LIFE AT A REMOTE RAILROAD SECTON HOUSE REVEALED THROUGH MATERIAL CULTURE

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Site CA-SBA-1145/H was first recorded in 1974 as a sparse lithic and shell scatter. It was not until 1983, when bottles, cans, ceramics, and glassware were observed during trenching, that the historical component at Honda was recognized. In 2003, Æ staff identified three shallow trash deposits while monitoring trenching for a water line on Vandenberg Air Force Base. After determining that the deposits were associated with the section house, a research design and data recovery plan were implemented. Twenty-two discrete features and an intact historic-period surface were exposed as the site was mechanically stripped. Feature types included shallow trash deposits, a privy, a brick cooking feature, and food-refuse pits.

The crew of Honda Section House (Figure 1) was widely lauded for their bravery following the naval disaster of September 8, 1923. These Southern Pacific railroad men worked diligently to rescue, feed, and house sailors stranded at Honda Point. But what of the years between 1900 and 1930, during which workers toiled on the rail line? Led by a section foreman and sometimes accompanied by their wives, these men lived in a remote area of the California coast with the railroad as their only connection to the outside world. In 2004, VAFB sponsored data recovery performed by E at the rear of the section house.

The Honda section house site, situated in rural Santa Barbara County, was constructed between 1898 and 1900. The complex included a foreman's house, bunkhouses, sheds, a cistern, and a chicken yard. A separate water closet, depicted on a 1925 Southern Pacific Railroad (SPRR) map, was located between the foreman's house and the workers' quarters. Construction of the bunkhouses varied. Those to the south were built of railroad ties, and those to the north were of frame construction. Latticework screened the frame bunkhouses from the railroad. Further, a fence separated the entire complex from the railroad tracks. No physical barriers seemed to limit the use of space behind the section-house complex. The Pacific Ocean was in full view to the west.

In developing a research strategy, several topics were proposed to focus the data recovery and analysis of material culture. One topic was an assessment of ethnicity, gender, and age of the inhabitants through time. It was recognized that ethnic diversity and social status might play a role in site usage and might be reflected in the material culture. While the remoteness of the site was not specifically identified as a research topic, the influence of transportation on subsistence and the role of the railroad in daily life were considered important to site assessment. The isolation of the Honda section house was recognized as posing special subsistence challenges. Data collection methods were tailored to an assessment of reliance on locally available resources as opposed to imported goods. Flotation samples were collected from all organic fill and 1/8-inch mesh screen samples were processed in an attempt to retrieve small fish and bird bone.

HISTORICAL SETTING

The Southern Pacific began construction of a coastal branch as early as the 1870s. Between 1873 and 1894, the line was constructed north from Los Angeles through Ventura, Santa Barbara, and Ellwood. It extended south from San Francisco through San Jose, Soledad, and San Luis Obispo. Construction of the 50-mile gap that remained was delayed because of engineering constraints requiring numerous tunnels and bridges. Collis Huntington ordered the gap closed in 1899, and the first passenger train ran the 470 miles from Los Angeles to San Francisco in 1901 (Maschner et al. 1991:22). Completion of the rail

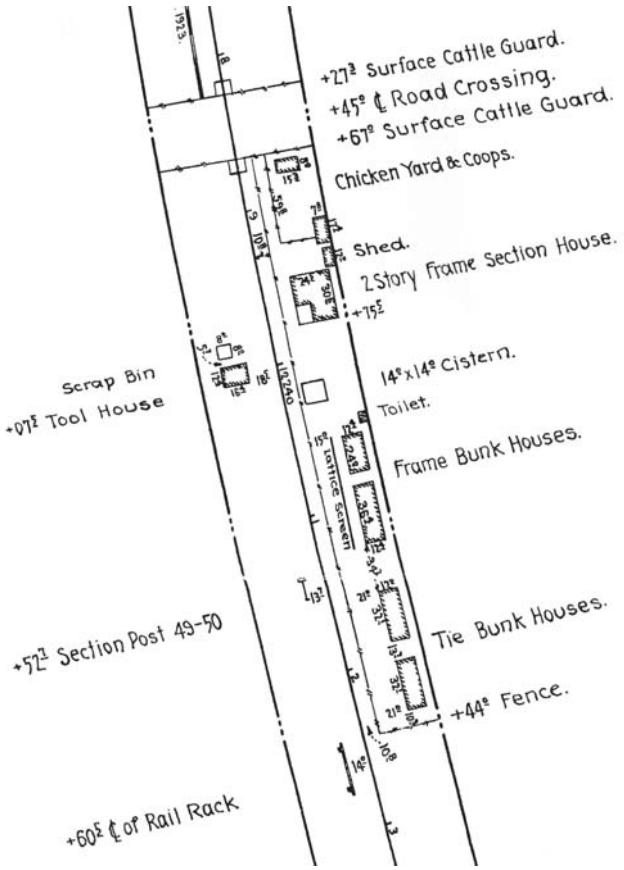

Figure 1: Station plan of Honda, May 1924 / Mar. 1925. On file at the California State Railroad Museum.

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opened a remote region of the west coast to travel and offered transportation of regionally produced ranch and agricultural products.

The Honda section house complex lay along the Southern Pacific tracks about a quarter of a mile south of the Honda Canyon trestle, between Point Arguello Station and the station at Surf. A section house was also located to the south at Sudden Ranch. Population density for the surrounding region was 300 in 1910 and 250 in 1920. The Honda section house was described by Southern Pacific surveyors in 1917 as a freight house and in 1924 as the "west end station building" (Maschner 1991:21). During the mid-1920s, the Honda siding supported a small community of railroad workers charged with maintenance of this segment of the line. Fortuitously, they also played the role of rescuers.

The Honda section house is well documented because of its involvement in two tragic accidents in Santa Barbara County's history – the 1907 train wreck near Honda siding and the Honda Point naval disaster of 1923. Details about the siding and changes in site usage through time can be gleaned from historical accounts of these events. These accounts also reveal the remoteness of this small workers' community.

Early in the afternoon of May 11, 1907, an excursion train left Santa Barbara Station. Aboard were conventioneers from New York and Pennsylvania. Bound for San Francisco, the Shriners and their wives were intent on enjoying the coastal vistas. Sixty-five miles out and in view of the Honda "flag station . . . something went horribly wrong" (Redmon 2003). The locomotive jumped the tracks, and the engine flipped on its side. Two sleeper cars derailed, and the dining car was badly damaged. Thirty-two died that day. Reportedly, two "flatcars with water tanks parked at the Honda siding" came to the rescue. What we learned about Honda from the accident reports is that at this time Honda was simply a "flag station" and freight house occupied by a lone flagman and his wife.

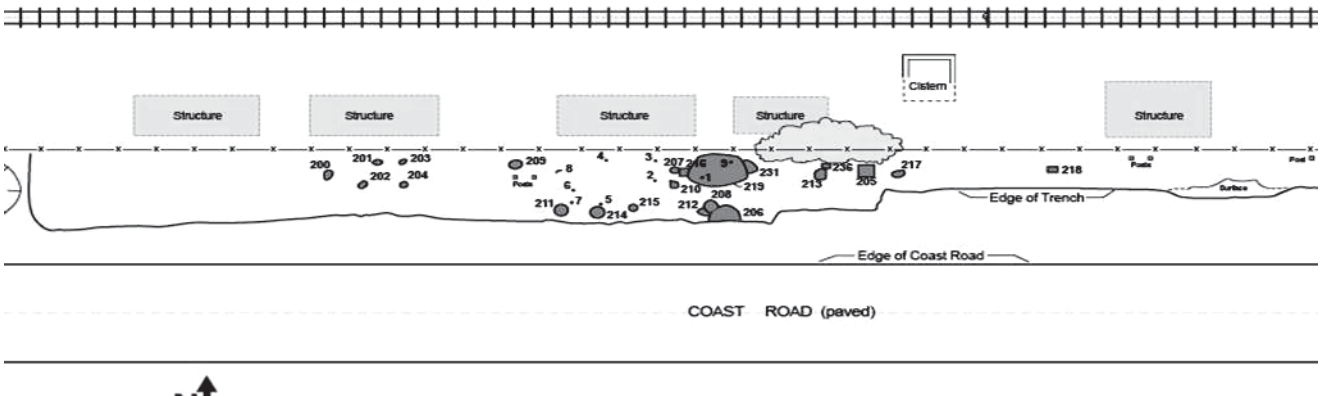
In contrast, by 1923, seventeen railroad workers resided at the section house. In the evening of September 8, seven naval destroyers destined for San Diego went off-course in the fog and hit the jagged rocks of Honda Point. At 8:46 p.m, John Giorvas, section foreman at Honda, heard the crash. From his second story window he spotted a light near the shore. Taking his sixteen men with him, he went to the beach and saw the destroyers on the rocks (Southern Pacific Bulletin 1923). Through the night, Giorvas communicated with the operator at Surf and acted quickly to locate "doctors, surgical supplies, food, blankets, clothing, etc." and transported them via rail to the scene to care for the injured. The only other route in was by horseback through " . . . soft drift sand" (Richart 1966). "With the arrival of Lineman Pierce, wires were cut both upstairs and downstairs in the section house for use of Western Union operators who arrived later that day" (Southern Pacific Bulletin 1923). A special train was procured to transport the some 550 sailors back to San Diego. The remoteness of the Honda section house had been transformed within hours.

PRESENT DAY SETTING

Through time, surface vegetation such as ice plant served to catch blowing sand, resulting in the accumulation of 20-30 cm of overburden. Once this layer was removed, a firmly packed, intact historic-period surface with *in situ* artifacts was found. The general layout of the site is important to site interpretation. Three distinct areas of feature concentrations were noted. At the northern end of the site, where the foreman's house was located, was a single, deep pit feature. The other two areas of feature concentration lay behind the two sets of bunkhouses. East of the railroad-tie bunkhouses was a small cluster of five features. These generally contained household refuse and personal items. The largest concentration of features lay east of the two frame bunkhouses. Here, features were variously associated with household activities and food processing.

Notably, the site lay outside the assessed boundaries of the railroad right-of-way on private property. It was anticipated that trash disposal would have occurred in this general direction; however, it was surprising to find intensive use of the space beyond railroad lands. The seemingly open expanse of the coastline, albeit not owned by Southern Pacific, suggests that few other people visited the area. Workers were at liberty to utilize the local environment as they saw fit. They built a brick cooking structure, likely an outdoor oven. Oven parts were recovered

Figure 2: Site map showing features in relation of non-extant section house buildings.



nearby and the center portion of the platform was charred. Additionally, many of the surrounding pits contained charcoal, faunal remains, and burnt shell. The walls of these shallow pits were delineated by barrel hoops. It appears that redwood shipping kegs were used to line the pit and were ignited as slow-burning hearths.

Analysis and Interpretation

While detailed analysis of the artifact collection is not complete, and interpretation regarding social stratification and ethnicity is preliminary, there seems to be ample evidence that differential site utilization occurred within the complex. Census data suggest that the Honda section foreman and at least four workers were Greek, while the remaining laborers were Mexican. Certain items, such as eggshells, were represented only in the section foreman's trash, implying access to some goods was more limited for laborers. There was limited accumulation of trash around the foreman's house and behind the tie bunkhouses. However, trash was heavily concentrated behind the two frame bunkhouses, forming what appears to be a communal cooking area likely used by all laborers.

Historical accounts demonstrate that the flagman's wife lived here in the spring of 1907. Then, in the 1920s, census records documented the presence of three females – two wives and a child. Female-associated artifacts included garter fasteners, cold-cream jars, perfume bottles, and perhaps the flowerpots. There were also a few women's and children's shoes present. The paucity of material perhaps suggests that women were not a dominant presence at the site. However, the ruggedness of the environment may have forced them to shed items normally associated with female presence, thus masking their occupancy.

Many work-related items were recovered from the excavations. These included a Disston handsaw represented by company medallions, an adze, a prybar, and a whetstone. Railroad-related items included railroad ties, metal spikes, a large lock with an engraved Southern Pacific logo, and other iron hardware. Rubber and leather boots and work gloves were among the articles of clothing found. The occurrence of shoe-repair tools, shoe parts (such as tacks and rivets), and a large number of shoes for men, women, and children suggests that at least one occupant spent time repairing or making shoes. With trains passing Honda daily in an official capacity, servicing other local communities or ranches such as Lompoc, Surf, and Sudden Ranch, local exchange in commodities and crafts likely occurred. Exchange of shoe repair services might have offered an opportunity to augment company supplies with fresh meat and produce.

Judging from the frequency and size of food cans, food bottles, stoneware crocks, and wooden freight kegs, the occupants of Honda were relying heavily on the importation of subsistence commodities. While single-serving size cans were present, most were of the size that fed seven to eight individuals. Stoneware crocks likely were used to ship sauces, preserves, or milk, while wooden kegs were used for dry goods. There is little evidence of local cultivation of fruit and vegetables, although beans, figs, grapes, and blackberries were recovered in limited numbers. Only one canning jar was present, suggesting canning of locally cultivated produce was not a high priority. Faunal remains included beef, rabbit, poultry, and fish. Cuts favored large roasts used in communal meals such as stews and soups. A few steak bones were present. The bird bone does not appear to be from domesticated species , but analysis is not complete. Native fish are represented in low frequency. Shellfish, however, was being collected in sizable quantities and may have provided the bulk of the fresh protein consumed. The shellfish assemblage was dominated by abalone, with over 100 kilograms of shell recovered. In comparison, California mussel represented only 5 kilograms. Both species would have been readily available in the inter-tidal habitat found below the section house.

Beverage bottles recovered include beer, ale, champagne, whiskey, wine, liquor, and soda. Also recovered was one bottle of absinthe, which has been banned in the United States since 1912. The section house appears to have been abandoned prior to the repeal of prohibition. Based on the presence of copious amounts of alcohol bottles and the absinthe, it is speculated that alcohol was being smuggled along the rail line. There were a few tobacco-related items, including a tobacco can and a celluloid mouthpiece of a pipe. Fragments of one opium pipe were also recovered.

Conclusion

The occupants of the Honda section-house complex likely spent the majority of their days in very close proximity to one another, working the rails and preparing and consuming meals, with periods of rest punctuated by collecting and foraging expeditions. Limited outside contact likely came on a daily basis as the trains passed by, but direct contact may have been more rare. The frequency of stops would have depended on delivery of supplies from Southern Pacific stores or exchange with local communities up and down the line. Remoteness, combined with the wind-swept environment of the coast, would undoubtedly have contributed to a feeling of isolation. This may have drawn the occupants within the Honda section house complex into a close-knit community where each was dependent on the other for food, company, and interaction.

Excavations at the Honda section-house site resulted in collection of extensive data that yet presents many questions. Little work at remote sites has been completed, limiting comparisons. Hopefully, the data extracted during this project will offer new methodological and analytical approaches for use in future remote-site investigations.

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