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Indigenous Women in Burton Frasher's Foto Postcard Collection

For this project, I mined the online “Frasher Foto postcard collection, 1921-1956” deposited at the Pomona Public Library in Pomona, California which consists of 5,018 of Burton Frasher’s photographic postcards. From this archive, I searched specifically for images from my community of Benton, California. Additionally, I searched more generally for photos from locations in, or near, the Owens Valley. I also include two photos from the Frasher collection located in the archive of the Nevada State Historical Society that are not included in the collection housed in Pomona. My goal is to analyze the photos of Benton, and Paiute women living there, within the framework of Frasher’s other work.

According to literature about the postcard collection, the subjects of Frasher’s photos consist primarily of landscapes with or without human mitigation, Native people, and what I call urban progress and rural decline. I argue that Frasher’s photographs of Benton Paiutes do not fit in with his other photos of Indians, but rather within the context of rural decline and landscape. Considering the progress narratives of the time, images of Native peoples would not fit into the category of urban progress because they are both a hindrance to progress as well as excluded from it. Frasher’s Indian subjects in the “Benton Dude Ranch” series are dehumanized and occupy only a peripheral location against the backdrop of rural decline. The lens through which Frasher chose his subjects was based in racist ideology that created cultural hierarchies that deemed some cultures as more valuable and evolved than others.

Burton Frasher’s treatment of Native subjects mirrors the contemporary view of Indigenous peoples and cultures. Where Natives peoples displayed visually accessible cultural practice, the People were deemed advanced and more civilized; whereas, in locals where Native cultures were seen as more simplistic, the People were decided to be less civilized and evolved. In the photographs from Benton, women and children lack agency in their circumstances. The boy on the burro is labeled as being little more than another ranch animal, and the women seen performing the labor of their gender. In both circumstances, the Indian subject becomes part of the landscape of a vanishing past, rather than individuals whose descendents are alive and well eighty years later.