

## **THE COMMUNE ERA OF OLOMPALI: CHALLENGING OUR ASSUMPTIONS OF THE HIPPIE LIFESTYLE**

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*The artifacts recovered from the archaeological remains of The Chosen Family Commune at Olompali State Historic Park are helping to determine exactly who the people were who lived there from 1967 to 1969. By studying these artifacts, there is already a vastly different image of the communards. For example, the music collection reveals a wide range of music that was being listened to at the time, from show tunes to jazz. An unexpected relationship with the military lends further support to the diversification of the commune's population.*

### **THE CHOSEN FAMILY COMMUNE: YEAR 1967-1969**

Located just north of San Francisco, Olompali State Historic Park has had a long and varied history. One such piece of that history is focused on the Burdell Mansion, which was occupied by "The Chosen Family" during the heyday of the commune's 1967-1969 occupancy. The Chosen Family was a famous "hippie" commune associated with the Grateful Dead and certain other San Francisco musical legends of the 1960s and often played host to these local musicians (Figure 1). In fact, the Grateful Dead even used a picture from their time at Olompali on the cover of one of their albums (Figure 2).

The Chosen Family commune was founded at Olompali in late November of 1967 by Don McCoy, Sandra Barton, and Sheila McKendrick (Figure 3), and started with about 30 members, then grew after a few months. At its height, there were anywhere from 50 to 70 members living in the 24-room mansion and a couple of adjacent structures. There was a wide age range for the commune members from 7 or 8 years old to around 50 years of age. The commune began as an ideal close community of friends and family members who wanted to live in a communal environment. It stayed a relatively closed community until the last year or so (near the end of 1968), when there were strangers coming and going who had less care for the ideals set down by the original members.

Early in the predawn hours of February 2, 1969, a structural fire consumed the Burdell Mansion. There were no injuries caused by the fire, as many of the commune members were away from the mansion at the time. Some members continued to live on the property in an unattached frame house for a few more months, and the official closing of the commune was in August of 1969. Even though this was the end of the commune, members from the group still consider each other family and have reunions (Figure 4) once a year in May for Olompali Heritage Day.

### **THE BURDELL MANSION PROJECT**

Although some of the commune members managed to salvage a few of their possessions from the fire debris, almost everything they owned was lost in the fire. In 1981, this fire debris was identified as a potentially significant cultural resource by the junior author. However, it wasn't until 1997 that an attempt was made to salvage the fire debris; many former commune members and their families, including the three original founders, volunteered to help out. Unfortunately, the recovery had to be cancelled due to the discovery of asbestos. Nothing more was done until 2000, when the fire debris was placed in 26 55-gal. hazardous materials (Hazmat) barrels for future analysis. The barrels were stored on the property in an old dairy barn until the contents could be safely cleaned, which took place in February 2009.



*Figure 1. Gerry Garcia (right) of the Grateful Dead and Paul Kantner (left) of the Jefferson Airplane jamming at Olompali, 1968.*

## ARTIFACTS FROM THE BURDELL MANSION

### Music

When discovered in 1981, there was a pile of vinyl records in the kitchen, below what used to be Sandra Barton's bedroom. At this time, many of the records still had covers and labels to identify them. Unfortunately, there was no attempt at recovery until 1997, at which time many of the labels and covers had disintegrated.

Almost 100 vinyl records were recovered from the fire debris, the majority of which are 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  LP records, though there are a few 45 and 78 rpm records. Only 36 of these have been identified, mainly through an online search of the serial numbers still etched on the records (Figures 5 and 6). There are still 24 records with visible serial numbers that could not be identified.

Some examples of the variety of records found in the fire debris of the Burdell Mansion include:

- "Why is There Air?" by Bill Cosby (1937- ) (Warner Brothers, 1965)
- "Judy at Carnegie Hall" by Judy Garland (1922-1969) (Capitol, 1961)
- "Rubber Soul" by the Beatles (Capitol Records, 1965)
- "Pal Joey" by Frank Sinatra (1915-1998) (Capitol Records, 1957)
- "Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Gershwin Songbook" by Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996) (Verve, 1957)



Figure 2. Back cover of the Grateful Dead's album "Aoxomoxoa" (Warner Brothers, 1969), showing the members of the band with The Chosen Family at Olompali, 1969.

- "The Eddie Duchin Story" by Eddy Duchin (1909-1951) and his orchestra (Columbia, Red Label, 1956)
- "Forbidden Fruit" by Nina Simone (1933-2003) (Colpix, 1961)
- "My Fair Lady" by Herman Levin (1907-1990) (Columbia Masterworks, 1956)
- "Beethoven: Symphony #3" by Otto Klemperer (1885-1973) and the Philharmonia Orchestra of London (EMI, 1961)
- "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" by Tony Bennett (1926- ) (Columbia, 1962)
- "West Side Story" by Dean Franconi and his Sound Stage Orchestra (Spectrum, 1963)
- "Flaming Drums!" by Babatunde Olatunji (1927-2003) (Columbia, 1962)



*Figure 3. This photograph was taken sometime in 1974 and shows the three founding members of the commune: Don McCoy (left), Sandra Barton (center), and Sheila McKendrick (right).*

- "Super Session" by Mike Bloomfield (1943-1981), Al Kooper (1944- ), and Stephen Stills (1945- ) (Columbia Records, 1968)
- "The Versatile Burl Ives!" by Burl Ives (1909-1995) (Decca Records, 1961)
- "The Music Man" by the cast of the musical (Warner Bros., 1962)
- "Stan Getz" by the Stan Getz (1927-1991) Quartet and Quintet (Jazztone, 1956)

There is an important question to ask about this collection: which of these were from Sandra Barton's personal collection, and what albums were considered property of the commune?

We believe that the majority of the records belonged to Sandra Barton, who had a music library in her bedroom (Noelle Barton, personal communication 2009). When the mansion burned, her collection fell through the floor into the kitchen below her room. There was also a collection of records that belonged to the commune as a whole, which was stored in the adjacent living room, as well as the music collection of Don McCoy, which was stored upstairs in his room.

There is much diversity to be found in this commune of individuals, as seen by their eclectic collection of music. Everyone still had their own personal taste in music, and at least one of the founders was listening to jazz and show tunes, the type of music that might not be first expected from a member of a commune. This rather surprising hippie discography is already challenging preconceived notions about



*Figure 4. Chosen Family Reunion at Olompali, 1997: Sheila McKendrick (far left), Sandra's daughter Noelle Barton (bottom center), Buzz Rowell (second from right), Sandra Barton (lower right).*

the hippie lifestyle. It is also important to note that these music collections were mixed together when placed in the barrels for storage; for this reason, there is no sure way to determine which records belonged to whom, but such a collection of music matches well with the multigenerational aspect of the commune.

Also found among the fire debris was a reel-to-reel player with three reel tapes (Figure 7). Presently, the content of these tapes has not been determined, since there is currently no way for the audio to be recovered. There is some speculation that these could even be recordings of some of Sandra Barton's own music, since she was a singer and had often performed in San Francisco and Los Angeles nightclubs prior to her years in the commune (Parkman 2010).

The presence of a reel-to-reel player at the commune may also suggest an association with the military. There are a few things that are known for sure, such as the fact that members of the commune were getting discount items from the PX Exchange at the Air Force base between Novato and San Rafael, where these players would have been less expensive than average.

### **Clothing and Personal Belongings**

Another interesting thing about this collection is the mixture of personal and communal belongings. Some of the communal objects we can identify are the decorative items such as the pool table, trash cans, ash trays, the vacuum, tools, and utensils.

The personal items include cameras, cosmetics, shoes, and pieces of textiles (Figure 8). There were many photographs taken at Olompali of the commune members which give a good look at some of the styles of clothing worn by members living there. In these photos, some are wearing love beads and some are not; there is a mix of go-go boots and more practical foot wear. In one of the pictures, a

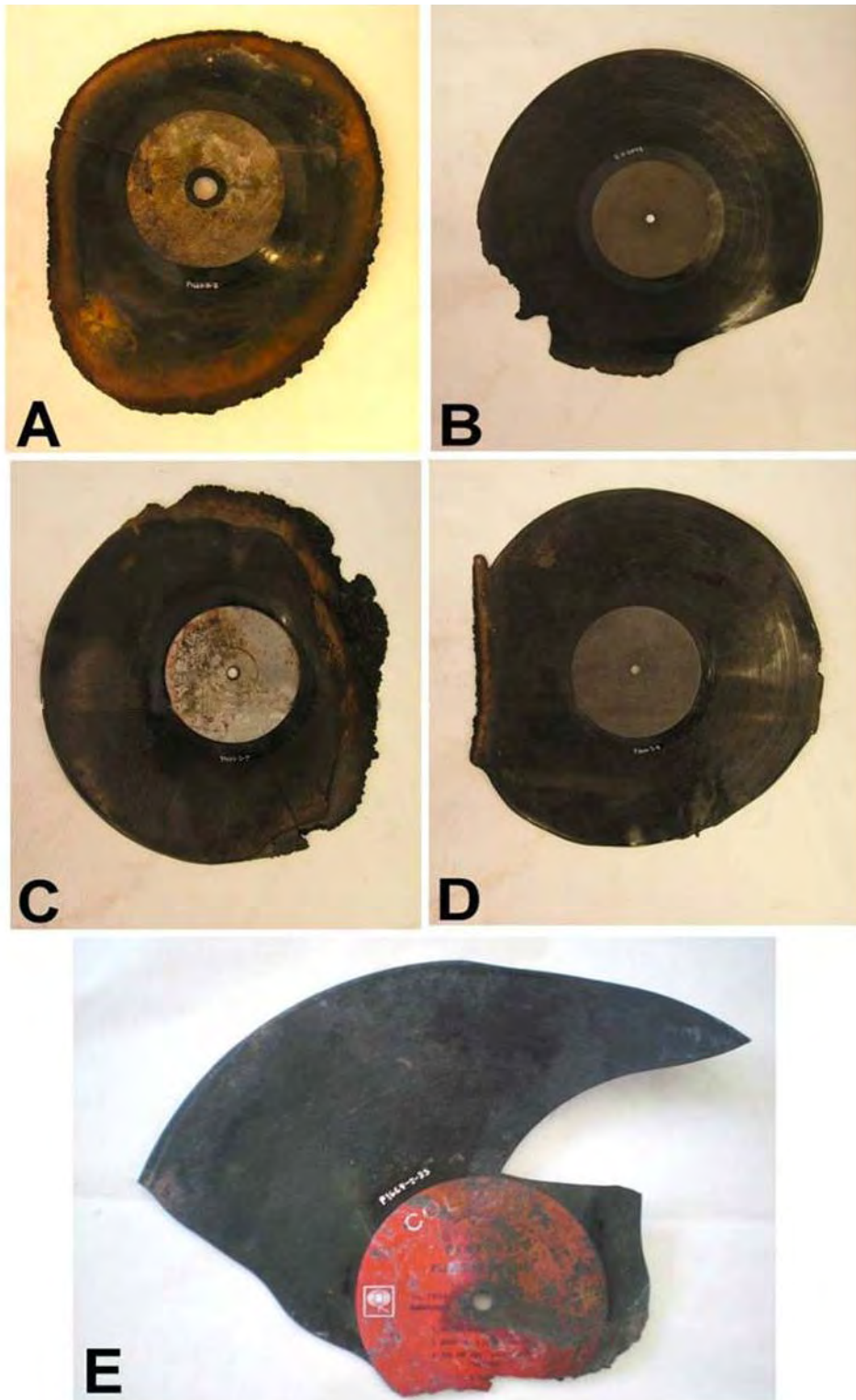


Figure 5. Selected vinyl records recovered from the fire debris at the Burdell Mansion, Olompali State Historic Park. (a) Bill Cosby, "Why is There Air?"; (b) Judy Garland, "Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall"; (c) The Beatles, "Rubber Soul"; (d) Frank Sinatra, "Pal Joey"; (e) Babatunde Olatunji, "Flaming Drums!"

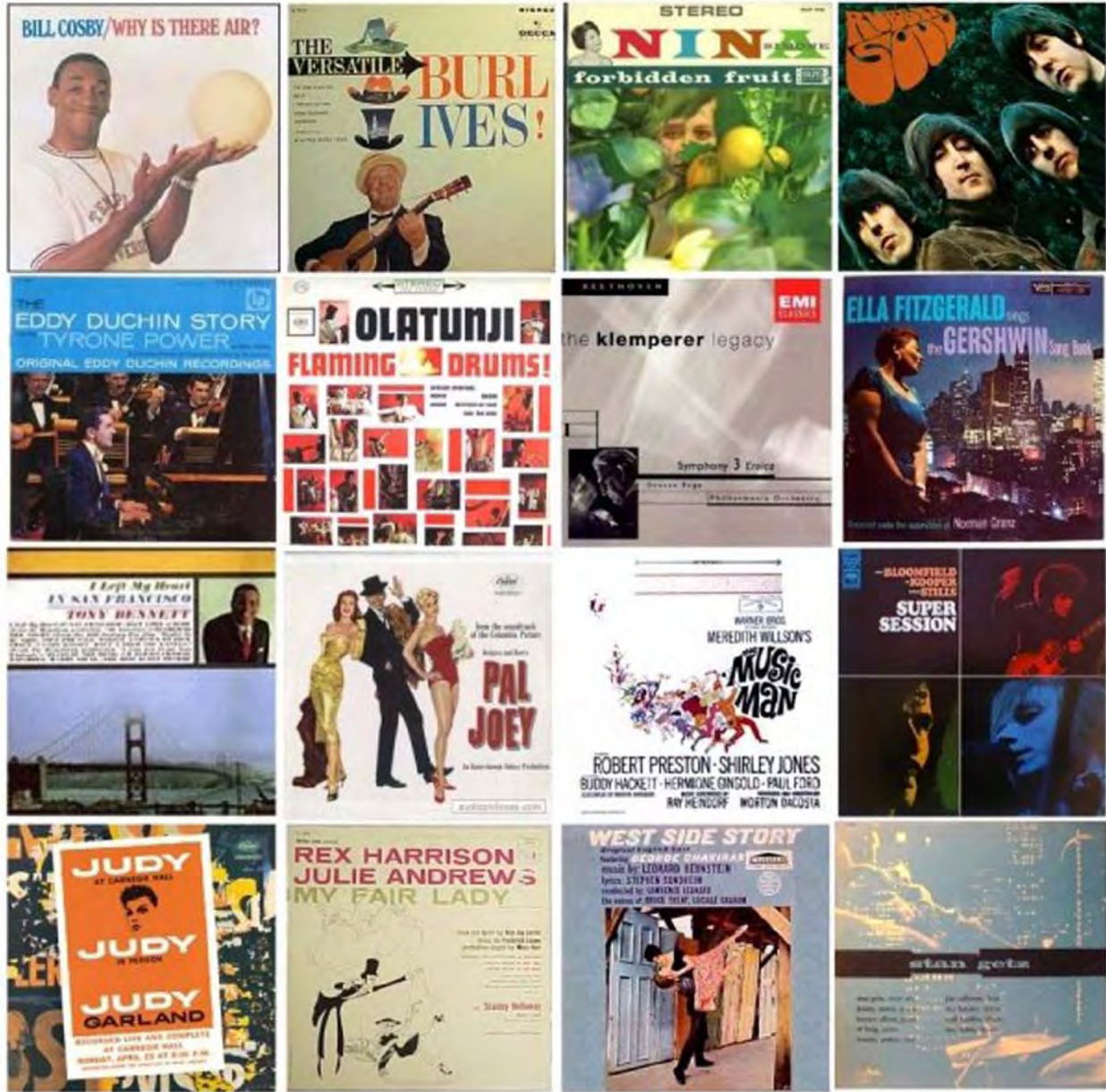


Figure 6. The album covers for 16 out of 36 of the vinyl records that have been identified from the collection.

commune member is even shown wearing a fairly conservative clothing style for the time period with a collared shirt tucked into slacks. From these visual clues it can be seen that the music collection isn't the only thing that was different than expected.

Other intriguing items found were one unfired shot gun shell and one expended cartridge case (Figure 9). It is known that someone in the commune owned a gun, but whether or not it was considered a communal possession is not known. For a group of people normally associated with pacifism, the presence of a gun can come as a surprise; the group dynamics definitely changed when the commune became an open community in the last year, and the ownership of guns could be a reflection of this. Further research into the population of the commune shows that there were four military veterans living there at the time, three of whom had already served in the Vietnam War. One of these men had joined the



Figure 7. Three reels from a reel-to-reel tape player.

reserves as a way to avoid the draft, since the reserve units were not being sent to Vietnam (Parkman 2009).

### Food Consumption

In the couple of days leading up to the fire (depending on how often the trash was taken out), someone in the commune had been eating meat, as evidenced by the remains of lamb and steak bones (Figure 10). This directly contradicts the following statement made by Don McCoy: “Large numbers of deer roam through the ranch, but McCoy does not allow hunting. ‘We are vegetarians and do not believe in killing or eating meat,’ he explained” (Leydecker 1968:20).

There could be a couple reasons for this disconnect. First, all the members of the commune may not have been strict vegetarians. Secondly, even if the original members were vegetarian, that could have changed by the time the commune became open to more people in the last year. The original members could have had less control over what people were eating due to the increase in population around October and November of 1968, in which case, McCoy’s statement is true and only the original commune members were vegetarians. According to Noelle Barton and Buz Rowell, two former members of the commune, the commune was originally vegetarian, but that changed during the second year of the commune’s existence (Noelle Barton and Buz Rowell, personal communication 2009). As increasingly greater numbers of people moved in, the original structure that the commune was founded on collapsed and new practices appeared.

### AN UNINTENTIONAL “HIPPIE TIME CAPSULE”

One of the unique things about this collection is that it gives the complete picture of life during the commune and may be the only one of its kind that is currently known. If the commune members had made an intentional time capsule, it would have most likely been more of a selective process, and they might have chosen objects that they felt more significant at the time, which means that certain things might not get included, like the records, or the dishes and steak bones.

There were many diverse lifestyles coming together: liberal and conservative, young and old, military and non-military. For example, Sandra Barton, at 50 years of age, was the oldest female and the matriarch of a multigenerational commune and, as evidenced by her collection of music from the 1950s and early 1960s, was definitely older than one would expect of someone who considered herself a “hippie.” Was The Chosen Family a typical Sixties commune, or was it a more unique group? Depending on research of other communes from the same time period, maybe Olompali is not as different as first thought.

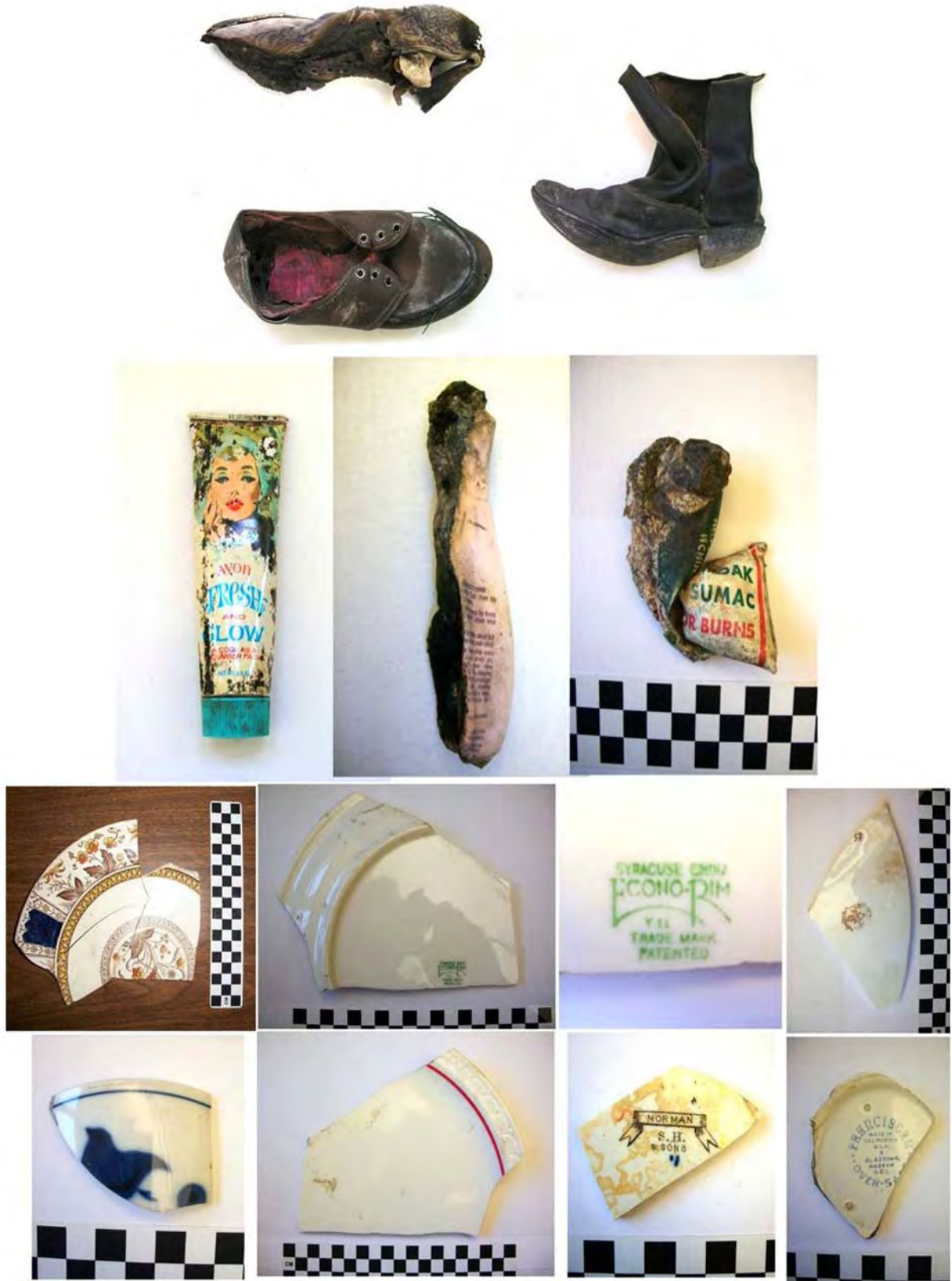


Figure 8. Personal belongings found in the fire debris: shoes and cosmetics. Communal belongings: dishes.

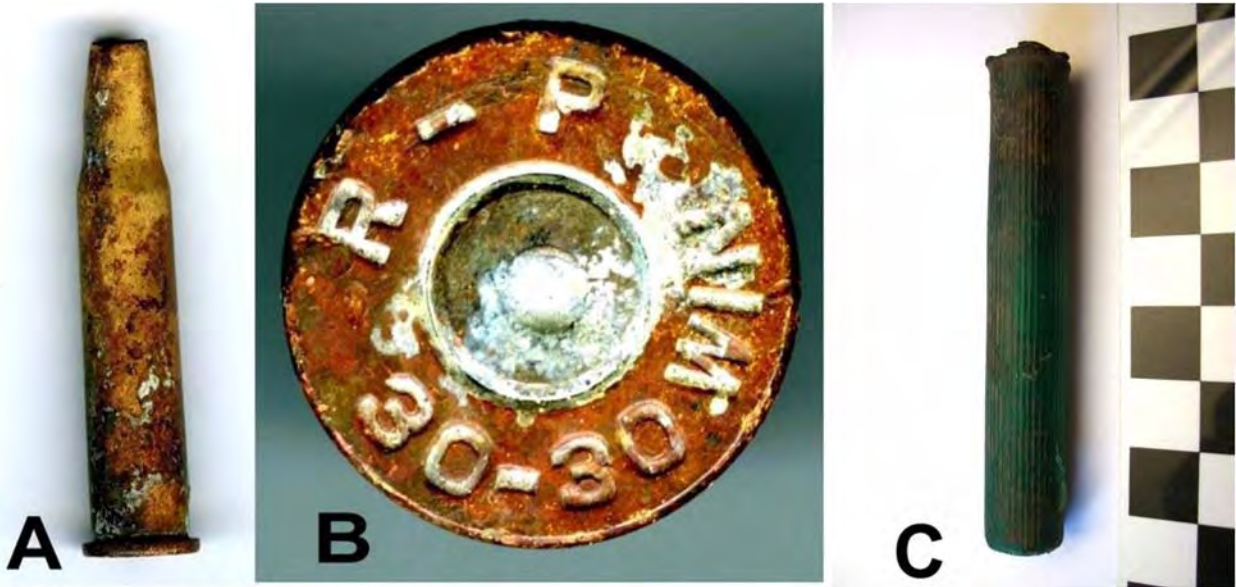


Figure 9. (a) .30-30 Remington-Peters Winchester cartridge case (1960-); (b) head stamp on cartridge case; (c) unfired .410-gauge shot shell.



Figure 10. More than 20 saw-cut beef and lamb bones were recovered from the communal kitchen.

## CONCLUSIONS

This was obviously a more complicated time period than was first imagined, and it is becoming clear that there really is no one image for those thought of as “hippies.” These new discoveries about the commune are turning out to be different than expected and tend to not match up with popular perceptions. But what exactly are those perceptions? An informal, nonscientific poll was conducted to find out, sorting responders into two age groups, those under 40 years of age and those 40 years of age and older, to see if different age groups would have different impressions. The following question was asked of 24 people: What are the traits and characteristics that first come to mind when asked, "What makes a hippie?"

There were certain words and phrases that were repeated across both age groups such as: clothing/appearance, politics, drug-related, nature, non-average, personality, music/art, age, and students. The top four most-mentioned were led by 16 mentions of clothing and/or appearance, which included things like tie-dye clothing, unkempt look, and beads. Next were 12 mentions of politics which included opinions of hippies being liberal or anti-“the man.” There were also 12 mentions of hippies as partakers of recreational drugs, and 10 mentions of nature-related qualities such as being at one with Mother Nature, eco-activism, and harmony with nature. These counts represent the number of times that a trait was mentioned, and some responders mentioned more than one trait. Another surprising result of this informal poll was that, even though the group of responders was split into two groups—those that lived or have personal experience with the time period, and those who might not—there were still very similar responses.

There is still much more archaeology and ethnography that needs to be conducted regarding the commune at Olompali and others of its kind. It is clear that there is not as much information as previously thought regarding this era and the people known as “hippies.”

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