

THE SIERRA MADRE AREA:
BOUNDARIES, SITE CATCHMENTS, ARCHAEOLOGY OLD AND NEW

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ABSTRACT

The Sierra Madre Ridge area in northeast Santa Barbara County was an early focus of reconnoitering archaeology. Waldo Wedel and William Duncan Strong excavated several sites in the area and wandered around a large chunk of backcountry acreage in search of baskets and other archaeological remains. In so doing they provided information that, in conjunction with more recent findings, suggests that the Sierra Madre Ridge was a seasonal gathering place for villages in the Cuyama and Sisquoc drainages.

INTRODUCTION

Usually published papers present some set of preliminary or final results. This paper deviates from that path because it stems from a period of taking stock and setting course, rather than from a program of research. This is the view from Los Padres National Forest: on one hand we see research long unfinished and on the other hand we contemplate a program of regional research just beginning.

This stock taking is important personally because both of the authors are, in a sense, just beginning. Janine has been an archaeologist on Los Padres N.F. for just one year; for me this is my second time around as Forest Archeologist after a ten year detour into other fields. On returning, I found that work begun over ten years ago on a Forest-wide research design was never completed and that new research on Los Padres N.F. is almost totally absent. The absence of such a research design necessitates our taking stock and setting course.

An early first step toward such a research design is reviewing past research, especially those antique investigations never published but known to us through collections, dog-eared field notes, and murky photographs.

In this paper we look at the research that has been done in one of the boundary areas of the Forest. Special attention is given to long-forgotten work done in 1935 by a group of

archaeologists and hangers-on led by William Duncan Strong and Waldo Wedel. In a sense, this paper deals as much with the history of archaeology as it does with archaeological research.

RIDGE OF THE SIERRA MADRES

Los Padres National Forest bears a tracery of invisible lineations of extinct, almost forgotten societies--the community and language frontiers and boundaries of the Chumash and their predecessors. We hypothesize that one such boundary trends crestwise along the east-west ridge of the Sierra Madre Mountains, separating the economic and political territory of two protohistoric villages.

On the north flank of the Ridge is the catchment of the village of Ciwikon. Ciwikon is situated on a squat finger of land in lower Castro Canyon with a view of the breadth of the Cuyama Valley and the baked, barren slopes of the Caliente Mountains to the north.

Toward the south of the Ridge is the catchment of Hawamiw, a protohistoric village sequestered along the Sisquoc River near the base of the Sweetwater Trail. In contrast to Ciwikon, Hawamiw seems hemmed-in, having no prospect except that of the rugged chaparral slopes surrounding it.

The rolling potreros, sculpted sandstone, and fascinating rock art of the Sierra Madre Mountains have drawn professional and avocational archaeologists for years but little was published or otherwise made available until recently. Curiously, Campbell Grant does not cite the areas's rock art in his now classic 1965 study, Rock Painting of the Chumash. Subsequently, documented research for the area concerns itself primarily with its corpus of rock art.

In the only recent research not exclusively dedicated to rock art, Horne and Glassow (1974) spent the field season of 1973 recording sites at Montgomery, Pine Corral, and Saulsbury Potreros along the crest of the Sierra Madres. And while interesting things were learned about the area, research that is both more extensive, or regional, and intensive is needed before knowledge will pass beyond the preliminary.

WEEKENDING WITH STRONG AND WEDEL

Until such intensive and extensive work is done we can partially console ourselves with a review and analysis of the research done in the area by W.D. Strong and Waldo Wedel in 1935 and reported in summary fashion that same year (Strong 1935). More detailed knowledge of the project comes from the notebook kept by Strong and from the collections curated after a fashion

at the Smithsonian. The authors currently are preparing an account of this work for publication, based in large part on Strong's notes.

How did such a pair end up in the Sierra Madre vicinity? Wedel, after all, is a Plains archaeologist, and Strong is not known for his research in the Chumash area. It seems that their work was a "busman's holiday". Wedel, Strong and their crew were gainfully employed during the week at the CWA-Smithsonian excavations at Tulamniu at Buena Vista Lake (Wedel 1941). Then on seven two and three-day winter weekend forays and one two-week backcountry expedition Strong and Wedel, assisted by Strong's wife, Jean, various stalwart "boys" from the CWA project, and miscellaneous locals proceeded to dig, scrape, and scour the archaeological traces in the Sierra Madre area.

A holiday atmosphere surrounded the work, as the notes make clear (Strong 1934-35):

Pleasant evening, wonderful weather. Rusty had a guitar and Mac sang. Dance over in the valley...

and,

the (Cuyama) Valley has been a Godsend to all of us after our hectic weeks at Buena Vista. Finally, tore ourselves away as the sad echoes of the "Last Roundup" faded into silence.

Underlying the fun and evident friendship was a somewhat more serious purpose. Strong in particular was interested in two basic, culture historical issues. As inferred from his notes they are:

(1) Was this area truly Chumash as asserted by Kroeber or could it have been Yokuts in affiliation? And,

(2) Was there at some time in the past a Basketmaker-like culture in the area? This was an idea that Strong had nursed for over ten years.

Their methods were direct and included:

(1) Excavating burials and houses, probably in order to describe variability and build a museum collection; and,

(2) Exploring caves in order to collect perishables, especially baskets, probably for comparison to basketry elsewhere and to add to museum collections.

Quatal Canyon

In Quatal Canyon, an east-west tributary of the Cuyama River, the crew spent four days in January 1935 excavating a

"fine Chumash sweat lodge" and a house. Although disappointed in their search for burials ("Had other boys hunting over hills for burials but had no luck at all"), Strong was excited by the fact the sweat lodge had a "southwest type 'ventilator' chimney" and that the house they excavated (H-1) was, in the vernacular, a "peach". In his written report these become "several irregular summer shelters and a winter earth lodge" (Strong 1935). The house was approximately 4.2 m by 3.6 m, ovoid, with post molds, a clear entry, a defined floor and a fire pit with flue. Standing juniper posts in several house depressions indicate a late date. This site has not been relocated.

Caliente Ranch

Across an early February weekend the group excavated at a site near Green Canyon at the Caliente Ranch about 25 miles west of Quatal Canyon. There they worked out two houses with post molds and hearths but again were unfulfilled in the quest for human remains.

Kuyam

In 8 long days of work across 3 March weekends the indefatigable group excavated at the protohistoric village of Kuyam on the Cuyama Ranch. The length of their stay is understandable given their interests: they at last had found a cemetery.

By the end of their work they had excavated at least 30 and maybe as many as 41 burials, 9 of which are housed in the Smithsonian (4 adult males, 4 adult females, 1 unidentifiable). Status differentiation is apparent, 1 burial (no. 41) was buried with an elaborate display of 6 to 10 wooden hair pins. Also, some of the burials had unusual preservation--textiles, wooden bowl fragments, matting and twined basketry. According to Strong's notes, the matting was very similar to that associated with burials at Tulamniu.

They also excavated at least 3 house depressions, however Strong's report mentions only the excavation of 1 "prehistoric lodge". Compared with the relatively diligent description of houses at both Caliente Ranch and Quatal Canyon and the ample Cuyama burial descriptions, the text concerning house depression excavations at Kuyam is less than minimal.

BACKCOUNTRY EXPLORATION

Up to this time the group had been working on Ciwikon side of the ridge (although not at Ciwikon itself). But on a fine day in early April they set out on horseback into the Sierra Madre backcountry, which they termed the "Santa Barbara Mountains". Along for the ride was a local rancher named James who, along with Henry Abels, had collected extensively in the area. Eventually much of their material was given to the Santa Barbara

Museum of Natural History, becoming known as the James-Abels collection.

They first crossed over into the Sisquoc River Canyon. Excavations were done at Hawamiw, or the "South Fork Village Site", and another protohistoric site at Judell Canyon. In both cases they concentrated on house depressions but they were disappointed by the low frequency of artifacts. Strong complains in his notes, "this is an 'artifactless' culture, basketry and wood and other perishables make up its fundamental content."

Rock shelters drew them. A few interesting discoveries were made in caves along the Sisquoc and in White Ledge Canyon including a digging stick, basketry fragments, and a wood fire starter.

After exhausting readily accessible possibilities along the Sisquoc they moved up to Saulsbury Potrero where they examined a protohistoric cemetery and occupation site. Earlier James and Abels had exhumed between 150 and 200 burials there; Strong found little left.

But, again, the caves proved more interesting and productive. After a day of scrambling in cave country below Saulsbury Potrero, the crew "came in loaded like pack horses with the stuff packed in the soft grass that lined the cists." The "stuff" included large baskets (apparently none of which made it to the Smithsonian), twined water bottle fragments, matting, shaft straighteners, composite arrow fragments, pointed sticks and large bone awls.

And on the fourteenth day of April they rested and departed, never returning.

Strong's conclusions are based on impressions made in the field, no analysis seems to have been done. Concerning boundaries and cultural affiliation, Strong offers this in his notes:

On the whole, it is a low grade culture--very poverty stricken--suggests a run down (San Joaquin) Valley culture gone into the hills as much or more than a coastal culture gone east. It's Californian but by its material remains alone would hardly be classed as Chumash.

And, more cautiously, in his 1935 report:

The people of this area were peripheral to the main Chumash centers on the coast and in the main possessed a simple culture like that of the valley Yokuts.

As for the Basketmaker-like culture, Strong writes after general disappointment in rock shelter reconnaissance of Lion and Branch Canyon, "thus ends the 10 year dream of the Basket Maker

sites in Lions Canyon."

CONCLUSIONS

Numerous problems beset Strong's research, the resulting documentation, and subsequent curation of artifacts and records. These include sloppy and needlessly destructive excavation techniques, poor to absent provenience both for artifacts and for sites, inadequate photodocumentation, missing field records, missing artifacts, and dismally poor curation of artifacts, especially perishables, at the Smithsonian. We are working on developing as complete a reconstruction of the work as possible and are thinking of trying to repatriate the collection to a local facility.

What about ethnic frontiers and cultural interaction? Some things can be said but they are intuitive and will prove difficult to substantiate, even with an aggressive and sophisticated program of research. Horne and Glassow (1974) originally suggested that the Sierra Madre Ridge was the upper end of a local pattern of transhumance for permanent villages situated in the Cuyama and Sisquoc drainages; 16 years later this still seems to be a reasonable suggestion.

It is our opinion that the 3 large occupation sites of the Sierra Madre Ridge at Montgomery, Pine Corral, and Saulsbury Potrereros were fall villages associated with acorn harvest and with the local observance of the Hutash ceremony (Kitsepawit 1977). Large oaks are abundant around the lower edges of the potrereros and others, including Strong, have suggested they were a powerful seasonal draw. The seasonal harvest and the Hutash ceremony coincided with the fall equinox. Hoskinson (1985) has suggested, very cautiously indeed, that the fall equinox was ritually observed at Sapaksi, the House of the Sun, a prominent rock art site and associated midden on Montgomery Potrero. Thus far mission registers do not indicate intermarriage between Hawamiw or Ciwikon but few baptisms were ever recorded for either village. All this is conjectural but until more intensive and extensive modern research is done, we can add little more.

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