Sherlock Holmes Had Nothing on Us: Collections Related to the Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake, California and the Surrounding Area

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the types of collections that are available for research at the China Lake Curation Facility. In 2003 Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake, with the help of the "Friends of China Lake Archaeology," developed a Curation Facility and Archaeological Laboratory at the "Old Ice House." The facility houses archaeological collections, both provenienced and unprovenienced, resulting from nearly thirty years of Cultural Resource Management work. It also curates recently acquired collections from Bierman and Mohr's pioneering archaeological work, and from private pioneer families. This paper discusses the value of this effort as well as data from Ayers Rock, Blackwater Well, local family collections, and casually collected sites from the early history of the San Bernardino County Museum. Consolidating these collections has served as a catalyst for further research into the prehistory and history of region. The public has gained a feeling of ownership of their past and are able to assist in its preservation. Important data is waiting for a local "Sherlock Holmes" to discover items which will benefit the cultural heritage of the western Mojave Desert.

Introduction

The Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS), China Lake contains 1.1 million acres in the Mojave Desert and Great Basin. The base is approximately the size of the State of Delaware, embracing portions of Inyo, Kern and San Bernardino counties (Fig. 1). The base was set aside from public and fee simple lands by the Department of Defense in 1943. The public lands were withdrawn from the General Land Office (now the Bureau of Land Management) and Fee or private lands were purchased from willing sellers or through condemnation. By some accounts over 200 families called the Base home. These families included ranchers, farmers, miners, gem and mineral collectors, and federally recognized as well as non-federally recognized Indians, all of whom had a close attachment to the land. Litigation against the United States for the "takings" was filed in Federal Court in 1953 and settled in favor of the Department of Defense in 1962 (NARA 1962). Some hard feelings exist to this day regarding the expulsion from private property, mining claims and aboriginal homelands. This is not unlike other federal takings for the general good. Feelings of disenfranchisement often last many generations.

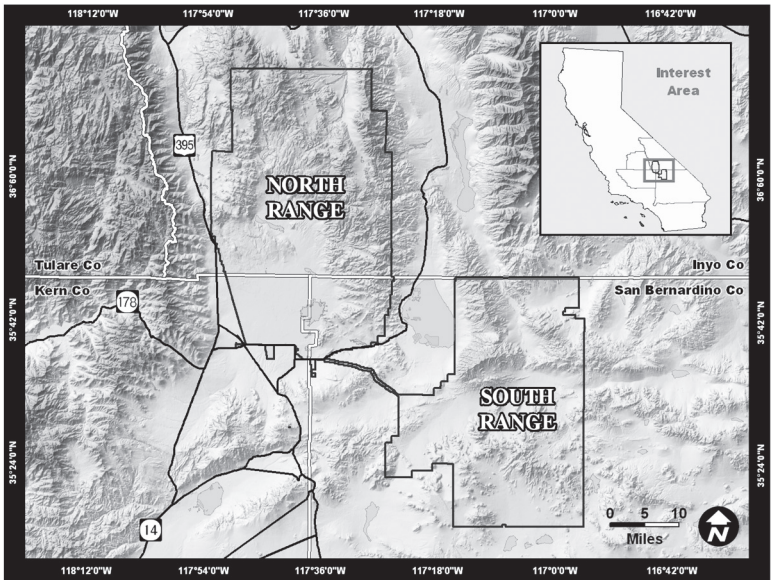

Fig. 1. Map of Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake.

The Curation Facility

Building 1022 (Figs. 2. and 3), located at the corner of Cobra and Blandy Streets on China Lake's Main site, was constructed in 1944 as an ice house. It contains approximately 25,000 square feet. Its walls are approximately three feet thick. It has usable loading ramps, well-lighted office space, and a bathroom facility. Prior to renovation for a curation facility, it had been scheduled for demolition. The building needed extensive renovation as it had been abandoned in the 1980s and was beginning to deteriorate. However, NAWS needed to comply with the legal requirements for curation of federal archaeological collections under the guidance found in 36 Code of Federal Regulations 79. Through negotiations between the Environmental Planning and Management Office and the Public Works Directorate in early 2003, 7,500 square feet of the building was transferred for use as a curation facility.

NAWS has a program called "self-help" through which employees who are between projects, or who have skills that are needed elsewhere, can spend time assisting other departments. After assessing the situation, a phone call was made to the Public Works Department requesting assistance from anyone having carpentry, masonry, electrical, or plumbing skills. Through Bureau of Land Management (BLM) contacts, volunteers were also recruited for the construction of shelving, painting, and moving heavy items. In 2007, the work was completed and the NAWS Curation Facility and Archaeological Laboratory was formally opened for research. Work continues at the facility to improve the curation process and research capabilities.

The organization of approximately fifty volunteers was incorporated as the Friends of China Lake Archaeology (FOCLA), as a 501c(3) non-profit organization. Every other Friday, referred to as "Flex Friday," and several weekends during the year the facility is staffed with volunteers. Ongoing work includes maintenance of the building, cataloguing of artifacts, managing an ever growing electronic and paper library, and updating site records. Photographs and photographic records are meticulously archived. Archaeological and historical site locations are field verified using photographs and

Fig. 2. China Lake Curation Facility and Archaeological Laboratory, Building 1022.

Fig. 3. Interior of the China Lake Curation Facility and Archaeological Laboratory, Building 1022.

sometimes scant field notes. Repeat photographs, the comparison of the landscape of historical photographs from the identical location are regularly used to monitor sites. The FOCLA volunteers also follow up on leads regarding the location of collections, doing what has become outstanding detective work. Over 6,000 volunteer hours were reported during the federal fiscal year 2007. In early 2007, all 25,000 square feet of the building was transferred by the Navy Central Command for use as a curation facility. The focus of ongoing volunteer work is on the mining, industrial, transportation and ranching history of the base.

The Collections

Provenienced Artifact Collections

The majority of the collections at the facility are those generated by the archaeological investigations of Far Western Anthropological Research Group (FWARG), Davis, California. The FWARG collections resulted from their intensive work at NAWS over the past twenty years. All of these collections are well documented, catalogued and provenienced. They form the basic foundation of the research collections. An electronic catalogue of the collection is being developed. Virginia Bickford and Vanessa Zelko of Epsilon Systems Solutions, Inc. and FOCLA volunteers have spearheaded this effort. Bar codes are scheduled to be added to artifacts for ease in managing and tracking them.

Collections also include the voluminous Emma Lou Davis China Lake collection from the early 1970s. This collection (Davis and Panlaqui 1978) was stored by the Great Basin Research Foundation for a number of years, then by the Maturango Museum in Ridgecrest. It is readily available for research and was recently used by Mark Basgall (Basgall et al, 2005, 2007) during his recent reexamination of the pluvial archaeology of Lake China. Recently, graduate student, Virginia Morgan has conducted additional research on the Davis collection. Her work involves the review of the typology of crescentics and is sponsored by Dr. Gerrit Fenenga of the California Division of Forestry.

Fig. 4. Photographic Example of the Use of Repeat Photography at Bandit Springs, South Range. Photo on the left was taken in 1922 by Shady Myrick. Photo on right was taken in 2007 by Russell Kaldenberg.

Alexander Rogers of the Maturango Museum has studied the collections from two archaeological sites excavated during the 1960s. These are the Ray Cave and the Chapman Cave collections, both from within the 36,000 acre Coso Rock Art National Historic Landmark, which contains literally millions of rock art elements as well as a range of archaeological sites spanning the last 12,000 years (Whitley 2000).

During May 2006, NAWS repatriated all identifiable Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act items. The items were transferred from NAWS to the Timbisha Shoshone, who, on behalf of the tribes of the Owens Valley area, accepted the collections for repatriation. Staff at Death Valley National Park has since maintained those collections.

Other provenienced collections include materials recovered by Ancient Enterprise, W and S Consultants, EDAW, Dr. Tim Hillebrand, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, Tetratec, and ASM Affiliates. These collections represent another 20,000 artifacts.

Artifacts collected by former Base employees form a small percentage of the overall total. Some are provenienced, others unlabeled. These items range from flakes and milling stones, tin cans, bottles, automobile club and Navy signs, water pipe fragments, a black powder flask, large ore buckets and wagon wheels to a rare wooden handcart.

Photographic collections

The curation facility has many file folders of early NAWS photographs that are unidentified. Those are problematic at best, and a struggle at the worst. Many of the old photographs are taken into the field where their locations are identified. When the location is identified an updated photograph is taken and compared to the original photograph. This technique (Fig. 4) is referred to as "repeat photography." This is a valuable technique to document changes in the site, landscape, vegetation and landform. The photographic archives are continuously improving and are a valuable asset to both research and the heritage values of the local area.

Family collections

These are collections made by members of families who lived on or near NAWS, or had an interest in its history. The Curation Facility provides a place for these collections to be stored and made accessible so that they retain their contextual historic value. Families who were displaced by the federal

government have important stories to tell and their collections assist in telling that story. Their contributions are valued by FOCLA. Working closely with them assists with better understanding of the region's past and also helps to reduce individual feelings of disenfranchisement.

Just as Sherlock Holmes was known for his detailed detective work, FOCLA's volunteers use their contacts to locate previously unknown collections. The approach has been to follow tips on where collections may be located, contact the owners and then to immediately inform the owners of the collections that their collections will not be confiscated; rather they will be documented, photographed, copied, or catalogued. If collections are loaned for study, they are returned quickly with a generous expression of appreciation.

To date, the most significant family collections are from the Chapman, DiPol, Lightburn, and Gossett families. They are pioneer families to the area and all had important items to contribute. These collections are identified by family surname for purposes of cataloguing and as a way to permanently recognize and empower the donors. One of the issues donors had was that they did not want items discarded if the collections do not fit into the future plans of the facility. No items are discarded without offering them first to the donor family. Some members have also donated early newspapers containing accounts of the area, and have also purchased historic items to add to the collections.

The Chapman collection, donated by Thomas Chapman, Jr., contains basketry and other perishables, prehistoric and historic pottery, a late prehistoric cedar bow, green slate pendants, miscellaneous photographs, articles about early "recreational" archaeology, historic artifacts and archival documents which includes mining claim records. Alan Gold has recently used obsidian artifacts donated by the Chapman family for his continued research into the temporal sequence of Great Basin obsidian biface technology (Gold 2006, 2007).

The DiPol collection was donated by John DiPol. Its focus primarily consists of well-documented photographs, historic maps, and historic Navy memoranda dating to the 1950s and 1960s. The maps include notations of place names that are no longer used but provide an important snapshot in time to understand the history of the base. Many of the notations refer to locations of undocumented rock art sites.

The Gossett family collection was donated by Barbara and Bill Gossett. This collection includes materials as far ranging as 1870s cavalry buttons, a restored Brown Ware olla, mining claim paperwork once in old Prince Albert-style tobacco cans, site location information placed on maps, photographs, and oral histories. Much of the material is provenienced in a general sense, but not by explicit location. The Gossett collection is one that requires field visits to verify the original locations of donated items.

The Lightburn Collection contains mining records and photograph from the early 1900s that belonged to Marion "Shady" Myrick, an early miner who lived and prospected throughout the South Range. Among other things, "Shady" was known as the discoverer of Myrikite, a precious gem that is found within a cryptocrystalline called "bloodstone." Water rights information, private letters, and mining memorabilia are also included in this important collection (Wild 2000). (The collection has been transferred to the Mojave Desert Historical and Cultural Association in Goffs, California, with copies of the archival material remaining at the Curation Facility.)

Fig. 5. Photographs of Al Mohr and an unusual petroglyph on a boulder at Seep Springs, South Range taken in 1947. Photographs by Agnes Bierman.

Various NAWS employees have donated artifacts which are located in general, but not by exact provenience. These are catalogued by the name of the donating employee. These are valuable for understanding the distribution of historically collected items and for interpretation.

Collections from Early Archaeologists

Malcolm Rogers excavated and reported on archaeological sites on the South Range, in particular at Indian Springs Cave and Zoo Cave (Kaldenberg 2005). Allen has reexamined the sites that Rogers studied and has found the collections to be valuable not only for comparative study, but to query subsistence activity and chronology. Allen has also reported on the significant preservation of archaeological resources on the South Range by comparing Rogers' notes, sketches and artifact lists (Allen 2004, 2005, and 2006). The Rogers' collection and notes are curated at the San Diego Museum of Man but duplicate records copied by Agnes Bierman and Al Mohr and photographs found in their collections are curated at NAWS.

Agnes Bierman and Al Mohr Collections

In 2002, after the death of the Albert and Trish Mohr, their extensive collection of materials from the California and Nevada deserts was donated for study. Distributions of the various collections were made to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, California State University, Stanislaus and the Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Association, Goffs, California. FOCLA continues to sort through paperwork for appropriate distribution of artifacts or documents. Among the collection of artifacts were extremely significant but previously unknown, collections from China Lake. These collections include excavation materials from Lead Pipe Cave, Seep Springs (Fig. 5.), and small associated sites through the Eagle Crags and Robbers Mountain area.

Fig. 6. Photographs of Agnes Bierman. Photo on the left taken by Gene Daniels at Little Lake, California, in 1948. Photo on the right of Agnes Bierman Babcock and Dean Babcock taken by Russell L. Kaldenberg in 2006, located at Lead Pipe Springs, South Range.

Over 13,000 artifacts, including perishables such as arrow shafts, basket fragments, fire sticks and starter blocks, fiber bundles, pine nuts, and other seeds were in their collections. Other items include ceramics and lithics, as well as photographic documentation, catalogues, note cards, notebooks, preliminary reports and maps. These collections had been missing for many years because Dr. Mohr transferred his archaeological interest from the Mojave Desert to China and Japan and Ms. Bierman discontinued her active archaeological research around 1955, while raising a family in the San Francisco Bay area (Wells and Backes 2005, 2007). Ms. Bierman had lost contact with much of the archaeology community, except for occasional contacts with Dr. Charles Rozaire of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Dr. Rozaire was contacted after several unsuccessful attempts to locate Ms Bierman. Dr. Rozaire knew that she was living in the San Francisco Bay Area. After much detective work, Ms. Bierman was found under her married name of Mrs. Dean Babcock (Kaldenberg 2005).

Judyth Reed, from the Ridgecrest BLM office, began interviewing Ms. Bierman and documented the Bierman and Mohr story on the South Range (Kaldenberg 2005). Helen Wells and Clarus Backes (2005, 2007) continued the documentation of Ms. Babcock's history of her work on the South Range. During that period (Fig. 6.), Ms. Babcock visited the sites that she worked on with Al Mohr in the late 1940s on two occasions (Wells and Backes 2005, 2007).

The collections have provided information that is extremely important to researchers. Andrew Monastero (2007) has used the collections as supportive data for his master's thesis work on the Bierman Caves (CA-SBR-8) in the Robbers Mountain area; Wells and Backes (2005, 2007) have reviewed the materials for their analytical work on the west side of the Robbers Mountain. Obsidian

has been examined for sourcing and hydration by Hughes (2007) and Richard Stewart, Owens Valley Paiute elder, has examined the basket fragments for botanical specimens as well as weaving techniques (Stewart 2005).

Dee Schroth and Mary Kearney of the San Bernardino County Museum conducted an intensive review of the collections from the South Range (Schroth and Kearney 2006). These artifacts had been collected during the 1960s and 1970s, including artifact collections made by Stuart Peck, who collected many hundreds of items including perishables and southwestern style pottery (Peck and Smith 1957). Over 9,000 artifacts, provenienced only by site location, were transferred from the San Bernardino County Museum. They are presently being catalogued into the China Lake accession system and they will be available to researchers. Gerald Smith had been granted access to the South Range for the purposes of collecting artifacts. Much of what he collected consisted of lithic artifacts. Schroth and Kearney (2006) reported that fairly extensive excavations at Hidden Springs recovered prehistoric artifacts and also historic artifacts such as an opium pipe, historic era ceramics, cans, and 19th-century bottles.

Collections from Areas Adjacent to NAWS

Volunteers from FOCLA have not limited their efforts only to those collections that are from within the boundaries of the base. Examples of other research that they have undertaken to contribute to the understanding of the prehistory of the region include the following examples.

In 1929 Malcolm Rogers first documented the Blackwater Well site, (SBR-2322H). This site is a prehistoric and historic era site ranging from Gypsum period to 20th-century cattle grazing. It is located adjacent to the South Range. The Archaeological Survey Association of Southern California (ASA) extensively collected from this site and Kaldenberg and Nelson Leonard conducted a test excavation in 1978 (Kaldenberg 1978; Kaldenberg and Whitley 2005; Kaldenberg 2006; Kaldenberg, Leonard, and Reed 2009). The collection was sorted and catalogued by FOCLA volunteers and is curated at the San Bernardino County Museum.

In 2006, the SRI Curation facility in Redlands, California identified other collections made by Dr. Gil Becker on behalf of the ASA and the University of Redlands. Anne Stoll located most of the material and identified it as debitage, but a number (n=37) of midsections of bifaces were found. Dr. Robert Yohe, California State University Bakersfield, examined them and found that the midsections were the result of manufacturing fractures (Yohe 2007). Monastero (2007) has also used data from the collection for his master's thesis project at California State University, Bakersfield.

Ayers Rock (CA-INY-34) is a site adjacent to the North Range of NAWS. Investigative work by Dan Fowler, Judyth Reed, Daniel McCarthy and this author, recovered this collection from the garage of an avocational archaeologist. It had been stored for over twenty years. The individual had been a field leader for the ASA for over thirty years. Documentation of the site through photography by the ASA began as early as 1956, and continued through collection and unprovenienced excavation through about 1974 (Whitley 2000; Whitley, Whitley, and Simon 2005). The site contains material such as perishables, projectile points spanning at least 5,000 years, and a wide array of other hunting-gathering related lithic items, which are primarily obsidian. A series of important pictograph elements are also at the site. The artifacts are curated at the Maturango Museum where they are available for researchers. Presently, Alexander Rogers, the

Fig. 7. Basketmaker Isabel Hanson holding baskets she made in 1962, Onyx Springs, Inyo County, California. Photos on the left courtesy of Eastern California Museum dated 1962. Photo on the right shows baskets in 2007 at Searles Valley Historical Society, Trona, California.

Maturango Museum Curator of Archaeology is studying the obsidian Pinto style points found at the site (Rogers 2007a, 2007b.)

Research Contributions from the Collections

As mentioned, several researchers have used these collections to contribute to the local and regional prehistory. Helen Well's oral historic approach to Agnes Bierman Babcock's work helps fill in the missing data, which is so important in understanding the foundations of archaeological research in the Mojave Desert (Wells and Backes 2005, 2007).

Chapman Family Collection

John Piri (2007) has begun extensive research on the strength of the bows in the China Lake collection, from the provenienced bows recovered by members of the Far Western team, and a bow donated by the Chapman family. Piri is a physicist, an archer and a flintknapper. Using basic formulas and the dimension of the bows, and using sources such as Pope (1918), he has determined the power of the bow and the distance projectiles could travel. This is important in attempting to understand the use of many of the hunting blinds and talus pit/depressions scattered throughout the base.

Yohe (2006) has studied the manufacturing techniques and the material from which the bows were made as well as to learn about chronology of the bow style.

Gossett Family History Collection

A photograph of a skilled Coso Shoshone basket weaver has been known for many years (Fig. 7). The photograph is labeled "Isabel Hansen, Onyx Springs." In 2006, Bill Gossett, the owner of the private land where the photograph was taken in 1961, contacted a member of the FOCLA. After some discussion, the property owner and an archaeologist visited the location where the photograph had been taken. After discussing how beautiful the two baskets in the photograph were, the question of the location of the baskets came up. Bill Gossett said he would do some research, but the photograph

had been taken 45 years ago and he had not heard anything about the baskets during the ensuing years. He began searching for information as to where the baskets went by inquiring with local people; his inquiries led from the Trona area to Ridgecrest.

After a few weeks Bill Gossett called a FOCLA volunteer and said, "I found them." The baskets were in a home in Ridgecrest, still in the same box they had been in since 1961, both together, both in mint condition. Bill "borrowed" the baskets from the owner and took them to a basket expert, Beth Porter of the Eastern California Museum, and had them authenticated. They were the same two in the photograph. An offer was made to purchase them from the owner. A price was set and the owner agreed. The baskets are now curated at the Searles Valley Historical Society in Trona, just a few miles from the location in the 1961 photograph of Isabel Hansen holding them. They are now protected and the handsome work of a master is on display. Detective work, care, and the ability to raise some funds supported this research. These baskets are remarkable not only for their art but also due to the photograph of the maker holding them giving them absolute provenience.

Conclusions

The NAWS Curation Facility plays an important part in the preservation of these collections for researchers and also has demonstrated the importance of these collections to the employees, collectors, and to the public. Education is a keynote for the facility and to those members of FOCLA who unselfishly donate time and money to the collections and facility. The success in locating and acquiring privately held collections from the base owes much to local volunteers. Their dedication and detective skills, as well as their ability to inspire trust, has been critical to acquiring many of the collections.

Undoubtedly, there are additional collections waiting to be found. It takes fundamental detective work and using skills to follow the clues which are sometimes decades old. For example, we know that in the 1940s and 1950s, O. R. Mont Eton, Senior, collected from sites adjoining the base such as at Blackwater Well site (Davenport 2006). He may have also collected from NAWS. Locating his collections would be important since they appear to be well documented.

During the 1950s, Commanding Officer Pope and his family collected prehistoric artifacts and sent the materials to the Southwest Museum. George Kritzman and Amy Gilreath have provided lists of these artifacts from the Lake China shoreline, which are stored at the Southwest Museum. These materials are only generally provenienced but they could provide fundamental information on site distribution, obsidian sourcing and hydration, and chronology. Due to the reorganization of the collections at the museum, they are currently unavailable for study.

Elizabeth and William Campbell (Spoo 2003) collected from NAWS in the 1930s. Their material is well archived at Joshua Tree National Park. The National Park Service staff at both Joshua Tree and Death Valley National Parks have assisted in the quest as FOCLA volunteers continue to search for collections to help document the region's history.

The NAWS Curation Facility will keep trying to identify the intricacies of both the recent and ancient past in order to understand how prehistoric and historic residents adapted to the changing environment of the Mojave Desert and Great Basin. What is needed is time and money, a universal that is essential in cultural resource management and historic preservation programs everywhere.

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