O	13.0 x 8.5
P	4.5 x 0.5
Q	6.0 x 0.5 (donut-shaped, with raised center)
R	10.0 x 1.5

unrecognized because of the presence of numerous natural small depressions. The ceiling has some evidence of fire-blackening. Lee (1999:36) reported the presence of a “red stain” on a wall of the cave some 60 cm. above the floor, and it is possible that this may represent a pictograph element (see Fig. 3). Above the cave is a natural tank where rain water collects; this has been interpreted as a water storage facility (Weidler 1980). No artifacts have been recorded in association with the cave.

THE PLANT

A large silk tassel bush (*Garrya flavescens* Watson var. *pallida*) is growing just below, and several meters to the west, of the cave (Fig. 2). Its trunk is in the talus well below the cave, but the top of the plant extends upward to the general level of the cave floor. This plant species is uncommon on the western slopes of the mountains in this region (Twisselmann 1967:300), and no other specimens are known in the vicinity. Andy believed that the bush had been purposefully planted for use at the cave, although this could not be confirmed by anything the authors observed at the site. The age of the bush is unknown.

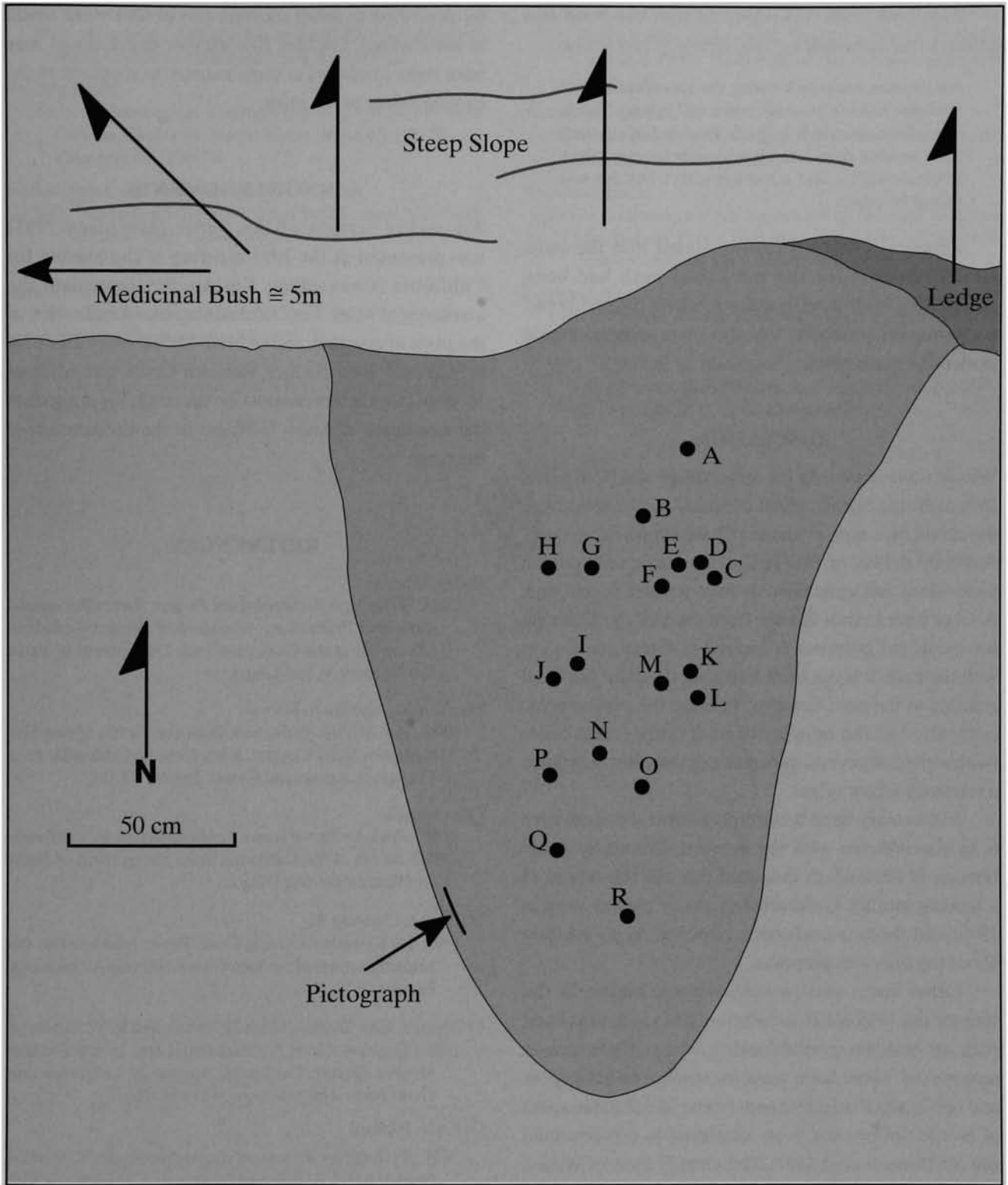


Figure 3. Map of Wizard Cave (CA-KER-4445, Feature E).

Zigmond (1981:32) reported that the bush was known to the Kawaiisu as “wild quinine,” and stated:

An infusion made by brewing the leaves constitutes medicine which is greenish, bitter, and “strong.” While one informant said it is drunk for relief of stomach ache, another considered it a remedy for gonorrhea. Some thought it had a laxative effect, but this was denied by others.

Zigmond (1981:32) further stated that the same Kawaiisu name for the silk tassel bush had been applied to a bush used to make a “claret-colored brew,” suggesting the possibility that there was some confusion in identifying the plant.

DISCUSSION

Wizard Cave overlooks the large village site (CA-KER-230) at Nettle Spring, much of which can be seen from the cave. There is no evidence of habitation (e.g., midden, domestic debris, or artifacts) at the cave; only cupule depressions and some possible rock art have been found. A large bush known to have been used by the Kawaiisu for medicinal purposes is located in direct association with the cave. It is not clear how long the plant has been growing at the cave; however, because the ethnographic occupation of the area lasted until fairly recent times (within the last several generations), the plant may have a relatively recent origin.

In summary, what is currently known about the cave is in concordance with the account offered by Andy Greene in 1994, which indicated that the site served as a healing locality. Unfortunately, Andy passed away in 1999, and there is no further opportunity to ask him about the site or its purposes.

Other caves and rockshelters are known in the vicinity; one (CA-KER-508; Sutton 2001) is an important rock art and ceremonial locality, while others remain unreported. Some were used for storage or habitation, and one in the Rosamond area (some 18 miles due south of Nettle Spring) has been identified as a ceremonial site (O'Donnell et al. 1997). The identification of Wizard Cave as a healing location expands our understanding of the function of caves and rockshelters in this region.

The identification of cupules in the floor of the cave is also of interest. If these depressions were actually used to process a medicinal plant, the larger ones might better

be described as small mortars (no pestles were found in association). Cupules (the smaller depressions) may have been employed in some manner to supplement the healing power of the plant.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this paper (McQueen 1995) was presented at the 1995 meeting of the Society for California Archaeology, Eureka. We appreciate the assistance of Mark Faull in obtaining the identification of the plant in question, and of Herb Dallas, Mark Faull, Jill K. Gardner, Ken Hedges, Rebecca Orfila, and Michael R. Walsh for their comments on the draft. We appreciate the assistance of Audry Williams in the preparation of the maps.

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