A Half Century of Death Valley Archaeology

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THAT an interest in Death Valley's prehistoric past developed only slowly is hardly surprising. The region's forbidding name, exaggerated accounts of its aridity and desolation, its remoteness—all these combined to deter fieldworkers. Moreover, the cultural adaptation of the aboriginal inhabitants seemed to offer little promise of exciting discoveries or rich rewards. Consequently, it was not until 1925 that an archaeologist set foot in the country; another quarter century elapsed before any sort of systematic program of study got underway.

CASUAL OBSERVATIONS (1849-1925)

Signs of early human activity in the country did not, of course, go entirely unnoticed prior to 1925. From the mid-nineteenth century on, passing comments on them were occasionally made by visitors. In his reminiscences, William L. Manly, one of the heroes of the episode involving an ill-fated emigrant party that blundered into Death Valley at the close of 1849 while seeking a shortcut into the California goldfields, mentions having seen footpaths, disused campfires, an abandoned brush hut and a cave "which had the appearance of being continuously used by the Indians" in the Furnace Creek area (Manly 1928:138).

Eleven years later Dr. S.A. George, leader of a group of prospectors searching for the legendary Lost Gunsight Mine, noticed "hieroglyphs on rocks, of a very interesting character" in upper Wildrose Canyon (Hanks 1883: 34). Rock paintings, "images of animals . . . one representing a goat," were observed at a spring near the summit of a pass in the Panamint Range by George Miller, one of four prospectors who spent several weeks in Death Valley during the spring of 1869 seeking the still elusive mine (Miller 1919). Native rock art also attracted the attention of two members of the United States Department of Agriculture's "Death Valley Expedition" of 1891. C. Hart Merriam, head of the party of scientists studying the local natural history, recorded petroglyphs at Emigrant Spring, and Edward W. Nelson, one of the biologists, noted a set at Saratoga Springs. Merriam and Nelson passed their information on to Garrick Mallery, who incorporated it in his classic *Picture Writing of the North American Indians* (Mallery 1893:60-61). Subsequently, the same data appeared in Julian H. Steward's *Petroglyphs of California and Adjacent States* (Steward 1929:73, 82). Edward Nelson also contributed a description of a prehistoric habitation site. After giving an account of Saratoga Springs, he noted that "Close by is an extensive ancient Indian camping ground, over which are scattered very many 'chips' made from manufacturing arrowpoints from quartz crystal, chert, chalcedony,

and other materials" (Mallery 1893:60-61; Steward 1929:82). A third member of the Death Valley Expedition, biologist Vernon Bailey, remarked on the occurrence of stone hunting blinds close by water sources in both the Panamint and Funeral mountains (Bailey 1940:16).

For approximately the next 35 years, little notice was taken of Death Valley's prehistoric remains, except by relic-hunters. They were active around Saratoga Springs and perhaps elsewhere in the area.

FIRST STIRRINGS (1925-1950)

The real discovery of Death Valley's archaeological past began with the work of Malcolm J. Rogers, that tireless student of California desert prehistory. In 1925 Rogers (1939) extended his survey of the Colorado and Mojave deserts into the southern end of Death Valley. Here, at Saratoga Springs, he recorded a large encampment described in his field notes as "having the greatest stone flaking industry that I have seen in southern California" (Rogers n.d.). Apparently, this was the same site described earlier by E.W. Nelson. An analysis of surface-collected artifacts led Rogers to the conclusion that this spot had been lived upon during three prehistoric phases, Amargosa II, Nonceramic Yuman I, and Panamint. The principal occupation, he believed, took place in the Nonceramic Yuman I period with only slight evidences of use of the living place in later times by Panamint Indians. An excavation conducted at the site twenty-two years later (Wallace and Taylor 1959) proved this surmise to be essentially correct. A second encampment, located a mile and a half west of Saratoga Springs on one of the channels of the Amargosa River, produced artifacts which Rogers regarded as belonging to earlier phases (San Dieguito II, Amargosa I and II), with the main habitation falling again in the Nonceramic Yuman I period.

Malcolm Rogers also made a detailed study of the petroglyphs pecked into scattered boulders and outcrops on the steep hill located just south of Saratoga Springs, recognizing stylistic and age differences among them. The majority of designs he characterized as of the "rubbed broad line geometric type" (Rogers n.d.), perhaps made in Nonceramic Yuman I times. A few elements, quite large and running to animal forms, he considered to be older, possibly Amargosa in age. A patina had formed over the latter representations and several gave signs of having been reworked.

Although he concentrated his efforts at the southern end of Death Valley, Rogers did visit and record two living sites at McLean Spring, 60 miles to the northwest. The first, situated in a cluster of mesquite dunes, yielded potsherds and other items typical of the last period of aboriginal occupation. Materials from the second, lying on low fossil dunes, he attributed to an earlier time span.

Next to venture into the area were two other pioneers in California desert archaeology—Elizabeth W.C. Campbell and William H. Campbell. Evidently unaware of Rogers' Saratoga Springs reconnaissance, they covered much of the same ground. Accompanied on at least one occasion by Charles Amsden, they visited the Saratoga Springs district three times between October 1933 and January 1935. Carefully searching the land surrounding the spring, the Campbells discovered and recorded ten campsites, one of which they test-pitted (Campbell and Campbell n.d.). Aside from an observation that one small encampment was "pure" and "old," no effort seems to have been made to place the sites in time.

Collectors continued to be active. A notable aggregate of artifacts was assembled by Herman W. Eichbaum, builder of a toll road into Death Valley and of the Stovepipe Wells resort. Presumably, most of Eichbaum's specimens were gathered in the late 1920's and early

1930's from camping places located in the mesquite-covered dunes north of the resort. Some of the objects are described and illustrated in Julian H. Steward's ethnographic reports on the local Indians (Steward 1933, 1941).

After the establishment of Death Valley National Monument by presidential proclamation on February 16, 1933, National Park Service personnel on occasion took note of habitation areas or rock art localities they encountered or were informed of by Monument visitors. But this work was independent and haphazard. A discovery of moment was made by Civilian Conservation Corps enlistees employed in road building and other activities. They recovered a cache of baskets out of a rockshelter not far from the old Monument Headquarters. The baskets, seven in all, were later analyzed and described (Lathrap and Meighan 1951:19-20).

The only planned investigation concerned rock art. In December 1945 the National Park Service's Regional Office in San Francisco requested that a study be made of petroglyphs and pictographs within Death Valley National Monument or adjacent areas. The task was assigned to newly-arrived Park Naturalist Edwin C. Alberts. Alberts compiled a preliminary report on twelve localities in the Monument and one in nearby Greenwater Canyon (Alberts 1946a). Later, he described rock engravings in upper Wildrose and Echo canyons (Alberts 1946b, 1947).

AWAKENING INTEREST (1950-1951)

A sudden upsurge of interest occurred in 1950-51. In the spring of 1950, Lydia Clements, an interested amateur who spent three months in Death Valley with her husband, University of Southern California geologist Thomas Clements, recorded nineteen widely separated "collecting localities" (Clements 1951). She also numbered and catalogued the modest collection of artifacts that had accumulated over the years at Monument Headquarters.

One of the nineteen "collecting localities" was Manly Terrace, formed by waves of a great freshwater lake that filled Death Valley in the late Pleistocene. Several hundred pieces of chipped stone picked out of the terrace's desert pavement were described as man-made tools left behind by primitive hunters who camped along the lakeshore 20,000 or so years ago (Clements and Clements 1953). Most professional archaeologists are not very impressed with the Manly Terrace finds, regarding them as naturally-flaked rocks rather than as products of human handiwork.

A secondary result of the Clements' investigation was the testing of several sites. Assisted by Louis Caywood, National Park Service Regional Archaeologist, and Ruth D. Simpson of the Southwest Museum staff, Thomas and Lydia Clements spent four days, December 31, 1950, to January 3, 1951, excavating at three localities. At Daylight Spring the field party trenched three rock circles and an adjoining area; in the Mesquite Springs district they tested three circular clearings and a sand dune site; on Manly Terrace four small spots were excavated (Clements and Clements 1951). The digging met with little success, for no cultural materials were recovered below ground.

At roughly the same time that Lydia Clements' research was going on, Adan E. Treganza, San Francisco State University instructor, and Arnold R. Pilling, assistant archaeologist for the University of California Archaeological Survey, conducted a one-day reconnaissance in Death Valley while on a wide-ranging field trip in the desert country (Arnold Pilling, personal communication). On April 9, 1950, Treganza and Pilling explored among the sand dunes south and west of Stovepipe Wells, identifying thirteen encampments and making a small collection of surface materials. Two petroglyph sites in Marble

Canyon were also recorded, apparently from the United States Geological Survey Ballarat Quadrangle, upon which they appear as "Pictured Rocks." Treganza paid a second visit to Death Valley on December 21 of the same year. This time he surveyed in the Midway Well section, noting the presence of three camping places in the sand dunes between Surveyors and Ruiz wells.

Another brief, though much more profitable, reconnaissance took place in February 1951. Alerted to the existence of inhabited rockshelters in the area by a geologist who had found an almost complete basketry parching tray in one of them, a two-man University of California Archaeological Survey field party composed of Clement W. Meighan and Donald W. Lathrap inspected a strip of rough and rocky country on the western slopes of the Panamint Range in the vicinity of Racetrack Playa. Thirty-three sites, mostly rockshelters that had served as temporary dwellings for recent Indians, were examined and reported upon (Lathrap and Meighan 1951).

Several of the rockshelters discovered during the Panamint exploration were excavated by a University of California Archaeological Survey field crew during the following June and July. The digging, done under the direction of Clement W. Meighan, was financed by the National Park Service. Major attention centered on the Coville rockshelter, named in honor of pioneer botanist Frederick V. Coville, a member of the 1891 Death Valley Expedition (Meighan 1953). The Coville shelter proved quite productive, with 366 artifacts recovered from its shallow fill. The majority differed little, if at all, from ethnographic specimens, so they were attributed to the historic Panamint Indians. A few objects, however, hinted at an earlier (Amargosa II) occupation. From the information gathered, it was surmised that the Coville shelter had been camped in sporadically for perhaps 300 years in the period between A.D. 1450 and 1750. Digging in lesser rockshelters yielded additional materials, evidently of the same general antiquity (Baumhoff in Meighan 1953:193-194).

INTENSIVE ACTIVITY (1952-1962)

The awakened interest resulting from the Clements' and University of California Archaeological Survey activities prompted the National Park Service to inaugurate a program of research designed to promote a more detailed knowledge of Death Valley National Monument's archaeological resources. Late in 1952, the National Park Service entered into a cooperative agreement with the University of Southern California for the conducting of site surveys within the Monument. William J. Wallace of the University's Department of Anthropology was named chief investigator. A program of field studies began on December 21, 1952, and continued intermittently for the next ten years.

Since it was not feasible to cover the entire 3200 square miles of rugged desert and mountain country contained within the Monument's boundaries, a sampling procedure was adopted. Limited, more or less homogeneous, districts were chosen so as to give both spaced geographical coverage and a cross-section of contrasting environments. The ideal was to cover the ground in each selected district so thoroughly that no prehistoric remains would be overlooked. As all field archaeologists know from experience, this ideal is seldom, if ever, achieved.

In fieldwork over a period of ten years, University of Southern California parties searched two major tracts on the valley floor (Mesquite Flat, Saratoga Springs), three at intermediate altitudes (Butte Valley, Old Crump Flat, Northern Death Valley), and two in the higher country (Wildrose Canyon, Grapevine Mountains). An outside locality (Greenwater Canyon) was explored at a time

when it was under consideration for inclusion within the Monument. Results of two of the surveys—Butte Valley and Wildrose Canyon —have been published (Wallace and Taylor 1955, 1956); information on the others is contained in reports submitted to the National Park Service.

By happy circumstances, Alice Hunt, who had previously conducted archaeological researches in the La Sal Mountains of Utah, was able to participate as a collaborator in the University of Southern California project. Working in central Death Valley during the winters of 1955-56 through 1959-60 and in close cooperation with her husband, Charles B. Hunt, who was engaged in making field studies for the United States Geological Survey, Alice Hunt recorded more than 650 sites around the low-lying salt pan and on the gravel fans flanking it. The result of her investigations was a remarkably full description of the kinds of remains occurring in the region, with geological information supplementing the archaeological (A. Hunt 1960).

Throughout, the University of Southern California archaeologists gave priority to locating and recording sites. However, now and again they did excavate at those threatened by vandalism. The first digging occurred in the winter of 1954 in Wingate Wash. An adult skeleton, already partially uncovered and in very poor condition, was removed from beneath a pile of large rocks. Two jasper quarry blanks and a portion of a large projectile point accompanied the remains. Next excavated was a rockshelter near Hole-in-the-Rock Spring. Here a Monument visitor, doing a little unauthorized scratching around, uncovered part of a human skeleton. Fearing that the wide publicity given to his find would result in further looting, three days (April 2-4, 1955) were spent clearing the shelter of its fill, which yielded two partial burials and a limited array of artifacts (Wallace 1957). The next site excavated was the large one at Saratoga Springs, remarked upon by both Nelson and Rogers. It had suffered enormous damage over the years and continued to be a favorite target of relic hunters. Despite the previous disturbance, the archaeological deposit, extensively probed in the winter of 1957, produced a fine collection of artifacts attributable to a single (Amargosa II or Death Valley III) occupational phase (Wallace and Taylor 1959). Shortly thereafter, three additional campsites in the vicinity, all marked with irregular holes, were tested. The most ambitious salvage operation took place during the winter of 1961 and spring of 1962 at a sizeable rockshelter in the Ubehebe Craters district. Because the shelter's dark mouth could be clearly seen from the Ubehebe Craters-Racetrack road and its deposit had already been dug into, it was judged vulnerable and fully cleared. The fill yielded a rich harvest of artifacts belonging to the last two phases of aboriginal habitation, plus a few suggestive of an earlier time period.

Occasionally, too, sites that presented a problem of interpretation were excavated. Included were several rock mounds. A pit below one near Tule Spring contained the skeletons of an adult and a child, accompanied by a fine series of delicately-chipped projectile points, a few bone tools, and a shell bead (Wallace, Hunt, and Redwine 1959). Skeletal remains of an adult and a child also lay in a pit beneath a second pile of boulders, located south of Bennetts Well. The only grave goods with them consisted of shell beads. Bones of a newborn infant or fetus were found beneath another Bennetts Well mound (A. Hunt 1960:191). From a shallow oval depression beneath a very large rock pile in the Furnace Creek Wash area came a series of early-type projectile points, knives, and scrapers, but no identifiable human bone (A. Hunt 1960:66-70). Also investigated was a stone structure built against a slightly overhanging cliff in a fork of Hanau-

pah Canyon (A. Hunt 1960:125-127).

What did the long-term University of Southern California project accomplish? First of all, it realized its prime objective of providing the National Park Service with detailed information on Death Valley National Monument's archaeological resources. In the course of the field studies over 1400 prehistoric sites were discovered and recorded. These included open campsites, caves and rockshelters, quarries and workshops, various rock constructions (mounds, circles, hunting blinds, alignments), and petroglyphs and pictographs. Secondly, the archaeological findings documented a span of human experience covering 10,000 or so years. It was possible to divide this into four major cultural stages (designated Death Valley I, II, III, and IV), each with its own characteristic assemblage of artifacts (Wallace 1958:10-15; A. Hunt 1960:12; C.B. Hunt 1975:157-173). Furthermore, a great deal of basic information was gathered on the nature and distribution of settlements during the four stages and in contrasting geographical settings.

Additionally, the findings proved helpful in dating certain geological events of the Holocene. From the location of sites belonging to the various prehistoric periods, inferences could be made regarding the time when a shallow lake flooded low-lying parts of the basin, when the last major faulting occurred, and when the valley floor tilted eastward (A. Hunt 1960:289-292; C.B. Hunt 1975:14-15, 126-129). Archaeological evidence also aided in determining the age of alluvial and other deposits that clearly record Holocene climatic fluctuations.

Partially overlapping in time with the University of Southern California field studies, but quite independent of them, went an investigation of rock art. This was conducted by Donald E. Martin of Santa Rosa, California, a long-time student of the subject. For twenty-five years (1949-74), Martin devoted his annual two-week vacations to searching for and collecting information on the local rock art. During this period he recorded 101 sites (91 petroglyphic and 10 pictographic), personally visiting and completely photographing 90 of them (Martin 1976). The circumstances in which the native carvings and paintings occurred, their relationship to such things as dwelling sites, water and food resources, favorable hunting situations, and seasonal migration routes were studied. Martin concluded that the dominant factor in their placement was proximity to game trails, with 73 of the 101 rock art sites on game trails and eight more on observation points overlooking good hunting spots. An effort was also made to relate the petroglyphs and pictographs to the four recognized archaeological stages.

SLOWING DOWN AND NEW DIRECTIONS (1962-1976)

In the years that have elapsed since the winding down of the University of Southern California program, archaeological research has gone forward, but at a slower pace. Its center of interest has also shifted. Recent fieldwork has been directed toward environmental impact studies and historic site archaeology.

A number of localities for which construction work was planned have been searched in advance to determine if any prehistoric remains would be endangered. The most extensive project of this kind was the inspection of the Southern California Edison Company electric distribution line designed to bring outside power into Death Valley for the first time. Three separate sections of the line's proposed route were inspected between February 1963 and February 1964 (Wallace 1968a). The field work was financed by the Edison Company. As a follow-up, two rockshelters encountered during the survey of the Grapevine Canyon power line branch and considered

Table 1

CULTURAL CHRONOLOGY OF DEATH VALLEY

CULTURAL STAGE	DATE	ENVIRONMENT	ECONOMY	WEAPON	PROJECTILE POINTS	SEED-GRINDING IMPLEMENTS	SPECIAL FEATURES	DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD	ROCK ART	CONTEMPORARY CULTURES
DV-IV Panamint (Shoshone)	A.D. 1000 to ca. 1870	Hot, arid	Collecting, some hunting	Bow and arrow	Cottonwood Desert Side-notched	Milling stones, handstones Stone pestles, wooden mortars	Pottery (Owens Valley Brown Ware)	Cremation and flexed burial	Pictographs naturalistic, geometric Petroglyphs naturalistic, geometric	Desert Shoshone
DV-III Saratoga Springs	A.D. 1 to A.D. 1000	Hot, arid	Hunting-collecting	Bow and arrow	Eastgate Rose Spring	Milling stones, handstones	Puebloan trade sherds	Flexed burial in living area, or under stone mound	Petroglyphs geometric	Amargosa II
DV-II Mesquite Flat	3000 B.C. to A.D. 1	Moderately warm, moist	Hunting, some collecting in late phase	Dart and throwing stick	Late phase: Elko eared Elko corner-notched Early phase: Pinto shoulderless Pinto sloping shoulders	Late phase: Stone mortars and pestles Early phase: None		Flexed burial under stone mound ?	Petroglyphs geometric ?	Late phase: Amargosa I Early phase: Pinto Basin
Hiatus										
DV-I Nevares Spring	7000 B.C. to 5000 B.C.	Cool, moist	Hunting	Dart and throwing stick	Lake Mohave Silver Lake	None	Numerous flake scrapers	?	?	Lake Mohave

to be in imminent peril of looting were dug under the direction of George Kritzman (Kritzman 1966). Lesser reconnaissances covered tracts scheduled for a variety of National Park Service construction jobs (Wallace 1963, 1968b:3-4, 1973; Anderson 1973; Herskovitz 1975b, 1975c). In addition, several districts were searched to determine the past and projected effects of mining on their archaeological resources (Stewart 1976).

In the historic field, three of the region's best-known monuments—the Charcoal Kilns in Wildrose Canyon, Harmony Borax Works, and Eagle Borax Works—saw archaeological exploration prior to their stabilization and/or restoration. The work at Harmony Borax, from whence the famed twenty-mule teams set out on their 165-mile haul across mountain and desert, proved the most rewarding. An exploratory excavation in 1971-72 laid bare several of the old plant's installations (Wallace 1972). Of particular interest was the unearthing of the remains of a blacksmith shop and the Chinese quarter in the settlement once occupied by borax workers. More extensive digging done in 1975 and 1976 in conjunction with stabilization work revealed more features of the borax plant (Herskovitz 1975a). A minor undertaking involved the exploration of a prospector's camp located in an unnamed canyon leading into Furnace Creek Wash. Discovered during the Southern California Edison Company survey, it produced materials dating from the time of the Greenwater mining boom (1906-07). Mention should also be made of Charles B. Hunt's study of trails used by prospectors before 1900 and the litter of bottles, cans, and other debris found along them (C.B. Hunt 1959, 1975:174-185). Although aimed at gaining information on erosion rates, this study represents a valuable contribution to local historical archaeology.

Obviously, the various archaelogical activities that have gone on in Death Valley during the past fifty-odd years, and particularly since 1950, have enormously enriched knowledge of the region's past. Now, with this expanded body of information, many questions as to the nature and course of former human occupation can be answered. But it would be wrong to assume that the archaeologist's task is done or that it has reached the point of diminishing returns. Vast tracts, some of considerable promise, remain totally or inadequately explored. The possibility of surprising or even revolutionary discoveries in these areas is strong. Moreover, even if the main outline of the region's past seems reasonably clear, obscurity and uncertainty still hang over many of the details. In short, there is still much to be done.

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