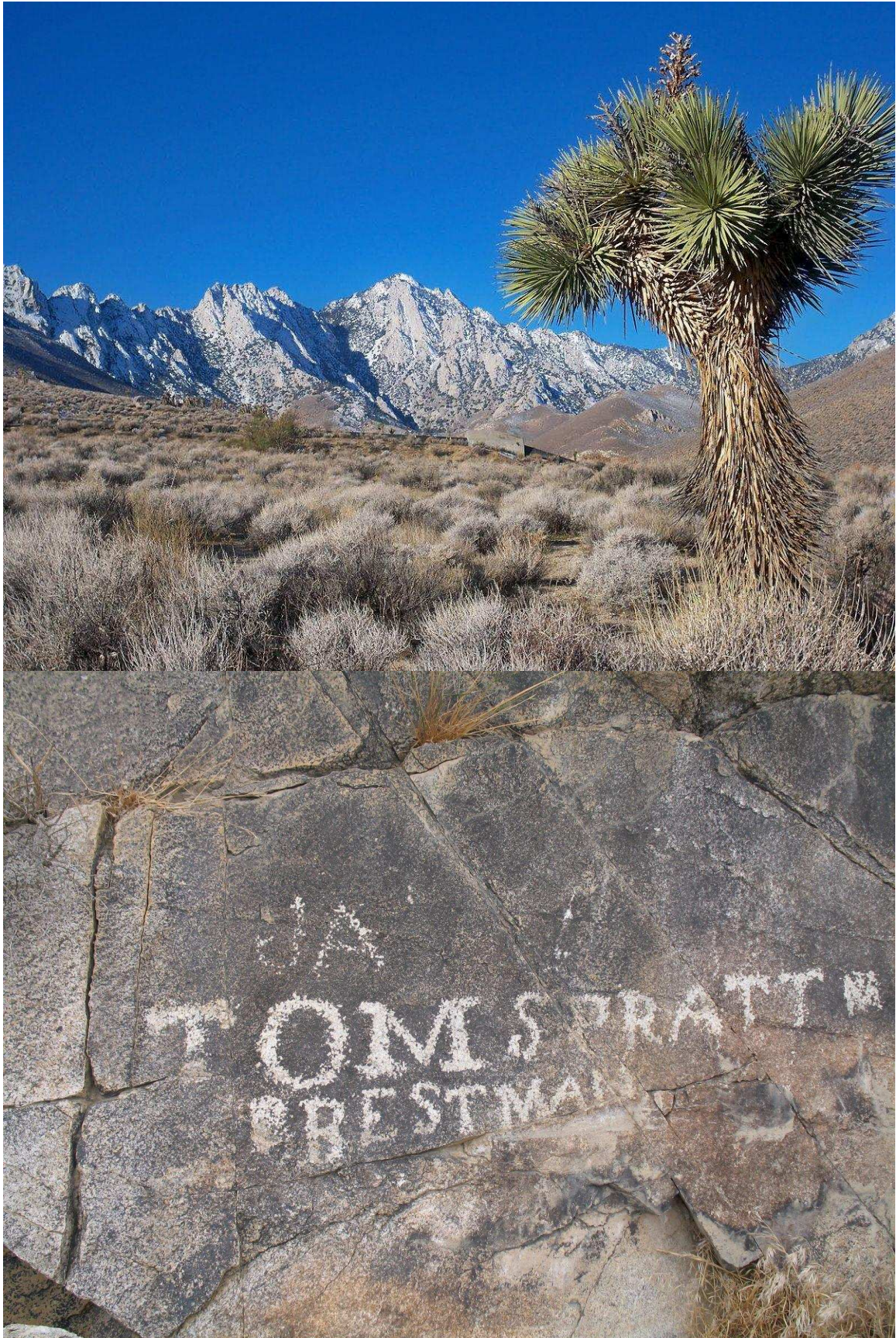




The Kawaiisu Indians and Grapevine Canyon

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This brief article is based on an excerpt and some further reflections relating to our book:

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I had a recent set of experiences that border on the extraordinary and I thought I should preface my reflections by explaining some of the details.

Back in 1976 over a three month period I completed an internship for the Bureau of Land Management, recording historic and prehistoric archaeological sites at Little Lake and Fossil Falls in the southern Owens Valley (aka Rose Valley). That brief stint in the Owens planted a lifelong love for the eastern Sierra Nevada region. You know as they say life comes in circles and after three decades we finally completed a book summarizing much of the knowledge relating to the one of the principal Indian tribes that lived in the region – the Kawaiisu (newah, also sometimes just called Paiute). In completing the book we authored a chapter on Indian place names and one spot that kept tugging at my psyche was Grapevine Canyon. The name is confusing as there are several places with that moniker but this one is the picturesque drainage just north of Walker Pass on the eastern skirt of the Sierra in Indian Wells Valley.

In researching the canyon I learned that the Kawaiisu called that place *sipiti-b'i-vi-yui* meaning wild grapes. Anthropologist, Julian Steward, reports that one of the last “*Mugunuwu*” (Desert Kawaiisu) lived there in the 1930s. He gives his initials as TSp and describes this individual as one-quarter Shoshone and one-quarter *Mugunuwu*. My old friend, a south fork Kern River Indian woman (aka Tubatulabal), Patty Wermuth, confirmed that the Spratt family lived in Grapevine Canyon in the vicinity of Coyote Spring, hence I knew that must have been a family member of the Spratts that was a consultant for Steward.

Anne “Annie” Spratt (1876-1946) and Tom Spratt (Thomas Jefferson Spratt 1874-1943) were residents of Grapevine Canyon. Annie was of mixed heritage - “half Shoshoni and half *Mugunuwu* (Kawaiisu)”. Thomas (“Tom”) was Annie’s brother.

I couldn’t get the name of Tom Spratt out of my head. I kept thinking that there must be some reason I just knew that name. Then it struck me like an electric shock, the Little Lake Stage Station, I remember there was a name glyph referring to the station right there above the rock that identifies the areas as the old stage stop. So, I wondered if it could be his name. That would indeed be very strange as I hadn’t thought of that historic stagecoach stop landmark’s rock writing in over 30 years. Then I remembered I had recently found my old notebooks (now 30 years old) with my original handwritten records on that site and there in my notes was the name – Tom Spratt. Old Tom that Desert Kawaiisu had pecked his John Hancock right there above the Stage Station glyph on a darkened granite boulder on the eastern face of the Sierra in a cove above where the station marker is still inscribed. Tom Spratt sending me a message – a freeze framed time capsule across the ages. Wow...

Recollections by Don Powers fill in some of the gaps in the information available on Tom Spratt. Tom Spratt was commonly known as “Indian Tom”. Spratt had a well-fenced property of about 30 acres that sat up on a bench up out of the canyon. He lived in an adobe house that his father, John O. “Jack” Spratt (1842-1916), had built. Tom was a very accomplished blacksmith and had built a well-equipped shop. Tom and his siblings (John “Johnnie”, James, and Ann “Annie”) were all born in Grapevine Canyon and Tom’s father was a “full blood” Irishman with flaming red hair and beard. Tom Spratt’s dad was

reportedly a “highwayman” who often would acquire extra “income” by holding up the Wells Fargo stagecoaches in the area and also served as a blacksmith.

Tom Spratt never had any formal education but was self-taught and could read and write well. Additionally he could read music and played the organ and the violin. In a telephone interview with Alan Garfinkel, Nadine Naylor (who is related to the Owens Valley Paiute and the Kawaiisu) shared that the only time she visited Tom in his Grapevine Canyon home, she was gifted with hearing him play a piece of music on his organ. According to Powers, Tom would harvest the wild grapes in the canyon and make several barrels of wine each year. He had a fruit orchard under the bank of his house as well as plum, apricot, and peach trees. Tom would hunt deer in Lamont Meadow (near Chimney Meadow) or below his home there in Grapevine Canyon itself and never failed to bag a deer which he would process into jerky.

Tom worked for the City of Los Angeles during the time when built the first Owens Valley aqueduct was constructed from Bishop to Los Angeles. Tom Spratt was there, at his home, in Grapevine canyon in 1927, when the Owens Valley farmers and ranchers had enough of those water barons and were finally sufficiently angered by the City of Los Angeles at what they had done with their water - feeling cheated and exploited. These Owens Valley residents gathered together and blew up the siphon in the canyon with explosives. Tom heard the giant explosion and he and his friends couldn't get out of the canyon except on foot for several days until the city rebuilt the roads into the canyon that were all washed out by the subsequent flooding.

Ken Wortley, a local Kern Valley historian, was a friend of the Spratts. He said that he had known the Spratt family since the early 1920's. He wrote a brief piece based on the recollections of Annie Spratt. An article he penned was based on Annie's reminiscences when she was nearly a century in age.

According to Annie, she was told that many years ago her people (the Kawaiisu or Newah) were camped at the edge of a spring near Grapevine Canyon. This was undoubtedly *Coyote Spring* (*sīna'a-vivo'o-bīzi*) near the mouth of the Canyon. In any event, Annie Spratt tells us that her tribesmen were hunting chuckwallas and there appeared a cloud of dust to the south that attracted their attention. Fearing unfriendly visitors the Natives concealed themselves and continued watching in a hidden position. They identified a long column of “strange warriors mounted on animals with long floppy ears. They rode up and dismounted near the spring. After watering their animals the strangers rode northward towards Little Lake.”

It appears that never before had the Natives seen Europeans and were terrified. They fled to the mountains where they remained for several days. Wortley believes that this incident may have described early Euroamerican explorers who were riding upon pack mules and left no written record of their passing. These people may have preceded the Joseph Walker party that is routinely credited as one of the earliest Euroamerican groups to travel through the area.

Patti Wermuth (1981) seems to have speculated that the Native paintings of Europeans (people with wide brimmed hats astride animals) located in two rockshelters in Indian Wells Canyon (CA-KER-735 and -736) may have been left by the Native people as a record to document this early incident (see photographs below).







