THE BEAVER CREEK SITE (CA-LAS-973) REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

In 1981, CA-Las-973 (the Beaver Creek Site), a winter village site in Lassen County, was identified by a BLM field inventory team under my direction. Because vandals were illegally digging the site at the time of its discovery, I decided to conduct an in-house monitoring, testing, and salvage program to determine site significance. I also wanted to evaluate what, if any, effects the vandalism was having upon the integrity of the site. BLM management concurred and I initiated the program. The sequence of events that followed proved to be an eye-opener to both me and local BLM management. These same types of problems were also being identified at the same time in two other BLM offices in northwestern Nevada and southeastern Oregon. Once the three offices realized that they were each having the same types of problems, management generated a three-way cooperative agreement to develop collective proactive policies for implementing new methods of archaeological identification, protection, and management within the region. In essence, the outcomes of our experiences at the Beaver Creek Site were pivotal in helping to initiate the regional BLM cultural resource management and Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) strategy in use for this area today.

CA-Las-973, a large midden mound, was first discovered by archaeologists during a Class II field inventory in support of the Alturas Resource Management Plan (RMP). It was located along a tributary of Beaver Creek in the Pit River highlands of northeastern California. The site was being "pot hunted." Screens and fresh back dirt were scattered across the site. I reacted as any good archaeologist in 1981 would have; I destroyed the screens and threw them into the pot holes. Unknowingly, I had just committed a major sin; I had just destroyed an on-going crime scene. I was an archaeologist and knew little about the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) of 1979; that would soon change. I returned to the site in the spring to see what was happening to it. The pot hunters had returned and were still trashing the site, and their pot hunter holes were filling with water and ruining what remained of the integrity of the site. I went to management and they agreed that I should test the site to see if anything was left.

As in all excavations, the first step was to map and grid the site. Some portions were easy; however, because of the extensive damage to the site, we had to be creative in laying out the grid. Once we mapped the site, we needed an excavation crew. The call was put out, and archaeology volunteers from the BLM, USFS, state of California, private sector, and universities arrived to assist me and my BLM archaeology technician trainees and local Native Americans in testing the site.

Initial testing showed that the midden was at least eight feet deep in places; later, radiocarbon analysis would date the bottom level of this unit at 1500 B.P. One unit contained a rock hearth feature on a house floor that later radiocarbon dated to 2720 B.P. In another unit were two post holes and a hopper mortar resting on another house floor (one of five house floors identified during the testing phase). I should note that we chased the pot hunters off the site several times while we were working. The midden was greasy and contained charcoal, pine nuts, animal and fish bone, fire-blackened rock, and fresh water clam shell; it was a dirty site to excavate, that is, for most of us. A total of 86 typable projectile points representing all the cultural phases of the last 5000 years were recovered. Over 150 milling

implements were also recovered. We had 15 radiocarbon dates ranging in age from 150 B.P. to 2720 B.P.

We decided to block grid and excavate the area that contained the highest number of house floors and features because the existing archaeological record lacked data on upland village sites and prehistoric house structures in northeastern California. Excavation soon identified several more house floors and part of a large rock ring. On the edge of one unit, one could see part of a fire hearth on a house floor; the midden in this unit contained the most ashy midden in the site. Two levels below this level we began to identify a burnt, collapsed house structure; it had apparently been excavated through the eastern side of the house floor some 200 years ago. Shortly after, the pot hunters returned to the site and destroyed the structure along with most of the other exposed features and excavated units. We closed the project down.

Why would someone do this, destroy something so important and valuable to archaeology and to the local Native Americans? Who were these people, why did they do it, and where were they doing it now? We set out to find out, and unwittingly started off on a path that would turn us into experts on, among other things, ARPA, working with law enforcement, aerial surveillance, and working with the press, TV, and other media.

What did we find out?

- We found out from old newspapers that this site at Duck Flat had been pot hunted for fun for over 100 years, something to do on a Saturday.

- We found out that what sometimes appeared to be minor damage was significant and sometimes what appeared to be important was just stupid.

- We learned that some of the pot hunters were neat and some of them weren't.

- We found out they had no conception of archaeological techniques and probably didn't care anyway.

- We found out some were sneaky and would hide from us. Sometimes what they did was accidental; some antelope hunters didn't know, for example, that they were destroying cultural sites when they made their hunting blinds.

- Some just like to vandalize things. For example, pictographs at Tommy Tucker Cave have been outlined in chalk. Pictographs are very rare in our part of the Great Basin and in order to get a better picture of them someone had outlined them in chalk, not knowing that they were accelerating their destruction by doing it. As a postscript, vandals have recently returned to the cave and have used charcoal to graffiti their love life all over the pictographs.

What can you do?

- You can build fences and put up signs, but that just identifies where the sites are and provides shooters with nice targets.

- You can remove the access roads and hope they get lost.

- You can build fences designed to both hide and allow the sites to stabilize in secrecy. You can work with other specialists and use nature to return the site to its pre-contact condition.

- You can put in protective grates, but they always find a way to get in.

- If you have enough money, you can bring in professionals to excavate the site. And you soon find out that you need other types of professionals (ones that carry guns). You begin to adapt your skills to their needs: what is a crime scene and how to do a stake out.

But how do you find the bad guys when you work in an area that includes Mt. Shasta on the west and the Black Rock Desert on the east?

- You learn that aircraft are better than trucks because you can cover more ground and see them when they cannot see you.

- You learn about special aircraft that can photograph whole townships in one pass and maybe catch a pot hunter on film - great for any trial!

- You learn that helicopters are better than fixed-wing aircraft because you can sneak up on them and catch them in the act.

We learned a lot of things during the last 17 years, things not taught in archaeology school, but we learned.

- We learned you need to inform the public about what's out there and why it's important; and why we need to educate the kids about the relationship between man and the environment. After all, the future is in their hands, not ours.
- We learned that you need someone physically on the ground, someone who can be seen, to deter those who might be tempted to ignore the laws.
- And that you need to have force available for those who will not learn or do not care.

If you do these things you might - just might - save some of our past for the future.