

SCORPION'S BLACKSMITH SHOP

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ABSTRACT

Every winter storm brings the inevitable runoff to Scorpion canyon on east Santa Cruz Island, located off the southern California coastline. Despite numerous dry-stone walls placed throughout the drainage system, native soil continues to be deposited in and around the Leaning Shed at Scorpion Ranch and constant pressure from this material has caused the structure to tilt significantly to the south. To prevent further damage, strategic trenching and archaeology using shovel, trowel, and brush were utilized as part of the initial restoration process. The interior south-wall trench revealed both artifacts and material that would suggest that this shed might, in fact, be the original Blacksmith Shop referenced as "forge" on the map of 1892.

STUDY LOCATION

Santa Cruz Island sits on the horizon approximately twenty-two miles from Santa Barbara, California (Gherini 1997:19) and about the same distance from Ventura Harbor. On the eastern end of Santa Cruz Island, the Scorpion drainage system is both extensive and diverse, and the level of the valley floor has been deepening over the past 18,000 years. Whereas the lower portion on the canyon is relatively flat and climbs at a gradual incline to the west and southwest, the upper section begins at an abrupt narrowing of the canyon as it progresses into the steep and rugged rocky gorge that can funnel and concentrate sometimes enormous volumes of water in a very short period of time. Scorpion Ranch, including the Leaning Shed which stands approximately 200m from the beach, lies at the base of the ridge running along the north side of the valley.

INTRODUCTION

In the early evening hours of 5 December 1997 the east end of Santa Cruz Island experienced an incredible impact as thousands of gallons of water rumbled down the Scorpion drainage system toward the Pacific Ocean. This end of the island was the undeniable focal point of an intense winter storm that pounded the area with torrential rainfall. The landscape was altered significantly as water, mud, rocks, trees, and other debris cascaded down from the higher ridges and canyons. Valuable and in some cases irreplaceable resources, both prehistorical and historical, were heavily impacted and much damage was sustained overall. Several

buildings were destroyed outright including one that had been constructed around 1880 and that had served, up until more recent times, specifically as a blacksmith shop. Another structure, now known as the Leaning Shed because of its significant leaning attitude, survived reasonably intact. It is this Leaning Shed that helps not only to illuminate Scorpion's past but also lends testimony to the consideration that this was quite possibly the original location for the business of blacksmithing.

According to both geologists and hydrologists, Scorpion Ranch, an outlier to the main ranch located in the Central Valley, was built not in a flood zone but in the flood plain itself. This factor only exacerbated the dynamic flooding event. The Leaning Shed nestles on a small bench slightly elevated above the canyon floor and, therefore, experienced only an increased layer of deposition rather than the devastating effects that destroyed some of the other ranch structures like the confirmed Blacksmith Shop that was constructed sometime in the 1880s (Gherini 1997:83).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Leaning Shed was constructed somewhere between 1885 and 1892 and is possibly the oldest structure of its kind on Santa Cruz Island (Gherini pers. comm. 1998). It is of wood construction and anchored in place by means of five 'true' 4 x 4 posts. The outside dimensions of the shed are approximately 7 m long, 3 m wide, and 4 m high as measured from the exposed baseboard to the apex of the roof. The posts, as well as the rest of the building, are in a state of serious decay due to direct contact and prolonged exposure to the weather and surrounding soil. Runoff associated with every winter storm system deposits a volume of silt and other material and as a result of this ever-increasing load of deposition along the north wall, the structure leans precariously toward the south. Dry-stone retaining walls constructed in about 1892 across many of the canyons in efforts to control and minimize erosion were not always successful (Gherini 1997:102). Consequently, the shed has experienced a good deal of damage, particularly the west-end room, which now displays only a leaning rear north wall and a dilapidated flimsy roof. Because of the constant exposure, the building has been repaired and modified on various occasions using different wood materials and methods. This patchwork technique of repair has created an intriguing

visual effect that is outdone only by the distinctive and crooked attitude of the structure itself. Of particular interest is the assemblage of artifacts that point to the possibility that this was the location of the original Blacksmith Shop that preceded the more recent 'shop' destroyed by the 1997 flood.

It was decided in May of 1988 that the shed had leaned for long enough and a plan was implemented to remedy this situation. In order to realize the objective and to preserve the structure's fragile integrity, strategic trenches would allow for its eventual straightening and subsequent stabilization. All 4 x 4 posts were seriously decayed. Consequently, only partial trenching that would leave a solid support cushion of earth around the posts would be permitted.

Exterior and interior trenching commenced on 4 May 1998. Extreme care was necessary during the initial stages of recovery and restoration. Because of the project's sensitive nature, archaeological techniques were employed in hopes that careful excavation would reveal any secrets buried beneath the erosion-covered surface. All material and artifacts were, therefore, uncovered and moved with shovel, trowel, and whisk broom. As trenching progressed to expose deeper levels where midden became evident, material was sifted and screened so that any lithics, shell, or artifacts could be recognized and retrieved. The provenience and dates of some artifacts, especially from exterior trenches, were not easily determined, yet all information helps to shed some light on the structure and its story.

DISCUSSION

Of particular interest are the various items retrieved from the interior trench that runs directly below and parallel to the south wall. Also, a distinctive layer of ash about one-third of a meter beneath the existing surface, two meters from the west wall, and three meters from the east at center, with an overall length of about one meter, yielded materials that could easily be associated with the craft of blacksmithing. The bits of charcoal, fused and oxidized metal, and chunks of mixed ash, charcoal and debris found as possible remnants from an old forge and bellows also hint that this may be the case. Several horse shoes, nails, and a pair of rusty pliers points to the theory that reflects this same idea. A substantial pocket of oxidized cable along with a piece of seared rope is obvious directly above the layer of ash and just below ground level. This ash appears along the trench on both north and south walls and is at least one-half a meter wide. The south trench wall also displays a length of rusty pipe in situ of indeterminate dimension and undetermined purpose that is in direct association with this ash.

Historical maps, books, and records in the possession of Santa Cruz Island owner Justinian Caire were delivered to Edwin L. Stanton at the time when Stanton purchased 90% of the island (Gherini 1997:161). These maps and books were again passed along to the Gherini family when they, in turn, purchased the East End from Dr. Carey Stanton, Edwin's

son, in 1925 (Gherini 1997:181). Who actually drew these maps is somewhat unclear, but it is likely that each ranch superintendent or foreman had a hand in their creation (Gherini pers. comm. 1999). Several of these old maps have played a crucial role in helping to clarify questions concerning the location of certain ranch buildings. Even though there is no obvious scale on these old maps, they seem to be reasonably accurate as to both structure location and dimension. For instance, the Bunkhouse/Underhouse, the two story 'Adobe', and the distance from the corner of the two story to the Leaning Shed, about thirty meters, all measure to within a meter of their designated locations on the 1892 map. The artists who created these renderings were remarkably precise, considering it was such an apparently casual endeavor.

Artifacts that date from both historical and possibly prehistorical times recovered from the Leaning Shed excavation site in the Scorpion Ranch complex were retrieved and documented. A careful analysis and evaluation of all artifacts, especially those of the last one hundred ten or so years, only strengthens the premise that this structure was, at least for some period of time, utilized as the Blacksmith Shop and that it was referenced as 'forge' on the 1892 map.

RESULTS

External digging unearthed various items that suggest that the shed was, at the very least, a convenient garbage dump, and in all likelihood, also a place where people gathered for both social occasions and work. Diagnostic artifacts include a piece of ornate ironwork, complete beer bottles, glass fragments from liquor and wine containers, nails, can tops, chert flakes, and shell fragments. A complete glass milk bottle was uncovered approximately halfway along the rear, or north wall, about one-half meter below the surface. One end of a heavy rectangular piece of lumber at least five meters in length with an attached resistor that may have served as a phone pole lay within several centimeters along this same rear wall and probably connected with the frayed phone lines that dangle from a shadowy interior corner. Evidence is strong and indicates that the Leaning Shed of today was the original Blacksmith Shop of the late 1800s.

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