

HOW OLD IS "OLD"?

Recognizing Historical Sites and Artifacts

by

Sharon A. Waechter

Far Western Anthropological Research Group, Inc.

with contributions by Judith Marvin, Foothill Resources, Ltd.

and Dan Foster, CAL FIRE

Revised June 10, 2010

The impetus and support for this article comes from Dan Foster, Senior State Archaeologist for CAL FIRE. It is meant as a supplement to CAL FIRE's *Reference Manual and Study Guide* for the Archaeological Training Program.



Introduction

State (as well as federal) laws and regulations dealing with cultural resources apply to both “prehistoric” and “historical” resources – that is, sites, features, and artifacts dating to both before and after the arrival of non-Native peoples. “Historical” resources in most parts of California fall into a rough date range of the 1840s to the 1950s. In some areas, notably in the region of Spanish missionization, the historic era extends back to the late 1700s. Although there are many Native American sites that date to this period, a site is defined as “historical” only if it contains artifacts or materials of non-Native origin – glass, metal, brick, etc [1].

Although the line between “historical” and “modern” can be a bit fuzzy, sites and structures dating after 1960 are generally not recorded or managed as historical resources. It’s important, then, to be able to differentiate between pre-1960 and post-1960 remains. Some types of artifacts (cans with soldered-lead seams, bottles with applied lips) are so old as to leave no doubt. Others (cans with “church-key” openings, crown-top bottles) can be right on the cusp. The following brief overview is designed to help you determine the “old” from the “not-so-old.” It’s important to remember, though, that dating sites and artifacts is only the first step. The real goal is to interpret the remains, and understand how they fit into the larger picture of human behavior and cultural processes. We’ll come back to this later.

[1]The transitional period, after the arrival of non-Native peoples but before their long-term settlement in California, is sometimes referred to as the “proto-historic” period. Proto-historic sites may contain a few “European” goods – glass trade beads, for example – mixed in with the mostly Native assemblages.

[Bottles](#)

[Cans](#)

[Ceramics](#)

[Miscellaneous Artifacts](#)

[Archival Research](#)

[Summary](#)