# "WE WEREN'T WHITE TRASH"
# RURAL MODERNIZATION AND FAMILY LIFE ALONG NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S RATTLESNAKE GULCH, 1910-1935

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*This paper examines the everyday life of the Green family from 1910 to 1935. An archaeological study of their residence (CA-SHA-2399/H) along Rattlesnake Gulch near Redding revealed much about work, gender roles, child rearing, and consumer behavior in rural northern California during the early 20th century. In particular, material cultural from the Greens' house and yard reflects the family's strategies for achieving permanence and success (perhaps measured in ways other than financial) in an unstable local economy based largely on mining.*

## INTRODUCTION

Following the early years of the California Gold Rush, people living in the upper reaches of the Sacramento Valley settled into a way of life familiar to many westerners of the late 19th century: economic dependence on primary industries controlled by government agents, big landowners, and corporate CEOs, many of whom were based in distant cities. For Redding, the region's railhead by 1872, growth and prosperity were tied to the fortunes of logging, ranching, farming, and mining—enterprises prone to dramatic ups and downs, determined by environmental constraints and the vicissitudes of the international market (Petersen 1965:52). Residents with better positions or sought-after skills could weather the down times, but for those economically on the fringe, steady wage work—the lifeline for a family struggling to make ends meet—could dry up overnight, and it wasn't uncommon for people to come and go depending on job availability.

With the electrification of America and the proliferation of indoor plumbing, copper mining—another boom-bust business—emerged as Redding's boss industry by the late 1890s (Kristofors 1973). Later, copper mining was spurred by World War I demand. People came from all over the world to work in the mines and smelters, which produced poisonous fumes that killed plants and denuded many square miles of land along the Sacramento River. Quartz was needed as a flux in smelting. This available mineral energized hardrock mining in and around the old Gold Rush diggings just west of Redding (Hamusek-McGann et al. 1999:3.13). Here, in the foothills of the Klamath Mountains, work could be found for a time at mines like the Boswell, Silver King, and Yankee John.

Frank Green, a journeyman miner from Napa, California, worked at these mines. He lived with his wife Lena and their seven children (two of the children were from Frank's earlier marriage) at a home along Rattlesnake Gulch, just north of the Yankee John (Figures 1 and 2). The Greens arrived here around 1910 and were gone by the late 1930s. Their life along Rattlesnake Gulch would probably have remained unnoted in local history, except that we came across their house site during a U.S. Government-mandated archaeological survey. It was one of several sites, both historic and prehistoric, found on a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) parcel slated for sale. The family's former residence, with its rich array of artifacts, stood out, and after doing some background research on the site, we knew there was an important story here.

With no hope of persuading the BLM managers to keep the parcel, we saw the opportunity to lessen the loss of this significant site through an archaeological study—a study we designed to try to fill in some gaping holes in local history, which virtually ignores the lives and contributions of lower-income, rural families (Ritter et al. in press). The archaeological remains also appeared to offer an opportunity to tackle the research issue of modernization at the household level.

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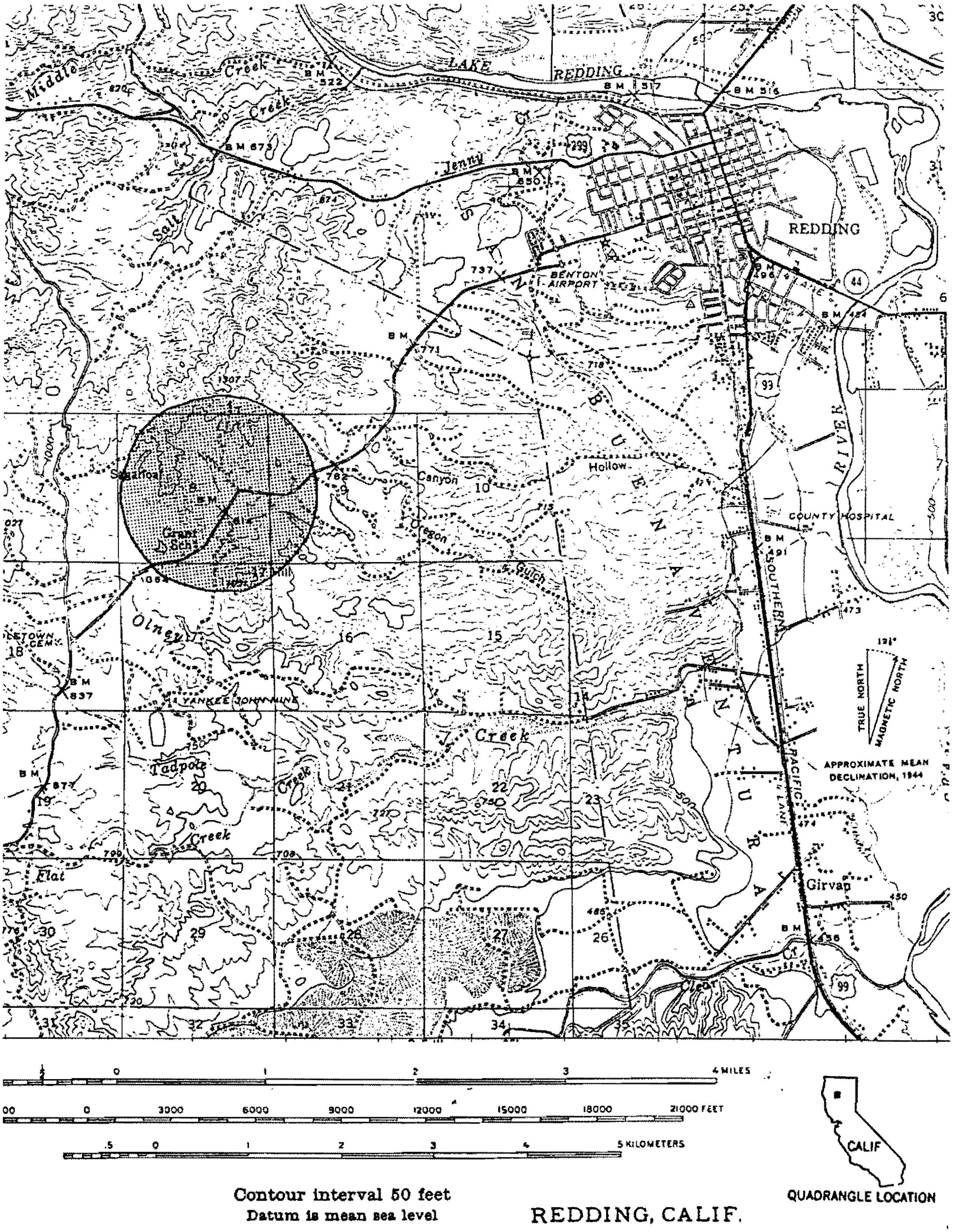
LAKE REDDING
Middle Creek
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Canyon
Hollow
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Gulch
YANKEE JOHN MINE
Tadpole
Creek
Flat
COUNTY HOSPITAL
SOUTHERN PACIFIC LANE
RIVER
Girvan
Clear
BUENA VENTURA
TRUE NORTH
MAGNETIC NORTH
APPROXIMATE MEAN DECLINATION, 1944
0 1 2 3 4 MILES
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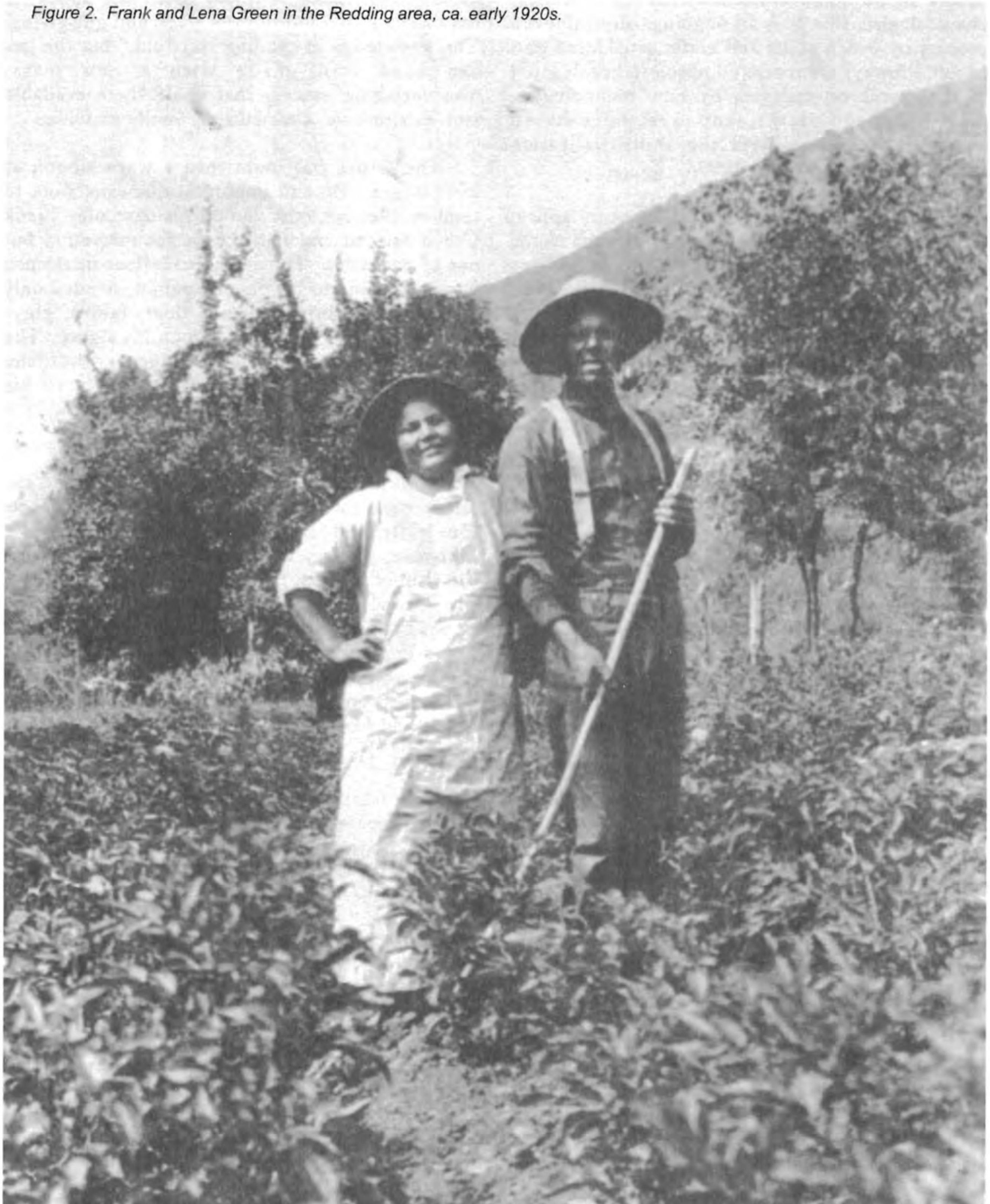
Datum is mean sea level
REDDING, CALIF.
CALIF
QUADRANGLE LOCATION

*Figure 1. Principal study location near Redding, California.*

Figure 2. Frank and Lena Green in the Redding area, ca. early 1920s.



Modernization is not easily defined. There seems to be some consensus among historical archaeologists that it is an ongoing, often uneven process by which skills and crafts considered part of folk lifeways are rendered obsolete or relegated to the status of pastimes by new technologies, mass-produced items, and a science-based rationale that arose with the Industrialization Revolution (Cabak et al. 1999).

The early decades of the 20th century appear to have been a period particularly relevant to the modernization of American households. Many long-standing domestic skills were abandoned during this time as families increasingly bought mass-produced goods (like clothing) at retail stores or through mail-order catalogues rather than making them at home (Cowan 1983; Schlereth 1991). Emerging and gaining momentum were larger trends like mass marketing, mass consumption, and popular culture—important facets of American life still with us today.

In tracking these trends and examining their effects on the Greens, we were fortunate to have rich data—not only abundant archaeological materials and archival sources, but detailed oral histories from longtime neighbors, in-laws, and even family members themselves. The glimpses of family life that appeared as we stitched together the data were in many ways not surprising for the Greens' place and time: we saw a family hard at work using mass-made tools—in some cases the latest technologies—in "old" or folk ways to produce various things needed to survive and succeed.

## A FAMILY PRODUCING

We can start with Lena's contribution. Work for mother included preparing the meals, cleaning house, caring for the children; making, repairing, and cleaning clothes; and other tasks too numerous to mention here. The Greens probably couldn't afford a mechanical washer, nor did they have plumbing. Lena did the laundry the old way—by hand—with mass-produced items like a sadiron, washboard, and washtub filled with water hauled from the nearby spring.

We found a canning rack and more than 100 broken canning jars at the site (Figure 3), and it appears that Lena was canning fruits and vegetables, probably to help carry the family through the winter. Canned goods also appear to have been important in local trade and gift-giving. The knowledge of canning was "old," but the jars she used were made with a new mass-manufacturing process that made them available and inexpensive, thus cutting family expenses.

The father was more than a wage laborer at local mines. He had important domestic work to tend to after his shift and on his days off. Frank Green hunted and fished, not for recreation but out of necessity. He was an excellent marksman who, according to his granddaughter, needed only one bullet to bring down a deer, rabbit, pig—whatever he could place between his sights. The archaeological evidence indicates that the household was heavily armed with at least six types of handguns and rifles, including a .25-.25, a popular firearm during the early 1900s.

Aside from "bringing home the bacon," the father took the lead on household maintenance. He built and repaired the family's house, outhouse, garage, and fences, occasionally with the help of in-laws, friends, and neighbors. Frank was also apt at blacksmithing, a skill not evident in the archaeological record. Mass-made items like a crowbar, drill bit (see Figure 4), handsaw, shovel, and file found at the site indicate that the family had not only the talent but the tools to do household work that many of us today would hire out.

The family lived along Rattlesnake Gulch when the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment outlawed drinking. Frank bootlegged to make extra money but didn't drink himself. In fact, he was a member of an anti-drinking group called the "Dry Squad." The archaeological evidence seems to confirm that liquor was infrequently consumed at the site, and older and newer bottles were apparently reused (Figures 4c, d).

Frank also mined placer and lode gold on his claims around the house. This was another strategy for making ends meet. In a time of increasing control over land in the area, the Greens and their neighbors used the 1872 mining law to carve out small tracts of public land along Rattlesnake Gulch. Such tracts were more than mining claims; they were residential sites that gave these people the room and resources they needed to make a living according to their

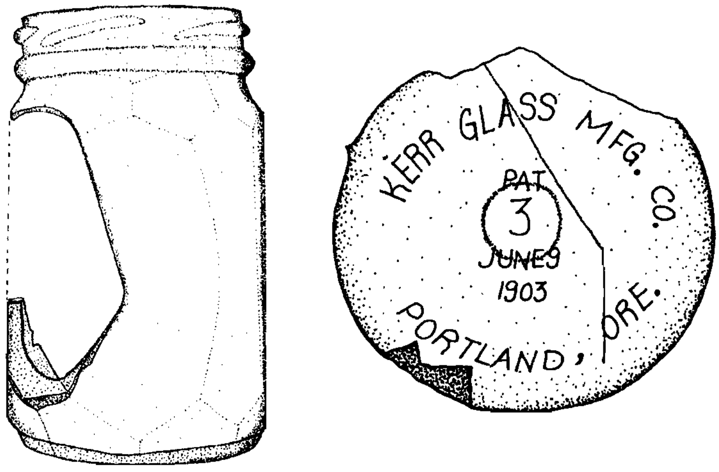

KERR GLASS MFG. CO.
PAT
3
JUNE 9
1903
PORTLAND, ORE.

*Figure 3. Clear glass condiment jar and amethyst-colored canning jar base (diameter 3 3/4 in.).*

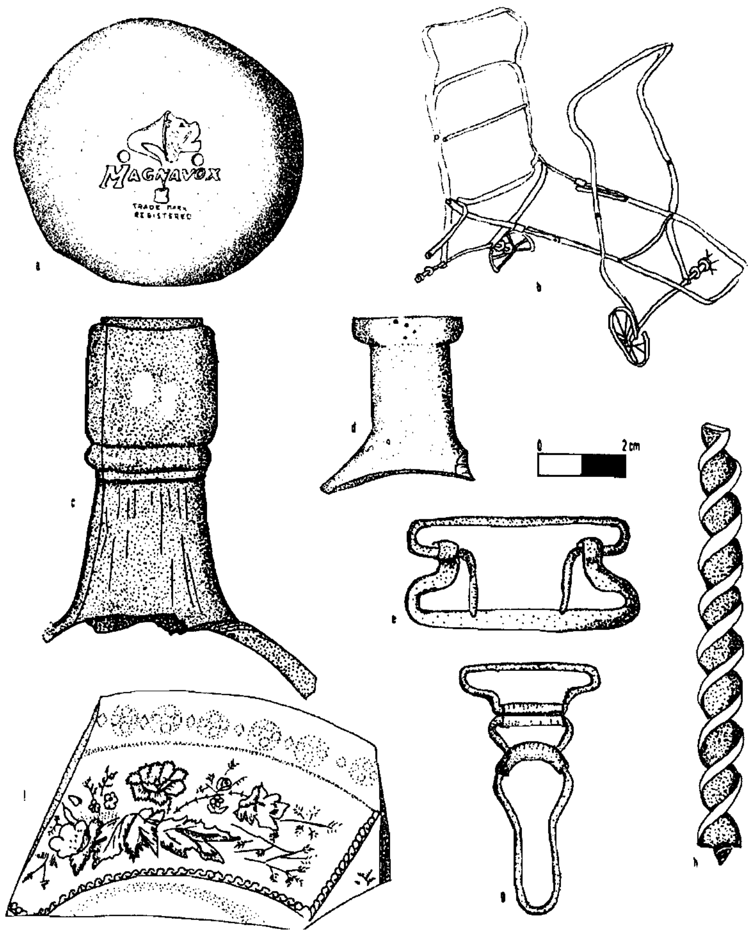

a
MAGNAVOX
TRADE MARK
REGISTERED
b
c
d
0
2cm
e
f
g
h

*Figure 4. Miscellaneous artifacts from CA-SHA-2399/H. a. brass phonograph cover (5 in. diameter), b. child's buggy frame, c. amber whiskey bottle finish, d. amethyst pharmacy bottle finish, e. suspender sliding buckle, f. brown transferware plate rim, g. garter belt suspender, h. 3/8 in. wood drill bit.*

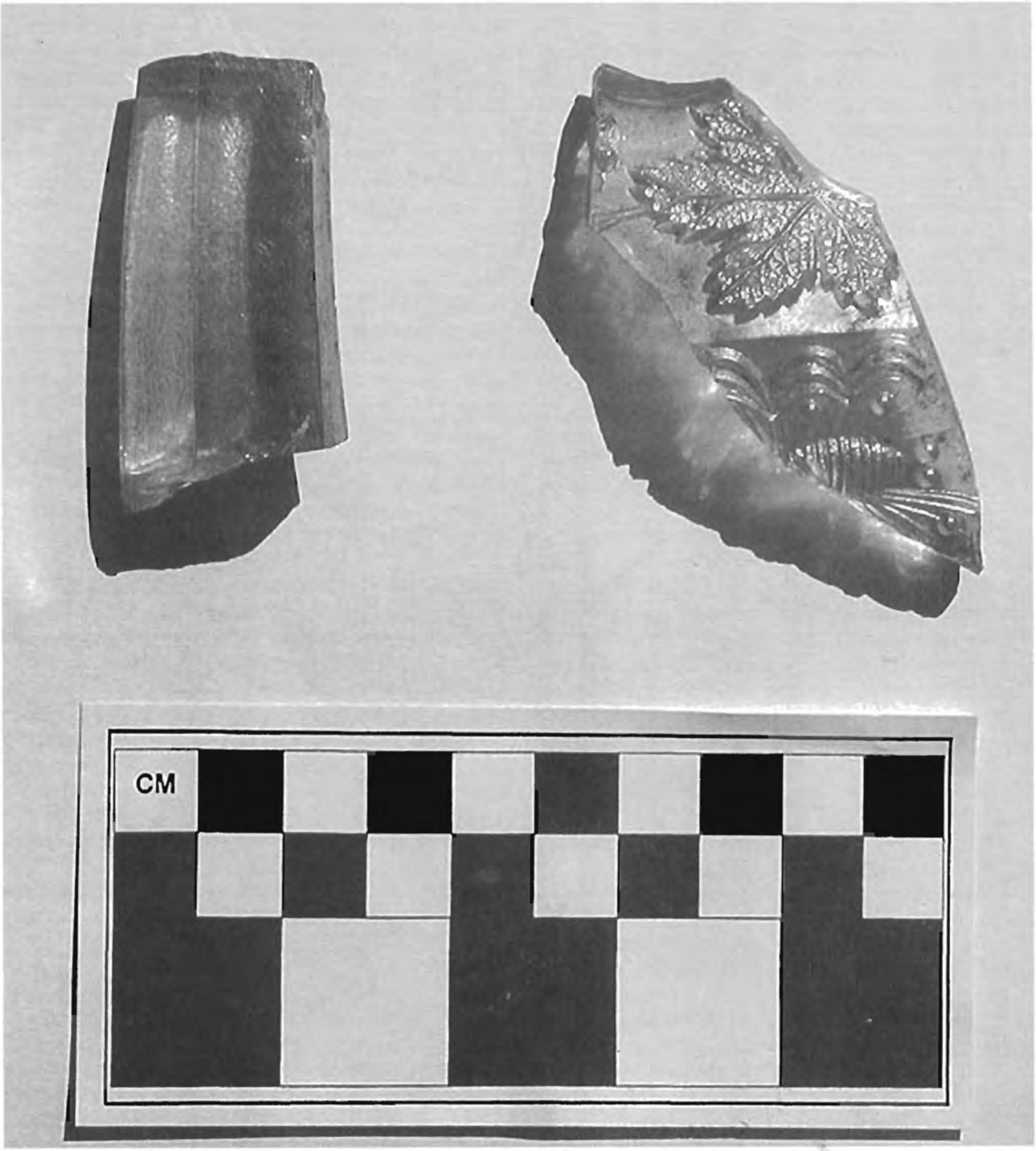


*Figure 5. Fragments from a Northwood Carnival Glass pitcher, Grape pattern, peach opalescent color.*

customs, away from the influences of the area's corporate mines and big landowners.

Frank and Lena's seven children also pitched in. School records indicate intermittent attendance, suggesting that there were times when they were needed to work. We know that daughter Josephine took a job as a janitor, and the younger children had chores like collecting manure for fertilizing the garden.

The division of labor along gender and age lines was rigid but probably not as rigid as one might expect for the early 20th century. Large domestic projects (like gardening) were often a family effort (refer to Figure 2) and sometimes a communal effort, as neighbors, friends, and relatives pooled resources to help out.

Regardless of who did what, domestic work was complementary and critical to achieving success—not necessarily financial success, but success in terms of enabling the Greens to do what families typically do: build close relationships, care for each other, carry on traditions, and reproduce. Doing these things was contingent on "staying-put." In short, doing whatever was necessary to avoid being sucked into the world of the migrant wage-worker—a "Grapes-of-Wrath"-like voyage filled with daily uncertainty, high risk, and emotional trial (see Streeter 1998). People like the Greens were never far from this life. As a Yuki/Rogue River Indian with local roots, Lena perhaps had deeper ties and a greater commitment than others to "staying-put." She was likely well-integrated into the complex social networks of a local community that we are only beginning to understand.

## A FAMILY CONSUMING

Staying-put would become more difficult for the Greens. With the local copper industry dying by 1920 due to a glutted market and decreasing demand, Redding entered an era that longtime locals dub "the Doldrums"—a downward dive in the local economy. And like other rural westerners, people living just west of Redding faced depression long before the Great Depression.

The archaeological record suggests that the Greens hardly noticed the hard times, even though production slowed at the Yankee John Mine where Frank Green worked (Barnes and Ritter 1998). The family eagerly took hold of the new national trends and fashions. They had a car by 1923, when few of their neighbors had one. The car was clearly a status symbol; cars were still a luxury rather than a necessity in the early 1920s. Multiple parts were found, indicating that car repair and dismantling took place at the site. As one longtime neighbor put it, "You would have an extra motor, drive with one, repair the other" and apparently "shade-tree" mechanic work helped save the expense of taking the car to a garage in town.

Scattered homes along Rattlesnake Gulch weren't wired for electricity until after World War II, but this didn't stop the Greens from keeping up with the times. They used batteries to run their "new-fangled" electric gadgets, including a radio and Magnavox phonograph (Figure 4a).

The Greens had numerous dishes, plates, cups, saucers and other containers with designs popular nationally from 1910 to 1940, including Carnival Glass (Figure 5), Art Deco lusterware, decal-printed ceramics, and Depression glass. Their collection was a mélange of older (Figure 4f) and newer wares; few of the dishes matched. They likely obtained dishes piecemeal, as premiums in cereal and soap boxes, or on "dish night" at the movie theater: see a double feature and get a dish for free (Yeske 1998:10). Manufacturers sold cheap imitations like these as premiums to encourage Americans from all walks of life to follow and literally buy into mass-culture ideas, trends, and fashions. Such marketing schemes appealed to lower-income people like the Greens who relied on trade and gift-giving with their relatives and neighbors to maintain their livelihood. Premiums also made consuming seem fun and exciting; they were tangible reminders that the latest fashions were important to keep up with and within easy reach of all.

Lena and the older girls wore makeup and body lotions such as Hinds Honey and Almond Cream. They also had fashionable hosiery (see Figure 4g), corsets, perfume, and fancy glass beadwork—accouterments society demanded of a woman at that time. Little things like a coat hanger, thermometer, paper-towel dispenser, and measuring cup from the Greens' dump suggest that the family accepted early 20th-century domestic reforms that promoted efficiency, sanitation, and the use of science-based, mass-produced technologies in American homes (Hutchinson 1986:178; Spencer-Wood 1996:407).

## CONCLUSIONS

Tragically, Lena died in August,1926 of a hemorrhage caused by a self-induced abortion. Malaria was a contributing factor to her death, according to the death certificate. She was 35 years old. It is difficult to speculate about the reasons and emotions that led to this tragedy, but it seems that the family was under considerable stress, financial and otherwise. Perhaps they simply could not afford to feed another mouth, and perhaps Lena herself felt unable or unwilling to cope with another child so soon after the birth of the two older babies.

For his wife, Frank Green purchased an expensive casket that he paid off over the next year and a half. And why not buy an expensive casket? This was, after all, for his wife. But his purchase, like other purchases the family made during the 1920s, belied their situation: this was a poor family in uncertain times. Despite the financial uncertainty, they reached out to embrace the latest mass-culture fashions (car, radio, phonograph, stylish dishes) as much as they could, even at times when they perhaps should have been more concerned with necessities like medical care. It is worth noting that after Lena's death, the family appears to have acquired little in the way of new dishes. By this time, with the older daughters grown and living elsewhere, without a mother in the home, and in the throes of local depressed times with the end of copper mining and the beginning of the Great Depression, the Greens may have made do with what they had.

Before Lena's death the family achieved stability and a high degree of self-sufficiency with hard work and skills like canning, clothes making, placer mining, and blacksmithing—skills increasingly seen as unfashionable, unnecessary, and unpopular by many Americans. But this way of life doesn't appear to be something that the Greens were proud of. The appearance of a middle-class, "modern" existence—the type of existence seen in advertising and promoted by domestic reformers—was important to them. This sentiment is echoed in the archaeological and documentary records as well as the accounts of family members themselves. One elder family member who lived at the site has made it clear to us that the family was not "white trash," and it is not surprising that the Green children abandoned many of the domestic arts common to their parents' generation—a theme echoed throughout 20th-century America.

With Frank Green's death in 1935 at the age of 58 and the children growing up and moving on, the family abandoned their home along Rattlesnake Gulch by the late 1930s. This was around the time that construction of Shasta Dam, just north of Redding, was helping to improve a dismal regional economy.

The Green family of the 1910s to 1930s is gone now, but not forgotten. We think that the archaeological study of their life on the outskirts of Redding is important. Our study (detailed in Ritter et al., in press) shows how pervasive and fast-moving trends like mass-marketing, mass consumption, and popular culture were in taking hold of the collective consciousness during the early decades of the 20th century. They engulfed even the poorest Americans living in rural places like Rattlesnake Gulch.

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