

The age and sex structure of Yreka, California in 1852 based on records from Foothill Cemetery

By Linda Freeman, Fall 2001

Early Burial Grounds in Yreka

A dozen settlements hugged the banks of Yreka Creek, the northernmost tributary of the Shasta River in far northern California, long before gold was discovered there in 1851. The houses of the Shasta Indians, who lived in these settlements, faced the river. After death, the soul of the deceased traveled towards the rising sun. The body was removed from the house through the roof or an east door cut into the side of the structure, and the body was laid to rest with its head to the east. The dead were buried in family plots or village cemeteries. If a Shasta died away from home it was common for them to be cremated so their remains could be transported back to their homeland (Renfro, 1992).

Fur trappers and traders came to the Shasta Valley in the early 1830s, followed by cattle drives, scientific expeditions, and emigrants traveling between California and Oregon. When gold was discovered in California in 1848 emigrant traffic increased, and when gold was discovered near Yreka Creek in March of 1851 the population swelled to 2,000 within six weeks (Holbrook, 1955). By 1857 there were 5,000 people in the Yreka area, which was at first called Thompson's Dry Diggings, then Shasta Butte City (Wells, 1881).

Once pioneers began to settle in Yreka in large numbers, the need for new cemeteries arose. The pioneers shared some burial practices with the Shasta; both groups created family plots as well as village cemeteries and both groups placed a focus on an eastern orientation of the body. Four cemeteries were developed in Yreka, the Siskiyou County seat, during the 1800s. Foothill Cemetery, commonly called Pioneer Cemetery, is located northeast of Yreka at the base of Butcher Hill on the south side of the Yreka Western Railroad. The first two burials were in 1855 and people continued to be buried there until 1942, with the exception of two additional burials in 1989 and 1993. The Chinese Cemetery, formed in 1877 after the Chinese were banned from Foothill Cemetery presumably due to fires resulting from their burial practices, is on the north side of the tracks just north and east of Foothill Cemetery on Highway 3 (*Yreka Journal*, August 22, 1877). Early Chinese immigrants were often temporarily interred until they could be shipped back to China for proper burial. According to the onsite plaque, 68 people are listed as buried at this site. St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery is also located at the base of Butcher Hill on the same side of the tracks as the Foothill Cemetery, but closer to town. Many of the immigrants buried in this cemetery are Irish, Italian, and Portuguese who mainly arrived after the gold rush was over. Evergreen Cemetery, the largest cemetery in Yreka, is on the west side of town, north of Greenhorn Reservoir. Evergreen Cemetery opened in 1878 and continues to be used to this day, with a new section just opening (Parker, 2001).

Foothill Cemetery is composed of three blocks in the Northeast Section and five blocks in the Southwest Section of the cemetery. The Northeast Section has a total of 38 burials in all three blocks combined and is predominantly composed of people interred from the 1850s through the 1880s with the exception of two recent burials (1989 and 1993). Six of the dated burials were in the 1850s, twelve in the 1860s, six in the 1870s, and five in the 1880s.



The gravemarker of Melvina Smith (1827-1865) in Northeast Section Block 2

Block 1 in the Southwest Section of the cemetery (the block on the northwest corner closest to the entrance) contains 31 burials. Over 74% (23 graves) have an unknown occupant and an unknown birth and death date. The remaining burials in this section all occurred in 1910 and thus are not considered in this study.



Southwest Section Block One

Block 2 of the Southwest Section only has six occupants, three of which have the same surname and share the same marker. One hundred people are buried in Block 3. Over sixty of these were buried in the 1930s. Three people were buried in the 1850s. Most of the remaining graves are unknown. Block 4 is largely composed of unknown burials. The earliest known burial in this section was in 1857 with the latest in 1908. The burials in Block 5 occurred during the 1850s-70s. The majority of the markers within the cemetery face either east or west.



The markers of Calvin and Oscar D. Witherill in Southwest Section Block 5

Methods

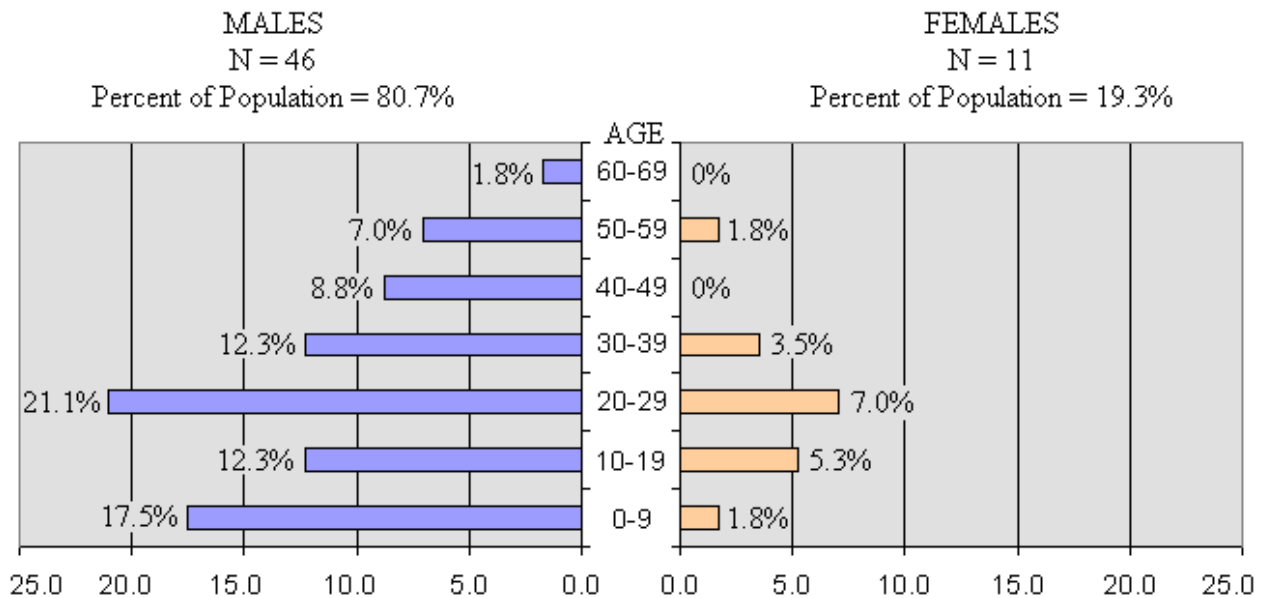
To allow a comparison between the 1852 California Census records for Siskiyou County and the cemetery data, the sample population from the cemetery must have been born on or before 1852 and died on or after 1852. There are sixty-five known burials in Foothill Cemetery that meet these requirements. The age of each individual in 1852 was determined by subtracting the year of birth from 1852. Gender was determined based on the given name. Eight people had names that utilized initials rather than given names and so it was impossible to determine their gender based on the name.

Results

The raw numbers for the cemetery data are provided in the table below. The population pyramid following the table is presented using percentages rather than raw numbers. Those of unknown gender are not included in the population pyramid.

Foothill Cemetery 1852 Sample Population			
Age Cohort	# Males	# Females	# Unknown Gender
60+	1	0	0
50-59	4	1	0
40-49	5	0	0
30-39	7	2	1
20-29	12	4	2
10-19	7	3	4
0-9	10	1	1
Total	46	11	8

Data source: Meamber (1995)



Population pyramid depicting 1852 population of Yreka, California

Data source: Meamber, 1995

Discussion

Gold rush towns are known to have a predominantly young male population. Both the census and cemetery study support this supposition. The population in Siskiyou County, according to the 1852 California Census, was made up of almost 96% males, with over half in the 20-29 year-old cohort. The cemetery data indicated that Yreka was made up of over 80% males with 21.1% falling in the 20-29 year-old cohort. Even the two youngest age cohorts had more males, indicating that some of the older males probably brought their younger brothers, sons, or nephews with them.

Several families listed in the census with children were without a mother. A total of eight babies are recorded in the 1852 Census and six of these did not have an accompanying female relative listed, indicating that their mother died in childbirth. This could account for the higher rate of females in the cemetery data. Another possible reason for a higher female population according to the cemetery study (19.3% compared with 4.2% in the 1852 Census) was that Yreka was the largest town in the county, which would presumably attract more single females as well as families. A higher female population based on the cemetery study can also be explained by how the unknown-gender individuals were categorized. If these individuals had been placed in the male category, then the male population would total 83%. Another likely explanation for the higher female population in Yreka as compared with county data was alluded to earlier; just because a person buried in the cemetery was born prior to 1852 and died after 1852, does not mean they actually lived in Yreka during the year 1852. Indeed, the highly mobile population of the period, combined with the fact that many buried in the cemetery are not listed in the 1852 Census, supports this idea. Another potential problem relating to this issue is that individuals with unusual names may have been placed in the incorrect sex category. Finally, the cemetery in question was a newly established cemetery during the gold rush and much of the data formerly present on the markers have been lost, resulting in a low sample size.

Census data ideally include all members of the population for the year the data was collected. This method provides the most accurate information about a population. The 1852 state legislature attempted to obtain a "correct and complete" census of the population, but noted the difficulties in doing so in their 1853 report (Rountree, 1935 in Meamber, 1992):

This object, however, has been but imperfectly accomplished, in consequence, in some degree, of the intrinsic difficulties of so complicated and extensive an undertaking, but mainly owing to the mixed, unsettled and fluctuating character of our population, the difficulties of thoroughly exploring our mountain counties, the hostile tribes of Indians infesting some sections, and the mistaken supposition on the part of many that the business of the Census agent was in some way connected with taxation...

A family buried in the pioneer's cemetery that was also recorded in the 1852 Census illustrates an example of an accuracy problem. Five members of the Witherill family were buried in Block 5 of the Southwest Section of the Foothill Cemetery. Information for these individuals is shown in the table below.

Name	Comments	Birth Year	Date of Death
Calvin Witherill	Native of N.Y.	1835	December 26, 1876
Lorenzo D. Witherill	Age 25	1843	June 14, 1869
Meretta Witherill (Mrs. Abel)	Dau. of Laurana Kellogg	1818	August 31, 1868
Oscar D. Witherill	Native of Michigan Brother of --	1838	October 31, 1886
Unk Witherill	Infant son of --		

Witherills buried in the Foothill Cemetery

With the exception of baby Unk, these same individuals are also recorded in the 1852 Census as follows:

Name	Sex	Occupation	Birth Location	Age
Adel Wetherill	F	miner	Vermont	37
Calvin Wetherill	M	miner	N.Y.	17
George Wetherill	M	miner	Michigan	4
L.V. Wetherill	M	miner	Michigan	9
Marietta Wetherill	F		New York	34
Oscar Wetherill	M	miner	Michigan	14

Wetherills listed in the 1852 Census as recorded in Siskiyou County

From these records we can conclude that Meretta and Abel were husband and wife, although "Adel" is listed as female in the 1852 Census. Since the family paid to have the stones carved, we can assume the spelling of the names is more accurate from this source. It is interesting to note that Calvin and Oscar had nearly identical tombstone carvings, including a rose above shaking hands, even though they were buried over ten years apart (see photographs above). Enough information was provided on the markers and in the census to clearly ascertain that this family in the Foothill Cemetery is one and the same as the family listed in the 1852 Census. Even though the census is one of the best methods of collecting information about a population, problems such as spelling errors and inaccuracies regarding sex did occur. Abel, the eldest, and George, the youngest, are not recorded as being buried in Foothill Cemetery.

After Evergreen Cemetery opened in 1878 few people were buried in Foothill Cemetery, excepting those who could not afford a plot in the newer cemetery. The original pioneer's cemetery turned into a pauper's cemetery after this time.

Conclusion

Cemetery data can be very useful in determining the population characteristics of a particular locale, especially when other resources are not available. Even though the results of this study were different from that of the 1852 Census, the several explanations provided may account for this difference. Further studies of this nature that compare cemetery data with other population statistics will better illustrate the benefits and problems of studies of this nature.

References

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