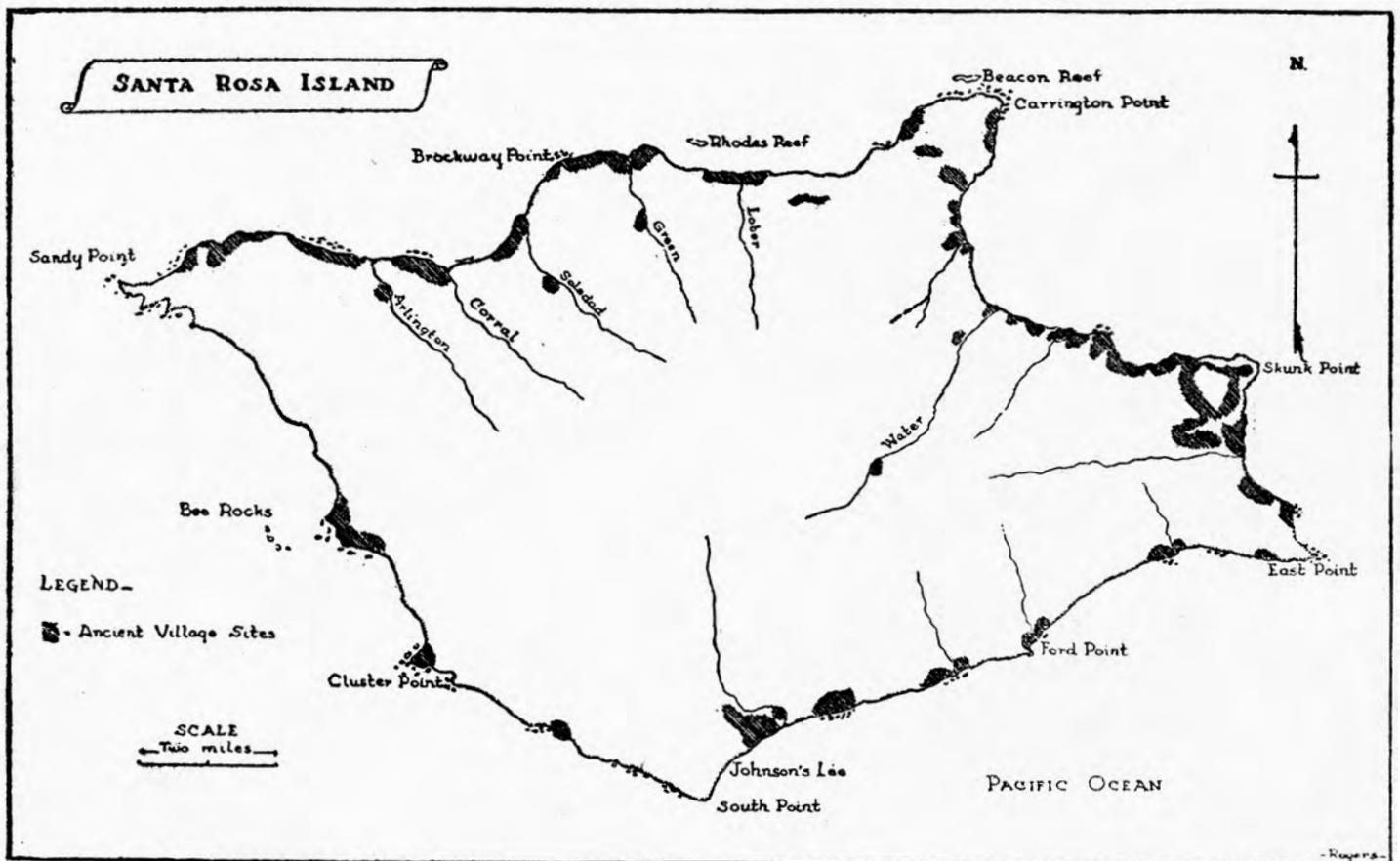
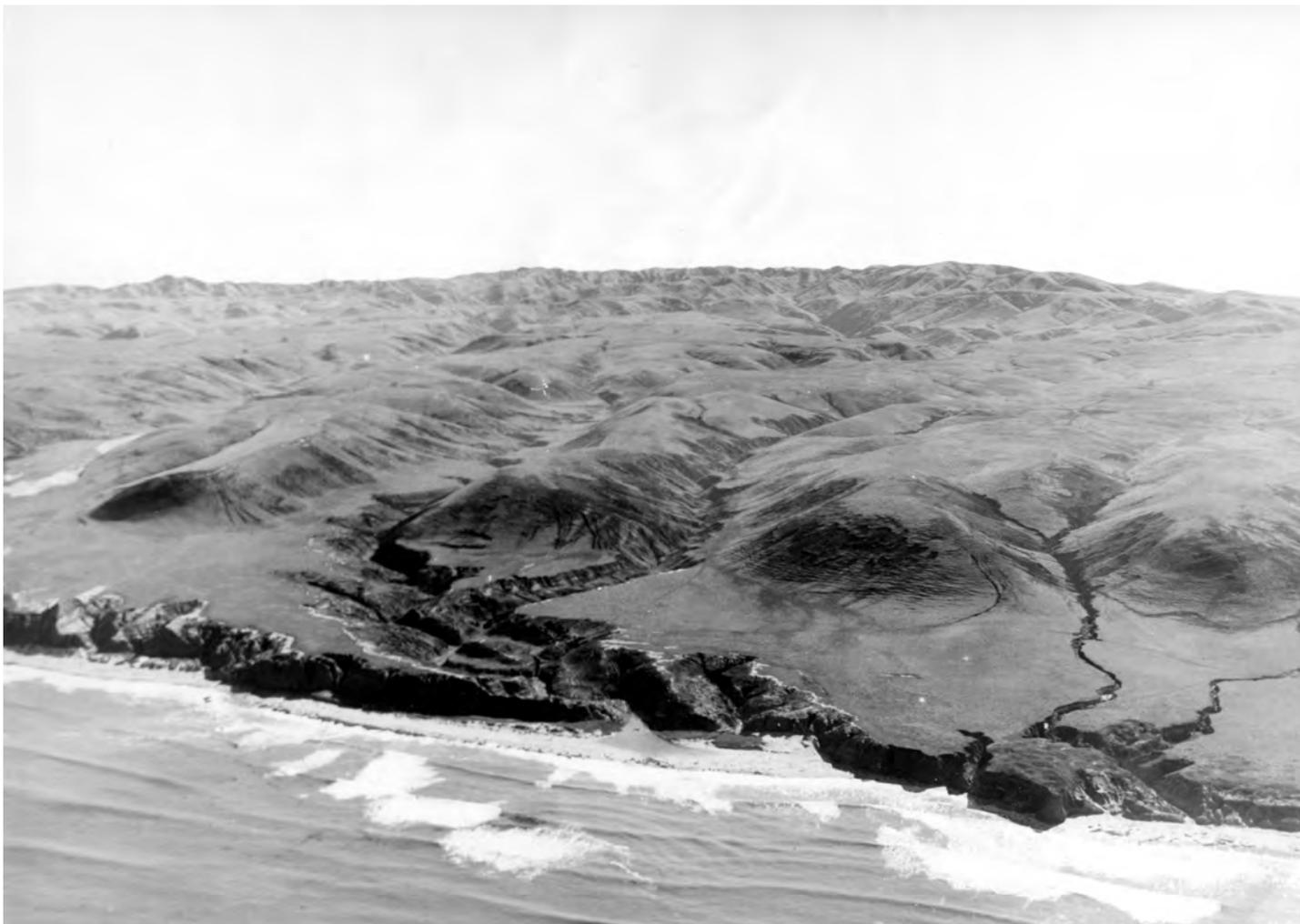


REPORT FROM SANTA ROSA ISLAND



Santa Barbara Museum
of Natural History



Northwest coast of Santa Rosa Island. Canada Tecolote in center, Skull Gulch at right. Note the crater-like depressions, which are the ancient house pits of the Skull Gulch village. There are twenty-five Indian village sites within this area.

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Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

1st Santa Rosa Island Expedition 1947

2nd Santa Rosa Island Expedition 1948-49

3rd Santa Rosa Island Expedition 1949-50

Introduction

Through the courtesy and cooperation of a few people, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (Departments of Paleontology and Anthropology) has been carrying out a systematic exploration of Santa Rosa Island for the prehistoric life—such as the dwarf mammoth, dwarf fox, and the prehistoric Indians—as an extremely important part of the general over-all survey of the Channel Islands first begun by Mr. David Banks Rogers in 1927 and continued by the writer in 1945, when San Nicolas Island was explored.

In the belief that our friends who have contributed in the past to the success of the expeditions, and who we hope will continue to support later expeditions, would like to know something of what we have done and what we plan to do, this brief and incomplete report is presented.

Acknowledgments

The Museum Expeditions have received important aid from many individuals connected with such organizations as the United States Navy and Coast Guard, the Macco Construction Company, and the Honolulu and the Signal Oil Companies, as well as the men employed by the island ranch of the Vail-Vickers Company, but without the support of the following, our task would have been far more difficult, if not impossible:

Trustees of the Museum of Natural History who have contributed towards the Expedition: Mr. Fred H. Schauer, Miss Katherine Harvey, Mr. Harold S. Chase, Mr. Charles A. Ott, and Mrs. M. Russel Perkins.

Mr. David Gray Jr. has flown personnel and supplies on more than fifty trips, and Captain George F. Hammond, Miss Bessie Owen and Mr. Eddo Katenkamp have flown other trips.

Boat transportation has been provided by the Macco Construction Company, the Scott Drilling Company of Chino, and Mr. Paul Ray of Santa Barbara.

A contribution from Mr. J. Townsend Russell of New York is gratefully acknowledged, and geologic aid has been rendered by Mr. Loel Redwine, district geologist of the Honolulu Oil Company, and Mr. Bob Anderson of the Signal Oil Company. Dr. Hildegard Howard of the Los Angeles County Museum has identified fossil bird bones secured.

Without the close interest and cooperation of Mr. Ed Vail and Mr. Al Vail of the Vail-Vickers Company, owners of Santa Rosa Island, the entire project would have been impossible.

Mr. J.W. Sefton Jr., of the Sefton Foundation of San Diego, has invited the writer to join several of his expeditions aboard the research ship "*Orca*" and thus enabled the Museum to carry on explorations by boat as well as by air and land.

Last, but not least, thanks are due the volunteer workers who have aided in the field: Mr. Ralph Colcord, Mr. Ernie Hovard, Mr. Kenneth Olsen, Mr. Matt Orr, and Mr. Clifton Smith.

History of the Santa Rosa Island Expeditions

The Island Expeditions really began in 1941 when Miss Bessie Owen flew the writer over the “elephant beds” and he was able to lay a groundwork of aerial prospecting. In 1945, he made other flights with the U.S. Coast Guard and secured aerial maps of the beds. The First Expedition began in March of 1947 when arrangements had been made with the Vail-Vickers Company, and Mr. Gray offered to fly us into the rugged and isolated section of the Island which could be reached only by air or foot.

After several months of preliminary prospecting and returning to the mainland each night, a temporary camp was set up and, with the help of Mr. Edward Rice, work was begun in the collection of the fossil bones of the Dwarf Mammoth (*Archidiskodon exilis*).

As there were no roads, all supplies, including water, had to be flown in by Mr. Gray, and later, by Captain Hammond. Due to the almost constant forty-five mile an hour winds, the camp was located in a deep erosional gulch out of the wind, but in the path of any cloud-burst. Fortunately, it was a dry year.

Now, after three years, the camp has taken on aspects of permanency with a solid dugout, still below the surface, but with adequate drainage to prevent washouts.



Supplies are transferred from Mr. Gray's plane to the Jeep for the long trip over the mountains to the camp. Left to right: David Gray Jr., Pilot, Richard S. Finley, paleontologist, Clifton F. Smith, botanist.

The only contact with civilization was made by plane and, due to the rough nature of the country, we did not go far from camp, finding plenty of interest within a two-mile area to keep us busy for two months.

Two skulls of the dwarf mammoth and many other bones were secured, so that we probably have the largest collection of the dwarf mammoth to be found in any museum.

The Second Expedition was more fortunate, as we secured a Jeep, which was made necessary by the closing of the landing strip. Oil exploration was under way, and our "desert" island was now a thriving focus of civilization with boats coming to the Beecher Bay landing, almost daily planes, and surveyors, drillers, geologists all over the Island.

Water was hauled from a dam the oil company had erected about seven miles away. Our heavy equipment and supplies were brought by boat, but Mr. Gray and Captain Hammond continued to fly perishables, "buzzing" our diggings and landing at the Ranch, where we would meet them after a two hour trip across the Island by jeep.

Mr. Rice had been replaced by Mr. Richard S. Finley who, as a permanent employee of the Museum, continued with the Third Expedition. More bones of the Dwarf Mammoth were secured, so that enough bones have been collected to complete a composite skeleton of this interesting little fellow for mounting. He stands about five feet high, as compared to his giant cousins of the mainland, which stand fourteen feet. (See exhibit in Patio)

With the Jeep we were able to cover many parts of the Island, which is some fifteen miles long by twelve wide, and rises to a height of 1574 feet. The oil company had built a main road down the center of the Island, but many times it was necessary to utilize the bulldozer blade attached to the Jeep to cut trails down into canyons or to fill steep-sided gulches.

In the process of this travel, during two years (Second and Third Expeditions) 142 Indian villages were discovered and mapped.



Island Oaks growing on the top of the Island near the place where our road passes from landing strip to camp.

Excavations were made at Skull Gulch and Green Canyon during the Second Expedition, and numerous skeletal remains and artifacts uncovered. The thorough survey showed that there were twenty-three Indian villages within a two mile area of our camp. On the hypothesis that this area could only support one village at a time, twenty-three "village cycles or phases" were represented in the total age of the habitation of the Island. Therefore it was decided that the Third Expedition would concentrate in this area, excavating key sites in an effort to determine whether a consecutive series of prehistoric habitations and artifact inventory could be established, which then might be utilized to good advantage on the mainland or on the other islands in determining the antiquity and relationship of the hundreds of ancient villages.

The Third Santa Rosa Island Expedition reached the field two months later than we hoped, due to lack of transportation. This came unexpectedly with an offer from Mr. Scott, of the Scott Drilling Company, to transport the Jeep to Santa Rosa on an LCM (landing craft) which he was sending to the Island.

Jeep and supplies were loaded at Hueneme during a driving rain in the middle of the night, and reached Santa Rosa safely where it was unloaded by Mr. Scott and his men. At this writing (May 1950), the Jeep is still on Santa Rosa, parked near the dock awaiting a trip back to the mainland.

A few days later, the expedition members stepped out of Mr. Gray's plane and two hours later were greeted at the camp by our friends, the island foxes, who for three years have welcomed us to their island. We appreciate their welcome and reciprocate by respecting them and inviting them to breakfast. Occasionally, when it is cold and raining, they drop in for the evening, curling up under the table or on our beds, just like the more civilized dogs or cats.

Our plan of systematic excavation was put into effect almost immediately with the excavation of "Turtle House," of the ancient village of Niakla, located at Skull Gulch. Here, the Indians lived in large thatched houses of sea grass with wood or whalebone ribs. Their food was almost entirely from the sea, and the huge heaps of shells have accumulated to a depth of ten feet.

Turtle House, about eighteen feet in diameter, contained more than one hundred supporting poles for the sea grass thatched roof which, by a freak of preservation, is still to be found—though in a sad state of repair. The carapace of a giant sea turtle, which today is generally found only along the coast of Mexico, was found in the ruins of this hut, together with some two hundred bone and shell artifacts of the ancient inhabitants.



Excavation of "Turtle House" in the Skull Gulch area, showing the post holes which supported the house of thatched sea grass some time prior to 1542.

A new insight into the construction of typical California shell mounds was found here and will serve as the subject of a scientific paper probably to be published by *American Antiquity*. This discovery, of too "scientific" a trend to be discussed here, is but one of the many of the important discoveries made by the expeditions.

Four separate types or groups of ancient Indian sites were discovered by the Second Expedition, and the Third Expedition tried to work out the possibilities systematically, but two men working under the handicap isolation from supplies and bucking winds and bad weather cannot do in one year that which should take a larger group several years. We were therefore able to investigate some of the "early" people who preferred sand dunes for a place of habitation and which at this time appears to be a distinct "race" from the later Canalino of mainland and island. We do not know yet, however, just who they were or where they went or anything about the "middle" people.

That the "early" people were a "super" race physically, there can be no doubt. Their bones, usually buried in semi-sitting up position, as contrasted with the later people of flexed, face down burial, suggest virile, rugged race which lived on plants and the choice Red Abalone, considered even at the present time far more choice than the Black. The main difference, so far as our conclusions on the ancient Indians is concerned, is that the Red Abalone lives only below twenty feet of water, hence diving is necessary to obtain them. The "late" Indians seldom bothered with the Red Abalone.

Of the three cultures which we believe existed on Santa Rosa Island, so far we have explored only the "late" and the "early." One skeleton of the "middle" horizon, was excavated, which seems to substantiate our belief in the three cultures of phases which are not contemporary with the three cultures of the mainland. There is much more work to be done in all three phases, however, and especially in the unknown Arlington Caves, where the first cave burials in Chumash territory has ever been discovered.

Perhaps these Santa Rosa cavemen will give us a clue to the cavemen of the Hurricane Deck region, but the lack of paintings in the caves suggests doubt on that score.



Excavation of "Dune Dwellers" cemetery of the early Santa Rosa Island culture showing skeletons in upright position. Blocks contain unexcavated skeletons.

We feel certain that the Oak Grove People—those ancient inhabitants of the Santa Barbara mainland of perhaps ten to twenty thousand years ago, did not reach the island, but at present it appears that man did reach the island perhaps more than twenty thousand years ago.

Where did the circular fish-hook, the plank canoe, and other traits represented on our islands which are reminiscent of the South Seas and northern Chile, come from (or go to)? Did a canoe containing a few artifacts drift from Santa Rosa to Chile or to the South Seas, or did it drift from there to here? Did the canoe contain men who settled on the island and perhaps became of “Dune Dwellers?” Frankly, there is little support for such a hypothesis, but the fact remains that we DO NOT KNOW where the first Santa Rosa Islanders came from or where they went, any more than we know about our mainland Oak Grove people, though each expedition brings us new knowledge.

The Channel Islands, from San Miguel on the North to Cedros off the coast of Mexico, because of their isolation and comparative freedom from interference by modern man with his agricultural cultivation, cities and industry which cover up or destroy sites by roads, buildings and cities, offer science the best opportunity to recover records of the past.

Our islands in general have not changed for many years and, except for the advances of nature, the history locked within their soils has not been destroyed. We cannot hope that this will continue indefinitely, however, for Guadalupe, the most remote island of all, 300 miles off the Mexican coast, has developed an important guano trade with factory and diggings. San Clemente, San nicolas, and now our own San Miguel, have been converted into target ranges by the United States Navy, and flora and fauna, as well as the “antiquities” have been destroyed by the high explosives.

Were you ever under fire from naval bombardment? The 1945 San Nicolas Island Expedition of the Museum was under actual fire. a 500 pound bomb landing on a cemetery can well blow a hole that it would take our expedition three months of careful work to dig. Santa Rosa Island is a cattle ranch and, as such, is relatively free from such danger, but OIL is a magic word which leads to the destruction of nature by road and building construction, pipelines and tanks, not to mention the human inclinations of oil workers, ranchmen, storekeepers and people in general to “pot hunt.” So far, oil has not been found on Santa Rosa Island, but more than three million dollars is said to have been invested in a hunt for oil there. Some day it may be found, and then there will be no more undisturbed prehistoric Indian sites in the extremely interesting Skull Gulch locality!

Plans for the future

Even with adequate finances, it would be impossible to lay out a “five year plan” of operation with any sensible degree of assurance that it could be carried out, but at this time it does appear that a long range plan of archaeological research and excavations in the Channel Islands, and especially on Santa Rosa Island, should be considered. From a scientific point of view, we have an opportunity to do in our own front yard what other museums go far afield to accomplish.

Let us say that our first consideration is to recover what we can of the fast disappearing antiquities of the Pacific Coast, and we can do more per dollar on the islands than on the mainland with its encumbering civilization.

What we may hope may result from the IMMEDIATE WORK on Santa Rosa Island is a complete and thorough study of the Skull Gulch Population Center* with the hope that it will prove a key to the various cultures and phases of both mainland and other islands. When completed, even though we do not succeed in producing a complete key to the stratigraphy and chronology of the prehistoric man of our coast, we should gain valuable information towards that end.**

* Unpublished manuscript for *American Antiquity* as a result of past work on the Island.

** In course of preparation in collaboration with Prof. E W. Gifford of the University of California. To be published in anthropological records of the university, the present accumulated data on Shell and Bone Artifacts from Santa Rosa Island.

Two years ago the expedition ran out of burlap, groceries, and water, and it was necessary to lose two days' work to secure emergency supplies which could have been secured by a ten minute radio conversation. Last year, a break down of the motorized equipment could have been repaired by five minutes on the radio and a ten cent bolt, but three weeks use of the equipment was lost for lack of communication. Next year? A broken leg, an attack of appendicitis or other emergencies might pay many times the cost of such common equipment.

Now is the time, while the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History has the cooperation of the Vail-Vickers Company, owners of the Island, and while David Gray and Captain George Hammond are willing to furnish the invaluable aerial transportation so vital to the work, and before the ravages of nature and commerce have destroyed the pages of history recorded in the sands of the Island—to gather this important information. Already, in three years time, commercial developments or pot hunting have damaged or destroyed seven percent of the existing prehistoric sites on the Island.

It seems that, due to the fact that civilization is making such rapid inroads on the natural conditions which have preserved our ancient Indian sites for hundreds of years, we should make every effort we can to preserve the data contained in the soils before it is destroyed. It is also important that whatever data is secured should be made available to the general public, not only through exhibition, but in writings. For this purpose, the aid of stenographer or secretary, who could also aid in routine cataloguing and tabulations and in the preparation of manuscripts for publication, is much needed.

Phil C. Orr

Curator of Anthropology and Geology