THE DEEP CREEK SITE REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

The Deep Creek site (SBr-176) has long been used as one of the type sites for the Protohistoric Period in the Mojave Desert. Previous analyses of prehistoric settlement in the Mojave River Forks region have viewed Deep Creek, as well as other large sites located along the Mojave River, as seasonal base camps occupied during the winter months. This view is based on ethnographic practices as reconstructed by anthropologists from memories of tribal elders during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The use of ethnographic analogy to interpret prehistoric settlement in the Mojave River Forks region is questioned. A revised settlement model, based on probable increases in population during the Protohistoric Period, is outlined and hypotheses to test it are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Lying on a terrace overlooking the confluence of the west fork of the Mojave River and Deep Creek is a prehistoric site of some importance to the history of archaeological research in the Mojave Desert (Figure 1). Recorded by Gerald Smith and R.J. Sayles in 1939, the Deep Creek site (SBr-176) has been used to mark the western extent of the Patayan culture as well as a type site for the Protohistoric Period (Warren 1984:426). These interpretations are based on data recovered by the Archaeological Survey Association of Southern California in 1953. Led by Gerald Smith (1955) and using a largely amateur crew, this work was conducted by volunteers during two weekends. In all, 40 man-days were expended in this effort. On this basis hangs some of the fundamental assumptions about Mojave Desert culture history.

The site lay dormant for over 30 years. The construction of the Mojave River Forks dam led some archaeologists to conclude that the site was totally destroyed (Singer 1966; Wells 1977). In 1985, Statistical Research conducted an intensive survey of about 1000 acres of the reservoir administered by the U.S. Army, Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles District (CoE). At the end of the survey, I was joined for a site tour by Gerald Smith and Mike Lerch. At Smith's urging, one of the sites visited was Deep Creek, which we found not only existed, but contained intact

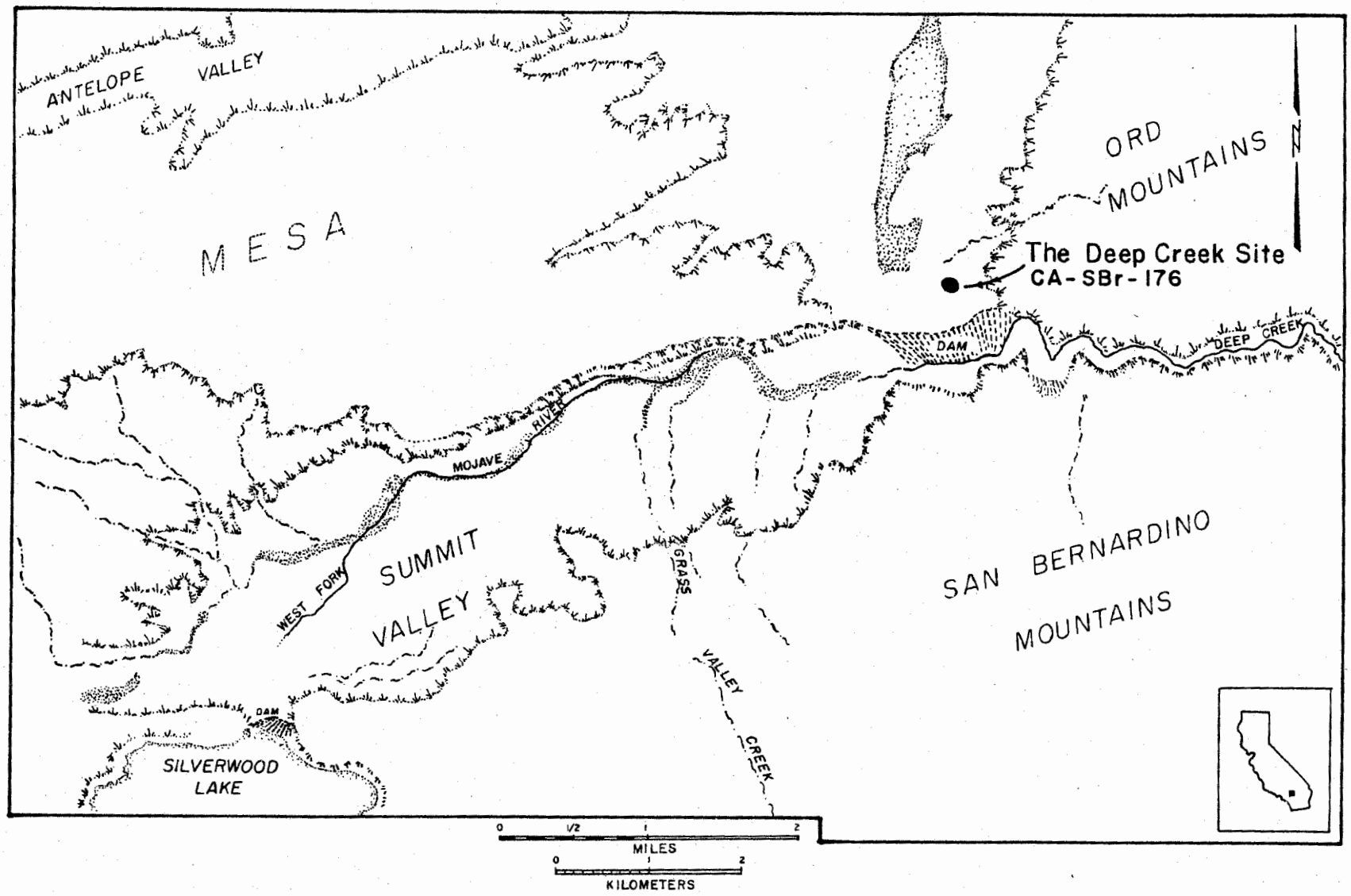

Figure 1. The Deep Creek Site.

subsurface deposits as evidenced by bank profiles of washes cutting through the site.

The 1985 survey resulted in a settlement model based heavily on ethnographic analogy (Altschul et al. 1985). In 1988, the CoE sponsored test excavations at Deep Creek to determine how much of the site still remained. One of the stated goals of this work was to test the settlement model developed in the previous survey (Altschul et al. 1989:20).

In the balance of this paper I explore two issues in which the Deep Creek site has played a pivotal role. The first concerns the use of ethnographic analogy for understanding the Protohistoric Period in the Mojave Desert. The second is an assessment of the Deep Creek site's importance to our understanding of the culture history of the Mojave Desert.

SERRANO SETTLEMENT MODEL

The Serrano, the indigenous occupants of Summit Valley, practiced a seasonal round that consisted of movement up and down the mountains. In the winter, large, multifamilial villages were established near a secure water source. Favored locales were sheltered river valleys at the interface between the mountains and the desert. Spring witnessed the break up of the winter base camps as familial groups began their movement up the mountains in time with the ripening of various fruits, nuts, seeds, and berries. The trek culminated near the mountain summits in stands of oak trees where families, although not necessarily the same ones that composed the winter camps, aggregated. In addition to gathering acorns, deer were hunted and the annual mourning ceremony was conducted. Around the first snow, the acorn camps broke up and families hiked down the mountains to their respective winter village base camps.

Using the seasonal round described above, I tied known site locations in the Mojave River forks region to appropriate positions in the Serrano settlement system (Figure 2). The two largest sites in the area, Deep Creek and Las Flores Ranch, both of which lie along the Mojave River, were viewed as semipermanent winter base camps. I argued that early spring in Summit Valley would have been a particularly stressful time. Winter stores would be low and available food resources would have been few and far between. One of the first available foods would have been (Yucca whipplei), which grows in great abundance on the mesa top overlooking the Mojave River to the south. While perhaps not a favored food, yucca's status as an early spring food would have made it a critical component to the diet of prehistoric residents. Because no reliable water source exists on the northern mesa, I argued that yucca was gathered and processed by small parties living in temporary camps tethered to one of the winter base camps. Once the yucca was depleted, the base camps

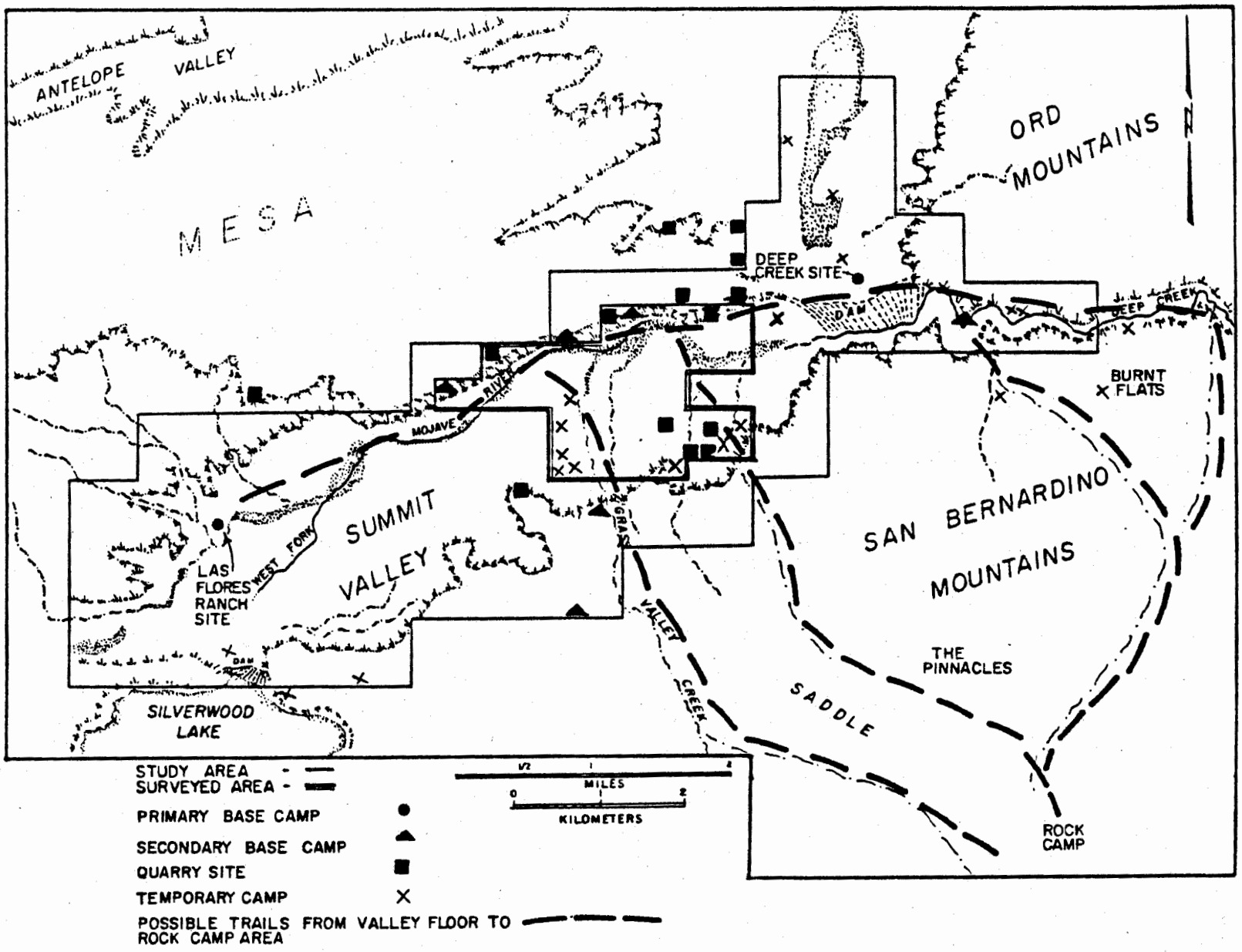

Figure 2. Hypothetical Settlement System for Summit Valley.

broke up into their constituent units, who then began their annual trek up the mountains.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGY

The settlement model outlined above neatly accounts for the available data; perhaps too neatly. While the model probably captures the broad outlines of settlement in Summit Valley, its construction raises two fundamental issues. The first concerns the ethnographic data. As is the case with many southern California tribes, ethnographic studies of the Serrano began long after traditional subsistence and settlement practices had ceased. The ethnographic "present" consists of memories of tribal elders. Our notion of traditional settlement, then, represents a generalized blend of these memories.

Of greater concern, however, is the use of analogy in the archaeological interpretation. The great power of archaeology is the ability to link the synchronic view provided by ethnographic studies with a dynamic temporal component. In theory, we should be able to combine the two facets in studies of culture change and cultural processes: in practice, we rarely do.

The Summit Valley settlement model is typical of most models based on ethnographic analogy. Instead of starting with the past and working forward to the present, we take ethnographic practices and project them into the past. This approach has two deleterious effects. First, it negates the opportunity to study change over time. By projecting the present into the past, we rob ourselves of our greatest tool. Second, these types of models often cannot be nullified. Although not a necessary condition, ethnographic models are generally presented as <u>the</u> model. But unless we can demonstrate that other models are not consistent with the data, we are left with the uneasy feeling that something might be wrong.

In the development of the Summit Valley settlement model, I followed Smith's (1963) argument that most, if not all, sites in the region were occupied by the Serrano. This conclusion has recently come under fire. Sutton (1990) has described a Millingstone Horizon site in the upper reaches of Summit Valley. As more work is accomplished, other sites of considerable antiquity will no doubt be found.

Summit Valley was clearly occupied prior to the Protohistoric Period. This fact in-and-of itself is interesting, but not terribly enlightening. At this point our attention needs to shift from the parameters of culture history to the structure of prehistoric settlement and subsistence systems and changes in these systems over time.

In 1985, Altschul et al. argued that prehistoric subsistence

practices in the Mojave River forks region focused on resources that were ostensibly vertically controlled. The distribution and density of plant resources is uneven as one moves from the mountain valleys to the summits. Resource distribution led to a dual node settlement system. Multifamilial aggregations occurred in the mountainous oak forests as well as in the valley floors. The exact familial composition of the aggregations varied annually. As individual families moved up the mountains, group movements were based on opportunistic decisions regarding the immediate availability of certain resources. This strategy had two beneficial consequences. First, it ensured that in areas, such as mountain slopes where resources are scattered in patches, groups would space themselves accordingly. Moreover, the reshuffling of social units between aggregations allowed the expansion of social ties and increased the probability of finding acceptable marriage partners.

PROBLEMS WITH THE MODEL AND A NEW FORMULATION

The system described above would only be successful as long as the regional population was small. Based on similar hunter-gatherer systems, I would guess that the settlement system for the entire forks region contained no more than 50 people (Lee and DeVore 1968). Ethnohistorically, there were at least two and perhaps three base camps occupied in the forks region: Las Flores Ranch, identified as the Serrano village of Guapiabit, and Hedricks Ranch, probably the location of Atongiabit, were certainly occupied when Garces visited the area in 1776. Deep Creek may have been abandoned by this time; but if so, the site had not been abandoned for long. Each of these villages probably had between 50 and 100 residents. Thus, during the Protohistoric Period, Summit Valley probably had a stable population of between 150 and 300 individuals.

There is no evidence that populations of this size had ever stabilized in the region prior to the Protohistoric Period. What could have led to such a dramatic increase in population? It is highly unlikely that such growth could have occurred solely in response to decreases in the birth or death rate. If not indigenous, where did the people come from?

There are several candidates for the source of the proposed demographic increase. We know that relatively large populations occupied the shorelines of the last stand of Lake Cahuilla. The desiccation of the lake around A.D. 1540 may have sparked large-scale migrations out of the Salton Trough. Alternatively, Warren (1984) has suggested that population movements out of the Great Basin and into the Mojave Desert occurred during the Protohistoric Period.

Regardless of the cause, what effect could doubling or tripling the population have on settlement practices in the forks region?

One of the first consequences might be an overtaxing of economic resources. Yet, there is no evidence of resources being depleted or the theoretical carrying capacity being approached. Although the resources may not have been threatened, the perception of potential hardships may have led to increased social stress. Simply the presence of more people at the annual acorn harvest or the fact that distances between base camps along the river were becoming ever shorter may have precipitated social reaction. Boundaries between groups that had been fluid might have become more rigid, territories more clearly defined, property rights more strongly asserted, and leadership more clearly institutionalized.

It may be contended that the argument advanced above is unnecessary. Even in a dual node system, it is possible that not everybody in the system moved between the camps in the mountains and the valleys. The oldest and most infirm members of the group may not have been able to make the trip. But such exceptions miss the point of the discussion. The establishment of permanent villages has less to do with a physical presence than it does with the organization of activities and society. All trips outside the village, no matter by how many people or how long in duration, are now considered temporary. The base camp is the logistic center. Residents have a strong sense of corporateness, disputes are resolved within the villages, and fractionalization that characterized earlier society has vanished.

I recognize that the scenario presented above is highly speculative; based more on isolated threads than woven strands. Yet, it is certainly as plausible as the model that projects the ethnographic practices endlessly into the past. The models lead to social forms that could be distinguished in the archaeological record. The "ethnographic" model holds that site types and site size should not have varied over time. In contrast, the "demographic" model specifies that base camps should be large and closer together than those of previous periods. Base camps should contain permanent storage facilities and evidence of resources gathered throughout the entire year. Finally, markers of status and group positions should be more frequent.

CONCLUSIONS

The Deep Creek site's place in the history of Mojave Desert archaeology is assured not because of its spectacular nature, for there are many richer and more elaborate sites, but because it was one of the first base camps to be excavated along the Mojave River. As more sites are excavated and reported, the large gaps in the cultural historic sequence that now appear so forbidding will shrink in size and importance. But as the outlines of prehistory come into sharper focus, glaring deficiencies in our understanding of the processes and events that shaped the sequence will be magnified. To keep pace with the accumulation

of data, we need to sharpen our thoughts and continually test our notions. In some small way, I hope this too becomes part of Deep Creek's legacy.

NOTES

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