Following the Trail of Glass

Glass trade beads are helping archaeologists make sense of the relationship between traders and Indians in the Pacific Northwest.

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A Ghost Dance

THE CONSERVANCY ACQUIRES A GHOST DANCE SITE IN CALIFORNIA

Florence Jones sits in her wheelchair on a rutted dirt road alongside wes men wakut, or “salt water creek.” Head held high, eyes bright, she recalls making pine-needle brooms and sweeping the salt deposits that encrust flat rocks in the dry creek bed. There were houses here, she says, made of mud and branches. She remembers family members living nearby; she was a child then, in the early 1920s. There were berry bushes and trees with plum-like fruit that her people would pick. The fruit trees and berries are gone now, and the place seems barren. Jones’ people haven’t been in touch with this land for a long, long time.

An elder of the Wintu people, Jones administers to their spiritual, physical, and political needs. Jones explains that hers is “a role handed down from generation to generation.” A young Wintu man, Luis Parrish, stands behind her, ready to move her chair so that she can better envision the Wintus’ past and future. However, like many of his generation, he is unwilling to step into her place. “There is no one who wants to learn the old ways now,” says Jones.

The Conservancy recently signed an option to purchase this 10-acre property near Redding, California, at the northern end of the Sacramento Valley. Inhabited from 3000 B.C. to the 1800s, it is one of 15 archaeological sites on private land in the surrounding area. The California Department of Forestry, which has used the property to train foresters to better recognize archaeologically and culturally significant properties, brought the site to the attention of the Conservancy. On Labor Day weekend, Florence Jones visited the site to talk to archaeologists, landowners, and Conservancy representatives, and to learn what happened to the land.

The site is large and complex. Seventeen round housepit depressions measuring from 10 to 25 feet in diameter are adjacent to a large, deep, rectangular earthen structure. Large structures such as this one are nearly unheard of in California archaeology. The midden deposit is at least three feet deep and extends more than 300 feet from the center. Researchers have excavated only a tiny percentage of the site. Nearby there are petroglyphs and other visible signs of the prehistoric presence in this location. Artifacts from 1000 B.C. to the mid-1800s are numerous, representing a long and stable occupation.

In 1972, Shasta College conducted excavations on this and other nearby sites under the direction of S. Edward Gewett. Researchers recovered Spanish, French, Mexican, and Chinese coins during the 1972 excavations, as well as fish hooks, glass, metal and porcelain buttons, trade beads, obsidian...
Revival

projectile points, a paint palette, harpoon points, and more. They even found two delicate projectile points crafted from bottle glass—a symbol of the Wintus' cultural conflict during the historical period.

Retired State Archaeologist Francis Riddell identified the large rectangular structure long ago as a likely dance floor of the Earth Lodge or Ghost Dance movements. These closely related cults believed their ceremonies would return traditional lands to native people. The cults peaked between 1870 and the turn of the century.

Riddell studied similar structures in the Clearlake area of Northern California that are historically documented as ritual centers. According to Riddell, the Earth Lodge cult dug deep, sometimes two-tiered structures for their rituals. Dancers believed that "a great wind would blow the white man away" as they danced inside. At Salt Creek, the dance floor's rim rises nearly two feet above the ground surface. The center area is leveled well below the natural contour. Archaeologists have recovered nearly 2,600 historic glass beads and 60 ceramic buttons from nearby units, but haven't done significant excavations.

"When I first saw the big hole in the ground, I knew the California Indians didn't dig this with their digging sticks and baskets, so it must be of the historic period," recalls Riddell. "We dated a core from one of the trees on the structure's edge, and it represented about the right time to be related to the Earth Lodge and Ghost Dance cults. I suspect that if you did quite a bit of archaeology, you would find the remains of house posts and fire pits."

Jones, though, describes the structure differently. "This would be the home of the underchief," she says of Riddell's hole in the ground. "Every village had one, and that's where he lived, to take care of the whole village."

California settlers forced Wintu Indians off their land well over a century ago. The Conservancy's purchase would allow the Wintu to return to the land for ceremonial functions.

These days, modern houses dominate the hilltops surrounding the site. Local property owners are sympathetic to preservation, but California law allows for residences on most existing parcels with few restrictions.

The Conservancy still needs $75,000 to complete this important California acquisition.

—Lynn Dunbar