

Locating the Buck Ranch Prehistoric Burial Ground, Huntington Beach, California

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Abstract

In 1930 and 1931 Orange County newspapers reported a prehistoric burial ground discovered on the old Buck Ranch, northwest of Huntington Beach. Ranch hands and curious members of the public reportedly uncovered more than 100 skulls on the Sunday after the original story was published. Eventually a local archaeological collector, Herman F. Strandt, took charge of the exploration. No professional study was published, and the location of the collection is unknown. This paper compiles the available information on the location of the Buck Ranch burial ground and concludes it was near the intersection of modern day Edwards Street and Varsity Drive.

Introduction

In the winter of 1930-31, a major prehistoric burial ground was uncovered on the old Buck Ranch property in the peat lowlands near Wintersburg, northwest of the Huntington Beach Mesa. Six contemporary newspaper articles described the location and the finds.

This essay is focused on reestablishing the location of this archaeological discovery. In reestablishing this site's specific location, it becomes possible to distinguish this discovery from the many other prehistoric archaeological sites presently known and recorded for the area of Huntington Beach/Bolsa Chica.

After the six contemporary newspaper accounts, there appear to have been only brief descriptions of this Buck Ranch discovery, and detailed knowledge of this major archaeological site soon passed. However, in 1999 a Huntington Beach historian and

newspaperman, Jerry Person, consulted some of the early newspaper stories and composed a short article. This 1999 review mentions that the original discovery was located on the Buck Ranch property, but it repeats a speculation "that the Bolsa Chica area may contain more than 2,000 bodies." Such broad reference to the "Bolsa Chica area" further obscures the distinctiveness of the 1930-31 discovery, and it amplifies the importance of reestablishing the specific location of the burial ground.

Discovery of the Buck Ranch Burial Ground

The six contemporary newspaper accounts outline how the discovery of this burial site occurred, although the six stories are somewhat contradictory (Appendix: Excerpts 1-6). On Friday, December 26, 1930, some large stone bowls and, soon thereafter, about thirteen skeletons were uncovered by farm laborers and local workers installing nearby oil well riggings. The stories suggest that initially several large stone bowls were unearthed when a ranch plowman was "sub-soiling" the farm land. Nearby, some new oil rigs were being installed. The Orange County Sheriff's office was contacted, and deputies inspected the locale the next day, Saturday. Reportedly (Appendix: Excerpt 4), the deputies decided the find was an "Indian burial ground," and "carefully reinterred the bones ..." However, the

publicity resulted in “more than 500 people” visiting the ranch on Sunday. Accounts indicate that “more than 100 skulls” were unearthed by ranch hands, oil riggers, and public curiosity seekers. “Many [visitors] carried away skulls and other relics.” Later, probably in the following week (Appendix: Excerpt 6), “Strandt ... took charge” of the exploration of this prehistoric burial site. Herman F. Strandt of Anaheim was an avid archaeological collector and an expert on local prehistory (see Koerper and Chace 1995).

In the contemporary accounts, only a few relics were identified to allow any suggestion of the age for this burial locale. The diagnostic artifacts, as well as the good condition of the bones, suggest an age within the Late Prehistoric horizon, which local archaeologists now date between A.D. 600 and A.D. 1,700. Mention was made of a molded clay pipe, a stone tablet with 70 drilled holes, large spear points, many arrowheads which were said to be made of obsidian, large and small stone vessels, and pestles. There also were large shells “resembling abalone shells but not abalone,” ascribed as food bowls. These were possibly the large heart clam, *Laevicardium elatum*. The newspaper accounts make no mention of shell beads or ornaments.

Location of Buck Ranch

The six contemporary newspaper accounts locate the archaeological discovery with some precision (see Appendix) on the old Buck Ranch, a well-known local property. In the 1880s, the Buck family pioneered their 30-acre ranch tract in the peat lowlands farming district that became known as Wintersburg. The ranch was established by Otto J. Buck. Following his death in 1909, one of his sons, Sherman Buck, continued the farming operations (WPA 1937, Marsh 1999:35). Shortly before the discovery in 1930, the ranch, or a part of it, had been sold or leased to the Callens brothers. The Callens brothers, possibly, had only acquired a lease for oil rights and were installing oil rigs.

Fortunately, the historic Buck Ranch is indicated on the September 1901 “Map of the Property of the Bolsa Land Co., Orange County, Cal.” (Figure 1). Buck Ranch appears as a rectangular parcel of about 30 acres. A ranch house or structure is indicated at the tract’s southeast corner, accessed by a roadway (now Edwards Street) that leads northward to slightly higher ground and a roadway (now Slater Avenue). Buck Ranch included a fronting length on the (Edwards) roadway of approximately 800 feet and had a depth extending westward of approximately 1500 feet. The ranch land had an elevation of only three to four feet above mean sea level.

The historic Buck Ranch property, thus, was part of the fertile lowlands of the vast Mexican-era grant of Rancho Bolsa Chica. After the U.S. survey, as a tract of about 30 acres, the Buck land constituted a portion of the SW 1/4 of Section 27, in Township 5 South, Range 11 West. Sherman Buck was taxed for the “N 1/2 of SW 1/4 of SW 1/4” of Section 27 for decades (County of Orange Clerk-Recorder 1910, 1915, and 1925). The Assessor’s repeated notation “N 1/2 of SW 1/4 of SW 1/4” in Section 27 ought to represent a rectangular parcel adjoining the northwestern corner of the Buck Ranch shown on the map of 1901, but this may be only a clerical, a survey, or a title error. At times the family held parcels elsewhere.

On the 1949 edition of the USGS map (Figure 2), the old ranch property on the west side of Edwards Street remained undeveloped, except for an access road to three oil wells indicated along the southwestern portion of the old Buck tract. It is likely the oil rigs shown on this 1949 map were those installed by the Callens brothers.

This property was subsequently laid out as a residential subdivision, probably about 1960. The tract homes there all appear to have been constructed together in a style of that period. This housing subdivision extends northwestward from the intersection of Edwards Street

and Varsity Drive. Varsity Drive is on the same E/W alignment as Talbert Avenue, which ends on the mesa heights just to the east.

It is unclear whether the extent of the burial grounds was ever established, but the discoveries probably all occurred in a relatively small portion of the Buck Ranch tract. Two accounts (Appendix: Excerpts 2, 4) stated that “more than 100 skulls” were initially uncovered, but they all had been unearthed “in a space of 15 by 30 feet.” One of these same initial stories (Appendix: Excerpt 4) commented that “no limit [yet had been] found to the size of the graveyard.” A story published the following week (Appendix: Excerpt 5) commented,

Excavations on the old Sherman Buck ranch have disclosed that quite a large Indian cemetery exists there, with graves scattered over a space.... [R]anch employees have in a measure tried to determine the extent of the

cemetery, by excavations, and are still working at odd hours, but up to the present time the boundaries of the burial ground have not been determined.

Surrounding Landmarks

Besides specifying that the burials were located on the historic Buck Ranch property, the contemporary newspaper accounts mention a series of landmarks that historically surrounded the old ranch. These landmarks further confirm the ranch tract to be the discovery locale. The stories mention Wintersburg to the east, the Long Beach Country Club and Springdale School to the northwest, the adjoining Bolsa Chica Gun Club property and the community of Huntington Beach to the east.

Accounts (Anon. 1930a, c) mention the archaeological site discovery as near Wintersburg. One story is the most specific, noting that the site “discovered

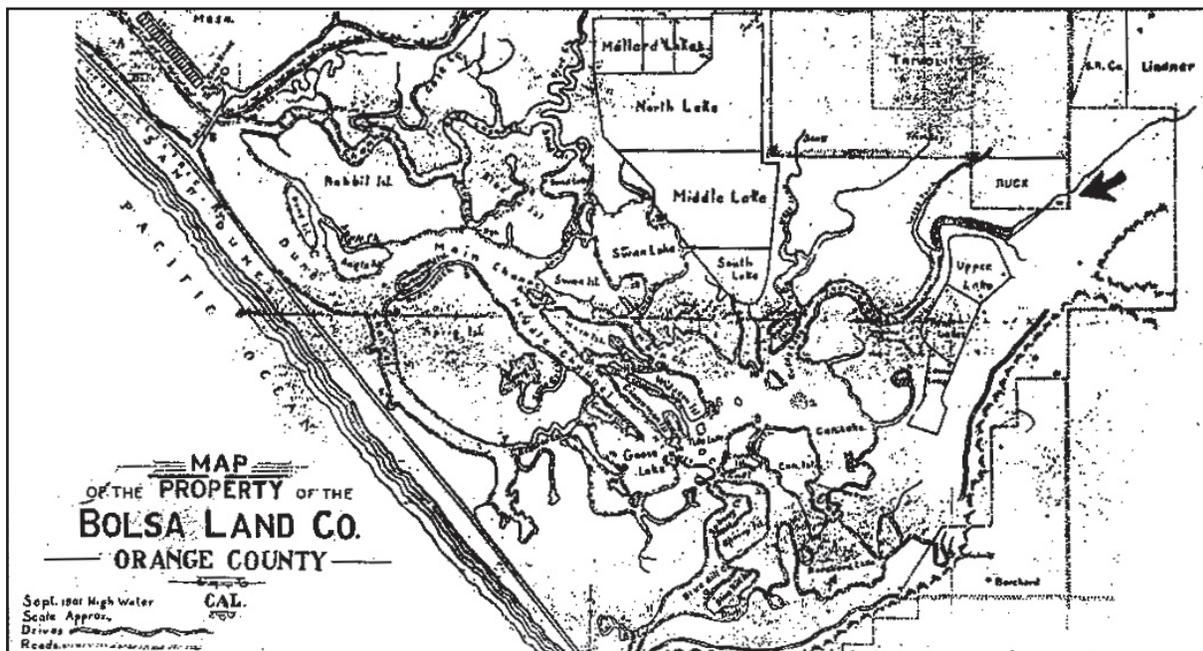


Figure 1. The 1901 Bolsa Land Co. property map indicating the adjoining Buck Ranch tract. Scale ~ 1:30,000.

yesterday [is] one mile west of Wintersburg.” (Anon. 1930a) Wintersburg, named for Henry Winters, a pioneering celery farmer in the peat lowlands, was a local rail siding and farm produce shipping center. It was located on the southern side of Wintersburg Avenue, now Warner Avenue, where a north/south railroad line still crosses the roadway (Meadows 1966:139). This area is near Gothard Street and Warner, on the eastern side of the modern Ocean View High School, northeast of the ranch tract and just over one mile distant.

Another account (Ruoff 1931) refers to the archaeological site discovery in terms of two other known local landmarks: the Springdale School and the Long Beach Country Club. It states that, “The land is about one half mile southeast of the Long Beach country club, About eight hundred feet from the Springdale school.” This reference to the country club would pertain to the Meadowlark Golf Club as depicted on the 1949 USGS map. This golf course and country

club were developed along the Bolsa Chica Mesa, and Springdale School was built on the lowland immediately to the southeast. Springdale School was established in 1904 at the northeastern corner of Springdale Street and Wintersburg Avenue, now Warner Avenue (Meadows 1966:131). On the 1949 USGS map the surviving school buildings were indicated as the Allied Trades Institute. The archaeological locale, therefore, was truly “southeast” of these landmarks, but probably about one mile away. The newspaper writer seems to have accurately presented the orientation but understated the distances.

Some accounts (Anon. 1930b, 1931a) reported, “the Indian cemetery ... on ... the Sherman Buck ranch, adjoining the Bolsa Chica Gun club, three miles west of Huntington Beach.” The segments of this compound statement, while accurate, are inverted and therefore could be rather misleading. Actually, almost three miles west of Huntington Beach was the big clubhouse of the Bolsa Chica Gun Club, a landmark

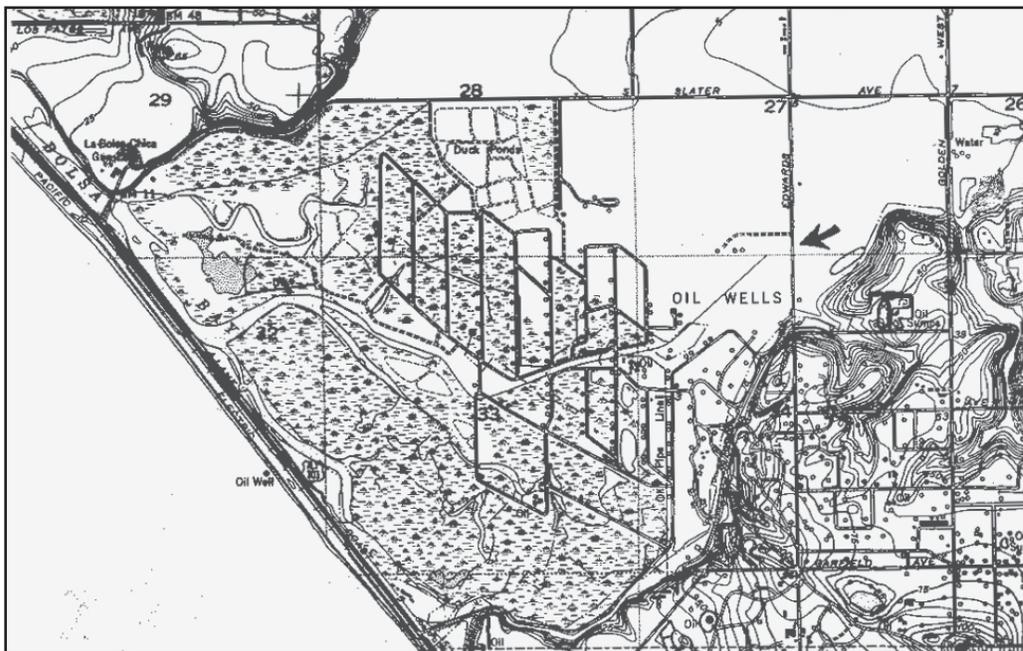


Figure 2. The 1949 USGS map showing the old Buck Ranch area, with three oil wells indicated. Scale ~ 1:30,000.

building built about 1899 atop the southeastern edge of the Bolsa Chica Mesa and subsequently demolished in 1964 (Smith 1965). However, the incorporated club, The Bolsa Land Co. (see Figure 1), owned over 3,000 acres, most of the vast low wetlands extending several miles east of the clubhouse, almost all the wetlands between Bolsa Chica Mesa and Huntington Beach Mesa. The gun club had developed this lowland property with lagoons, dikes, lakes, islands, and hunting blinds creating a duck and game preserve. The old Buck Ranch property (see Figure 1) was directly “adjoining” the eastern portion of the Bolsa Chica Gun Club game preserve; in fact, the gun club property adjoined three sides of the Buck Ranch.

Situating the Callens Brothers

The contemporary references to the Callens brothers’ recent acquisition of the Buck Ranch about 1930, or a part of it, or a lease for oil rights, does not easily help fix the archaeological site location because the Callens brothers rented, leased, and owned various ranch properties in numerous areas. The brothers, Gustave J. Callens, Adolphe Callens, and Joseph R. Callens, came to Orange County in 1911, and they became enterprising agriculturists and entrepreneurs. Biographies of this prominent family were featured in many county histories, and Joseph Callens in the 1950s became one of the initial city councilmen of the new City of Fountain Valley (Armor 1921:1343-1344; Pleasants 1931 (II):253-254; Talbert, MacArthur, and Meadows 1963 (I):713-716; and Dick 1988:105-106).

Herman F. Strandt, Archaeological Collector

After the flurry and publicity on the discovery of the initial burials, a later newspaper account (Ruoff 1931) states, “Strandt ... took charge” of the archaeological digging. Herman F. Strandt, of Anaheim, was an avid archaeological collector and an expert on local Indian prehistory. He made his living as a cement contractor and builder. Strandt’s searches and digs for prehistoric

Indian relics began about 1920 and extended throughout southern California and into Arizona. He sold his best finds to major museum institutions, but he built and operated a museum behind his Anaheim home for his extensive relic collection. Strandt’s archaeology collection was purchased in 1953 for the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana (Friis 1967:27; Strandt 1953). There were no catalogs, ledgers, or detailed notations with the Strandt materials transferred to the Bowers Museum. Strandt passed away on July 13, 1963 (Anon. 1963). Strandt’s death in later archaeological reports is inaccurately given as occurring a year or two later (PCAS file, n.d.; Smith and McKinney 1965; Chace and Koerper 1994; and Koerper and Chace 1995).

According to the newspaper story of January 1931 (Appendix: Excerpt 6), Strandt took charge of the prehistoric burial diggings on the Buck Ranch and presented himself as representing “the Orange County Historical society.” Further, Strandt seemingly indicated that the prehistoric relics recovered “may be put” into the then recently proposed Bowers Museum in Santa Ana. However, the minutes of the Orange County Historical Society for 1930 and 1931 indicate that the Society never acted to aid such a project (Chace 1967), and the Bowers Museum was not built until the following year (Friis 1967:11-18). It appears, rather, that Herman Strandt was acting solely on his own authority.

Strandt had secured a large map of Orange County in 1921 and began plotting all known prehistoric Indian sites (Strandt 1953). The original map now is in the PCAS files, and a redrafted print was published by the Society about 1965 (Strandt n.d.). On this published map, the Buck Ranch burial ground is represented as “105” with the circular symbol indicating that Strandt considered the site to be of the Late Prehistoric horizon. There is no other information corresponding to Strandt’s numbered locales. Plotting on the grand scale of Strandt’s county map is not very precise;

the “105” site symbol is just west of Edwards Street and just south of the projected alignment of Talbert Avenue, now Varsity Drive. This imprecise plotting would situate the discovery somewhere near the southern boundary of the old Buck Ranch property.

During the Depression, in 1935, Strandt was employed by the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) to help conduct an archaeological program in the county (Chace 1965a:6). As part of this program, Strandt (1965) prepared a report on local burial customs in which he described a series of Late Prehistoric horizon burials and artifacts from an extensive burial plot he excavated “in 1930.” Although the specific locale is not named, it is probably the Buck Ranch burial ground. Of the reported artifacts, several are quite similar to those mentioned in the original newspaper accounts: a tubular pipe of red stone, a ceremonial stone with many drilled holes, and large knives and spear points (Strandt 1965:30-32). Many additional relics found with these Late Prehistoric horizon burials are mentioned, including a necklace of limpet shell rings with an exotic cowry shell, possibly a pendant, recently discussed by Koerper and Whitney-Desautels (1999).

Memory and Knowledge of the Location

Memory of the Buck Ranch burial ground waned through the 1930s, and knowledge about the location was all but lost. Interestingly, a single reference occurs in Pleasants’ two-volume “History of Orange County” (1931(1):439) the historian wrote, “*The noted Indian cemetery find of last winter was on the Callen [sic] ranch near Wintersburg.*”

Apparently Strandt and the others involved in the discovery never wrote any further accounts. The skulls and other materials from the location have not been traced. Three decades later, when a comprehensive history of archaeology in Orange County was

attempted, the discovery on the old Buck Ranch property was entirely omitted (Chace 1965a).

Recently, some of the skulls in the Aldrich Collection at the Bowers Museum were noted as being labeled “Huntington Beach” (Sherri Gust, personal communication 2006). These specimens may have been acquired from the ranch workers and curiosity seekers at the Buck Ranch discovery in 1930-31, or even from Strandt. Unfortunately, no catalog accompanied the Aldrich Collection when it came to the Bowers Museum in 1962. Fred R. Aldrich had maintained a public museum for many years in his home on Bay Island in Newport Bay, a tourist attraction in the early Balboa community. He had acquired an array of prehistoric American Indian materials along with spectacular sea shells. Following Aldrich’s death in 1953, his collection was exhibited for a decade in the Balboa Pavilion before it was presented to the Bowers Museum (Chace 1965b).

It appears that someone knew of one account (Ruoff 1931) and filed an abbreviated record form for the “Buck site” with the State of California archaeological site inventory developed at UCLA in the 1950s and 1960s. The specific location was unknown and was left blank on the incomplete form, but it was nevertheless assigned a site number, CA-ORA-78. Some years later, this site record was augmented with a “correction” which located the site on the mesa at the Bolsa Chica Gun Club buildings. Subsequent recording of updated site forms have followed, focused on the mesa locale. However, the term “Buck site” remains as a previous site designation on these forms, clearly a confusion.

When the newspaper retelling occurred a decade ago (Person 1999), the historical story was headlined as “The Ancient Bolsa Chica Burial Ground...” This broad reference to the “Bolsa Chica area” further obscured and confused the distinctiveness of the 1930 discovery location.

In conclusion, with the rediscovery of six contemporary 1930-31 newspaper accounts about the discovery of the prehistoric burial ground, it is now possible to specify the archaeological site location. This major burial ground was encountered on the historic Buck Ranch, which was along Edwards Street, near its current intersection with Varsity Drive, in the lowlands area northwest of the Huntington Beach Mesa.

Acknowledgments

This study clarifying the location of the historic Buck Ranch locale was initiated and supported by Hearthside Homes, Inc.; Lucy Dunn, Bolsa Chica Project Manager, and Ed Mountford, Senior Vice-President, deserve special thanks for their encouragement. The project was coordinated through Nancy Anastasia Desautels Wiley of Scientific Resource Surveys, Inc., the archaeological consulting firm responsible for the investigation and documentation of the heritage of CA-ORA-83, a major prehistoric settlement situated atop the nearby Bolsa Chica Mesa, where Hearthside Homes proposes a future housing development. The description of this separate and distinct locale was designed to serve as an appendix to the master report being prepared on the investigation of CA-ORA-83 (P-30-000083). The initial draft report was completed in May 2000, and it is slightly revised here.

Phil Brigandi, Orange County Archivist, assisted with the County's tax assessment records for the Buck family properties. Elizabeth Swanson provided a copy of the published obituary for Strandt and a brief life summary.

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APPENDIX: Excerpted Locational References to the Archaeological Locale

1. “one mile west of Wintersburg,” “on the Buck oil lease,” “on the oil lease,” “by oil drillers,” “workers making preparation for the installation of new oil riggings,” “the workmen on the oil lease have no trouble turning over skeleton after skeleton,” and “the property is owned by the [C]allens brothers, who recently acquired it.” (Anon. 1930a)

2. “the Indian cemetery ... on the Callens Brothers’ ranch, formerly the Sherman Buck ranch, adjoining the Bolsa Chica Gun club, three miles west of Huntington Beach,” “in a space of 15 by 30 feet, more than 100 skulls have been unearthed,” “buried in the peat soil,” “[the] area was overgrown with willows when the white men came here to claim it,” and “it has been drained and is now valuable peat land, highly productive.” (Anon. 1930b)

3. “the ancient Indian burial ground discovered on the Callens brothers’ ranch near Wintersburg.” (Anon. 1930c)

4. “the Indian cemetery ... on the Callens Brothers ranch, formerly the Sherman Buck ranch, adjoining the Bolsa Chica Gun club, three miles west of Huntington Beach,” “in a space of 15 by 30 feet more than 100 skulls have been unearthed,” “[two ranch employees] plowing three feet deep in the field, discovered the burial mound, Friday, December 26th, when their plow-share turned out a skull,” “[then] they obtained shovels and digging in the soft peat soil discovered several skulls and other bones of human bodies,” “deputy sheriffs visited the scene of the discovery Saturday and decided the plowmen had found an Indian burial ground,” “[the] area was overgrown with willows when the white men came here to claim it,” “it has been drained and is now valuable peat land, highly productive,” “with only a few feet square explored and no limit found to the graveyard, the old Buck Ranch

may show quite an extensive Indian cemetery, if it desired to fully explore the area,” and “on the old peat land farm.” (Anon. 1931a)

5. “Excavations on the old Sherman Buck ranch have disclosed that quite a large Indian cemetery existed there,” “the finding on the Buck cemetery has brought out that the soft peat soil along the base of the bluffs of the Huntington Beach mesa was the location for a number of Indian cemeteries ...” “the newly discovered cemetery on the Buck ranch and the Buck cemetery.” (Anon. 1931b)

6. “Walt Peters [a ranch employee] was sub-soiling Call[e]ns land, and the sub-soiler struck a fragment of an Indian bowl,” “he called some men who began to dig. They unearthed two large bowls,” “the land is about one half mile southeast of the Long Beach country club, About eight hundred feet from the Springdale school,” “the property belongs to Call[e]ns brothers,” and “formerly Sherman Buck was the owner.” (Ruoff 1931)