

# TALKING TRASH: A LOOK AT 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SITES IN THE COACHELLA VALLEY, RIVERSIDE COUNTY

JAMES BROCK, WILLIAM A. SAWYER, AND BRENDA D. SMITH-PATTEN

*Because of the comparatively late Euro-American settlement of the low desert's Coachella Valley, the great majority of its historical archaeological sites date to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper presents research on three 20<sup>th</sup> century sites and evaluates the potential of historical archaeology in the valley. Consideration is given to types of sites present, environmental factors, and the ability of the resources to address meaningful research questions.*

Environmental factors play a huge role in archaeology. In Riverside County's Coachella Valley the former presence of Ancient Lake Cahuilla has always been a major influence on the direction of archaeological studies of the precontact period, with a focus on the rich and abundant, or formerly abundant, shoreline sites. Historical archaeology in the area has always taken a backseat to the study of these sites, primarily because of the late date of historical use of the area. Very few historical archaeological sites from pre-1900 are known. Nonetheless, time marches on and development projects gobble up land at a rapid pace. CRM archaeologists are increasingly confronted with 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeological deposits that have traditionally been written off as being too late in time to be of interest or research value.

We will attempt here to outline the types of 20<sup>th</sup> century sites present in the valley, and how the former presence of Ancient Lake Cahuilla influences research on these sites as much as, or even more than, on the precontact Native American sites.

## TYPES OF SITES PRESENT

The types of historic-period archaeological sites present in the Coachella Valley do not vary much from similarly dating sites in other areas, particularly desert areas. We do not have quantitative information on the frequencies of these site types, and what we discuss here is based on our own research. It seems clear that the most frequent site type is the isolated surface refuse dumping deposit characterized by plentiful cans and to a lesser degree glass, ceramic, and other material categories. It is generally impossible to determine who was responsible for the creation of these deposits.

Another type of site, in our experience much less common, would be a habitation area, such as a homestead or work camp, with an associated refuse deposit. This could have a surface or buried refuse deposit, along with possible foundation remains, a well, and perhaps a privy. While the participants in the site occupation can generally be identified, well-preserved examples of this type of site are not as common as one might expect. We occasionally find homestead sites but are unable to identify associated artifact deposits.

A further type of site, which is rare, is the buried communal dump site. These would be considered early versions of land fills. We have been involved with only one such site, which we will discuss, and are unaware of other recorded examples in the valley. With such sites you can determine the character of neighborhoods but cannot identify the individual participants. The principles of "garbology" are usefully applied to such sites (see Rathje and Murphy 1992).

Other types of 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeological sites are present in the Coachella Valley, such as industrial sites, roads, canals, and utility features, but our concern here is with artifact-bearing sites.

## ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

The ability of sites to address research questions often depends on the quality of the deposit under consideration. Well-preserved sites are generally regarded as having greater research potential. One thing that has come to light in our investigation of historic-period sites in the Coachella Valley is that this valley contains the "black hole" of artifact preservation: the Salton Sink. Our working hypothesis is that the lower the elevation of a site, the worse the preservation. Dry lake beds can be hugely saline and alkaline. This results in the degradation of almost all artifact and ecofact materials in time. Catherine Sease (1987:2) has noted that saline soils result in poor preservation for some metals (particularly iron and copper alloys), organic material (bone, shell, etc.), and even glass, glazes, ceramics, and stone. Alkaline soils are not quite as destructive but will degrade lead, softer organics (leather, wood, cotton), glass, glazes, and ceramics (Sease 1987:2).

To deal with natural preservation issues in the valley we have devised three simple zones based on elevations pertaining to Ancient Lake Cahuilla (Figure 1). Zone A, where we expect the best preservation, is land that rests above the maximum shoreline of the ancient lake, which was 42 feet above modern sea level. Zone B, where preservation is expected to be moderately good, is the area between modern sea level and Zone A. Presumably, the salinity levels should be lower here, because the zone was flooded with fresh water. Zone C, the region of poor preservation, includes all areas below sea level, which includes extensive

areas subjected to salinity buildup and alkalization. Human threats to site preservation also need to be taken into account but are beyond the scope of this paper.

**EXAMPLES**

Table 1 presents data on three 20<sup>th</sup> century sites in the Coachella Valley. Each falls into a different zone and has distinctive characteristics.

**CA-RIV-7959H**

The first site we consider here is CA-RIV-7959H (Brock 2006). This is a classic, well-preserved, surface dump comprising mostly cans. It was located during a Phase I survey and is located in Sky Valley at the northern end of the Coachella Valley, on an alluvial deposit at an elevation of 1,360 feet above mean sea level (amsl). This places it clearly within Zone A, where we expect good preservation. The slightly acidic, non-saline soil has resulted in excellent preservation of artifacts. Many of the 350+ cans present still retain their labels (Figure 2). Identifiable products include Sunkist Lemon Juice, Country Club Malt Liquor, Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom Soup and Beef Consume, Lucky Beer, and Brew 102 Beer. Among other items are 20+ Copenhagen snuff lids. Bottles and jars present make the deposit tightly dateable to 1957-1958. The site includes five loci which indicate multiple dumping episodes.

The site is interpreted as a 1957-1958-era refuse deposit created by part-time residents, or simply one resident, of the area. Bureau of Land Management records indicate that there were three late-1950s 5-acre “jackrabbit” homesteads immediately adjacent to the site. Given the consistency of the materials in the deposit, probably only one of the homesteads was responsible for the creation of the dump. Two of the three homesteads were granted to women. One was made to a man, Lawrence W. Hill, on April 13, 1956 (BLM Serial No. CALA 0083393). The refuse indicates activities traditionally associated with men—beer drinking and tobacco chewing. Perhaps the most likely suspect for the creation of the dump would be Mr. Hill. Excellent preservation has resulted in a good understanding of the site with only a surface reconnaissance.

**CA-RIV-6782H**

Site CA-RIV-6782H, in Indio, presents quite a different scenario (Brock and Sawyer 2006). This was an informal neighborhood dump, located at the southern end of Clinton Street in downtown Indio, that was active from the 1930s to the early 1940s. It apparently represents the infilling of a natural gully with subsequent soil capping. It was used for agricultural purposes for more than 50 years after the deposition of the materials. The City of Indio and the County of Riverside claim to have no record of this early landfill-type dump.

The top of the deposit is at an elevation of approximately 20 feet above sea level, but it has a depth of up to 15 feet. This would put it

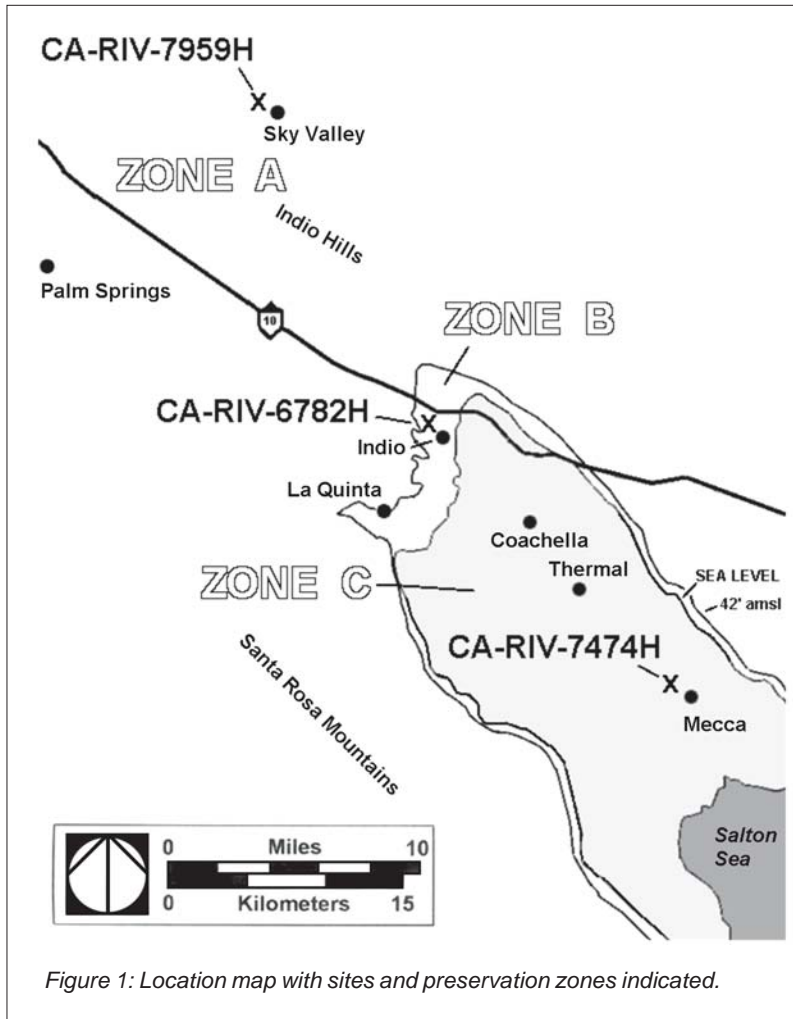


Figure 1: Location map with sites and preservation zones indicated.

Table 1: Data for the three sites discussed in the text. Salinity has been measured using electrical conductivity (EC). The readings are in micro-seimens (µS); the higher the reading, the more saline the soil.

Site	Location	Zone	Elevation (ft)	Soil? pH	EC (µS)
CA-RIV-7959H	Sky Valley	A	1360	6.6	95.3
CA-RIV-6782H	Indio	B	20'	8.1	360
CA-RIV-7474H	Mecca	C	-180	8.2	>1000



Figure 2: Examples of can preservation at CA-RIV-7959H.

within our preservation Zone B, where we would expect moderate deterioration of materials. Table 1 indicates moderate alkalinity and salinity. The site covers perhaps five acres, but the northern portion is paved over and yet to be defined. We had the opportunity to sample the deposit when the southern tip, comprising perhaps ten percent of the site, was removed because of compaction concerns pertaining to a housing development.

We found that many of the concepts of “garbology,” as developed by the University of Arizona’s Garbage Project, are applicable to this site (see Rathje and Murphy 1992). One problem encountered by the Garbage Project was how to sample landfills. They solved this by utilizing truck-mounted augers. We simply used excavator bucket samples in areas of dense domestic deposits, taking two quantitative samples, while collecting occasional diagnostic artifacts. The site included large items, such as palm tree trunks and major car parts, that we noted but were not capable of collecting.

Preservation on the site was good for glass and ceramic artifacts. Metals were deteriorated. For instance, large-enough portions of can rim fragments remained to allow for the determination of can diameters and consequently a guess at the can sizes. The most frequent diameters were in the 3-1/2 and 4-inch range, indicating the use of Number 2 and Number 2-1/2 size cans. Advertisements in Indio’s early *Date Palm* newspaper indicate Number 2 cans enclosed such products as peas, corn, and figs, while Number 2-1/2 cans contained things like peaches and “chili tomatoes.” Other metal items included such things as enameled table wares, smaller auto parts, and a large number of wire? nails—probably indicating the burning of scrap wood. There were still many unidentifiable rusty metal fragments.

The ceramics from the dump were typically semi-vitreous wares common in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with a couple of

examples of California Colored Dinner Ware. Of five backstamps, three were “Made in Japan” ware and two were American. There was one complete Chinese brown-glazed stoneware spouted jug (i.e., “soy sauce” bottle).

Glass artifacts produced the best information about the site. These comprised mainly bottles and jars, along with some glassware items. A number of bottles, particularly sodas and beer, exhibited Applied Color Labeling, also known as pyroglazing. Alkaline and saline subsurface conditions contributed to the degeneration of these labels and caused most to deteriorate rapidly once collected and exposed to air and sunlight. This was not anticipated, and the problem was partially solved by photographing the specimens immediately upon recovery.

As might be expected, the bottles and jars were filled with such things as liquor, wine, soda, beer, culinary products, condiments, household cleaners, milk/cream, toiletry/personal products, and medicines.

The glass artifacts were the most reliable indicators of the depositional period of the site, particularly 25 Owens-Illinois Glass Company marks that specified exact year of manufacture as well as plant number and serial number.

Some assumptions regarding socio-economic status can be made from the glass collection. Some evidence may point to lower income status such as the presence of small, half-pint milk bottles rather than larger sizes. In addition, large quantities of half-pint or pint-sized liquor bottles rather than larger bottles may also indicate the inability of the buyer to purchase larger-volume items. The low quality of the ceramics might also point to lower income, along with the faunal remains recovered. Dr. Thomas Wake at the UCLA Zooarchaeology Laboratory noted that all of the identified bone specimens represented

either cow or pig (Wake 2006). The cuts of meat represented, cross-arm and leg cuts, short ribs, distal metapodials, and pigs' feet, are all relatively inexpensive, suggesting the site users had limited purchasing power. The absence of smaller species in the faunal assemblage could relate to preservation issues in the saline environment.

Given the Depression-era context of the deposit, in a community of small-scale farmers, merchants, and laborers, the lower income socio-economic indicators make sense. In terms of exchange patterns there is evidence of extensive, complex, national and international trade. In terms of ethnicity, the dominant group in Indio at the time was Euro-American. The recovered artifacts are consistent with this, with the exception of the Chinese "soy sauce" bottle, which could represent the small Chinese population in Indio at the time.

#### CA-RIV-7474H

CA-RIV-7474H is located on the Zone C salt flat that surrounds the town of Mecca at an elevation of 180 feet *below* sea level (Brock 2005). This was a small, partially buried refuse scatter located in a mesquite thicket near the Cabazon Indian Reservation and the former Southern Pacific Railroad tracks. Our research design focused on determining if the site was an occupation site and whether there was any indication of ethnicity and household composition, among other topics. This was wishful thinking. The site may have had difficulty in addressing our research questions if it had been in pristine condition, but artifact decay resulted in an almost meaningless deposit. Table 1 indicates the high salinity and alkalinity of the site. Presumably a major component of this site had been cans. All that remained of these were small, undiagnostic rim fragments, and small, flat, rusted steel fragments. Apparently there had been some larger steel items, perhaps bed or furniture frames, that were buried near the surface. These came out of the three units dug as simply rusted metallic chunks. Interestingly, there were no faunal remains. This is probably also attributable to the salinity of the site. Even fragments of vitreous pottery exhibited deterioration of their glazes.

The lack of tightly datable glass and ceramic artifacts lead to an attempt to date the site through embossed milk-bottle fragments that were present, leading to a minor investigation of the less-than-successful early dairy industry in the valley. Fortunately the dairies represented were only active in the 1920s and early 1930s, so at least the date range could be determined. CA-RIV-7474H is a site that was well on its way to disappearing long before a migrant-farmworker? mobile home park was proposed for the property.

#### CONCLUSIONS

We have seen here different types of 20<sup>th</sup> century sites in the Coachella Valley with different levels of preservation pertaining to salinity and alkalinity levels caused by the former presence of Ancient Lake Cahuilla, along with other factors. We have seen a well-preserved site, CA-RIV-7959H in Sky Valley, that has little research potential left.

In contrast, CA-RIV-7474H, in Mecca, may have had research potential initially, but environmental factors have essentially ruined the site.

While it is difficult to argue for the significance of any 20<sup>th</sup> century refuse deposit, we feel that one of the three sites discussed perhaps qualifies. This is CA-RIV-6782H in Indio. It is the only large, buried community dump from the 1930s and early 1940s that has been recorded in the valley. Despite some deterioration from being in a saline/alkaline soil, its preservation is generally good and there has been a lack of human disturbance. It can address a wide spectrum of research questions and its value should only increase through time.

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