CHILDREN’S TOYS AND ADULT BEVERAGES FROM A CA. 1967 HIPPIE COMMUNE, SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

E. BRECK PARKMAN
CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS (RETIRED)

JON A. PARKMAN
RINCON VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL, KENWOOD, CA

Four years ago, we presented on the investigation of an archaeological site we termed the “Lodge,” the scene of a ca. 1967-1968 “hippie” commune (Parkman and Parkman 2015). We reported the absence of children’s toys and “love” beads in what appeared to be an otherwise rich archaeological deposit. This absence led to speculation about the nature of the commune. A few months after the presentation, we returned to the Lodge for the last few days of fieldwork. On the final day, we found the toys and beads. This is a cautionary tale on reading too much into “absence.”

THE LODGE

A few years ago, we presented the preliminary results of our investigation of an archaeological site we termed the “Lodge,” the scene of a ca. 1967-1968 “hippie” commune (Parkman and Parkman 2015). The site has been recorded as CA-SON-2133H (Whatford 1994). We reported the absence of children’s toys and “love” beads in what appeared to be an otherwise rich archaeological deposit. This absence led to speculation about the nature of the commune. A few months after the presentation, we returned to the Lodge for the last few days of fieldwork. On the final day, we found the toys and beads. This is a cautionary tale on reading too much into “absence.”

The final occupation of the Lodge resulted, in part, from Haight Ashbury’s great “Hippie Diaspora” of 1967, as those who were disillusioned with the worsening street scene left San Francisco for more rural areas of the country. This is how intentional communities, such as Black Bear Ranch in Siskiyou County, California, and the former New Buffalo commune near Taos, New Mexico, were founded. The Lodge benefited from the same diasporic movement from San Francisco. We know that at least some of the 30 or more people who relocated to the Lodge in 1967 were from San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury district, the epicenter of the so-called “Summer of Love” and an important landmark in the birth of the Counterculture Movement.

Prior to the arrival of the communards, the Lodge was the homestead of Ray and Bertha Hurd and their children between 1914 and 1930. In 1930, the property was purchased by a banker from Napa Valley and soon after became the Bear Ranch Hunting Club. The ranch house built by the Hurd family was converted to a hunting lodge. In 1964, Santa Rosa attorney Everett Shapiro purchased the parcel from the Napa banker. Whereas both the Hurd family and the banker had been allowed to access the property across several private parcels to the east, that access was denied by the new owner. With permission from the State of California, Shapiro constructed a road that began atop Bald Mountain and followed the ridge north to his landlocked parcel (Figure 1a). Today, the road created by Shapiro is known as High Ridge Trail. By 1967, Shapiro had arranged for a caretaker to manage his property. It was this caretaker who invited friends of his to come and live on the ranch, a place the residents came to know as the “Lodge.”

The senior author initiated an archaeological test excavation at the Lodge in response to a walk-in campground proposed in the park’s General Plan (Figure 1b). Our fieldwork was conducted in 2011-2015 and consisted of several days spent at the site every winter, after the fire danger had ended and the chance of encountering armed marijuana farmers had lessened. In 2007-2008, several large grows were discovered by law enforcement staff within a mile of the Lodge, and the fear of continued grow activity required our careful scheduling of field visits.
Accessing the Lodge required that we utilize a 4WD Gator (Figure 2). Although the site was only a few miles from the park’s Visitor Center, it required that we climb up and over Bald Mountain and then along the track created by Everett Shapiro. This was a trip that took about an hour when using the Gator, and three to four hours if traveling on foot. Use of the 4WD Gator made it possible for us to access the site in a time-efficient manner and allowed us the ability to easily transport our excavation equipment, which would have been all but impossible on foot.
METHODS

Shallow 1x1-m test units were excavated throughout the cultural deposit, centering primarily on what we term the “push zone.” This was the area where a bulldozer pushed fire debris to the edge of the site during a post-fire cleanup effort, following the accidental burning of the ranch house in 1968. A total of 52 units were excavated between 2011 and 2015 (Figure 3a). The soil excavated from those units was screened through 1/8-inch mesh screen to recover artifacts. Recovered materials were catalogued under Accession Number P2110.

After two years of testing the push zone nearest the house pads, where the cultural deposit is about 2 cm thick, we moved the focus of the excavation farther down the hill. While most of the units had less than 5 cm of cultural deposit, some of the units farther down the hill had deposits ranging from 20 to 30 cm thick. These lower units resulted in a higher and more intact artifact yield (Figure 3b). We termed this area the “spoils pile.” It is where most of the material that the bulldozer pushed over the hillside came to rest.

Following the test excavations, a decision was made to remove the various pieces of metal objects resting at the bottom of the slope, in the spoils pile. These items included the remains of several metal bed frames, an old refrigerator, a hot-water tank, a wood-burning stove, and other large metal furnishings from the ranch house. All of the items appeared to have gone through the house fire and were then pushed over the hillside during the post-fire cleanup. Because the items were highly visible, it was felt that their presence might attract illegal activity (“pothunting”) to the site. As some of these items had sharp edges, they were also considered potentially dangerous to future campers, thus the decision was made to remove them from the site.

On May 28, 2015, a six-person crew of volunteers assisted the senior author in the removal of the large metal items at the base of the slope (Figure 4). The objects were exposed by use of shovels and picks. A winch was used to move the heavier items to the top of the slope, where they could be loaded into a 4WD truck for subsequent removal. As the items were uncovered, they were examined and documented by the senior author. Once the items were loaded into the truck, they were transported to a central location in the park, where the senior author could conduct more review before deciding on their final disposition. Most of these items were eventually recycled in the metal bin at the county dump.

Figure 2. The 4WD Gator traversing High Ridge Trail at the end of the day, on 1-2-2014. The photo is looking south toward Mt. Tamalpais and San Francisco Bay.
While exposing the large metal items destined for removal, we encountered pockets of artifact-rich deposit. We documented these discoveries as best we could and salvaged the items we deemed important. The final aspect of the field project entailed erosion control and restoration of the site following its cleanup. This work was conducted by a two-person crew of biologists from the Sonoma Ecology Center on June 10, 2015. Today, there are few if any signs that hippies or archaeologists were ever there.
FINDINGS

The excavation of the Lodge revealed the presence of a rich multi-component deposit associated with the occupation of the site throughout much of the twentieth century. We found artifacts associated with a family homestead known as the Hurd Ranch (1914-1930), a deer-hunting club known as the Bear Creek Ranch (1930-1964), and a commune we know as the “Lodge” (1967-1968). Cultural materials that we associated with the Hurd Ranch included ceramic sherds, wire nails, and the occasional spent cartridge case, among other things. For the Bear Creek Ranch, we identified numerous spent cartridge cases and shotshells as well as glass sherds, primarily from liquor bottles. The majority of what we found, however, was associated with the commune. This included a vast array of household furnishings, remnants of clothing, jewelry, kitchen utensils, and various food items. A considerable range of artifacts was found, including the mouthpiece for a tuba, a slide rule, a couple of small copper bells, and parts of a Honda 90 Trailbike from ca. 1966.

Almost everything we found was mangled and fire-affected. Nothing we found had any monetary value. The true value of this archaeological collection is that it serves as a comparative sample for studies of other communes, especially the one at Olompali State Historic Park. Olompali was once home to the Chosen Family (1967-1969), an intentional community loosely associated with the Grateful Dead. A 1969 house fire destroyed the Burdell Mansion, in which most of the communards lived. The fire destroyed the Chosen Family’s possessions, remnants of which have been recovered from the fire debris (Parkman 2014, 2016).

In our earlier article (Parkman and Parkman 2015), we noted the absence of “love beads” and children’s toys in our work at the Lodge. We found their apparent absence to be puzzling, especially given the known presence of children. On the final day of our project, we discovered two items that had been used by children. The first was a tricycle, which we have identified as a Classic Radio Flyer Tricycle from ca. 1966 (Figure 5a). The second artifact was a portion of a child’s ride-on-top (Figure 5b). We have identified it as a Playskool Ride-on-Top Wooden Giraffe from ca. 1966.

Two glass beads were found on the last day of the project. One bead was green and blue, the other black (Figure 6a-b). They were found in an especially rich deposit that was exposed when we removed a metal trough-like object (Figure 6c). The trough appeared to have been an old water heater tank that had been split in half for use as a trough. The trough had rolled down the hill and ended up at the base of the slope, with its concavity down, trapping a deposit of artifacts beneath it. In addition to the two glass beads, we recovered a wide range of artifactual materials from beneath the trough.

Numerous examples of processed foods were recovered at the Lodge, especially on the last day of work. We found the plastic packaging from loaves of sandwich bread, sliced cheese, luncheon meats, and hotdog franks (Figure 7a-b). Several empty jars of Skippy peanut butter were found, as was a tin that once held a canned ham. Not a single pot or pan was found. They may have been salvaged following the fire. However, there was little evidence suggesting that the routine cooking of meals occurred at the Lodge during its occupation by the commune. Instead, food preparation appears to have been made fast and easy with the use of ready-to-eat foodstuffs, including the makings for sandwiches and hot dogs. In contrast, the Chosen Family cooked most of their meals. Kitchen duty was an important part of the daily routine at Olompali, and few if any remains of ready-to-eat foodstuffs were found in the fire debris there.
Figure 5. (a) Classic Radio Flyer Tricycle found at the Lodge; (b) Axle with two wheels from a Playskool Ride-on-Top Wooden Giraffe found at the Lodge. Note fire damage to wheels.
Numerous beverage bottles were found at the Lodge on the last day of work, as well. The bottles included several brands of beer and soft drinks (Figure 7c). The soft drinks consisted of Frostie Root Beer, 7-Up, Coca Cola, Fresca, Dr. Pepper, and Pepsi-Cola. Frostie Root Beer was probably the preferred soft drink consumed at the Lodge. The brands of beer were Lucky Lager, Pabst Blue Ribbon, Olympia, and Budweiser. Lucky Lager outnumbered the other brands and appears to have been the preferred beer.
Thirty-five coins were recovered over the course of the excavation. The coins were dated 1920-1968. There were 27 Lincoln pennies, four Jefferson nickels, two Roosevelt dimes, and two Washington quarters. Most of the coins were fire-affected and several were partially covered with molten glass. Two of the pennies were minted in 1968, and one of those had molten glass on one of its sides (Figure 8). These two pennies are evidence that the house burned in 1968, rather than in 1967 as noted in an interview with Everett Shapiro, the property’s former owner (Lortie 1978:8). The site of the burned ranch house is surrounded by mature walnut
Figure 8. Two Lincoln pennies dated 1968-D found at the Lodge. Both coins are fire affected and have molten glass affixed to them.

and oak trees, all which show evidence of scorching, but only on the sides facing the house. This suggests to us that the fire occurred in winter, perhaps during rainy weather; otherwise, the trees would have caught fire and burned more fully than what is observed today. The fact that there appears to be no mention in the local newspapers of a wildfire in the area during this period (1967-1968) further suggests a winter fire. A summer fire would have almost certainly spread, requiring an organized suppression effort. Although the ranch house was entirely consumed by the fire, and the surrounding trees were scorched on one side, there is no evidence that the fire spread beyond the immediate house site. Given the two pennies we found that were dated 1968, we believe that the ranch house burned around January-March 1968. It may be that Shapiro was unaware of the fire until sometime later and only guessed that the fire occurred in 1967. It is thought that the fire resulted from an untended candle (Lortie 1978:8).

All but four of the coins dated from the 1950s to the 1960s. The four exceptions were pennies dated 1920, 1940, 1945-S, and 1948. While the 1920 penny showed no evidence of burning, the 1945-S and 1948 pennies were partially covered with molten glass (Figure 9). It is our belief that, except for the 1920 penny, all of the coins (i.e., those minted 1940-1968) were stored in a glass jar at the time of the fire. That would explain our finding molten glass on some of them. An earlier experiment conducted by the senior author suggested an average lifespan of approximately 30 years for loose change (Parkman 2008:116, FN 11). Thus, any coins dated 1938-1968 could very well have constituted loose change stored in a glass jar within the house. For that matter, at the time of the fire, the coin dated 1920 could have been in the jar as well.
CONCLUSIONS

The finding of glass beads and children’s toys on the very last day of the project, on a site where neither had previously been found, informs the telling of a cautionary tale. Earlier in our investigation, we had speculated about the possible meaning of a beadless and toyless site, considering it as having been the scene of an intentional community occupied by many adults and children. We found ourselves wondering if this might have been a religious commune or one otherwise given to a strict and narrow outlook on dress and behavior. As we increased our sample, and yet still found no beads or toys, we began to think that this is exactly what we had, a carefully controlled community governed by a strict code of behavior. If not for the last day’s discoveries, we would have written our report noting the absence of glass beads and children’s toys. Furthermore, we would have suggested that this community was likely one focused on a strict interpretation of some unknown religious dogma. That is not to say that we were not aware of religious communes whose members wore “love beads” and whose children played with toys. Certainly, we know of many. But we felt that we had found an exception. And on the last day of our fieldwork, we realized we had not.

Archaeologists are primarily involved with the nature of Presence. We find things in our investigations, physical things, like artifacts and features, and then we attempt to associate them with the other things we
find. That is how we make sense of the artifact and the assemblage within which it is found. The nature of Absence is important, too, but rarely do we contemplate, to any real degree, what is meant by the absence of things. When we do contemplate meaning in Absence, it is wise to remember that absence might prove an illusion, as we learned our last day at the Lodge.

We can find the presence of things found in the archaeological record, but determining their absence is often impossible to do. For example, we have seen auger tests used to define the boundaries of archaeological sites and the excavation of one or two sterile levels used to justify the abandonment of an excavation unit. We are reminded that positive findings are always positive but negative findings are not always negative. A successful archaeological endeavor requires that we properly balance the positive and negative findings derived from our work and not fall victim to the illusory nature of Absence.

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