

CHASING ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE NARRATIVE: THE CASE OF CA-TEH-74/H

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Preservation of archaeological resources hinges on the production of complete and thorough records. It was not until recently, however, with the advent of GIS, standardized recording, and strict procedural guidance that our system of record keeping became reliable. An example of this is CA-TEH-74/H, which was initially recorded in 1954. In the intervening years between the initial recording and the present day, much of the site information has been obscured or forgotten. The current investigation depends on local anecdotes, record searches, and a bit of sleuthing to uncover the past of TEH-74/H in order to better understand its present condition and determine its future status.

Preservation of archaeological resources hinges on the production of complete and thorough records. It is through these records that the composition and significance of archaeological sites is protected for perpetuity. It was not until recently, however, with the advent of GIS, standardized recording, and strict procedural guidance that our system of record keeping became reliable. As a result, many earlier recorded sites have records that are underdeveloped, creating complex challenges for tracing site narrative, such as location, composition, and previous archaeological work. In turn, this makes it difficult to develop a management and curation plan for historically recorded sites. These issues have been the topic of discussion in California archaeology for many years and continue to pose problems (Allan 1998; Dallas 2013; Fredrickson 1996, 2004; Moratto 1984).

In the case of TEH-74/H, the site was initially recorded in 1954 under the auspices of the University of California Archaeological Survey, but had little in the way of documentation. Even at the time of recording, there was speculation concerning previous excavation on the site by a Dr. Stuart C. Way during the 1930s. Additional recordings of the site had not much else to add in the way of description, other than to indicate the presence of a large prehistoric occupation site and cemetery and to provide ever more contradictory, indefinite information. By the time the site was recorded using modern methods and technology, much of the early site information had been obscured or forgotten. By the time this most recent investigation began, it seemed too late; the site was seen as having little to no integrity (Brown 2011).

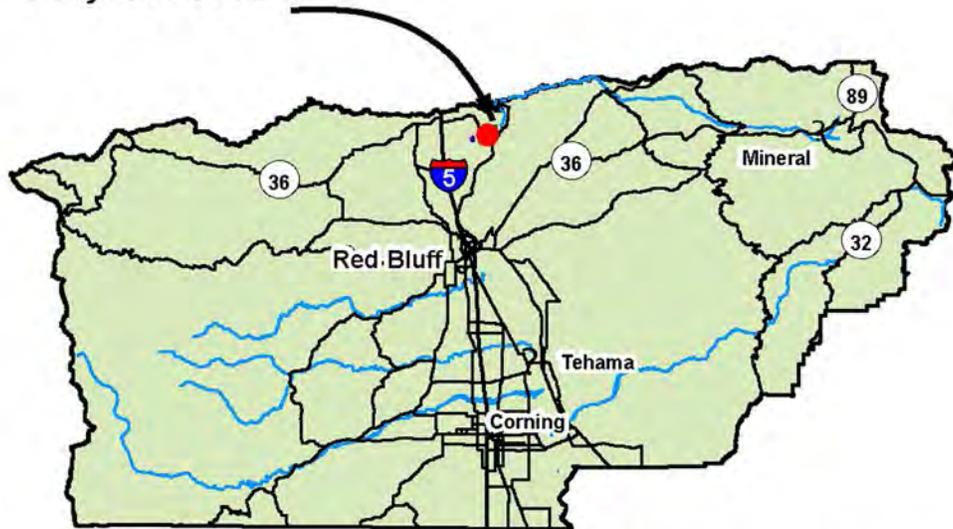
However, in October 2014, significant, intact cultural deposits at this site were exposed and irrevocably impacted as a result of construction activity. It became pertinent to unite the present with the past in order to understand how the historic narrative of the site led to it being adversely affected.

Evidence and knowledge from multiple reports were reconciled, with the help of local anecdotes and a bit of detective work, to identify the processes that led to the discovery. Information from several sources helped to compile a retrospective site narrative for TEH-74/H. Discrepancies in site location, period of occupation, records of previous excavations, and site characteristics were all addressed through the exploration of previous site records, property ownership records, georeferencing of descriptive data, and review of the Smithsonian Institution's catalogue.

CA-TEH-74/H

TEH-74/H is a large multicomponent site located just south of the Tehama/Shasta county line (Figure 1). When originally recorded, the site was referred to as Johnson Mound and was located on land previously owned by Hiram Johnson, formerly a U.S. Senator. Johnson was deceased by the time the site was recorded by the University of California Museum of Anthropology (UCMA) in 1954. According to

Project Location



Tehama County, California

Figure 1. Site location.

the UCMA Archaeological Site Survey Record by A. B. Elsasser, the site was first recorded by Dr. Stuart C. Way. This site was allegedly a large occupation site not occupied prior to 1852, located “on the right bank of the Sacramento River, about 1¼ miles NNE of Jelly School” (Figure 2). Based on the 1944 Tuscan Buttes USGS 15-minute quadrangle map, this would place the site in Township 29N, Range 3W, Section 27. This location does not match that provided by Bennyhoff in his record for TEH-074 from later the same year.

The Bennyhoff (1954) UCMA site record location is described as the “West Bank of [the] Sacramento River, on [a] bluff above [a] slough” (Figure 3). The site was originally reported as being 300 ft. in diameter with a depth of 4 ft. It was recorded as being primarily west of an irrigation ditch and northwest of the slough. At the time of recording, Bennyhoff estimated that 90 percent of the site had been destroyed by leveling, presumably from the construction of Rio Alto Drive. Bennyhoff mentioned that S. C. Way reported burials at this site, but no records remain of his excavations, if indeed any were kept at all. Reported historic artifacts included glass beads, shoe leather, and metal objects such as ax heads and knives that were recovered at the time of bulldozing. Bennyhoff gave no indication as to the time or purpose for the bulldozing. Prehistoric artifacts observed during the 1954 archaeological survey included small obsidian, glass (historic), and chert projectile points.

Richard C. Jenkins, California Department of Forestry (CDF) Archaeologist, and Chuck Schoendienst, CDF Forester and Project Manager, could not find any evidence of the site in an archaeological reconnaissance survey conducted in 1992 in conjunction with a vegetation management project. Their letter report does not indicate the exact location of their survey, only that they attempted to re-locate the site (Jenkins 1992).

The 2011 ENPLAN survey was able to re-locate the site, but found it to be much more extensive than previously recorded. Additional observations made by the 2011 survey included increased dumping activities, significant ground disturbance, and the construction of the man-made Indian Lake directly adjacent to the site boundary. Prehistoric surface artifacts observed include a 12-x-12-cm chipped/flaked metavolcanic ax or chopper tool, tested cores, and primary, secondary and tertiary flakes. Most lithic materials are metavolcanic (approximately 99 percent), with a very small amount being obsidian or greenstone. Additionally there are two shell middens and two rock piles/cairns. In preparation for the

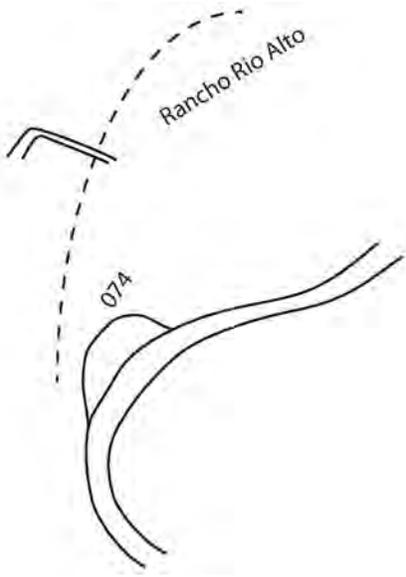


Figure 2. Digital reproduction of Elsasser's site sketch included in the 1954 site record.

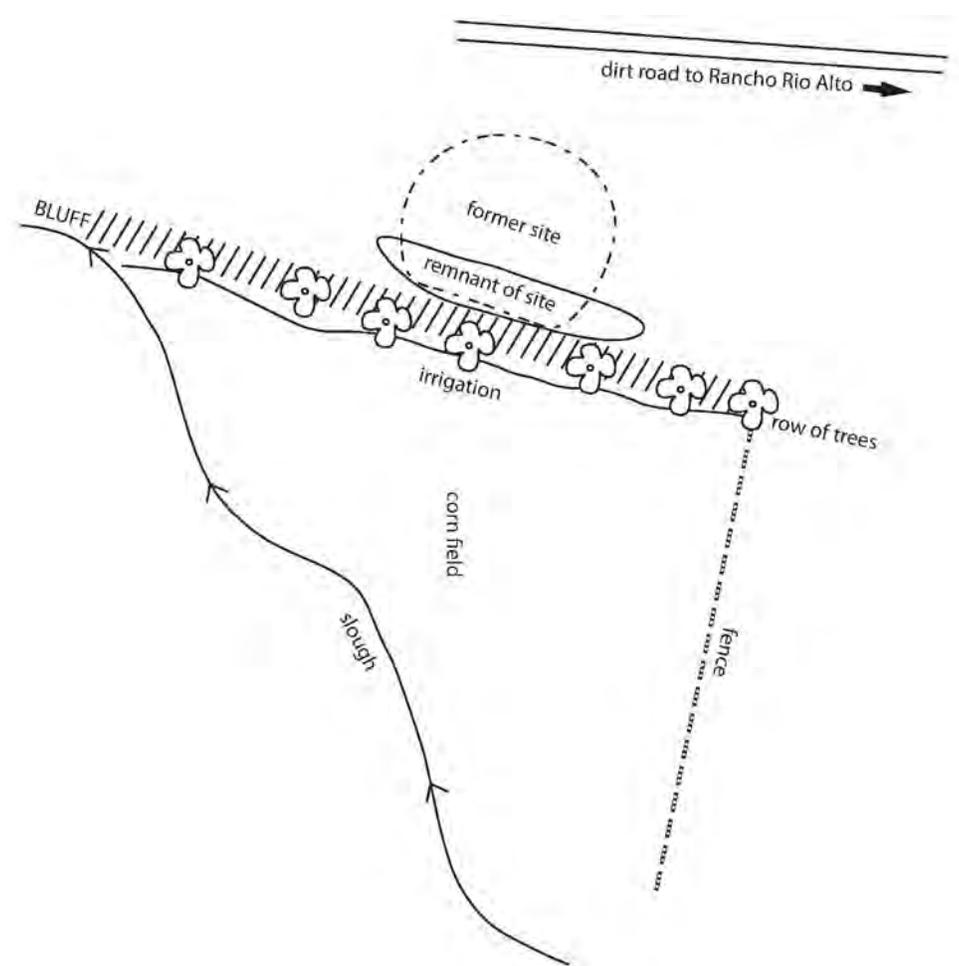


Figure 3. Digital reproduction of Bennyhoff's site sketch included in the 1954 site record.

installation of a new water pipeline through the site, ENPLAN conducted an Extended Phase I to identify the presence and evaluate the integrity of any subsurface deposits associated with this site. During evaluative testing of the site, five test trenches were excavated directly northwest of an existing dirt road in the intended pipeline trajectory. The results of the testing indicated that no significant cultural deposits existed within the proposed pipeline corridor.

DISCOVERY

In late October 2014, during the construction for a reclaimed water pipeline within the limits of TEH-74/H, human remains and significant midden deposits were exposed. The pipeline trench was being excavated down the center of a dirt road that was graded in the 1950s in preparation for a subdivision that was never realized. The discovery came after a cultural resource inventory, archaeological record search, Native American consultation, and Extended Phase I investigation had all been carried out. None of these inquiries had indicated the presence of this deposit.

In the process of mechanical trench excavation, the skeletal remains of a single individual (SK 1) were exposed in the wall of the trench. The excavation had truncated the supine burial of the individual along the inferior-dorsal aspect, leaving a cross section of both tibiae and fibulae, a portion of the pelvis, and several sternal rib ends exposed in the trench wall. This inadvertent discovery triggered a process of data collection and mitigation measures, the plans for which evolved as the information generated by the deposit increased.

Initially, the land owner, the designated Most Likely Descendant (MLD), and the archaeologist determined that the most respectful and cost-effective course of action would be to exhume the remains and rebury the individual outside the project corridor. In accordance with this plan, a 2-x-1-m control unit was delineated directly above SK 1 and was excavated in arbitrary 10 cm levels, with all spoil screened through ¼-in. mesh. Additionally, all soil removed from the pipeline trench was screened through ¼-in. mesh to retrieve any remains and any associated artifacts inadvertently excavated by the backhoe.

Screening of the pipeline trench spoil resulted in the recovery of not only various fragments of adult skeletal elements but also fragments of three non-adult individuals (SK 3, SK 5, and SK 6) In the process of excavating the control unit, and with the help of heavy winter rains, an additional in situ burial was identified eroding from the side wall of the pipeline trench. This individual (SK 4) was located directly adjacent to, but approximately 43 cm below, the initially identified burial (SK 1). At the base of level 1, a partial frontal bone (SK 2) was identified in the southwest wall of the control unit. Further skeletal elements were recovered from within level 2. The spatial arrangement of these elements suggests that there had at one time been an in situ burial located in the northern corner of the control unit that has since been truncated, likely during the construction of the gravel road. All that remained of this individual were skeletal elements corresponding to the skull, legs, and feet. At this point, it became clear to all involved parties that the extent of the deposit and the number of burials in the area were prohibitive and that the course of action needed to be revised. It was agreed upon by all parties that excavation would cease at the base of level 3. All recovered human remains and associated burial goods would be reburied, and the pipeline route would be amended to avoid subsurface impacts to this sensitive area. All other recovered artifacts and cultural material were subject to data recovery processes, as per the State Historic Preservation Office's recommendations.

This inadvertent discovery initiated a reconciliation of anecdotal evidence with formal records in an attempt to construct a history for the site, to better understand the circumstances leading to the discovery, and to determine a plan for the site moving forward to help prevent future disturbances.

RECONCILIATION

The inadvertent discovery prompted a review of the original site records in the hope of reconciling them with the results of the discovery. It quickly became clear that assumptions and missteps in communication had resulted in a disjointed site narrative.

First, it was assumed that the integrity of the site as described by earlier records was accurate. Earlier site records gave the impression of a site with very little integrity. Both Elssasser and Bennyhoff mention disturbance to the site in the form of previous excavations and bulldozing of the topsoil of the site. Combined, the two descriptions give the impression of a disturbed site unlikely to retain the integrity necessary for it to provide much valuable information. This impression was supported by the difficulty experienced by Jenkins (1992) in re-locating the site. When ENPLAN re-located the site in 2011, the observed artifacts were thought to be only residual from a once larger, significant site that had since been decimated by agricultural use, residential development, and road construction. While these factors undoubtedly impacted the site, they did not do so to the degree that was previously thought. A bias was clearly imparted by earlier site records' descriptions of the site's integrity that ultimately impacted the mitigation and management plans for the site.

The discrepancy of the location of TEH-74/H between site records was also revisited. While the discrepancy had been previously recognized (Brown 2011), it was assumed that it resulted from the inability to accurately record the location of sites prior to the application of GPS. The discovery, however, has now introduced a new level of uncertainty about whether these site records actually reflect the same site or different sites. Notably, Elssasser and Bennyhoff provide different descriptive information about the location of the sites they recorded, even though they both referred to the same trinomial. It is entirely possible that Elssasser and Bennyhoff did record two different, but spatially related, sites. It is not uncommon in this area of Tehama County to find multiple occupational sites in close proximity to one another (Brown 2011). Moreover, a review at the Tehama County Assessor's Office did not indicate that the property where TEH-74/H is located was ever owned by Hiram Johnson, as Elssasser suggested. The locational discrepancy of TEH-74/H illustrates recurring issues in cultural resource management regarding early site records. While early site records are valuable assets to archaeological site narratives, they can also prove dangerous. As we have seen with TEH-74/H, they are often underdeveloped for the needs of modern cultural resource management and need to be critically applied in the identification and assessments of archaeological sites.

In addition to the problems identified with the site records, there were also issues with project communication that contributed to the disjointed site narrative. Initially, archaeological testing by Brown (2011) supported the descriptions provided by the earlier site records. However, subsurface testing was negated by on-site changes to construction plans that were not communicated to the project engineers or the archaeologists. Instead of the pipeline trench being dug adjacent to the dirt road and within the archaeologically tested corridor, it was dug in the middle of the road, a mere 5 m southeast of the intended corridor. A seemingly small alteration to construction plans contributed to the inadvertent discovery and the changing site narrative.

The process of reconciliation did not result in all negative things, however. The process of reconciliation also revealed new anecdotal information related to Elssasser's site record and Dr. S. C. Way's excavation. Anecdotal accounts suggested that the material recovered by Way was housed at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, but this was not substantiated by any written account. When contacted, the Smithsonian confirmed that they did have a record for artifacts donated by a Dr. S. C. Way belonging to a site in Tehama County just south of Cottonwood (presumably TEH-074/H). The Smithsonian kindly provided photos of all the artifacts in that collection, a sample of which is shown in Figure 4. Unfortunately, no documentation accompanied the artifacts. It is speculated that any associated contextual information for the artifacts was either not collected at the time of excavation or has been subsequently lost. Nonetheless, the items at the Smithsonian add to the growing wealth of information helping to inform the new site narrative for TEH-74/H.



Figure 4. Abalone shells from the Smithsonian collection from S. C. Way (courtesy of Dr. James Krakker, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

A series of factors and actions with significant time depth contributed to an underdeveloped site narrative for TEH-74/H. In turn, the narrative for this site affected the way it was perceived and the treatment it received by subsequent archaeologists. Those perceptions contributed to a situation in which the details and even location of the site were unclear. Early recording techniques, unrecorded excavations, long intervals between surveys, and historical and modern construction activity just served to compound the problem.

Site narratives are exogenous and assigned to sites during the process of recordation and analysis. Access to information and technological improvements affect the narratives archaeologists create. As a result of increasing data and rapidly evolving technology, narratives are made and remade as these sites are recorded and rerecorded ahead of developments. The case of TEH-74/H demonstrates the need to reconcile previous reports in order to understand how they can generate bias in future analysis. Compiling multiple data sources enriches narratives and contributes to an understanding of the greater site context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Rio Alto Water District for access to the site, and Tracy Foster-Olstad, James Hayward, and Robert Burns for their support on the project. Special thanks to Matthew Petyo for his graphic design contribution. Thank you to Dr. Damien Huffer and Dr. James Krakker, collections managers for North American Archaeology, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, who graciously obtained records and photographs of materials from TEH-74/H stored at the Institution.

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