

# A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF HISTORIC SITES ON SAN NICOLAS ISLAND

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## ABSTRACT

A reconnaissance survey for historic sites on San Nicolas Island reveals that although there are relatively few historic sites, these sites do reveal a complex history of occupation and constitute a significant research field. The main historic context for the island is sheep ranching (ca. 1857-1943), with 3 separate ranch locations. Also present are a number of small fishing camps around the island. These temporary camps were utilized from at least the 1870s by Chinese and American fishermen. Numerous Aleut artifacts have been recovered, though the temporary Aleut occupation of the island (ca. 1815) is not well documented. A number of historic shipwrecks are known for the island, and literature research is well under way. Other sites related to early military occupation and navigational markers are also present.

## INTRODUCTION

San Nicolas Island has long been known for its wealth of prehistoric resources. Investigations into the prehistoric sites began in the early 1870s and have continued sporadically to the present. Little attention, however, has been paid to the historic resources of the island. A recent reconnaissance survey of the island revealed that although there are relatively few historic sites, these sites do reveal a long and complex history of occupation and constitute a significant research field, particularly if a cultural ecology viewpoint is used.

## SHEEP RANCHING

The main economic pursuit on the island was sheep ranching. Sheep ranching on the island began about 1857, just 4 years after the last of the Nicoleños was removed. His-

torical information on island ranching is generally lacking at this time; however, a basic outline of events is known. It appears that the earliest sheep ranching operations were based at Corral Harbor (Figure 1). By the mid-1890s the ranch facilities were moved to the east end of the island at Jehemy Beach. At some later time the operations were moved to Brook's Landing on the north shore where a pier was constructed (ca. 1925).

Charles Meritt of Santa Barbara, reported (Jones 1969:88) that his brother-in-law put the first sheep on the island. The original herd consisted of 500 Mexican ewes and a few rams. By 1875 there were 16,000 head on the island.

Later the number of sheep on the island increased to nearly 40,000, but they soon cleaned out the thick covering of herbage and thousands starved to death. Later, when Howland sold out his interest in 1919 to the

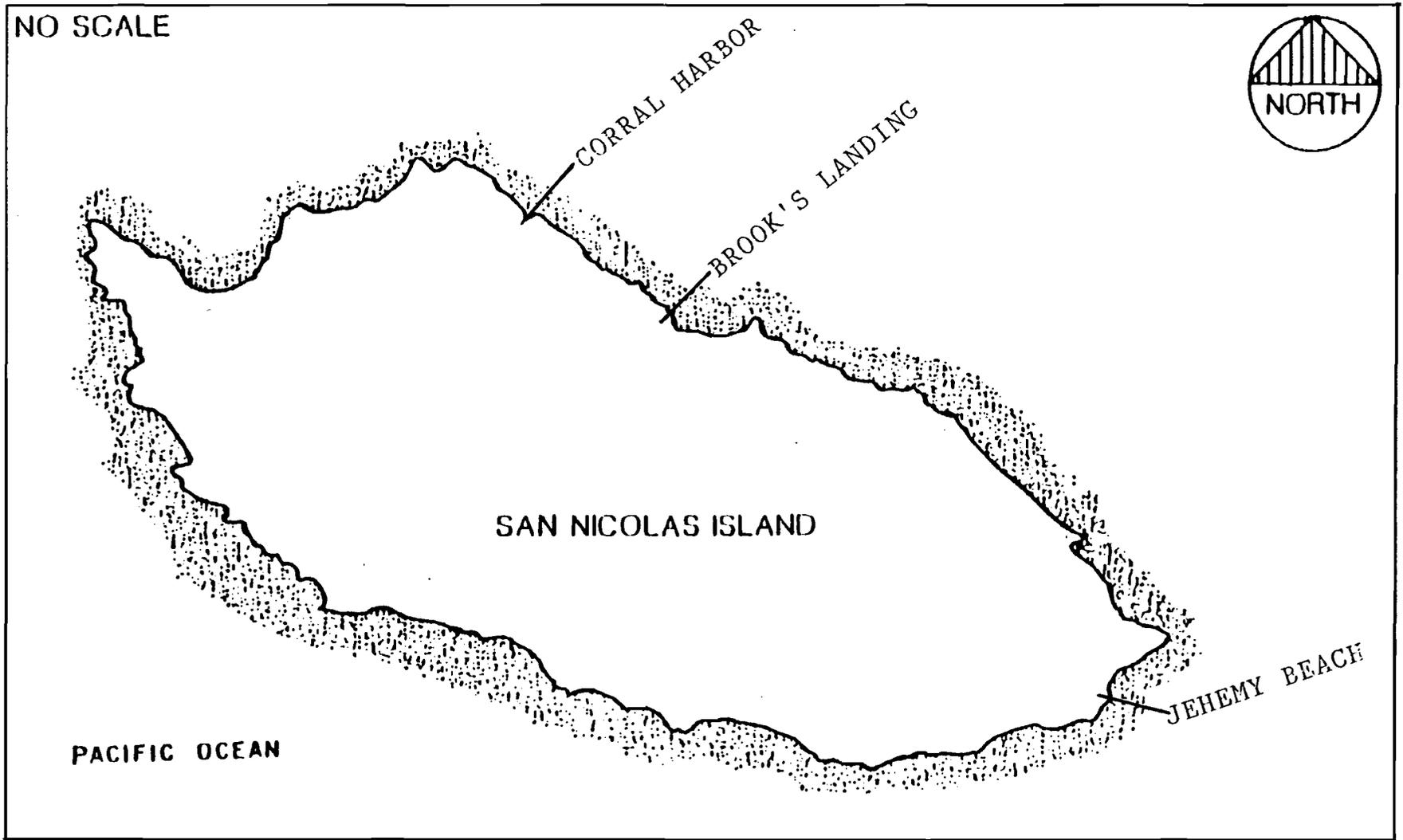


Figure 1. General locations of ranching activities.

Vail brothers, there were only about 11,000 sheep on the island and only about 4000 acres of grazing land left (Los Angeles Times 1949).

One of the early systems of sheep management was to let the sheep roam the island until shearing time. Sheep shearers were transported to the island by boat, and the wool was then carried back on the return voyage. Once Basque shepherds immigrated to California, however, this system became less common. Pastures were established by fencing off areas of the island, and the herd was more actively managed.

The reconnaissance survey for sheep ranching occupation concentrated on the Corral Harbor, Jehemy Beach, and Brook's Landing areas. The survey was conducted between 1989 and 1991 by archaeologists from the Naval Air Weapons Station and the Student Conservation Association.

The Corral Harbor area reveals only scant evidence of any historic occupation (SNI-10-H). It is quite possible, however, that shifting sand dunes have buried further evidence of the ranch at this location. A number of accounts discuss a stone or adobe house near Corral Harbor which apparently was completely buried by about 1930. Some of these accounts state that a structure was present in the canyon next to, and not actually at, Corral Harbor.

Archaeologist Paul Schumacher, visiting San Nicolas Island in 1875 noted, "The shifting sand has almost buried the adobe house, and its old inmate, the superintendent of the Stock-raising Company" (Schumacher 1875:378).

The Jehemy Beach area contains evidence of a substantial settlement (SNI-323-H), though the area is radically dissected by stream erosion, making interpretations difficult. There appears to have been a road cut here that leads from the site down to a small pocket beach. This beach may have been a landing spot due to its proximity to the ranch site and the fact that the offshore area has been known traditionally as a safe landing spot in fair weather. The area is strewn with artifacts. A depression at the site may represent a brick- or stone-lined

cistern.

Botanist Blanche Trask (1900:99) visited San Nicolas Island in 1897 and reported:

At the east end there are a cabin, barn, shearing sheds, a cistern, and a platform which drains its rainwater into a reservoir. All these improvements are due to the once ambitious ranchmen who seem now to have abandoned the sheep; about 500 are occasionally seen.

A field party from the Pasadena Academy of Sciences visited the island in May of 1897. They camped at the east end of the island, near the ranch house, where there was a cistern for rainwater (Grinnell 1897). "Our party landed on the east coast where are shanties and corrals inhabited by sheep-men and horses during shearing time. Troughs on the roofs conduct water into a stone cistern" (Britton 1897:192).

On the slopes well above the ranch site, there are remains of a wooden structure about 8 by 12 feet in size (SNI-H11). The structure is partially dug into the hillside near the top of the slope so that it would avoid most of the winds. The structural remains are composed of wooden planks attached by wire nails to 2x4 supports. Most of the structure is buried under vegetation. Found in association is a folding table and a Coleman-type stove with a Bakelite knob. No other diagnostic artifacts were seen, probably due to dense vegetation. This structure appears to be present on 1940 aerial photographs.

At Brook's Landing there is substantial evidence of occupation. Remnants of the pier are still standing, as well as a substantial road cut making a transition from the marine terrace down to the pier (SNI-H9). A few small drainages nearby contain large amounts of historic debris, primarily industrial artifacts of metal and wood. There are traces of fencing just above the pier and fences leading to the pier area. The habitation area was further back from the shore near the base of the hill slope (SNI-257). A small dam was built in this area. A number of foundation elements and artifacts are located in this area. A wooden underground

root cellar is also present in this area. Remains of corrugated roofing were found some distance away, near the beach, perhaps due to subsequent land clearing. A significant amount of wire fencing converges on this area from the plateau above as well.

Bruce Bryan, of the Los Angeles County Museum, spent several weeks on the island in 1926 conducting archaeological investigations (Bryan 1970). During this time, he stayed at Brook's Landing and made several important observations. He stayed at the "shack of the single inhabitant of the isle, old Captain Nelson, whose unique position was a combination of caretaker of the island and shepherd to the 2,500 head of half-wild sheep that roam its expanse" (Bryan 1930:152). Bryan (1932:58) also notes a "stable just back of the old man's cabin".

Luis Kemnitzer was on the island in 1933 conducting geological investigations. At that time he noted, "At the present time the island is inhabited by one family of sheep ranchers who graze some twelve hundred head on the rather meagre growth of grass" (Kemnitzer 1933:3). He also mentions landing "below some ranch houses". Regarding water supply, he noted: "most of the water for drinking purposes is caught in cisterns at the ranch houses" (Kemnitzer 1933:4).

Reginald H. Lamberth was in charge of the sheep ranch when the Los Angeles County Museum conducted their explorations in July-August 1939:

Water is brought to the ranch from a spring at "The Garden" [Humphery Sump?] through a pipeline about two and one-half miles long. The pipe line was completed while the expedition was on the island. [Meadows 1939:7-8]

A set of 1940 aerial photographs of the island taken by the Army Corps of Engineers reveals 7 structures including a large barn. Also present were corrals around the barn, a small earthen dam, and a small fenced-off area. Three of the structures are surrounded by fencing perhaps to keep the sheep out. Fence lines are seen leading to the pier.

## SHEEP FENCING

Extensive reconnaissance effort was directed toward recording the remaining sheep fencing (Figure 2). The fencing will soon be completely lost to the elements and it was felt important to record it in some detail at this juncture. It was also hoped that fence lines would lead to other areas of occupation and that tracing out the fence lines would lead to a better understanding of sheep management practices.

Wood used for fence posts varied from rough-cut lumber to split rails. Dimensions varied widely from 1x4, 2x4, and 4x4, to 4x6, indicating that almost any type of lumber was being used. Where lower tips were visible due to downed posts, the posts had been sharpened to a rough point with an axe. For the most part, the mesh was attached with wire brads. In the cases where nails were used, the predominant type was wire nails, but some square nails were noted. The type of mesh used varied widely as well. In most areas, no mesh was present, but usually evidence of double-strand twisted wire could be seen. In 1 case a twisted metal ribbon was used. In a few spots barbed wire was used, but this was rather rare. Where mesh is present, it varied in size from 4x4 to 6x10 inches. Most of the mesh was common livestock mesh with welded cross points, similar to what is available today. On 1 stretch, 2 distinctive types of mesh were utilized. One utilized a circular reinforcement at the juncture points; the other had a distinctive twist-and-loop reinforcement at the junctures. In areas where the ground surface makes a dip under the fenceline, we often encountered small piles of rocks under the mesh which appear to have been intended to raise the surface to meet the level of the bottom of the mesh.

Historic descriptions of fencing are extremely limited. One observer noted a "wire fence that extends along the brink of the cliffs east of the shack" (Brook's Landing; Bryan 1932:49). Bryan's (1970) map of 1926 indicates sheep fencing near the west end, an L-shaped configuration near the southeast shore, and a Y-shaped arrangement on the central plateau. The 1940 aerials show 2 pastures cutting across the central part of

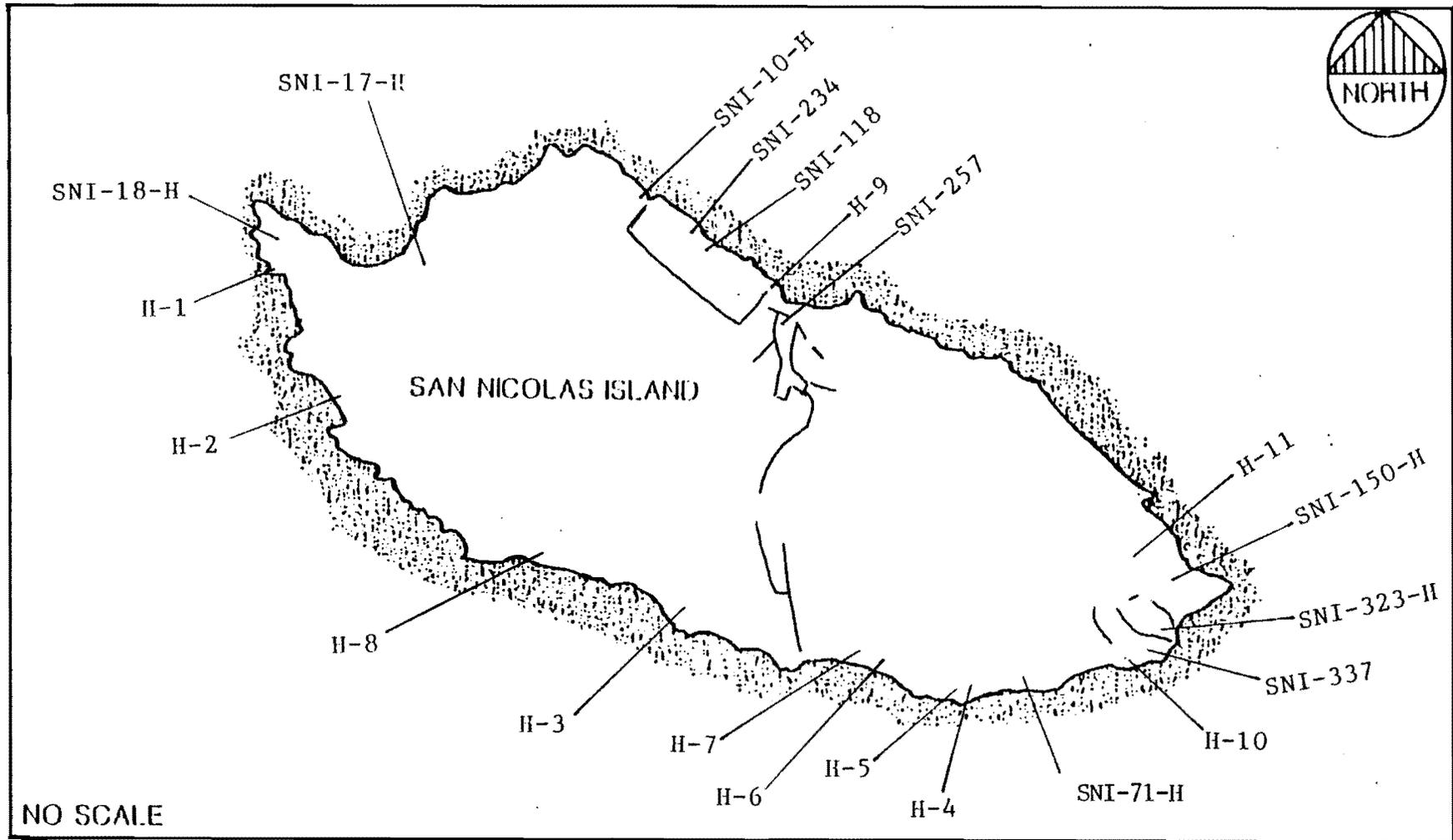


Figure 2. Sites attributable to ranching or fishing themes.  
 ~~~~~ = remaining sheep fencing

the plateau and fences leading to the pier on the north shore. A number of individuals recount a central fence that extended all the way across the island, cutting the island in half; this probably refers to the same alignment as seen in 1940.

## FISHING INDUSTRY

As early as the 1870s, Chinese abalone collectors used the island as a source of supply of abalone, and an extensive camp was set up near Corral Harbor. In 1857 it was reported that 12 schooners and sloops, chartered by Chinese, were operating in Channel Islands waters. The meat was shipped to China for food, and the shells were sold in San Francisco for buttons, jewelry, and tourist items.

Reconnaissance efforts for sites related to fishing activities concentrated on the shoreline and the first marine terrace above the shore.

A complete Chinese storage jar was collected in 1984 on the southwest shore. So far, this jar appears to have been an isolated find. The area of the find was searched with no additional evidence of habitation. Chinese ceramics have also been found in a small habitation site on the south shore (SNI-H3). Fragments of 3 different vessels have been collected here. These represent 2 storage jars and a soy pot. The site appears to have been a temporary fishing camp. Also present was an amethyst glass bottle finish with a screw closure. A small refuse deposit is also present including sheep bone, mussel shell, and amorphous metal.

Two other sites have yielded Chinese ceramics. At the sheep ranch at Jehemy Beach (SNI-323-H), sherds of 4 vessels have been observed; 2 storage jars and 2 serving vessels. These were found on a very extensive site with structural remains. Another, nearby site, SNI-337, has also yielded Chinese ceramics (Reinman and Lauter 1984).

Perhaps the most interesting observation, to date, on the Chinese presence on the island, is the almost complete lack of circular stone foundations such as are found

on San Clemente Island. Only 1 circular stone wall or foundation has been reported (at SNI-17; Reinman and Lauter 1984) and this may not be related to Chinese occupation.

John Kelly visited San Nicolas Island in 1897. While exploring the island Kelly (n.d.:18) observed:

Near the beach at the N.W. end of the island we found where a pit had been recently opened and it looked as if someone had been temporarily buried there and then the corpse taken up for reburial in some other more civilized place. A rough wooden box that had been used for a temporary coffin was left lying on the bank of the grave and from the papers covered with Chinese characters we believe that a Chinaman had probably been the temporary occupant of the grave and had afterwards been taken up and shipped back to the "Middle Kingdom" where every Chinaman wishes his bones to finally rest.

Two isolated hearths may also relate to Chinese use of the island. Both are situated on the west side of the island. Both appear as rectangular stone alignments of 1 and 2 chambers. Test excavation of one (SNI-H2) documented that these features are indeed hearths, but was inconclusive regarding ethnic identity of the users. This site includes a small level area that was paved with sandstone slabs. The use of such pavements as drying areas for abalone has been suggested.

Six other sites which may relate to Chinese habitation are all small black abalone middens located adjacent to sandstone shelves just above sea level. The abalone middens consist only of black abalone all of roughly the same size. The clear association with the sandstone shelves, which extend almost horizontally into the surf, perhaps indicates that these rock outcrops were used to dry the abalone. Few or no artifacts are present at these sites.

McGimpsey, who secured the first official lease for San Nicolas Island (1902-1907), owned a fishing company and placed fishermen on the island for some time. This is the earliest documented use of the island by

American fishermen, though their use probably began much earlier.

In June of 1905 Ira Eaton transported 2 of the best local fishermen, Frank Nidever and Clarence Libbey, to the island. When he returned to pick them up at the end of October they had obtained:

...seventeen hundred pounds of crawfish [lobster], three tons of abalone and four tons of shell. They had also found some good pearls in the abalones which they could sell for two or three hundred dollars. [Eaton 1980:26]

Other products taken from the island during the early and middle years of the 19th century were gull eggs, seal fur, and elephant seal oil.

A scatter of shipwreck timbers is present at the northwest end of the island (SNI-18-H). A road has disrupted the deposit, but there may still be some research potential. This site may well relate to one described by Bryan (1932:21-22) in 1926:

Close to the beach were two ramshackle old shacks built of cast-up driftwood. Papers and magazines found in them bore the comparatively recent date of 1919. The better shack, on the northwest bore an inscription nailed over the entrance, "North Pole". A similar wooden placard over the other carried the stigma, "Hell's Hole". Just above the latter was a modern grave marked with slabs of whalebone, human bones of probable aboriginal origin, and some old whiskey and gin bottles. It had both a head and a footstone, also of uninscribed whalebone.

SNI-71-H is the most intact of the presumed Anglo fishing camps on the island. The site consists of structural foundations, a pit adjacent to the structure the size of a privy, a large trash pit, and another area of refuse. The site is quite intact, with a thick layer of ground cover. A preponderance of battery cores is present in the trash pit. This site is located near the location where Bryan mapped a shack, on the southeast shore, in 1926. The 1940 aerials show a trail leading from the site area down to the adja-

cent beach.

SNI-118 contains a reported rectangular stone feature (Reinman and Lauter 1984) measuring some 155 by 170 cm. The perimeter is outlined with sandstone rocks.

SNI-234 contains a small dune which appears to have buried the remains of a wooden structure. Floor joists, 46 inches on center, were observed here previously (Reinman and Lauter 1984). A wine bottle was collected from the site in the 1970s.

SNI-150-H contains a fairly complex assemblage of structural remains and scattered artifacts. A primary structure made from shipwreck timbers is present with associated excavated areas. Also present near the structure are fragments of a cook stove and glass and bottle fragments (including cobalt glass).

## OTTER HUNTING

In 1811 a group of Koniag Eskimos from Sitka was reportedly landed on the island by Captain Whittemore, from the Boston fur-trading firm of Boardman and Pope, for the purposes of sea otter hunting. In the succeeding years other sea otter hunters were attracted to the shores of San Nicolas and the other Channel Islands. Later sea otter expeditions were led, for the most part, by American citizens or Americans who had become naturalized Mexican citizens. Kanakas (Hawaiians) and later Mission Indians were also employed as hunters.

A Russian, Boris Tarasov, was arrested by the Spaniards in 1815 for hunting sea otter in Spanish waters. He stated that:

He had been in charge of Aleuts left on the Santa Barbara Channel Islands by the Imen apparently before it had gone to San Francisco. He and his men had been stationed on San Nicolas for seven months, and during that time had obtained 955 skins. These furs were kept on the islands where a number of hunters still remained. [Ogden 1933:44]

A number of Aleut artifacts have been

collected from the island (Meighan and Eberhart 1953). These artifacts include harpoon foreshafts (Nelson 1936), toggle-harpoon heads (Hodge 1922; Leroi-Gourhan 1946), atlatls (Heizer 1945; Nelson 1936), a slate lance point (Nelson 1936), and possibly ceramics (Nelson 1936). The vast majority of these have no provenience. Malcolm Rogers and Phil Orr, however, both recovered Aleut artifacts that can be assigned to known sites on the northwest shoreline.

Survey efforts for otter hunting sites concentrated on the shoreline and immediate adjacent areas. No sites that can be assigned to this historic theme have been identified to date.

## EARLY MILITARY USE

President Hoover's Executive Order of 1933 placed San Nicolas Island under the control of the U.S. Navy. A few months later an aerological (weather) station was established by the Navy and, together with a family of sheep ranchers, the total island population was about 15 people. A school teacher, Miss Alma R. McLain, was hired for a short time to teach 2 children in what was known as the San Nicolas Elementary School. It was known as the smallest school in the nation to have a full-time, fully accredited teacher. Gleason (1958:41) has a sketch of the school bell that probably dates to that time.

Archaeological evidence of the early Navy occupation includes the remains of an early wind-turbine with electrical posts running downhill to the area of the sheep headquarters at Brook's Landing. Remnants of an early water system with storage tank are present on the hillside above Brook's Landing. The Navy had built an "emergency" airstrip by 1938.

In November of 1942, when the U.S. Army 82nd Observation Squadron was given temporary administration of San Nicolas, the west end of the island was used as a gunnery and bombing range. The Army built considerable facilities near Brook's Landing. The Army made substantial improvements to the airfield during this time.

Historic photographs and field observations reveal an extensive military encampment in the vicinity of Brook's Landing. Several buildings were constructed. The buildings were apparently present until about 1959 when the current NAVFAC facility was built in this area. The entire area is scattered with building materials, industrial artifacts, and household items.

In 1947 the island was placed under the control of Naval Air Station, Point Mugu, from where it continues to be administered today. Since 1946, San Nicolas has served as part of one of the nation's most important missile proving grounds. In fact, Point Mugu, the Navy's giant Pacific Missile Test Center, was established, in part, because of the presence of San Nicolas Island 60 miles out to sea. San Nicolas is used primarily for tracking weapons testing on the Sea Test Range area offshore.

## SHIPWRECKS

Literature survey work to date has identified 21 vessels thought to have been wrecked at San Nicolas Island. Terrestrial surveys for shipwreck sites around the island in 1987-1990 identified over 60 locations with wreckage (Howorth 1988). These sites include locations with structural members and planking. Of the 60 known sites, about 20 are considered to be historic, 15 to be recent, and the rest are of unknown age.

## NAVIGATION AIDS

The use of San Nicolas for navigational markers is not well documented, at this time. It seems that the island was originally federal land set aside as a Lighthouse Reserve.

Two remaining signal lights were constructed in 1939. The lights have functionally been replaced by solar powered units, but the older structures remain intact. The structures were apparently pre-fabricated on the mainland and shipped to the island for assembly.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This preliminary survey serves to demonstrate the potential for significant historic sites, but is by no means a complete inventory of historic resources. Future research efforts will be directed toward archival research, particularly into the sheep ranching era. The sheep ranching aspect appears to have the greatest potential for specific archival data, plus there is at least 1 living informant from this time period, as well. Based on this additional background research, a more complete survey of ranching resources will be possible. It is very likely that many early sites on the island have been covered with sand dunes or recent sedimentation, and these will be difficult to locate.

Efforts continue to inventory the shipwrecks on and around the island. An on-going joint study between the Navy and the Channel Islands National Park is conducting further literature search on the reported shipwrecks around the island as well as on the entire Sea Test Range of the Naval Air Warfare Center. Terrestrial surveys are expected to continue as the literature survey work progresses. Eventual remote sensing surveys around the island for specific vessels are planned.

Additional background research will also be conducted for the other identified historic themes: Fishing Industry, Otter Hunting, Early Military Use, and Navigation Aids. With archival research completed more precise field surveys for these types of resources will be possible.

## NOTES

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