ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT LOS PEÑASQUITOS RANCH COMPLEX: SUMMARY OF STUDIES FOCUSSED ON SITE CHRONOLOGY AND FUNCTION

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological investigations have continued at Los Peñasquitos Ranch House since the early 1980s. The excavations provided evidence that the site has been occupied continuously for several thousand years. Historic use of the area dates from the Mission Period, and includes construction of a Mexican ranch in the 1820s. By combining information from history and archaeology, Parks and Recreation Department staff reconstructed the pattern of occupation of the site. This paper provides a summary of the results of archaeological investigations at Los Peñasquitos Ranch House relating to the early historic period.

DISCUSSION

Los Peñasquitos Ranch is located on an alluvial terrace in Los Peñasquitos Canyon, which is managed jointly by the County and City of San Diego as an open space preserve (Figure 1). An integral part of the Master Plan for the preserve is the conservation and interpretation of cultural resources located within Los Peñasquitos and Lopez Canyons. The restoration of the main adobe structure has been completed, and the San Diego County Parks and Recreation Department is working on restoration plans for the several outbuildings. These include a Victorian redwood poultry house, a stone spring house, and an adobe barn (Figure 2).

In addition to the historic and prehistoric components at the adobe complex (SDI-8125 and SDI-5220), many other cultural resources are located within Los Peñasquitos Canyon. Sixty-eight historic and prehistoric archaeological sites have been recorded in the canyon (Fink and Corum 1983; Schaefer and Elling 1987). These resources range from low density lithic artifact scatters to the extensive Los Peñasquitos Ranch historic and prehistoric occupation complex.

Besides the excavations at Los Peñasquitos Ranch House, other sites have been investigated by archaeologists. El Cuervo Adobe (formerly called the Ruiz-Alvarado Adobe) was the focus of a San Diego State University field class (Kidder 1986). Site SDI-1087, located on County property at the end of Lopez Ridge, was excavated by Hector (1987). Radiocarbon dating from that site indicated an occupation dating to 7300 ± 120 years before the present.

Archaeological research at Los Peñasquitos Ranch began in the fall of 1983, and continues to the present time. In 1983, the County Parks and Recreation Department executed a contract with RECON to conduct exploratory excavations inside the northern wing of the adobe and at a prehistoric site on the knoll behind the ranch house (Hector 1984a). Until the 1987 San Diego State University field class, all subsequent excavations were directed toward mitigating any potential impacts that could occur as a result of the restoration of the ranch.

Although Los Peñasquitos Ranch House has received the most attention, there are

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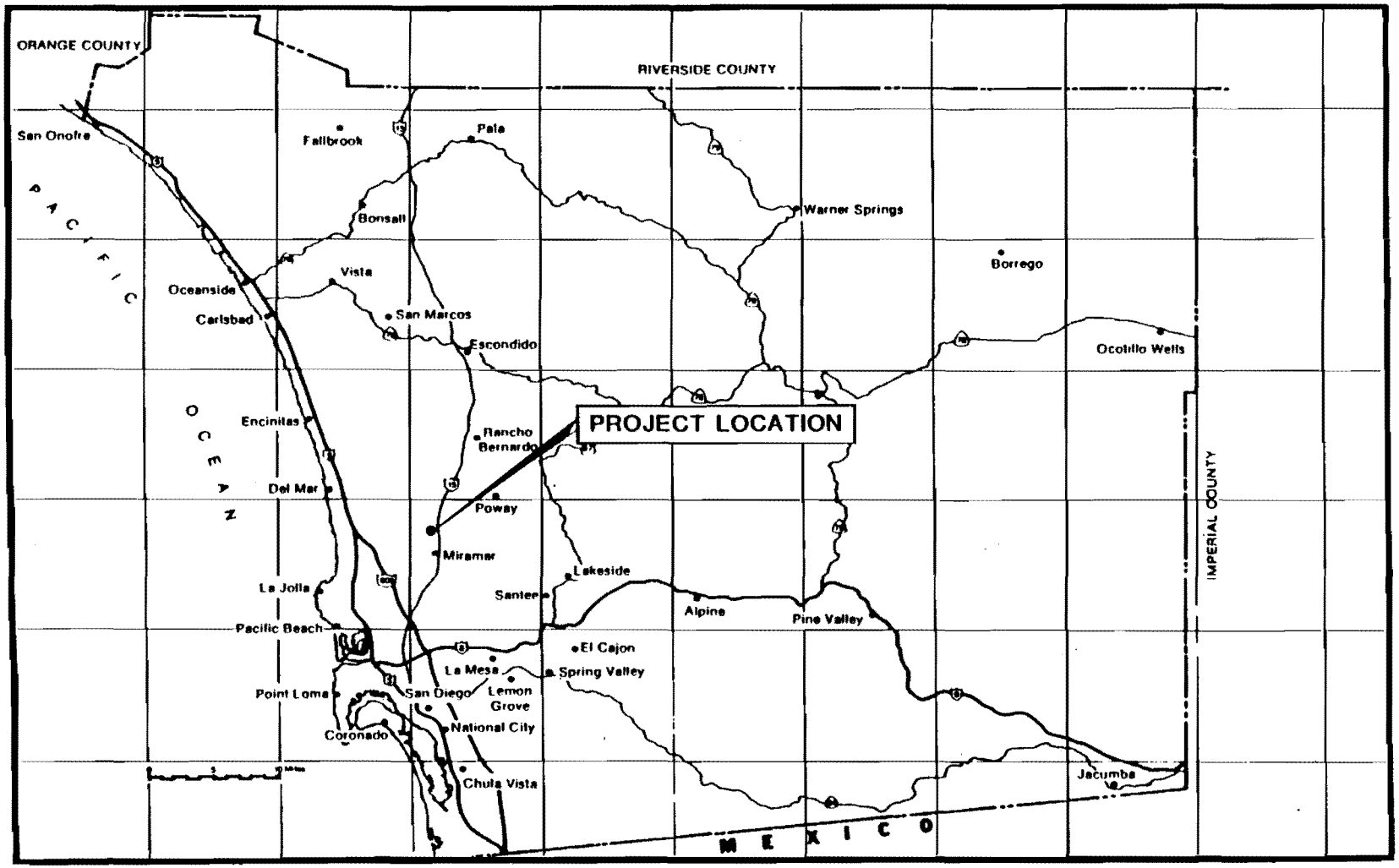

Figure 1. Location of Los Peñasquitos Ranch House.

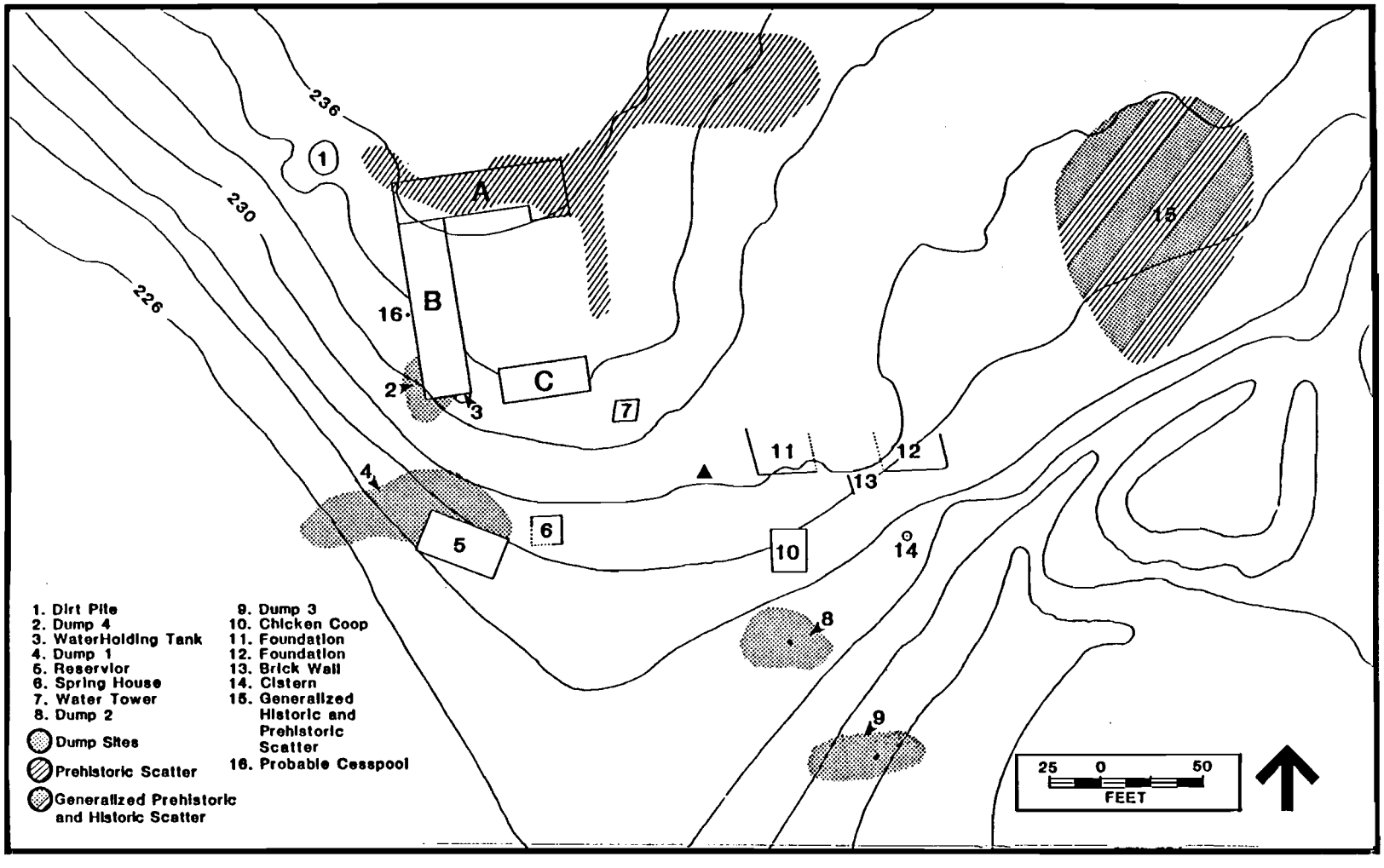

Figure 2. Ranch house buildings and features.

3 related adobe complexes in Los Peñasquitos Canyon. The ruins of El Cuervo Adobe are located at the western end of the canyon. Although this structure was thought to have been the original Los Peñasquitos Adobe constructed by Captain Francisco Maria Ruiz in 1824, recent evidence indicates that it was probably built later, in the 1830s. The archaeological evidence will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs of this paper; the author and County Historian Mary Ward are writing a comprehensive archaeological and historical report on the Mexican occupation of Los Peñasquitos Ranch House. Los Peñasquitos Adobe is located upstream from El Cuervo, and the Mohnike Adobe was built at the upper end of the canyon. Charles Mohnike built the Mohnike Adobe around 1910; at that time, he owned Los Peñasquitos Ranch, and rebuilt the ranch house after a portion of it was destroyed by fire in 1912.

Based on a research design prepared to assist the County in planning future interpretive and restoration projects at Los Peñasquitos (Hector 1984b), studies have focused on determining changes in the use and function of the adobe area through time. Occupation at the ranch house area began several thousand years ago; a radiocarbon date obtained from an excavation unit located outside the eastern wing of the adobe yielded a date of 5500 years B.P.

In 1862, George Johnson and his wife Estefana were given title to Rancho de los Peñasquitos; Estefana was an Alvarado. The Alvarados inherited the grant from Comandante Ruiz, and probably built El Cuervo Adobe at the mouth of Peñasquitos Canyon. Johnson and his family lived at the ranch until around 1885, when he sold the property to J.S. Taylor. Taylor remodelled portions of the ranch house and promoted it as a resort. In 1912, the ranch house burned; it was rebuilt and used as a bunkhouse until around 1940, when a modern kitchen and bathrooms were added.

Mary Ward has been researching the history of Los Peñasquitos Canyon for many years, and published her original research in 1984 (Ward 1984). Historical documentation discovered by Ward indicated that a structure existed at the ranch before 1860. This research prompted archaeological excavations in 1983-84 within the 1860s structure to find an earlier building.

Foundation Research

The main part of the ranch house is divided into 3 parts, each representing a wing of the building. The A Wing is the northernmost building, and consists of an adobe section flanked by wooden additions. Wing B is the largest building, and is on the western side of the ranch house complex. Wing C is a small adobe structure that is not at present connected to the other 2 wings. Each of the 3 wings of the ranch house is built on foundations that are diagnostic of its period of construction. Wing A, the earliest building, has foundations representing at least 3 periods. The earliest foundation, dating from the 1820s-1830s, consists of 2 rows of large cobbles extending all the way across the approximate center of Wing A. The area between the 2 rows is filled with rubble and soil. The foundation was found to be thicker on the south side, consisting of 3 parallel rows of cobbles; the westernmost row was composed of very small cobbles. A foundation of this size supported an exterior wall; when this wall was knocked down, the adobe blocks at the corner were sheared off, and an eastern extension wall was built abutting the original wall. This second foundation was the base for Johnson's 1862 expansion of the earliest building.

The finding of a foundation from a former exterior wall indicated that the eastern half of Wing A had been outside a smaller building at one time. With this hypothesis, excavation was continued on both ends of A Wing during 1983 and 1984.

Adobe structures can be relatively dated by the morphology of their foundations. Garrison (1990) observed that there were 3 separate adobe foundation systems used in the American Southwest between 1848 and 1948. For California, there is 1 additional system, dating to approximately the same period as Garrison's earliest system. From the earliest historic period to approximately 1881, adobes were built using either the Indigenous System (Garrison 1990:53) or the

Cobble System. The Indigenous System consists simply of the excavation of a trench and the successive layering of adobe blocks. The wall begins below the surface, and continues to its ultimate height. Garrison (1990:53) states that this was the method used by the Southwest's native population.

In California, this method is relatively rare, although several examples exist in the southern part of the state. Most adobe structures are built on piles, single rows, or double rows of cobble foundations. As with the Indigenous System, a trench is excavated. The trench is then filled with layers or piles of cobbles, which are then levelled off just below ground surface to serve as a platform for the construction of the adobe wall. The Cobble System is found in southern California adobe buildings dating from Spanish times to the middle of the 19th century (generally before 1850). For example, this system was noted and studied at the Chapel of the Royal Presidio of Santa Barbara (Bente et al. 1982). May et al. (1982) described the massive double-row cobble foundations at Fort Guijarros, in San Diego. Mexican period sites exhibiting this system include Wing A of Los Peñasquitos Ranch House (Hector and Van Wormer 1986), site SDM-W-1439A in San Diego (Hector 1984c), the Santa Gertrudis Chapel in Ventura County (Greenwood and Browne 1968), the Bandini-Cota Adobe in Riverside County (Greenwood et al. 1983), and the Ortega Vigare Adobe in San Gabriel (Marshall 1982). The construction of the Ricardo Vejar Adobe in San Gabriel (King 1984) was a variation on the same theme. At this adobe, a base of brea or tar was poured into a prepared trench. Angular pieces of siltstone were then placed within the trench; several courses were used. At the Ontiveros Adobe in Santa Fe Springs, archaeologists found yet another variation (Bente 1980; Frierman 1982). The foundations of the adobe were constructed by filling the excavated trenches with courses of sandstone, mud, and cobbles.

In contrast, the Rancho Guajome Adobe (located in Guajome Regional Park, northern San Diego County), begun in 1852 after most of the adobes mentioned above (Ward and Engstrand 1991), was built using the Indigenous System (Hector 1992). When used on top of stable soils, this system provided a strong foundation. However, as noted by Garrison (1990:53), this system readily absorbs water from the soil. Since the adobe walls extend uninterrupted into the soils, they carry any moisture present into the building. A common type of deterioration seen in walls built using this system is failure at the base (Garrison 1990:55), which is prevalent at the Guajome Adobe. Attempts to remedy this problem only serve to worsen it. Cave Couts, Jr., the owner and son of the builder of the adobe, tried to stop the wall failure by facing the exterior of the walls with concrete and stucco in the 1920s. As Garrison (1990:55) notes, this only exacerbates the situation by forcing the rising damp even higher up the walls. The facing of walls with an impervious substance that does not extend all the way through the wall results in the base failure moving to the interface between the impervious substance and the adobe. This can be seen at Guajome Adobe on the interior of the courtyard, along the eastern walls.

The construction of the Guajome Adobe using the Indigenous System, common in the Southwest but only noted occasionally in California, may have several interpretations. State Parks archaeologists have noted that buildings from the 1850s in Old Town San Diego did not have foundations (Glenn Farris and Larry Felton, personal communications, 1992). This method has been attributed to the absence of skilled labor. Felton (personal communication, 1992) has suggested that, as of the 1850s, there was a loss of knowledge in southern California concerning the construction of adobe buildings. It is possible that Couts, Sr., who served as his own architect when he built his family home, did not have access to traditional information about adobe building construction. Another explanation may be that after digging the trenches for the buildings, Couts, Sr., noted that the soil was decomposed granite. In a dry year, this would have appeared solid and stable. Therefore, he may have simply began the walls at the bottom of the trenches, believing that the cobble layers would not provide additional stability.

The issue of establishing structure chronologies based on foundation construction has validity, but more information will be necessary before these can be verified. In general, for southern California, cobble foundations date from the earliest period to the end of the 1840s. Then, adobes lose their foundations, and are either built directly on the ground or on trenches using only adobe blocks. Later methods (post 1880) include foundations of fieldstone and concrete.

Following the early construction of Wing A on the old Mexican building, the next phase was a major building period at the ranch. Analysis of adobe blocks from both ends of Wing A indicated that the blocks were made at different times (West 1989). From ca. 1865 to the fire in 1912, Wings B and C were added. Interestingly, Wing B was built on mortared fieldstone, typical of adobes constructed during the 1870s-1880s. As stated above, Johnson's additions to Wing A, accomplished after 1862, were continued in the Mexican style common to an earlier period. Wing B is set on a mortared stone foundation; it is on a slope that required a foundation of up to 5 feet in height at the southern end.

The third building phase at Wing A is also found at the eastern half of Wing C. These structures represent an early 20th century adobe construction method using concrete blocks or slabs. The eastern portion of Wing A is lath and plaster on concrete blocks. Although the western half of Wing C is a thick-walled adobe structure, the eastern half is thin-walled and has a concrete slab floor. No archaeological excavations within Wing C were required during the restoration of that building because the floor did not need to be disturbed; therefore, nothing is known about the foundation of the older, western half of the building. However, Lynne Christenson's San Diego State University field class conducted an excavation around the exterior of the building and her results support a contention that Wing C did not always have its present appearance (Christenson 1992).

Other important evidence for the existence of an earlier building at the site was found by studying the compacted earth in Wing A. The western half of the main room had a compacted earthen floor that exhibited a complex structure. Dirt floors in rural Mexico are maintained by a daily sweeping, augmented by a scattering of water to settle the dust. Eventually a hard surface results, similar to a heavily used dirt road. Through time, a series of thin layers are formed; these are composed of silt, ash, dust, and whitewash. Layered surfaces of this type up to 10 cm thick were found in the western portion of the main room in Wing A.

There are 2 other parts of Wing A with adobe walls. One is the eastern half, which was mentioned above; this is where a large ceramic vessel was found (the olive jar, described in detail below). The other area is a small room west of the large room. In both this west room and in the eastern half of the main room compacted surfaces were found, but they did not exhibit the layering of the western half of the main room. The compacted surface was simply hardened dirt with no internal structure. These areas were exterior ramadas; they were covered over by subsequent construction phases at the site (Hector 1991).

Remains found in the eastern half of the main room supported the hypothesis that this was an outdoor activity area. Early bottle and ceramic fragments were found, as well as cow bone butchered in the Mexican style. In addition, a cement and cobble trough feature was discovered. This shallow, rectangular feature was probably used to hold water for washing; it was set into the ground, constructed in place, and contained a piece of painted wood with square nails that may have been a cover. This artifact, referred to as a lavanderia, was removed and stabilized and will be used in a future interpretive exhibit that will describe the Mexican ramada kitchen.

Olive Jar Research

In 1983, a large earthenware ceramic vessel was found just below the surface in the eastern portion of Wing A (Figure 3). It was buried right side up just below the surface of the ground, and contained only sterile soil, although it was embedded within the archaeological midden that is below the

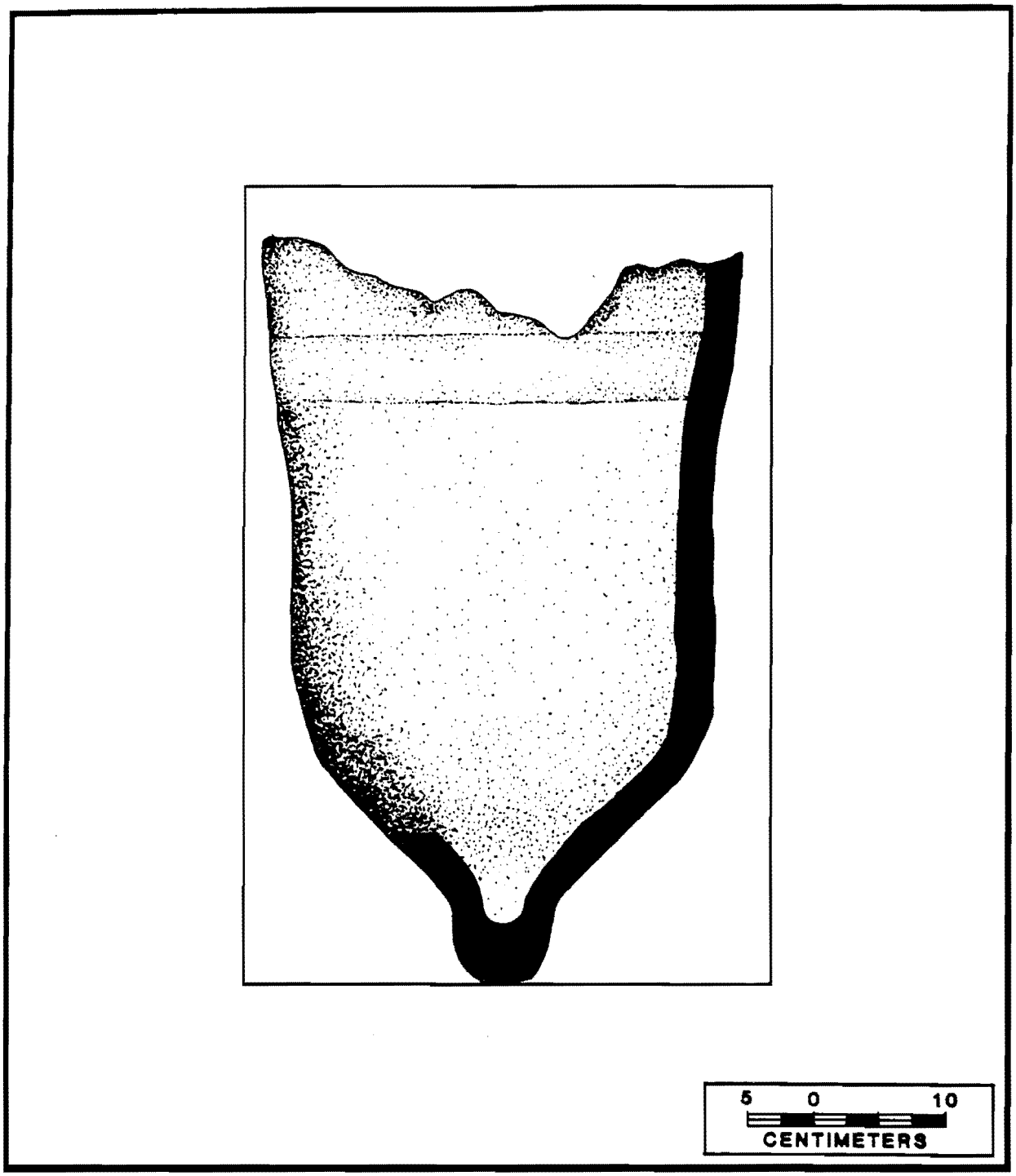

Figure 3. Olive jar recovered from Los Peñasquitos Ranch House.

historic stratum. This vessel measures approximately 60 cm in length and 40 cm in diameter in its widest area. The walls at present are 1.5 cm thick, and it was thrown on a wheel. Besides its size, the amphora-like shape is of interest. Vessels of this form, known as olive jars or tinajas, were used throughout Europe and the Mediterranean for shipping and storing oils, wines, and other foods. Many vessels of this form have been found in shipwrecks off the coast of southern Europe, and were also used in rubble filler in cathedrals and other large constructions (Lister and Lister 1981).

Since the 1983 excavation, additional research by the author has been conducted on this fascinating artifact. Evidence indicates that this type of artifact, while uncommon on the west coast, occurs in Florida in sites dating to the late 1700s (Deagan 1987), although the example from Los Peñasquitos is larger than the Florida specimens. Examples similar to the specimen at Los Peñasquitos were found at Mount Vernon, and at British Colonial sites (Noel Hume 1991:144). Correspondence with other historical archaeologists has provided more information about the Los Peñasquitos olive jar. An olive jar almost identical to the Los Peñasquitos example, and including a broken-off neck and rim, was found off the shore of western Canada. This jar was dated by thermoluminescence at over 200 years of age (James 1988).

Additional research on the Queen Charlotte Islands jar, which was found off the coast of British Columbia in 1987, is in progress. This jar is nearly identical to the jar found at Los Peñasquitos (Williams et al. 1991).

Noel Hume (1991:143-144) described the presence of these "carrot-shaped" vessels at Colonial sites, and noted that they were used into the 1960s in the West Indies as water containers. He estimated that the vessels date between 1745 and 1780, and were made in Spain or Portugal.

One of the things about the olive jar that has always been puzzling was how such a large item, made on a wheel in a large industrial center (a large, specialized kiln was required to fire such an object) could have ended up in what was originally believed to be a shepherd's shack or a caretaker's residence. The olive jars were extensively reused and resold after their original shipped contents were removed; the new uses were to hold water or other material (McEwan 1992:104-105). The construction of the adobe by Ruiz explains the presence of the olive jar. Ruiz would have had access to such an unusual item, since he had extensive maritime and military connections. It is reasonable to assume that the olive jar was buried in the floor of the ramada kitchen as a storage vessel, and, although the reuse of olive jars for storage was common in the Spanish colonies, was a speciality item in San Diego available only to those with connections.

Summary of Early Period Occupation

Recent research by Mary Ward and the author, as well as a series of valuable discussions with Lee Bibb, Alexa Luberski, and a number of historians, has resulted in a reinterpretation of the Mexican period occupation at Los Peñasquitos. This included a reconsideration of artifacts recovered during the excavations, with a less conservative perspective. The following evidence exists for occupation at the adobe dating to the 1820s:

1. Glass beads recovered from Wing A (consisting of large, translucent copper blue cane beads, large barrel-shaped translucent cobalt blue cane beads, one disc-shaped translucent cobalt blue wire bead, and oblate spheroid translucent green cane beads) were introduced to coastal southern California between 1785 and 1816 (Gibson 1976:122). These beads were from ladies' garments. It is unlikely that a ranch hand, shepherd or caretaker would have a variety of beaded ladies' garments in his home.

2. Tumacacori polychrome majolica was found in Wing A; this type of pottery was produced in Mexico between 1820 and 1860 (Barnes and May 1982).

3. Blown Three Molded glassware was found in Wing A. This type of glassware was produced in the United States between 1820 and 1840 (McKearin and McKearin 1941).

4. Shell-edged pearlware was found in Wing A (Price 1986); this decoration was distributed between 1780 and 1830 (Savage and Newman 1974:262). Pearlware ceramics had significantly declined in popularity by 1820 (Noel Hume 1991:129-130).

5. Creamware was found in Wing A (Price 1986). This undecorated fragment was of a type introduced in the 1740s and replaced in popularity by pearlware by the early 1800s (Godden 1975; Noel Hume 1991:123-126).

6. The lavanderia excavated within Wing A in the ramada kitchen is similar to one noted in the De la Guerra garden in Santa Barbara; the De la Guerra site dates to 1787. This type of wash basin is closely associated with Mexican-period residences.

7. The olive jar located within Wing A in the ramada kitchen has been dated to the late 1700s (Deagan 1987; Noel Hume 1991).

8. The Native American pottery was produced locally (Wade 1986) and found within Wing A, in the historic deposits, and also on nearby site SDI-5220. In addition, projectile points and flaked tools were found made from ceramics and glass. An analysis of the Native American ceramics (Wade 1986) indicated that the same type of pottery was present in both the Mexican-period historic deposit in Wing A and at SDI-5220. Native Americans brought from another area could have been living at SDI-5220 and working for Ruiz as caretakers. A relatively large number of workers would have been required to tend the orchard and vineyard that have been identified historically from Mission correspondence as present on the Los Peñasquitos site during the early 1800s. These indigenous people also made household pottery for use in the ramada kitchen; this may explain the relative scarcity of European ceramics. A previous suggestion for the establishment and occupation of the small Mexican-period adobe was that Ruiz or Alvarado had a caretaker or shepherd living on that end of the rancho. It is unlikely, however, that an employee of Ruiz would have had a Native American workers' village nearby to support his activities; Ruiz would have had the social, political, and financial resources necessary for such an arrangement.

9. Finally, a comparison of the foundation type present at Los Peñasquitos supports the contention that the structure dates to the early 1800s. Spanish and Mexican adobes in California, dated to circa 1820, typically are built on foundations of cobbles or rubble; a few examples are the Chapel of the Royal Presidio in Santa Barbara, the Presidio and Fort Guijarros in San Diego, the Santa Gertrudis Chapel in Ventura, the Bandini-Cota Adobe in Riverside, and the Ortega-Vigare Adobe in San Gabriel.

It is more likely that someone of Ruiz's stature and connections had access to up-to-date items rather than much older artifacts. With his connections to San Diego and other parts of California, his ranch could have obtained a variety of "modern" and trade items. It would be expected that his ranch would contain a mixture of items available from ships at that time, as well as traditional and Native American items. This expectation appears to be supported by the archaeological finds made to date.

Research on this topic is continuing. The San Diego County Parks and Recreation Department has requested grant funding to pursue additional historical research. Lynne Christenson is reexamining the materials from El Cuervo Adobe, since the earlier San Diego State University work did not produce a complete artifact analysis. Steve Buscaren from San Diego City College is excavating SDI-5220, the site located near the adobe where the author proposes Ruiz's Native American workers lived. Los Peñasquitos Canyon is an exciting place for historians and archaeologists interested in early California and contact period settlements.

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