



NEWS AND NOTES

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News and Notes contains expanded treatment of archaeological issues, descriptions of unusual artifacts and sites, summaries of fieldwork, SCA organizational and awards news, important new legislation, and an honoring of our colleagues who have passed on. This edition includes information on the discovery of the cave where the Tongva Lone Woman lived and Frank Fenenga honored in Sands of Time.

Lone Woman's Cave Found on San Nicolas Island

Navy archaeologist Steve Schwartz, teaming with archaeology students from California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) under the direction of René Vellanoweth, have uncovered the long lost cave where the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island was reported to have lived during her 18 years of isolation. The Lone Woman was found working in a brush covered windbreak on the west end of the island, but early accounts state she was actually living in a cave nearby. The cave was explored in the years immediately after her discovery, but the location of the cave was lost over the intervening years. Numerous archaeologists have surveyed the island, but no cave was ever reported other than the Cave of the Whales rock art site. As it turns out, the Lone Woman's cave had become completely buried by sand that became dislodged by subsequent sheep ranching on the island. The cave holds the prospect of an unprecedented archaeological record from the earliest island inhabitants to the very last occupant.

The key piece of information that led to the discovery of the cave site was an 1879 U.S. Coast Survey map that shows the location of "Indian Cave." However, the map was not detailed enough to pinpoint the cave's location precisely as the shoreline is actually more complex than shown on the map and the cave had become completely buried, with no visible trace of its location. Testing in the area for more than 20 years failed to uncover any evidence of a cave or any occupation for that matter, but one location always looked promising. The break in the story came when U.C. Berkeley researcher, Scott Byram, discovered the field notes that accompany the 1879 U.S. Coast Survey map. The field notes specify that the cave on the map was, in fact, the cave where the Lone Woman was believed to have lived, and the map includes a detailed drawing showing

precise distance and compass bearing from the closest survey station (the location of which could be approximated). This pointed to the same spot that always seemed the most likely location for the cave. With this information, it was determined that the cave must be at this spot, but was likely deeply buried, far deeper than anyone had expected. A field crew consisting of CSULA archaeology students made a herculean effort to remove an estimated one million pounds of sand, all by hand, one bucket load at a time.

The cave had become completely buried by windborne and waterborne sediments. The early history of San Nicolas Island saw the development of a sheep ranch in 1857, which triggered an era of extreme erosion due to loss of vegetation. This placed large amounts of blowing sand into the system, which allowed the cave to be completely buried within a short period of time. The top of the cave entrance was buried under two meters of sand, with a total of seven meters deposited over the presumed 1850s floor of the cave. The first evidence of occupation encountered were two sets of initials with the date of September 11, 1911, indicating that the cave was at least still partially open at that time. A midden layer with dark soil, shell, bone, and lithics was encountered at seven meters below the surface. Excavations were stopped at that point, pending review and approval by the Navy to proceed. The cave opening that was exposed is three meters high, five meters wide, and 18 meters deep. The cave goes much deeper. This can be seen in a cavity at the rear of the cave, which extends for at least an estimated five more meters. The cave is an ancient sea cave in an 80,000-year-old marine terrace, which has been uplifted a few meters above sea level. The cave developed along a fault line, which is clearly visible in the roof of the cave.

Given the large size of the cave, it is believed to hold evidence not only of the Lone Woman's 18 years of occupation, but also of previous occupation perhaps going back to the original inhabitants of the island. The cave is in an ideal location on an island that has extreme weather conditions, so it seems likely that the earliest settlers would have found the cave and occupied it from the very earliest times. The deposits in the cave are completely undisturbed and were laid down in what appears to be a season-by-season record of occupation. This record has the potential to reveal the entire ecological history of the island during historic times, as well as serving as a cap providing incredible preservation of the prehistoric deposits beneath. Future work in the cave is likely to answer many of the outstanding questions, including the timing of the original occupation of the island and how the Lone Woman survived her 18 years of isolation. A detailed report of findings to date is in process.

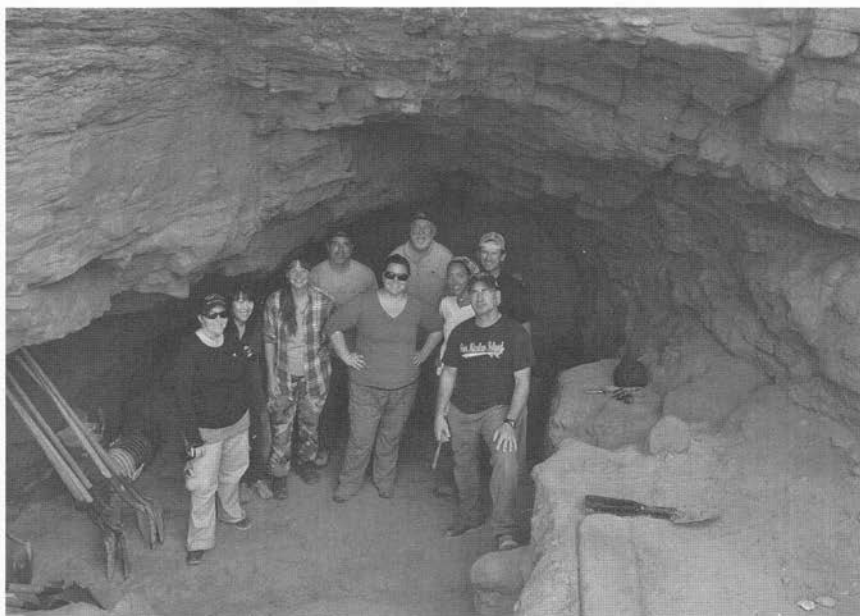


Figure 1. California State University, Los Angeles field crew in front of the cave. Students moved an estimated 40,000 buckets of sand to expose the cave. From left to right: Jessica Colston, Jennie Allen, Lisa Thomas-Barnett, René Vellanoweth, Emily Whistler, Steve Schwartz, Amira Ainis, Richard Guttenberg, and Brendon Greenaway (back). (Photograph courtesy of Bill Kendig).

Steven J. Schwartz, Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division, Point Mugu (retired)
René L. Vellanoweth, California State University, Los Angeles