A Railroad Runs Through It: Project Overview and Goals for Investigations of Redlands’ Chinatown and a Mexican Colonia

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Statistical Research, Inc. (SRI) conducted archaeological data recovery in 2019 and 2020 prior to planned development at the northern edge of CA-SBR-5314H, the site of the historical period Chinatown in downtown Redlands, San Bernardino County. SRI’s work identified evidence of Chinatown, as well as a previously (archaeologically) unstudied ethnic Mexican community in the project area. The research focused on household consumption and community structure among both groups from the later nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century. SRI analyzed the archaeological evidence and its broader historic context through investigations of immigrants’ links to ancestral countries and other regional diaspora communities, material culture patterns, life stories via oral interviews of individuals who lived in project area (or whose ancestors did), markers of sociopolitical and economic status in the archaeological and historical records, and evidence of changing attitudes of acceptance and discrimination by the majority community. The project has provided new perspectives on these communities and their context within the history of California. This article introduces the project and its goals.

In 2019 and 2020, Statistical Research Inc. (SRI) conducted archaeological data recovery as part of the Downtown Redlands Archaeological Project prior to a proposed development project at the northern edge of CA-SBR-5314H (P-36-5314), the site of the historical period Chinatown, astride the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks near downtown Redlands in San Bernardino County, California (Figure 1). A portion of the site is within the Redlands Santa Fe Depot District (P-36-23343), a collection of industrial and commercial buildings, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places (No. 91001535) (Wright and Stoddard 1991). SRI’s work in four project areas (Figure 2) identified not only evidence of Chinatown, but also of a previously (archaeologically) unstudied ethnic Mexican colonia (community) in the project area, as well as industrial development in the area.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PROJECT AREA HISTORY

During 1876 and 1877, Chinese laborers provided labor for construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad (SPRR) through San Timoteo Canyon and San Gorgonio Pass. Between 1885 and the 1920s, the Redlands area was experiencing land boom speculation, water use development, and population growth (Hampson et al. 1988:40-42). Some of the Chinese workers remained in the region, finding employment to support the town by working as vegetable gardeners; in orchards, groves, vineyards, private gardens, and public parks (Atchley 1974:41); building ditches and water systems (Archer 1976:43-44); and manufacturing bricks and constructing brick buildings in the growing downtown district (Daily Facts 1968; Horton 1957:6).
Figure 1. Downtown Redlands Archaeological Project location map. SRI map.

Figure 2. Location of four project areas in the Downtown Redlands Archaeological Project. EDR Sanborn Certification Number 37EF-4D87-8008. SRI map.
Others worked as domestic servants, living in the homes of their affluent Redlands employers (Atchley 1974:42). However, most of Redlands’ Chinese residents settled in a small Chinatown community about a half mile west of the center of town, on both sides of what eventually became Oriental Avenue (Figures 3 and 4). These residents found work in town, and within the Chinatown community itself.

Ostensibly, Redlands’ Chinese residents were initially accepted by some of their Euroamerican neighbors. Other community members, however, viewed the Chinese as competition for Euroamerican labor, and in the pattern repeated throughout western states, intolerance increased. Passage of the Chinese exclusion acts put pressure on Chinese immigrants as well as Chinese-American United States (U.S.) citizens. The crash of 1893 exacerbated the situation, and in September of that year, Euroamerican laborers from Redlands and surrounding areas gathered in a mob to expel the Chinese. The city council mobilized the sheriff and the National Guard—not to protect Chinatown but because of concern for the city’s reputation for order (Los Angeles Herald 1893). Within a week, after the immediate threat of violence had passed, Redlanders began forcing the Chinese out through legal means and social harassment, genteel alternatives to organized violence (Citrograph 1893a). Within two weeks, Chinatown was nearly deserted (Atchley 1974:42; DiDonato 1977: unpaginated). Only a few Chinese continued to live there as late as the mid-1920s.

By that time, a new community had moved north of the railroad tracks and built residences in what had previously been vacant lots, similar to other ethnic Mexican communities in north Redlands that were situated close to orchards and packing houses that employed many of those who lived nearby (Architectural Resources Group [ARG] 2017:148-149). Many ethnic Mexican Redlanders and those throughout the Inland Empire were descendants of the pioneers of the previous century of migration. Historical period maps label these residences only as “Mexican shacks” or “Mexican shanties,” and they were not plotted with precision. In the early decades of the twentieth century, newspapers frequently referred to the neighborhood as “Sonoratown,” a term then in common usage for such neighborhoods (Los Angeles Times 1911; San Bernardino County Sun [SBCS] 1903, 1918).

Racism directed at Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, mirroring anti-Chinese racism of the nineteenth century, led to deportation of Mexicans across southern California in the early 1930s (SBCS 1932). In the 1930s, the Mexican Repatriation Program altered the proportion of U.S.-born and foreign-born Latinos in these places, including in Redlands (California Office of Historic Preservation [COHP] 2015:8-9; SBCS 1932). The majority of those who remained were Americans, and many young men from this community volunteered for World War II (SBCS 1942, 1943, 1944). Yet their service did not fundamentally change the status of the community in Redlands, and after the war those living in the project areas were still subject to the kinds of discrimination they had suffered formerly (Shea 2019; Vasquez and Carpio 2012). This continued up to the division of the neighborhood by Interstate 10 in the 1960s, which cut off the project areas from the wider community and accelerated the transition to commercial property along West Stuart (ARG 2017:149-150).

The project areas became the focus of unauthorized excavation and collection during the 1960s (Pasik 1968). The area finally was recognized for its archaeological potential, with a number of previous investigations focused in and around the project area (Alexandrowicz et al. 1994; Brock 1987, 1988; Duke 2019; Glover and Gust 2012; Lange and Hansen 2005; LSA Associates, Inc. 2006; Mason 2012; Padon and Swope 1997; Tang et al. 2005a, 2005b; Waugh and Johnson 1998; Wright and Stoddard 1991).

PROJECT RESEARCH DESIGN THEMES

Our primary goal is to develop a contemporary past of the western side of downtown Redlands to enrich existing community histories (Vasquez and Carpio 2012). Our analysis is not designed to simply supplement the historical documentary record of parcel ownership and newspaper accounts with archaeological data. While that record forms the context for our analysis, we focus on the evidence of the people and families whose lives were linked to this place. As a result, while we address questions about chronology and physical development, and we attempt to correct factual errors in the historical record, we emphasize questions about how the historically attested ethnic minority communities in our project areas within Redlands developed and
Figure 3. Historical Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, showing Chinese brick barracks and archaeological features. EDR Sanborn Certification Number 37EF-4D87-8008. SRI map.

Figure 4. Discovery of archaeological remains of Chinese brick barracks in Project Area 3. Image courtesy of City of Redlands Police Department.
about how they navigated within the larger physical and sociopolitical organization—from communities in the Inland Empire to those across the Pacific Ocean.

To accomplish this, we have drawn on the knowledge and expertise of archaeologists, local historians, and descendant groups, using historical documents, oral history, family genealogy, and archaeological data (Figure 5). We connect these lines of evidence to existing theory, secondary historical accounts, and previously reported archaeological data to interpret our findings in light of macrohistorical events and to identify social ties. Our analyses emphasize particular details—local contingencies, global events, and individual decisions—to understand general trends in the Inland Empire of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The project research design is focused on the changing cultural geography of Redlands and the roles of residential populations that are underrepresented in written documentation. Project research questions are organized into five topics that our data allow us to address directly: chronology, subsistence practices, cultural geography, socioeconomic status, and infrastructure development.

**Chronology**

Research questions related to chronology are focused on understanding the sequence of occupation and land use in the project areas as revealed by the comparison of archaeological evidence and historical documentation. Identifying elisions of fact is foremost in our consideration, in order to recognize the temporal patterns of individual, family, and community life, and the evidence for neighborhood change.
through time. Another important aspect in the reconstruction of chronological details is comparison with other communities in the Inland Empire, such as San Bernardino (Doolittle and Majewski 1997:5-2, 5-3). It is also necessary to view local incidents (the near-riot against the Chinese in 1893 [ARG 2017:153-154], the Freeze of 1913 [ARG 2017:22, 66], increased discrimination against minority Redlanders after the Panic of 1893 [ARG 2017:152-154] and again during the Great Depression [ARG 2017:149]), in light of regional, national, and global events and trends (Chinese Exclusion and Geary acts, the Mexican Revolution, the Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, and 1924, the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program, the Great Depression, World War II, and the development of the interstate highway system [ARG 2017]).

Subsistence Practices

The historical period communities that occupied the project areas obtained food through market participation, by raising food (both plants and animals) in backyards, and by hunting and collecting wild foods. Communities of different ethnic backgrounds engaged with markets and produced/collection food in different ways to suit different preferences and traditions, and the nature of subsistence practices changed through time as the markets themselves changed (even if culturally specific food traditions did not). As a result, the archaeological indicators of subsistence practices differed substantially both between and within the ethnically Chinese and Mexican communities in our project areas (Figures 6 and 7). The proportion of ethnically diagnostic material culture versus objects and foodstuffs more commonly found in Inland Empire markets provides insight into the availability and affordability of goods, household size, sustained and changing food preferences, and self-reliance versus dependence on mass-produced commodities.

Cultural Geography

California’s history of racially motivated violence against ethnic minority communities is fraught with unpleasant episodes, including dispossession, exclusion, expulsion, and other forms of aggression. Relationships among different ethnic groups varied from city to city according to local politics and culture. Known in the late nineteenth century for its orderly planning and wealthy residents, Redlands walked a tight line between accepting minority communities as good for business while keeping them separated according to upper-class Victorian ideas of racial morality. In times of hardship, this meant suppressing or attacking some groups in favor of Euroamericans (Citrograph 1893b).

In this atmosphere, different ethnic groups in Redlands forged communities and developed identities as a part of the city. In the case of our project areas, extended family ties and historical cultural connections beyond Redlands were important components of identity as ethnic minority communities developed across generations. While these communities were local phenomena, they were also embedded in sociopolitical networks spanning continents, languages, and generations. This project allows us to investigate the ways in which archaeological data contribute to the understanding of two ethnic communities in Redlands and their connections to communities elsewhere, illuminating the uniquely local patterns embedded in the material record.

The ethnic Chinese community in southern California was closely linked across multiple physical centers by associations among individuals and groups, with San Bernardino (Costello et al. 2008, 2010) and Riverside (Great Basin Foundation 1987) connected directly to the heart of the community in Los Angeles (Greenwood 1996). Redlands’ Chinatown (like the nearby community in Yucaipa) was also tightly connected to these larger centers to the west and north, and individuals likely moved frequently among them. Records suggest that many of those who lived and worked in Redlands, as in San Bernardino and Riverside, may have been closely related adult men who emigrated from Gom-Benn village in southern China in the middle to late nineteenth century to live and work in the U.S. (Costello et al. 2008:148; Voss et al. 2018).

The ethnic Mexican community in Redlands represented families and individuals descended from immigrants having arrived in California before and after it was appropriated by the U.S. When the Mexican railway system expanded in the 1880s, further opportunities for rapid travel between the far western and
Figure 6. Excavated Chinese wok oven, Project Area 3. SRI photograph.

Figure 7. Assorted glass tableware from Project Area 1. SRI photograph.
southwestern U.S. and northern and western Mexico opened up, with links to areas further south in Mexico as well (Acuña 2007:38-40, 79). This served to draw the regions on both sides of the border closer together from the 1890s through the 1910s, as American products and companies came to dominate the economies of Sonora and Chihuahua and Mexicans traveled north for work. There was little recognition of the border as a barrier and circular migration was common (COHP 2015:5-7). As a result of the Mexican Revolution and the Immigration Act of 1917, Mexicans traveling for work increasingly chose to stay in the U.S. (COHP 2015:5-7; Sánchez 1993:50-51). By 1930, the Redlands community had developed into a permanent neighborhood with its own unique institutions and familial connections throughout the Inland Empire (Vasquez and Carpio 2012; Shea 2019). Comparisons with other ethnic Mexican communities, such as Belvedere in east Los Angeles County (Gann and Duignan 1986:40; Sánchez 1993:75) and Casa Blanca in the City of Riverside (COHP 2015:7-8), provide important insights.

Finally, these communities did not exist separately from one another, in the U.S. or in Mexico. Chinese laborers also worked in Sonora between 1883 and 1904, when they were violently expelled (Acuña 2007:83-84). The memory of Redlands’ Chinatown was not lost among those living in the project areas in the mid-twentieth century. They preserved knowledge of the place, and found artifacts south of the tracks that they understood were associated with the former residents (Shea 2019).

Socioeconomic Status

Attitudes toward ethnic minorities in California varied through time, but were rarely favorable across broad swaths of the state. Correspondingly, the socioeconomic status and professional roles that were commonly occupied by those of different ethnic backgrounds were conditioned by this culture, although many individuals defied such stereotypes. In general, both ethnic Chinese and Mexicans in Redlands worked in construction, agriculture, and domestic service. There was, however, substantial variation in these trades and the ways in which the communities participated in them. One of the most important questions in our study of the project areas involves understanding the socioeconomic status of these residents in comparison to patterns in the Inland Empire and beyond. Crucially, our results provide an opportunity to understand the ways in which socioeconomic status in Redlands articulated with global patterns of consumption and identity formation in their extended communities outside of the project areas (Voss et al. 2018).

Members of the ethnic Chinese community arrived in the Inland Empire in the 1870s seeking employment, largely in industries with which they were familiar from living elsewhere. These pioneers worked in both railroad and general construction, in packing houses, and in domestic contexts, and established thriving communities throughout the region. Chinatowns in San Bernardino and Riverside included business and residential districts, operated and occasionally owned by ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs (Costello et al. 2008). Laws against immigration and naturalization enacted by the mid-1880s slowed the development of Redlands’ Chinatown in these regards, and for most of its life it may have served mainly as an outlying residential community, connecting more permanent Chinese centers (e.g., San Bernardino) with outlying business opportunities. In Redlands, the community operated laundries and vegetable farms in and near the project areas. While relatively lucrative, these were not high-status positions. As anti-Chinese sentiment in California, and in Redlands specifically, grew from the 1880s onward (particularly after the Panic of 1893) and restrictions on migration increased, Redlands’ Chinatown dwindled in size (ARG 2017:153-154).

As the effects of the Chinese exclusion acts spread in southern California, Mexican immigrants and some Americans of Mexican descent increasingly took the place of displaced Chinese laborers in construction, agriculture, and domestic work (although immigrants from Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Portugal did as well, including in Redlands [ARG 2017:155-157]). Before the turn of the twentieth century, a vibrant ethnic Mexican community existed in the Inland Empire, but seasonal migration was also common. That would change with the Mexican Revolution against Porfirio Díaz in 1910 and the U.S. Immigration Act of 1917. At the same time, the newly formed Border Patrol focused on preventing crossings by any Chinese attempting to enter the country rather than on stopping Mexicans traveling north for work. Numerous ethnic Mexican
neighborhoods developed around this time, and the Casa Blanca neighborhood in Riverside, in particular, was geographically similar to the project areas in Redlands. Both were situated near orange groves and the railroad line, close to agricultural and service jobs (Howell-Ardila 2018:23-24).

The closure of the border and anti-Mexican sentiment during the Great Depression reduced demand for Mexican labor in Redlands (SBCS 1932) and led to a lull in immigration as a result. This pattern shifted back with the beginning of World War II, when the Emergency Farm Labor Agreement (the Bracero Program) again brought seasonal Mexican laborers to California while U.S.-born Latino men, among them Mexican-Americans who lived in the project areas, went to serve in the war. The Bracero Program also unintentionally encouraged increased immigration in general (COHP 2015:9-10). This exacerbated tensions between newly arrived workers and those already living in the U.S., driven by worsening working conditions as businesses used the opportunity to exploit the labor force and drive down wages for all (COHP 2015:75-76). Deportations, spurred again by anti-Mexican sentiment in the U.S., followed in 1954 (COHP 2015:9-10). The urban redevelopment projects of the 1960s, along with the construction of Interstate 10 one block north of Stuart Avenue (see Lev-Tov 2013), continued these trends and further isolated those living within the project areas from economic opportunities (Vasquez and Carpio 2012).

Infrastructure Development

Much of the history of Redlands can be told in terms of its development as a city, and then as a hub for the citrus industry in the Inland Empire. Beginning from the early nineteenth century, infrastructure developments aimed at bringing water, power, and transportation connections to the city shaped community formation and civic development. Prior to 1888, when the city formally incorporated, these developments were piecemeal and associated with individual landowners or projects. After that point, infrastructure was aimed at improving the city itself, including flood control projects and the installation of municipal utilities, telephone, sewer, and gas services (ARG 2017:57). The connection of the city to major regional and continental transportation networks was also critical to the city’s development (ARG 2017:18-19, 112-114).

Aside from the direct impacts of municipal utilities on the project areas, regional developments in transportation networks fundamentally altered the flow of goods in the western U.S. The arrival of the railroad in the broader western and southwestern U.S. in the late nineteenth century improved access to American-made products and shifted consumption patterns (Ciolek-Torrello and Swanson 1997:524-537; Ciolek-Torrello and Swope 2013:218-224, 227, 228). The widespread adoption of automobiles beginning in the early twentieth century greatly reduced the need for livestock, and, along with the increasing use of bicycles among city dwellers, profoundly changed the types of material culture associated with individual and family transportation. Ultimately, the automobile and its infrastructure (e.g., repair shops, highways, service stations) would come to dominate the project areas as both the residents and the railroad were eclipsed. Commercial redevelopment in the post-war era focused on making Redlands car-friendly, rather than people-friendly, as it did in much of southern California. One consequence of this was the piecemeal “redevelopment” of downtown and of the project areas, conducted with little concern for the historic character of the structures or for the well-being of those living in the area. Ultimately, redevelopment had the effect of hardening race and class divisions (ARG 2017:113-114; Vasquez and Carpio 2012).

This investigation has provided new information related to disposal practices at the household and neighborhood levels. Among the items deposited in backyard refuse features associated with Chinese occupation are numerous liquor containers. We postulate that, with alcoholic beverages prohibited in the city, disposal required discretion (Figure 8). Occupants of the project areas likely made use of other local dumps (both official and casual) in areas that are now Jennie Davis Park, Texonia Park, and Sylvan Park, and at the point where Church Street ends in the Santa Ana River flood plain. The project is providing important data to enable comparisons regarding consumption and disposal between ethnic minority households and those of the majority Euroamerican population.
CONCLUSION

At the time of this writing, with the fourth and final project area excavation just completed but the assemblage not yet fully inventoried, the Downtown Redlands Archaeological Project has produced 411 intact features (refuse pits, privies, foundations, wok ovens) and a plenitude of associated artifacts, representing domestic activities, industrial pursuits, and the dynamics of an evolving community (Figure 9). Archaeological
and archival sources have supplied ample data to address the themes laid out in the project research design, particularly the history of land use, socioeconomics, links to ancestral countries and to other diaspora communities in the region, modes of public and private ethnic expression, and the nature of ethnic interactions.

The project has provided a unique window into ethnic communities that supplied the local workforce for railroads, citrus groves, packhousings, and associated industries that drove the Redlands economy into the mid-twentieth century. These residential communities were horizontally stratified due to the expanding industrial district that increasingly pushed domestic life out of downtown. The work has provided an opportunity to examine how different ethnic groups adapted to discrimination, the changing attitudes of the dominant community, and variable economic conditions from the founding of the City of Redlands, through its shift from an agricultural focus to the urban/suburban community that exists today.

We recognize the tremendous responsibility we have in analyzing these collections. The ethnic Chinese and Mexican communities of Redlands suffered significant racial discrimination with effects that played a role in shaping the city and continue to resonate today. We hope our research will contribute to the conversation about our collective history. Archaeological assemblages alone can never provide us with a complete picture of life’s complexities as experienced by individuals or communities, but it is our intent that this project will produce data for ongoing constructive discourse about the history of marginalization and a future celebrating diversity and inclusivity. Ongoing project tasks include synthesizing a wealth of archival data, artifact analyses, continuing dialogue with descendant groups, and commemorative efforts in public venues.

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