DIGGING OLOMPALI: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE RECENT PAST

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My first assignment as a State Archaeologist was to inventory the cultural resources of Rancho Olompali, a brand, new 760-acre State Park in Marin County. Perhaps my most important discovery was a cultural deposit consisting of artifact-rich fire debris inside the ruins of the Burdell Mansion. It was here that I found a virtual time capsule of hippie material culture, items that once belonged to the Grateful Dead-affiliated, Chosen Family commune, the residents of the mansion when it was destroyed by fire on February 2, 1969. This paper describes the importance of that discovery.

Forty years ago, I entered the archaeological profession as a “prehistorian.” That meant that I was interested in the archaeological record of North America prior to the coming of the first Europeans. The pursuit of “Prehistoric” Archaeology was commonplace in the 1970s and throughout the early years of my career, I participated in numerous investigations of what I then considered to be the “Prehistoric” era, that time before the existence of written records. Today, we are more likely to think of this time as having been the “Pre-Contact” era, an admission that “history” is documented in ways other than text. Although I had considered myself a prehistorian, I found myself increasingly immersed in historic archaeological endeavors, including extended field stints with Bobbie Greenwood at Mission San Buenaventura in 1975 and Warm Springs Dam in 1979. Gradually, prehistoric and historic archaeology melded into one approach for me and it was here that I began to realize the importance of anthropology to archaeology, an understanding that was greatly influenced by my graduate advisor and mentor, Professor Lowell Bean.

I visited Olompali for the very first time on January 7, 1981. I had begun working as a State Archaeologist for California State Parks in Sacramento just a few days earlier. Having an opportunity to visit the site of the legendary Rancho Olompali excited me. I was tasked lead archaeologist for the preparation of the Inventory of Cultural Resources for this brand new 760-acre park acquisition, which, in its pre-classification days, was known to the State as Rancho Olompali Project. Over the course of several months, I surveyed the extent of the property, alone on some days and with a small crew on others. Everything found was documented, including archaeological sites, historic structures, and various kinds of cultural features.

On my first day at Olompali, I walked through the ruins of the Burdell Mansion, a large two-story adobe and stucco structure that had been gutted by a house fire in 1969 (Figure 1). Once known as the “Whitehouse of Hippiedom” (Anonymous 1969), the Mansion had been home to The Chosen Family, an intentional community loosely associated with the Grateful Dead. By coincidence, the Dead resided in the Mansion one year prior to the arrival of The Chosen Family. On the floor of one of the rooms, I noted numerous vinyl records in a heap of fire debris. The debris included various other artifacts dating to the time of the fire, including a fragment of a tie-dyed garment.

In the early hours of February 2, 1969, an electrical fire destroyed the Mansion and most of the commune’s possessions, leaving what was essentially a time capsule of 1960s-era, hippie material culture in the fire debris (Figure 2). I felt that it was important to salvage some of the hippie artifacts I had observed, although that didn’t happen until twenty years later. In May of 1981, I attended a public meeting in Novato, the nearest town to Olompali, in order to present an overview of the cultural resources my crew and I had recorded. By then, I had realized the importance of defining a “Flow of History” at Olompali, so that all eras could be properly addressed. I included what I termed the “Hippie Horizon” in my Flow of History, noting the importance of telling the story of that time. This proved to be the one time I’ve had a room full of people boo me. The folks from Novato were aghast that I was giving credence to The Chosen Family commune, a group that many of them had worked to evict just a dozen years earlier.
Figure 1. Front page, Marin Independent Journal, February 3, 1969 ( Courtesy, Marin Independent Journal).

Figure 2. Interior of Burdell Mansion ruins, ca. 1972 (Courtesy, Doug Burgess).
persevered, though, and managed to include the story of the commune and the Sixties in the State’s forthcoming plans for the new State Park. When it came time to name and classify the park, I urged the State Parks Commission to name it Olompali, instead of Rancho Olompali, so as to honor the Flow of History. The State concurred with my recommendation and Rancho Olompali became Olompali State Historic Park.

In 1996, as I began my term as the President of the SCA, a news release was sent out that noted my interest in the archaeology of the Grateful Dead and the commune at Olompali. Within a day or two, I received a phone call from a producer at CNN. That led to a filmed interview at Olompali, for which I was joined by a representative of the Grateful Dead. The 5-minute clip played for over a week on CNN and CNN International. In the clip, I spoke to the significance of the artifacts visible in the fire debris.

With the broadcast of the CNN interview, I realized that it was time to recover the commune artifacts. That day came during the summer of 1997, when I learned that State Parks was planning to remove the fire debris from inside the Mansion. I decided to move quickly with an archaeological excavation in order to salvage the vinyl records and any other commune-era artifacts that might be found in the fire debris. I arranged for members of The Chosen Family to assist me with the excavation. Because it was the 30th anniversary of the Summer of Love, the news media was fascinated with the project. However, just days before we were to begin the excavation, I learned that the fire debris was contaminated with high levels of asbestos and lead. The excavation was cancelled due to potential health concerns.

Five years later, the State brought in a hazmat crew to remove the fire debris inside the Mansion. The debris containing hippie artifacts was shoveled into special 55-gallon hazmat drums, sealed, and stored within the park. There were 26 such drums placed in storage.

Funding was made available in 2009 for a second hazmat crew to open the drums and clean the materials found inside them. This resulted in the “discovery” of what I had long posited to be an important time capsule of hippie material culture (Figure 3). News of this discovery was picked up by the news media and disseminated widely, resulting in stories and interviews throughout the world (cf., Akerman 2009; Brunwasser 2009; Fimrite 2009; Franz 2009; Goetzman 2009; Rottman 2009). Interest in the story has yet to wane (cf., de Pastino 2014; Ellen 2014; Franz 2014; Mooallem 2014; Oerzen 2011; Overbye 2011; Patel 2014; Schofield 2010, 2011; Shapiro 2015).

Over the years, I have slowly made my way through the collection, sorting, identifying, and cataloging what appeared important (cf. Fernandez and Parkman 2011; Parkman 2015; Parkman and Parkman 2015). The component of the collection that is of most relevance to this paper consists of numerous vinyl records. A total of 94 vinyl records was recovered, most which lacked labels (Figure 4). Although it was a challenge, I was able to identify 56 of the discs. The results of this identification illustrate the importance of creating an archaeology of the Recent Past (Parkman 2014).

Contemporary Archaeology was not a consideration in 1981, when I began my study of Olompali. At the time, I could not have imagined the Olompali survey leading to my becoming a Contemporary Archaeologist. I was a Prehistorian. And yet, here I am today, talking about the value of creating an archaeology of the Recent Past.

Following publication of my essay, “A Hippie Discography,” in World Archaeology Parkman 2014), the story of the records was picked up by the news media and circulated about the world. People seemed surprised by the eclectic nature of the records and, like me, they were interested in what it might reveal regarding cultural stereotypes.

I was keenly aware that meaning might emerge from the interpretation of the Olompali discography. I believed a meaningful interpretation would add to our understanding of the Sixties and perhaps testify to the core of human nature. Understand that these records include everything from The Versatile Burl Ives to Ken Kesey’s The Acid Test, featuring the Grateful Dead.
My musical continuum of Ives on one hand and Kesey on the other, admittedly a reflection of my own perspective of Straight-to-Hip Sixties culture, is complicated in a most interesting way by the recollections of Grateful Dead guitarist, Bob Weir. In 2014, Weir and I were filmed at Olompali for the yet-to-be-released Martin Scorsese movie about the Dead (Figure 5). When I mentioned the Burl Ives record to Bobby, he told me that he thought that it had belonged to the Dead and was inadvertently left behind when the band moved from Olompali in 1966. Bobby reminded me that the Dead had been influenced by Burl Ives and other such folk musicians in their early days, when the Dead were known as the Warlocks. Indeed, Jerry Garcia was a folk musician prior to the British Invasion of 1964 and the psychedelic euphoria that characterized San Francisco the following year. In 1965, the Warlocks discovered LSD and soon thereafter changed their name to the Grateful Dead, thus becoming the psychedelic band we know today.

The musical diversity I saw in the Olompali discography suggested a diversity of personalities, a range of past histories, and a variety of future expectations, as one would expect of any diverse group coming together for common purpose. In fact, I believed that these records might inform a discussion of cultural stereotypes, in this case, the one we know as "hippie."

To many in society’s mainstream, hippies were young, longhaired, unkempt, shiftless, dope-smoking malcontents. They were the epitome of the counterculture and objects of ridicule. If the mainstream comprised the Inside of culture, then the hippies were Outside culture and thus part of the Wild. They were wild in the collective subconscious of the mainstream, like wolves and bears, and thus they were perceived to be a threat to the whole.

American Indians living free were also considered dangerous to the whole of society. They were of the Wild. A society that fosters the concept of "wild" Indians implies the existence of an opposite entity. The opposite of wild is "tame" or "domesticated." For example, with human intervention, wild plants became domesticates like corn and wheat, and wild animals become dogs and cows. To the human mind, domesticated plants and animals were deemed useful to humankind, whereas wild plants and animals had lesser value. Historically, "wild" Indians were contrasted to those who had been "tamed." In 19th century America, a tame Indian was one who had been conquered and relegated to a life on a
Figure 4. Selected records from Olompali (Courtesy of the author). Top Row (Left to Right), “Rubber Soul,” The Beatles (Capitol, 1965); “Why is there Air?,” Bill Cosby (Warner Bros., 1965); “French Practice Record, No. 1,” (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1961); Middle Row (Left to Right), Unidentified Record; “Flaming Drums!,” Babatunde Olatunji (Columbia, 1962); Lower Row (Left to Right), “My Fair Lady,” Herman Levin (Columbia, 1958); Unidentified Record.
reservation, or perhaps assigned to work as a servant on a ranch or farm. Thus, a "wild" Indian was one who remained free of the conqueror's will. Throughout much of American history, people professed that "wild" Indians were bad and "tame" Indians, good. The taming process continues today, as seen in the relentless effort that Society goes to in order to conform the individual. Cue Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall”.

Early American settlers perceived a dwindling wilderness just beyond their reach. In his famous "Frontier Hypothesis," Frederick Jackson Turner proposed that, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Thus, American settlers spoke of "free" land on the edge of the ever-receding frontier. What the settlers called "free" land belonged to native peoples, but indigenous claims to the land were dismissed by American opinion and what they considered to be their Manifest Destiny. Therefore, free land was equated with "wild" land, hence our word, "wilderness." In the early Norse languages, from which the English word "wilderness" is derived, the root meant "will" as in self-willed or uncontrollable. Like the indigenous people who occupied these free lands, the land was not under the will of the settlers. Wild lands posed a challenge to Americans, whose very religion called for the conversion of unspoiled landscapes to pasture and farm land. It had to be made productive. Wild land, and its animals and people, were to be broken, tamed, or destroyed. Manifest Destiny saw to that. In the subconscious of Society, then, wolves, bears, wild Indians, and hippies were all viewed as being outside of Culture and thus they were part of the Wild. Hippies were just the latest threat to the social fabric of American Culture.

The discussion of what constitutes a hippie seems as relevant today as it was in the Sixties. For example, during the "Occupy Wall Street" movement that sprung up in 2011, online newspaper commenters were quick to label the protestors "naive hippies." Some went so far as to call them "dirty hippies," reminiscent of the 1960s. Of course, when I looked at photos of the protest, I saw people of all ages taking part, and none of them look particularly "dirty." I suspect the personalities and backgrounds of the various protestors were complex and not easily given to stereotypes. The eclectic nature of the Olompali discography suggests a similar complexity for The Chosen Family.

Those who comprised The Chosen Family were every bit as complicated and different from one another as were the protestors on Wall Street. And yet both groups were labeled “hippies” by their
detractors. Some of those who were part of The Chosen Family thought of themselves as hippies. To an outsider, they appeared to dress and act the part. There were others, though, who would have objected if called a hippie. And yet, they were just as much a part of the Chosen Family as those love-beaded and long-haired others, marching to a different beat. Regardless of their individual beliefs, the Chosen Family came together at Olompali in an experiment in communal living.

The Olompali discography is as eclectic and contradictory as the Sixties. This music has an incredible range in its style and temperament. Indeed, it includes albums from a host of genera, including Country, Jazz, Folk, Rock, Pop, Show Tunes, and Comedy. I do not believe that all of these albums were listened to communally by the members of The Chosen Family. Rather, they were brought into the commune as items of personal cultural baggage, and were thus artifacts that helped define the individual personalities that came together in the pursuit of communal living. While some of these records were communally shared, I suspect that many of them remained sequestered in personal spaces and went unplayed or rarely listened to by more than a few people at a time.

What seems most important to me is the fact that the commune attracted a diversity of individuals, each bearing their own cultural preferences and baggage, including unique tastes in music. If musical tastes varied to the degree suggested by the identified records, then perhaps we can assume that the communards’ political, religious, and social beliefs varied as well. If so, then no simplistic one-size-fits-all definition of a hippie would easily apply, nor would the popularly held stereotype that serves to demean the experience. For example, consider Phyllis Diller and Bob Hope’s portrayal of hippies in a 1967 episode of the *Phyllis Diller Happening* and Dorothy and Sophia’s portrayal of Sonny and Cher in a 1990 episode of the *Golden Girls*.

The records from Olompali inform a discussion of what constituted a hippie during the time of tremendous social and political upheaval in the late 1960s. These artifacts remind us that our species is a complex and diverse one and that those who believe that we can be subdivided into stereotypes are only fooling themselves. The fortuitous time capsule, from which these records were derived, includes artifacts that offer insight into the life and times of The Chosen Family.

In conclusion, the contemporary archaeology of Olompali suggests that the concept of a stereotypical “hippie” is unfounded. Hippies came from all walks of life and often retained the cultural baggage of their earlier lives, including musical interests.

Furthermore, an anthropological reading of the 1960s suggests that hippies were scorned and ridiculed by the mass media and so-called “Silent Majority” in part because they represented a perceived threat to the stability of the whole. As such, they were thought of as being outside Culture and, thus, untamed. They were part of the “Wild,” similar to the bears, wolves, and “wild” Indians of the American imagination.

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