

UP FROM THE DUST: ORPHANED COLLECTIONS AND INNOVATIVE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

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The Totem Pole Ranch archaeological collection illustrates how the process of curation can generate innovative research undertakings drawn from “orphaned” collections. In this article, I outline the history of the excavation of Totem Pole Ranch, the subsequent “orphaning” of the collection, the development of a management and research plan for the collection, and current curation and research efforts by undergraduate students. Student participation in the various stages of the project has provided an appreciation of the importance of stewardship, both as caretakers of and advocates for the archaeological record, as well as the importance of carrying out independent research projects.

For the past two years, the Totem Pole Ranch archaeological collection has become the focus of student research projects and professional training. The projects have concentrated on determining the nature of the occupation of the site and its place in the larger settlement pattern of the western Mojave Desert. This article presents an approach to how an orphaned collection can be utilized for undergraduate research and generates innovative research undertakings drawn from “orphaned” collections. The orphaned collection is from Totem Pole Ranch (AVC-184) in Antelope Valley, California. The resulting research has included analyses of the lithics, ground stone, shell and steatite beads, and faunal materials, which are providing insights into several key cultural transitions in the region.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AT ANTELOPE VALLEY COLLEGE

The Totem Pole Ranch archaeological collection illustrates how the process of curation can generate innovative research drawn from “orphaned” collections. In this article, I discuss the history of the excavation of Totem Pole Ranch, the subsequent “orphaning” of the collection, the development of a management and research plan for the collection, and current curation and research efforts by undergraduate community college students.

When I first came to Antelope Valley College (AVC), I was thrilled and at the same time exasperated upon finding the poor condition of much of the AVC-184 archaeology collection, as well as the extent of the collection that had yet to be analyzed and reported. I recognized the research potential of the collection and acknowledged that this gold mine of data would allow students the opportunity to develop innovative research projects, if I could develop a management and research plan for the collection. To that end, I developed a series of overarching goals for the department: (1) to help students gain first-hand experience managing existing cultural collections; (2) to build and develop an archaeological collections database; (3) to carry out independent scientific research projects from the existing archaeological collection; (4) to appreciate the importance of stewardship, both as caretakers of and advocates for the archaeological record; (5) to expose students to employment opportunities in the discipline of Anthropology, specifically related to Archaeology; (6) to provide an understanding of the role of local, state, and federal agencies that focused on cultural resource protection; and (7) to develop an awareness of the importance of working with local native communities.

A key part of the management and research plan was to get students interested. So, I began by incorporating the organization and inventory of the collection into my existing course offerings. The intent was that students would show interest and elect to enroll in either Anthropology Work Experience or Honors Options as part of the Honors Transfer Alliance Program. This worked better than I anticipated and a core group of students took on the first phase of inventory and assessment of the collection. Over the course of

two summers, the collection was inventoried, reorganized, curated (rebagged, boxed, and labeled) and an archaeological database developed.

It was during the initial inventorying of the collection that I came across the Totem Pole Ranch materials. It became obvious that there was abundant material and a good amount of field notes, maps, and photographs that would assist in developing student research projects focused on the Totem Pole Ranch collection. Thereby, Totem Pole Ranch became our first “orphaned” collection to inventory, curate and protect.

TOTEM POLE RANCH PROJECT

Totem Pole Ranch is located in the south-central Antelope Valley near Little Rock Creek watershed. Roger Robinson and students from AVC participated in an academic field class excavated from 1982 to 1986 and recovered over 20,000 artifacts and ecofacts. The excavations focused primarily on two main trenches (Trench I and Trench II) excavated to a depth of 140 cm, as well as 45 additional test units and an extension of Trench II of varying depths (50-120 cm). The site is thought to be the contact period Serrano village of Maviayek (Earle 2005; Earle et al. 1995).

The site is located on private land and at the invitation of the owners, work was permitted. At the time the excavations took place, the location was a well-known rental venue for outdoor parties with adjacent picnic and barbecue areas. In addition, it was the staging and stable area for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Mounted Posse. Robinson noted that these current activities, along with road grading, earth moving, and general construction associated with the ranch, had resulted in the site being heavily disturbed. Therefore, interpretations of the extent, size, and depth of the site was difficult to determine (Robinson 1996; Roger Robinson, personal communication 2015).

It appears that there was no formal research design developed for the excavations. However, there was a series of general questions that guided the investigations of Robinson, including function and dating of the site, a delineation of subsistence strategies, and the relationship of the site to other sites in the vicinity. Project documents consist of field records, laboratory records, maps, and images. Most of the material consists of handwritten field notes recorded in spiral-bound stenographers' notebooks, assorted loose leaf papers, and catalog pages.

The recovered artifacts were sorted by material category and counted on-site. A catalog number was assigned to each material category from each unit and level. Cataloged artifacts were marked directly with ink and a catalog number, while debitage, animal bone, shell, botanicals, and soil samples were bagged together with a catalog number assigned by unit and level only. The artifacts were stored in non-archival materials on the AVC campus, either in the Anthropology Lab or in an exterior storage container. With the exception of several unique artifacts, the collection remained largely unanalyzed and unreported (Robinson 1996). A primary record requesting a trinomial for the site was not submitted to the South Central Coastal Information Center in Fullerton. Hence, today it would be referred to as an “orphaned” collection.

ORPHANED COLLECTIONS

Cato et al. (2003:255) broadly defined an orphaned collection as “a collection that has lost curatorial support or whose owner has abandoned it.” Collections are “orphaned” through a variety of processes. West (1988) noted that natural history collections typically become “orphaned” due to museum closures or cutbacks, the retirement of faculty, agency staff, or independent researchers, and abandonment by private collectors. By the 1980s, concerns with the problem of what to do with these collections moved into the forefront and began to gain national attention (West 1988).

Orphaned collections in archaeology occur for these same reasons, but the main contributing factor is related to the large number of collections that were generated through early cultural resources management

(CRM) excavations from the 1970s to the 1990s. This CRM-related curation crisis is widely acknowledged and has been attributed to a gap in historic preservation legislation. While such legislation required archaeological excavations to retrieve artifacts and data from sites threatened by development, it did not specify or require procedures for curation of the collections these excavations generated (Voss 2012).

Recognizing the lack of standardized curation procedures of CRM-generated archaeological collections, new legislation and regulations mandated appropriate curation procedures (Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979; 1990, 36 CFR 79). Most important, curation became an integral aspect in the planning and implementation of CRM-generated archaeological projects (National Park Service 2019). Unfortunately, even after these regulations were mandated, curation issues continued to persist because many regions lack adequate curatorial facilities (Voss and Kane 2012), not to mention that there was no stipulation to apply these new procedures to existing collections.

In the past decade, “orphaned” CRM-generated collections have received increasing attention (e.g., Barker 2003; Marino 2004; Sullivan and Childs 2003; Voss 2012; Voss and Kane 2012; West 1988). A common theme throughout discussions of orphaned collections is the rationale for accessioning, inventorying, and curating orphaned archaeological collections to “restore their research potential” (Marino 2004). Clevenger (2004:11) noted that the time lapse between field recovery, analysis, and the separation of artifacts from their field records limits the “research potential” of orphaned collections and poses potentially insurmountable challenges in archaeological interpretation of the collection.

Voss and Kane (2012) undertook the challenge of creating a model for re-establishing archaeological context of orphaned collections for research purposes, with great success. By developing a four-stage process—archive analysis, methods analysis, feature context, and evaluation of research potential—they were able to provide “an example of how the historical and archaeological context of CRM-generated orphaned collections can be systematically reconstructed, providing the information needed to assess research potential and to make day-to-day collections management decisions” (Voss and Kane 2012:105).

In many ways, the Totem Pole Ranch collection is typical of orphaned archaeological collections. As noted by Voss and Kane (2012), these key attributes include:

- The collection is the result of CRM-generated archaeological collections and/or academic field schools from the 1970 to the 1990s.
- The absence of a research design.
- The excavations were conducted when regulatory and industry standards were still evolving.
- Original funding for the excavations was inadequate to cover laboratory analyses and curation.
- An adequate curation facility was not identified in advance.
- The collection was stored in non-archival materials in buildings that were not suitable for curating archaeological specimens.
- The collection is under-analyzed and under-reported.

For these reasons, we now refer to the Totem Pole Ranch collection as an “orphaned” collection. This also holds true for the majority of the archaeological collections housed at AVC.

CURATION AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

Suffice it to say that when I originally began work on developing the management and research plan for the AVC collection, I was not familiar with the term “orphaned” collection even though the concept was not new to me. My early attempts at developing a model that would work for our multiple collections were difficult, but had many parallels to the model developed by Voss and Kane (2012). I have since incorporated aspects of their four-stage process into our research model with success. For example, we have incorporated the “Feature Summary” document with modifications to include not only features, but a “Unit Excavation

Summary” and an “Excavator/Student Summary” for a diachronic understanding of the excavations as they occurred (Voss and Kane 2012).

Student participation from the initial stages of the project has provided an appreciation of the importance of stewardship, both as caretakers of and advocates for the archaeological record, as well as the importance of carrying out independent research projects. Not only have students developed typical research projects based on the analysis of the artifact collection, but it has also given rise to the development of public outreach surveys, a traveling teaching collection for local K-6 schools, fundraising schemes, planning stages for a Western Mojave Archaeology Conference at AVC, working with local museums to plan future exhibits highlighting native peoples and archaeology in the Antelope Valley, and even the development of a ethno-archaeology project focused on rhyolite procurement and use.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Analysis of the Totem Pole Ranch collection will continue, and we anticipate publishing a report in the very near future. Alongside this ongoing analysis, we will be initiating an Archive Analysis Phase to organize the existing documentation and hopefully access unknown documents from participants of the field class. The Archive Analysis Phase will include the following:

- Assign each document a unique identification number
- Develop a relational database to record and index the documents
- Digitally scan documents to PDF files
- Complete a short description and summary of each document
- Contact members of the excavation for additional documents
- Interview the principal investigator, students, and volunteers who participated in the project
- Excavation Unit Description

CONCLUSIONS

Most archaeologists view “curation as a process that manages, rather than investigates, archaeological collections” (Voss and Kane 2012). To the contrary, my students and my experiences with the Totem Pole Ranch collection argue that inventory, cataloguing, rehousing, and conservation are not simply precursors to research, but rather meaningful generative encounters between scholars and objects. Shortly, students will be presenting their independent research projects and you will hear about recent analyses of the lithics, ground stone, faunal materials, and shell and steatite beads. These analyses are determining the nature of the occupation of the site and its place in the larger settlement pattern of the western Mojave Desert, thus providing insight into key cultural transitions in the region. Today is the first step toward changing this collection from an “orphaned” status to an “analyzed and reported” status.

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