

## 2016 Governor's Historic Preservation Awards

Project: **Cuyama Valley – A Corridor to the Past**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the California Division of Highways (precursor to the California Department of Transportation [Caltrans]) carried out three highway realignment projects along State Route 166 in Cuyama Valley in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties. These projects entailed large-scale earth-moving activities, including changes to the Cuyama River channel, which resulted in impacts to seven archaeological sites. Although unusual for the time, salvage archaeological work was conducted at the sites, but there were no available funds to formally catalogue, analyze, and document the resulting collections.

The collection was left untouched for 40 years when, in 2011, Dr. Valerie Levulett, Chief of the Caltrans Central Coast Environmental Specialist Branch, submitted a Caltrans Transportation Enhancement grant proposal to address the long-delayed processing of these important collections. The Enhancement grant was awarded in 2012. To adequately document the 40-year-old excavations, Far Western, assisted by Caltrans, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Foothill Resources, and Tiley Research, gathered all primary documentation on the sites, formally catalogued and analyzed the previously excavated collections (120 boxes), assembled associated paperwork (typically hand-written notes, level records, photos, etc.), prepared site maps, and analyzed and synthesized site-specific and regional data. Five technical volumes were prepared to document findings from each site as well as the archaeological, ethnographic/ethnohistoric, and historic aspects of Cuyama Valley; interpretive materials intended for a general audience were also created. All final project materials were submitted to Caltrans in December 2014.

Not only are the collected data important contributions to the prehistory of Cuyama Valley, the Cuyama project also documents the birth of modern Cultural Resources Management practices in California. When the Cuyama Valley sites were initially excavated, cultural studies, as conducted by the Division of Highways, were still in their infancy. The agency did not yet accord archaeological concerns with the full consideration given today, with the result that salvage operations were sometimes necessary ahead of imminent construction activities, but formal analyses and publication of excavation results were not included. Technical reporting of this project also delves into the complicated, and often confrontational, history of the first private cultural resources management firm in California, changing cultural laws, and the dichotomy between academic and for-profit archaeology.

A truly important component of this project was the community's involvement. As mentioned, prior to this research endeavor, the prehistory and history of Cuyama Valley was largely unknown. Part of the project funding was used to help educate the public about the project, Cuyama Valley prehistory, and the importance of this knowledge to still-present Native Americans. Compiled data in the technical volumes brought to light a wealth of significant new information about the history and lifeways of the Native people of the region. Far Western worked closely with the Northern, Barbareño, and Ventureño Chumash tribes to find intriguing and creative ways to use the data derived for educational materials and to integrate it into the oral histories that are passed down to each generation.