INTERACTION BETWEEN MARGINALIZED ETHNIC GROUPS IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY CALIFORNIA

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High on a mountaintop overlooking nearly all of Southern California including the bustling, industrious city of Los Angeles, sit the ruins of Mount Lowe Resort and Railway, a place nearly forgotten by the region's contemporary inhabitants. From the 1890s to the late 1930s, however, the resort was a household name to the nearly three million visitors who traveled far and near to tour its notable attractions (Seims 1976). These amusements included a first-rate and fully staffed observatory, a zoo, four hotels spanning over three mountains, a searchlight, miles and miles of hiking trails, and the world's steepest incline railway. To keep this monumental tourist attraction running in top form, hundreds of employees were recruited from all over the world. The resort's officials desired newly arrived immigrants as employees, as the threat of deportation often kept them from filing complaints with the state and requesting better pay and living conditions.

Between 2004 and 2008, the Mount Lowe Archaeology Project has sought to explore the working conditions at the resort (Camp 2009). Documentary and archaeological research has demonstrated that workers employed at the attraction were both materially and spatially separated from one another based on gender, racial classifications of the time, class, age, and citizenship status (Fig. 1). Railway labor, for instance, was reserved for individuals of Mexican and Irish heritage since individuals of Asian origins were banned from obtaining employment in the United States (Garcilazo 1995; Ngai 2004). The conditions that Irish and Mexican immigrants faced at Mount Lowe Resort and Railway paralleled the rough and often dangerous experiences Asian Americans dealt with while working on railways in the western United States. As the archaeological data would later reveal, the similarities would not end there.

Fig. 1. In this photograph, circa 1906, the Mexican railway workers' household for the Mount Lowe Resort and Railway is at bottom left just below the railway tracks. The white, circular building at upper right is the Lowe Observatory. Image courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library, Security Pacific Collection.

In addition to being chosen to work on the railway based on their nationality, the railway laborers were stratified by ethnicity, with Mexican immigrant and Mexican American workers performing railway maintenance while the Irish employees acted as supervisors and foremen. In addition, historic maps recovered as part of the Mount Lowe Archaeology Project illustrated that railway workers were not only kept on a mountain far away from the resort's tourist attractions and from employees who were either naturalized or were native citizens of the United States, but also that Irish and Mexican employees were housed in different structures. These structures differed substantially in construction, utilities, and layout.
Revealing the racialized climate of early 20th century Los Angeles, Mexican workers and their families were placed in a two-bedroom household designed to accommodate a small family of three or four people. In a typical year, eight to ten employees and their family members were housed in this tiny, cramped structure. Irish workers, on the other hand, were given a bigger, more luxurious two-bedroom house, with only one or two workers sharing the structure. In addition, despite numerous citations from the Los Angeles County Health Department, the resort did not follow state-mandated sanitation standards (such as proper bathroom drainage and showering facilities) for its railway workers. Irish railway workers received sanitary plumbing in 1921, whereas Mexican workers living on the same landscape but in different living quarters had to wait until 1928. All other individuals employed by the resort received sanitation updates in 1912.

These structures were the focus of the 2005 and 2006 archaeological investigations, with the goal of determining if additional material distinctions existed between the Irish and Mexican railway workers' living quarters. Though the archaeological investigations inside the Irish household produced limited data, the findings inside the Mexican workers' structure revealed a number of surprising finds. One of these artifacts hints at either interaction or, at the very least, a shared material experience between Mexican immigrants and Chinese immigrants. A single copper alloy button with a shank was recovered from the Mexican immigrants' household. Typically cataloged as a "Chinese-style" button by historical archaeologists (c.f. Great Basin Foundation 1987; Greenwood 1996; Wegars 2001), this small find calls into question the practice of classifying and referring to an artifact by a cultural group's ethnicity or nationality. In a similar vein, what was an object generally associated with Chinese immigrants doing at an early 20th century Mexican railway workers' camp?

One explanation is that Mexican immigrants came into regular contact with Chinese immigrants in 19th and early 20th century Mexico. Several historians have noted that Chinese immigrants often sought illegal passage to the United States in Mexico by adorning clothing traditionally worn by Mexican villagers (Brandenberg 1905; Lee 2002). It is possible that ties were forged between these marginalized cultural groups across the border, leading to the complex material signature found on Mount Lowe's railway workers' camp. This discovery illustrates that archaeologists studying racialized groups must look at the transnational linkages between cultural groups. Though Chinese and Mexican immigrants came from different homelands, they shared the status of being a marginalized group in the United States. Perhaps that common bond sparked a mutual interest in each other's cultural practices and material worlds, leading to the deposition of this small, copper alloy button inside the Mexican immigrants' household.

I am curious to hear if other archaeologists working on inter-ethnic communities in the Western United States have discovered similar material crossovers or if objects typically described as relating to one specific ethnic group have been found amongst the remains of an unrelated ethnic group. Any responses are greatly appreciated and can be sent to scamp@uidaho.edu.

References Cited


