

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS: A SECOND CHANCE

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ABSTRACT

The Legacy sponsored Private Artifact Collection Inventory, Analysis, and Recovery Project at Edwards Air Force Base Flight Test Center has opened doors to collections that otherwise would not contribute data to the archaeological and historical record of the base and the surrounding area. The value of this Department of Defense project was quickly proven with the discovery of a unique diagnostic artifact collected on what is now base property. The multidisciplinary approach used to conduct fieldwork provided more opportunities for gathering information than an approach narrowly focused on surveying collections would have. Among the disciplines used were archaeology, history, oral history and museum curation and collections management. Video documentation of field visits was a valuable tool for collecting both visual documentation of the collection and oral interpretation from the collector. The breadth and variety of collections continued to be a source of amazement.

A logical question to ask would be, "Why would anyone on an Air Force base study private collections?" The answer is, "Private collections often contain a lot of the good stuff, the artifacts archaeologists and historians cannot find because they have been picked up and carted away." In August 1993, Computer Sciences Corporation was tasked by the Air Force to conduct a survey of private collections funded by the Department of Defense Legacy program. The purpose of the Legacy program is to protect the cultural heritage and historic properties on its installations. The goal of the private collections survey was to identify and recover information relating to Native American, settler community and early use of the Edwards Air Force Base area. The scope of this work included gathering prehistoric and historic artifacts, documents, photographs and military and aerospace memorabilia.

Over the years, prehistoric and historic artifacts have been picked up and transported from their sites of origin. Often these whole or unique diagnostic artifacts, tools, and memorabilia become a part of collections cared for and enjoyed by private collectors. Without access to these diagnostic artifacts, it is often difficult for archaeologists and historians to correctly date known sites or attribute them to specific archaeologically recognized cultures or historic eras. In addition, surface collecting may alter or remove any signs of activity by earlier inhabitants, making it difficult to identify these sites.

The objectives of the project were to increase the knowledge of the prehistoric and historic occupation of the Base and the surrounding area, to develop specific approaches, methods and techniques for acquiring this information, and finally, to assess the usefulness of studying private collections.

The multidisciplinary approach used for this project was helpful in addressing the many facets involved in recording the history of the area, experiences the collectors had to share, and

the documentation and provenience of their collections. In essence, this approach painted a more complete picture of the collectors, collections and artifacts investigated. For this project, it reflects a more integrated history than might have been attained by using a single discipline approach.

One of the concerns that was raised during the preparation of the project was how to treat the matter of illegal collecting should it arise. It was decided that recovering the information that private collections held was of paramount importance to the project and any heavy-handed posture would create an atmosphere of hostility that would interfere with building rapport and gathering information. Therefore, each collector was approached as though they were well-intentioned, law-abiding people. When the subject was raised, the project staff responded in a non-threatening and positive manner to educate against illegal collecting; inform collectors of the legal issues and laws; and try to convey to them why it is important for all of us to protect these irreplaceable cultural resources.

A number of laws have been instituted to protect the cultural and natural resources of the land. Laws which deal directly with issues raised by private collecting are the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979; the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990; and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended through 1992 (USDI 1992). Although many of the collections in private hands were collected prior to the passage of these legislative acts, some, no doubt, were collected afterwards and belong in the realm of questionable acquisitions. Despite their removal from context, the artifacts in private collections can have diagnostic value if they can be linked to specific sites. For this reason, there is a growing recognition of private collections as a significant cultural resource.

Traditionally, early collections were accumulated at a time when such activities were accepted and even seen as a positive way of preserving the remnants of vanishing cultures. Ordinarily, collecting was not done in a climate of vandalism or disregard for the cultures involved. In the 19th century, many well-intentioned individuals associated with institutions of higher learning combed the country looking for treasures to fill the vaults of academia, thereby forming some of the finest museums in the country. This was all done in the excitement of discovery, the eagerness to learn, to educate, and to preserve. However, this sort of collecting presents a problem as it may not concern itself with the context of the object. This deprives us of information crucial to understanding the full extent of an object's significance.

In our work at Edwards, we have found a strong tradition of amateur collecting. Traditionally, desert dwellers are a hardy sort who take great interest in their environment and the native cultures and history of the area. Collecting, and its less than legal cousin, "pothunting," have been long time passions of some locals who, the project has revealed, have collected far and wide. One collector boasts a 300-mile radius for past collecting activities and has a vast collection to prove it. The high desert area has an abundance of ore and mineral deposits and is known by "rockhounds" (collectors of mineral and gem specimens who often cut, polish, and mount their finds) as an especially fruitful area for collecting. There are numerous field books specifically written by and for the rockhound community.

Historically, the area was an important mining area for such minerals as gold and silver and other less precious resources such as clay, mud, and borax. Borax is still mined today in big open pits near Boron. A traditional form of recreation for families in the past was "weekend prospecting" for these ores and minerals. In the pursuit of this entertainment, families would travel to likely areas to camp and prospect. In the process, discovery of archaeological sites was unavoidable and collecting artifacts became a part of the activity. Sadly, digging and destruction of archaeological sites was a result of this interest in "Indian treasures."

More recently, recreational off-roading has taken a great toll on prehistoric and historical artifacts remaining in situ. Four-wheeling, motorcycle riding, and hiking in the desert take people to places which until recently remained mostly undisturbed. With the quicker access that rough terrain vehicles provide, serious collecting or pothunting is made easier than ever.

To be fair, some collectors are honestly ignorant of the laws protecting archaeological and historical sites and artifacts. Efforts can be made to educate them and the general public about state and federal laws prohibiting illicit collecting. Perhaps these efforts will encourage collectors to return collected objects. On the other hand, there are collectors who simply do not care about protection of cultural and natural resources and resent any attempts to try to educate them. Moreover, there are always those who will plunder for monetary gain to feed the traffic in illegally collected items. These people are not only

breaking the law, they are wantonly decimating our cultural heritage.

I would like at this point to go directly to some specific collections in the vicinity of Edwards, and our experiences in investigating them.

Collectors are as varied as their collections. They come in all ranges of personalities, interests, and awareness. Those involved in the project seemed to have been very proud of their collections and were anxious to share information and access to them. One was rather skittish, initially, and remained somewhat uneasy about revealing locations. However, his interest in the project and in sharing his information superseded his fear of prosecution once he was assured that the project was not for that purpose.

Some collections were focused while others contained anything and everything. Some were very organized while others existed in a state of chaos. Some collectors knew where everything came from while others didn't see the need to document provenience. Regardless of the state of their collections, collectors were proud of them and expected others to be also. The key to working successfully with these collectors was to make them comfortable and to assure them that their participation in the project was important and would be handled in a professional manner. This, of course, required tact and sensitivity as well as technical skills.

A word, here, about the identities of these people. Several methods were included to protect the participants, their information, and collections. Among these were anonymity, binding legal documents, restrictions, and protective clauses. There are several reasons why contacts may choose to remain anonymous. The two most obvious are for the protection of the collector and the collections, and fear of disclosure of illegal or questionable collecting. If there is a threat of disclosure, the collector will more than likely decline to share their collection and information with the investigator. If they can be assured of absolute anonymity, they are often willing to share information that otherwise would be lost. Anonymity was addressed in the project by using a contact number with no other identifying information in the database or files. If a name was listed on an agreement, the person was still referred to as "ANONYMOUS" if they requested anonymity. In the technical report, participants were identified by number only.

Because of the time limits of the project, we chose 7 individuals from a database of 69 contacts who had collections or information that we thought worth pursuing. They include: Collector 012, a long term employee at various military installations in the area whose collecting activities have spanned fifty years; Collector 020, who started gathering arrowheads as a child growing up on a homestead located on what is now the Base; Collector 022, who has extensive holdings related to the Pancho Barnes era; 037 & 043, a brother and sister who spent summers at their grandparents homestead on land that now belongs to the Base; 052, a donor who collects historical objects and as a child accompanied another one of our collectors; and Collector 069, a collector who lived on base and collected objects from the Pancho Barnes site while there.

Collection 012 was used as the core collection for this project. The collection is quite large and includes prehistoric, historical, and military artifacts including a rare flaked stone butterfly crescent (Tadlock 1966:663). The full extent of the collection is unknown as the collector brought the artifacts to the investigator instead of allowing the entire collection to be viewed and researched. Investigation of the entire collection may be pursued at a later date. The collector has collected for at least the last fifty years in this and other locations where he has lived and worked.

Sensitivity and tact were required with this collector because of his fear of someone taking away his collection. Assuring the collector that his identity would be kept confidential facilitated access to the collection and the valuable information it contained. Over time, however, he became quite interested in the project and visited the investigator and neighboring staff often, talking to many people in the area. Needless to say, this activity compromised the attempt at confidentiality.

The collector was justifiably proud of his collection, although he did not realize its research value. He graciously agreed to lend the collection for the length of the project for analysis purposes. He also agreed to a loan-out of the crescent to California State University, Bakersfield for research purposes. A paper was given at the 1994 Kelso conference which included information gained from this research. Co-authors of the paper were Gerrit Fenenga, Mark Campbell, and Gwyn Alcock.

Among the prehistoric artifacts lent from this collection, the following were identified:

- 3 Pinto points
- 1 Elko point
- 8 Rose Springs points
- 1 Eastgate/Rosegate point
- 2 Cottonwood points
- 1 Desert Side-Notched/Rose Springs point
- 2 Dart points
- 2 Arrow points
- 1 flaked stone butterfly crescent
- 2 shell pieces, one worked around the edges
- 1 milling slab
- 3 manos

In addition there were the following historical items:

- 1 clay horsehead sculpture
- 1 medicine bottle
- 1 Asian doll's head
- 100 coins, medals, buttons, and military insignia

The collector stated informally, that most of the artifacts lent for the project were collected from multiple locations on Base. He also stated he could identify some of these locations. The collector has indicated his willingness to take the investigator and an archaeologist to identify these locations. To date, this has not happened. While unsure, we suspect that this collector's reluctance to do a site trip relates to a fear of losing his

collection. This situation leads to the larger question of protecting the individual's rights and the rights of all participants.

The sensitive nature of borrowing other people's possessions or interviewing them for their oral histories requires that care be taken to adequately protect them. Oral history and museum professionals are ethically bound to protect their contacts, an obligation sometimes overlooked in the competitive business environment. Without it the individual has no reason to trust or share their collections and valuable information and should not be expected to. Because the Private Collection project had as its base the surveying, inventorying, borrowing, and recovery of private collection artifacts and documentation materials, it was necessary to create forms for the transfer or change of custody of items from one party to another. These legal agreements were developed to cover all legal aspects anticipated through the pursuit of these activities. Creating legal documents that are appropriate and binding assures all parties that their interests have been adequately addressed and protected. These legal agreements set the parameters for activities in writing and stipulate the conditions to which all parties agree.

In order to produce acceptable and binding agreements, legal considerations were researched and addressed as fully as could be anticipated prior to formulating each document. In addition, the agreements and forms created contained protective clauses concerning copyright, restrictions, insurance, classified or sensitive information, and care of collections. Restrictions could be selected or written into the document by the individual or the investigator. In our case, restrictions of access and distribution were added by the Air Force at a later date, as required.

Besides the legal aspects, the challenges of working with collectors can take many forms. Many of the collectors are older people with serious physical limitations. Ways must be found to work with them.

Collector 020 suffered a stroke recently which has left him paralyzed on one side and without speech. Although he is ambulatory, precautions must be taken to protect his health at all times. He does communicate through his wife and in drawings and maps. He is very excited about a planned trip to the site of his childhood collecting. Because of the importance of his collection and his willingness to share it, the additional effort is worth it. The collector grew up on this homestead and collected artifacts on both this site and on an adjacent site, a large prehistoric village or base camp which slightly overlaps the western boundary of the homestead. Both sites are on land that now belongs to the Base. The collector indicated he found artifacts along the road while walking to school as a young boy. This road bisects the prehistoric site which is very large.

This collector has a huge collection which covers the walls and nearly every piece of furniture in the room. A large display case sits at one end of the living room and artifacts large and small fill every corner. Mortars, pestles and other artifacts lie beneath every table. Six or seven huge blades grace the wall beside his recliner and he keeps his Clovis point on the coffee table. This is only half his collection. His ex-wife has the rest and, although he was awarded the portion she took, it has not been recovered.

Plans have been made to take the collector to the homestead and the adjacent prehistoric site. Because he is in frail health, the trip is awaiting good weather and dry ground conditions. At the same time, his physical condition makes the speedy investigation of his collection a necessity. This individual's collection happens to be well-documented and well organized and displayed. Such is not always the case.

Imagine going to visit a collector and finding three tractor trailer containers, several buildings, a four-room motel, and an Amtrack car, all stuffed with memorabilia.

Collector 022 was associated with the Pancho Barnes Ranch Site, which was located on what is now Edwards AFB. He still retains a large collection. The Rancho Oro Verde or "Pancho's", as the site is called, included at various times a dairy, an alfalfa farming operation, an airport, a flight school, and finally (and most successfully) a private restaurant, bar, dance hall and motel with a large swimming pool and riding stables. This complex was called the "Happy Bottom Riding Club," and was famous for its test pilot and Hollywood-crowd patrons. There is much speculation about the goings-on at Pancho's and great interest in her unusual and legendary life.

The collector now lives on a cluttered parcel of land north of the Base. In addition to his small house, which is jam-packed with papers and other things, there is a small rental, a pumphouse, a 4-room motel, an Amtrack railroad car, and three huge storage containers of the type and size pulled by an eighteen-wheel tractor-trailer rig. Most of these hold items that are related to the Pancho Barnes site. In addition, there are two huge borax wagons and an old Cadillac beside the Amtrack car. The motel was loaded with scattered and boxed items related to Pancho, aviation history, and the ranch. Items in the office of the motel were in disarray because it was vandalized several years ago. There were historic photographs, awards, papers, furnishings, historic mementos, boxes of Pancho shirts from the Pancho Barnes parties, etc. Some of the original photographs were in extremely poor condition and are presently stored in an old magazine—a conservator's nightmare!

A number of original songs written by Pancho were stored in an old suitcase in the motel. While we were looking at the music written by Pancho, he sang one of the songs he said she had written for him. This was quite a wonderful moment since he obviously relished the fact that it was his song and sang the chorus with gusto.

The Amtrack car is loaded haphazardly with everything from Haitian paintings to crockery from the Happy Bottom Riding Club. Some of the items include boxes of check stubs from the 1940s, a trunk full of historic/family photographs, the huge slotted silverware bin from the club, numerous antlers (some made into furniture), boxed glassware and ashtrays, a mineral and crystal collection, framed paintings, photographs, and much more. The contents of the three huge containers are unknown at this time.

As an initial approach to the logistical problems of this collection (which were very near to insurmountable), we did a survey sample using a video camera and limited on-site docu-

mentation. Plans to revisit the site were postponed due to ill health and an annual hunting season visit by the collector's friend. At this time, it is not likely that the collection will be inventoried unless substantial funding becomes available.

While the project had its share of problems, there were many instances where the going was less tough and the rewards sweeter. In conclusion, I would like to share with you a case where our multidisciplinary approach provided some quick and gratifying results. A field visit to a homestead led to new information about that homestead and surrounding sites. Our guides, 037 & 043, while not currently collectors, spent childhood summers at their grandparents farm which is now Base property. During the visit to the site, the brother and sister who had not been back to the homestead in over forty years, were able to identify the site of an orchard, the vegetable garden, the outhouse, irrigation canals, a reservoir, and a subterranean liquor still. These features would have been difficult for anyone else to identify. The still had previously been misidentified in an archaeological report as a holding pond. They brought with them to the interview 22 historical photographs of the homestead, a hand-drawn map, a 1947 topographical map of the area, one newspaper clipping, and their mother's diary.

The field trip to their former homesite was a very emotional experience for both of the interviewees. Because the interview took place so closely afterwards, it produced a vivid picture of a child's life in the area during the 1930s. When asked how the visit to the homestead affected them, the sister replied:

Well, when we were invited to go out there, we were very interested and it was a wonderful trip. I expected just to look around and kind of see what was left, which was almost nothing. But, when I got there and walked there, it was like the whole thing was in three dimensions. It brought back everything just the way it was, almost. So, it was really exciting to have that feeling and to walk over the ground and think of where we had been and what it looked like and all the good times we had there (Johnson and Keene 1994).

The brother responded to the question by saying:

Well, I had been out there in the early 1950's, so I had a little more vivid impression of the homestead. I did draw...a copy of what my recollection of the homesite was and I think it was pretty close to what we found when we went out there yesterday on the 13th. I just sort of hate to see the damage that incurred over the years because we had such favorable memories when we were children. It was too bad that we were not able to maintain it so that our children could have experienced that same type of lifestyle that we had out there. It was a protected lifestyle because you had your own family, basically, and then your close friends. But, it brought back a lot of memories (Johnson and Keene 1994).

This oral history interview was especially rewarding due to the interaction of the brother and sister. It was both amusing and informative, and proved that oral history is a valuable tool in historic archaeology. The brother's first recollection was of the still which had recently been destroyed by the "Feds": "My first recollection is around 10 to 11. That must have been after they blew up the still and we went out and got these redwood barrels and brought them in for our swimming pools. We filled them up and we smelled like little breweries when we'd get out because the alcohol had soaked into them" (Johnson and Keene 1994).

At about the same time, the brother was appointed chief protector of the peach orchard, charged with shooting birds out of the trees with a small .22 rifle given him by his grandfather:

...we arrived one weekend and he was standing there grinning with his hands behind his back and he approached me and handed me a small .22 rifle and said,

"Well, this is to replace your B.B. gun. You keep the birds out of the fruit." So I walked out just adjacent to the ranch house there and I saw this bird sitting in the grapes and I shot it and, of course, I was rather happy that I got it and I ran out and brought it back. Well, it happened to be his pet quail that he had been feeding for... several months and he had a fit! (Johnson and Keene 1994).

In the course of this project, we accomplished several things: we increased the knowledge of the prehistoric and historic occupation of the Base and the surrounding area; we developed specific approaches, methods and techniques for acquiring and processing this information; and finally we proved the usefulness of studying private collections. The prehistory and history of Edwards AFB is very complex, but the information gathered from private collectors and other contacts has helped to fill in some of the gaps. It has given us a second chance.

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