

A Volunteer's View of Early Calico Excavations  
by Chuck Williams  
contact: *chukwil@yahoo.com*  
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When I arrived to volunteer at the Calico dig in early 1965, Dee Simpson greeted me with a wide-armed welcome for a long-missing friend that I was. She had been my main mentor in the 1950's, along with Charles Rozaire, Ben McGowan, Charley Howe, and others during many family outings at surveys and digs throughout southern California conducted by the Archaeological Survey Association. I had returned from military duty and a year of backpacking around Europe where I had found student archeological work in Germany and Libya; now I wanted to do more archaeological work.

Dee Simpson, Director of the Calico excavations, didn't mince any words while showing me around the site, explaining the controversy concerning whether the artifacts were cultural or were naturally occurring. She reminded me of the earlier rejection of the bifaces found on the surface of the site, when the Southwest Museum called them her "cracked rock collection." Now, however, they were accepted as artifacts. She also told me that while most European archaeologists rejected her idea of a connection between those bifaces and the Early Man hand axes found elsewhere in the world, her contention that there was a connection had brought Dr. Louis Leakey here and he had found a deposit containing material that resembled the "Oldowan" artifacts from his excavations in East Africa. These artifacts were what she was looking for in the excavation.

I lamented about not being able to bring back any of the Acheulian hand axes that I had come across in the Sahara Desert. There I had seen these crude Oldowan-type cultural materials both in and out of known sites and would enjoy learning more about where and how the line is drawn between geofact and artifact. Dee said it was necessary to keep the volunteers motivated so she didn't tolerate anyone wanting to prove the site naturally made because badmouthing anyone's finds would be counterproductive. I assured her that I understood the need to keep volunteers happy and motivated and I would strive to keep my comments positive while maintaining scientific accuracy. Without realizing the full implications, I think I had just become the dig's in-house devil's

advocate.

Within weeks, Dee had me showing new arrivals the rules of the pit. Like when her square-bodied, hands-on-hips stance hovered over us from the highest side of the main pit and she sternly scowled "No levity in the pits." That was my cue to explain to volunteers that she didn't mean we couldn't talk, tell jokes, sing, laugh, or have a good time. But "planting" a rock or even a coin or plastic comb in someone's pit or artifact bag, could lead to escalating practical jokes and a loss of integrity for the whole effort. Big Jack Maddox kept everyone entertained (or groaning) with his mastery of puns and hums. Puns will never be outlawed no matter how bad, but I do wonder about the longevity of the parody of humming.

Humming is the scholarly art of seeing how many implications can be assigned to a response from a knowledgeable field worker being shown a new find. Facial expressions are OK, but no words are allowed -- just "hmmm."

It was impossible to avoid talking about naturally cracked siliceous material when showing new volunteers what to keep or discard, because much of the stone has some characteristic that can be interpreted as a flake scar or two. "Keep it when in doubt; let someone else throw it out," became my mantra. It kind of fit my theory that, for an even-handed analysis, one would need more of a balanced cross-section, rather than one biased toward cultural samples. To help volunteers get a better idea of what they were looking at, I wanted to show them how flakes are made. Years earlier I had learned basic knapping skills on obsidian. I felt it would be valuable for anyone digging to at least see how percussion and pressure flaking is done, if not actually trying their hand at it. Proposals to do this resulted in references to studies describing it. But they also led to some of the younger crew members wanting to talk more and learn more about the natural aspects of the dig, but only when Dee was not around.

Leakey would visit the site for a few days or for a week each year. During the visits, most of his time would be spent sequestered with Dee, artifacts, and officials of Dee's choice. During one such visit he came to examine the main pit while we were working. While there, he spotted a large chert boulder with incipient cones of percussion on it, which he explained, could indicate that it was used as an anvil on which to crack bones with a hammerstone. Follow-up questions brought out the fact

that he knew flint-knapping but didn't have time to demonstrate on this trip. We made sure that during his next visit he had a selection of knappable rocks, hammerstones, a canvas tarp, gloves, goggles, and a reminder to save some time. He proceeded to break the ice by whacking out a very serviceable Acheulian-type hand axe, complete with blood on it -- he didn't use gloves because he used finger pressure on the underside to guide the flake's depth. In the following months, several of the volunteers got quite good at knapping.

A sizable contingent of the volunteer crew was somewhere in their twenties so we younger volunteers tended to hang out both during and outside of work. Somehow we "youngsters" found time to visit petroglyphs in the Newberry Mountains, spelunk lava tubes at Pisgah Crater, explore Rainbow Fossil Beds and Afton Canyon, and even excavate the "Headless Horseman" discovery found nearby. Dee didn't like us to spend daytime hours elsewhere, so it was easier to attend evening parties in Barstow and elsewhere. Returning from one of those parties we found our designated driver had imbibed too much, so we let a sober intern with only a beginner's license drive us back to camp. Everything would have been OK, except that we had somehow left one of the female crew members behind. The next morning she simply called and caught a ride back to camp with one of the elders who stayed in town. But questions were asked and, because Dee wanted to keep her work crew together and Leaky wanted to know the extent of the artifact bearing deposit, all of the culprits were summarily removed from the main pit and exiled to Siberia.

Siberia was a test pit on top of the cold, windblown highest hill east of the main pit. Within the first foot or so we knew we were in the virtually sterile fan overburden. By copying Ritner Sayles's use of a windlass over a rectangular pit we were able to use a hand pick in relative safety while a second person loaded buckets. I'm not sure if it was the freedom of swinging a pick or getting out of the wind, but there was no lack of crew wanting to take a turn at the bottom of Siberia. In no time at all the pit was 15 or 20 feet deep, but eventually our lackadaisical enthusiasm was overcome by the prospect of a cave-in. Our appeal to return to the main pit was accepted. Even though every bucket was sifted I doubt we had more than a dozen poor pieces in our artifact bag.

After the Siberia test pit failed to reach through the fan overburden to the

artifact layer, John and I got permission to locate and dig another test pit. I wanted to get as close as possible to the Calico Mountains and a 10-ft-high arroyo wall up that way with some chalcedony exposed in it; earlier Dee had dismissed it as being "reworked" without further explanation. John wanted to stay closer to camp and use his ethnographic knowledge garnered from his recent work along the Feather River to locate it. Neither of us wanted a lot of overburden to dig through. We settled on a location in a saddle on a high ridge about one half mile west of the main pit—a location which showed some underground type material on the surface.

It did not let us down. The soil was weathered, so digging was easy and the soil was loaded with the rock we called "Black Chalcedony," a material which occurs up by Tin Can Alley in a very poor-quality outcrop. Our site had high-quality material and produced a lot of flaked pieces. One of the outstanding worked pieces was a round disk about 4 inches in diameter, maybe an inch thick and having rather steep flaking, mostly from one side, around more than half of the edge, albeit discontinuously.

One morning when our pit was a foot or so deep, we noticed a large column of smoke rising from the direction of camp. The smoke seemed a bit more than Mr. Winklepleck's burn barrel would produce. So we headed back to find Dee's trailer burned to the ground. Dee was fit to be tied because she had kept a lot of the best artifacts in it. In the frenzy of fingers being pointed in every direction, even John and I were accused of causing the fire by throwing a cigarette (neither of us smoked) when we hiked past there going to our test pit, causing the propane tanks to ignite. During the following weeks as we cleaned up the mess, we pulled out buckets of opaque white cubes similar to a shattered car window, which she insisted we fit back together to reconstruct the artifacts. Cathy actually got me to help her try for awhile, but we soon decided that if Dee rode us about it anymore, we would tell her to prove it was possible. I wonder if Dee saved those fragments for when the right savant came along.

Neither John nor I ever got back to that test pit, other than to retrieve our tools. Dee needed us all back in the main pit to dig up some new artifacts to replace those which were lost in the fire.

As in all endeavors, everyone --volunteers and bosses alike-- had their

up and down days. And Dee was no exception.

In spite of the admonition that we should keep our eyes peeled for pieces that would fit together, and even after getting onto me for not finding the tip of a piece from my pit that, with its addition would have resembled an Acheulian hand axe, giving greater credibility to these artifacts, Dee was always looking for the proof. (The missing tip was found later in an adjoining pit). However, when we did find a core with several flakes that refit on it, it was treated so casually that questionable documentation of the circumstances was made.

This rare find of a refitted core occurred just outside the lower edge of the main pit when it was about four feet deep and was collecting rain water from the rest of the pit. It was proposed that part of the lower edge be removed so that there would be a trench wide enough to run a wheelbarrow so we could remove our dirt for sifting below the pit instead of hauling it up above; this would also serve as a walk-in entrance in place of ladders, thereby solving several problems at once. It was such a well-accepted idea that Dee made it a priority, assigning the task to me with the help of a slightly experienced high school student. We were to use a hand pick as opposed to hammer and chisel. This was virtually unheard of especially considering that the artifact-bearing strata was very near the surface as evidenced in the adjoining pit. But dig we did, even though I had other newbie volunteers to tend. When the drainage/access trench was down about 2 ft deep, the kid showed me this rectangular piece -- maybe four inches long by one and a half inches thick, along with a double flake (concave one side, convex the other) that fitted snugly into the end of it!

Boy, talk about mixed emotions! I wanted to praise for such a find, curse for it not being *in-situ*, share it, and rescue and document whatever I could, all at the same time. Dee was over by the screens but engaged with someone, so I had the kid show me from where it came. Lo and behold, not only was there a nice shiny cast where it had lain, but another flake was in the loose dirt by it. This flake fitted the other one on the core, which then fitted perfectly back into the cast with their striking platforms all on top. While I was explaining the importance of the cast to the kid, Dee got done and I showed her the fitting pieces and moved to show her the cast, wondering if we have plaster to make a mold. She said, "Bag it", and made no move to see the cast. Because John Kettle was not there to take a photo, I asked if she wants the cast

photographed. She replied, "I don't have a camera. Bag'em and send it to the lab." I told the kid to mark the bag and put it with his other finds, but don't destroy the cast yet. I moved among the other volunteers asking about a camera until I got pictures taken. Later at the lab, I told Leona Barnes about who had the pictures on their personal camera, and asked her not to clean off the thin layer of smooth calcite crystals deposited between the flakes and core as that shows that they were all nestled together in the ground, and that they had not just been knapped off by the hand pick.

There had always been talk of funding problems and when and how the dig might end. Several months after a National Geographic Magazine photographer departed, word came that the magazine had lost interest in the dig. So one day I got inspired to present a win-win idea to Dee: because this crude Oldowan-type material turns up not only in Early Man sites but in diverse places, in and out of other stone age sites, there should be wide interest in learning if there is a way to tell a geofact from an artifact. With this site seeming to present both, why not invite people from all the natural sciences to suggest ways to solve the problem. Much thought from all possible perspectives could be put into the effort. Invite them to conduct their own excavation or train the volunteers what to look for. Heck, we could even spike the pot by asking if some material could have been shaped by permafrost heaving or local rock glaciers during the ice ages. Or could the swelling of bentonite deposits under the site lift the overburden, pressure cracking rocks against one another, and then release the cracked rocks downward when it dried out? How about a comparative sampling of the hard limestone in the Blackhawk Rockslide deposit on the north side of the San Bernardino Mountains that was conchoidally fractured and that she herself had pointed out to me? By analyses of known man-made with known naturally-made rock items, couldn't some light be shed upon this site? Or might this site itself, be a remnant of such a rockslide?

Wouldn't it be better to learn this yourself, rather than have an opponent disclose it?

It is common for archaeologists to consult experts and consultants from other disciplines for input on things like geology, dating, or analyzing pollen or poop, depending on what materials they find. They or others would be more likely to furnish funds if it were a collaborative effort. If

expert consultants confirm that these are cultural, then you win. If it turns out to be a geofact, then archaeology gets what it is in need of and your name is still on the report.

I guess I didn't say it as well then, as I write it on paper now. She heard me out, but then she Herded Me Out, of her office, with something that sounded like "Over my dead body." The next day one of the elders told me my A-frame shack was an eyesore and I would have to move it. Several days later while I was removing the siding from my shack, I saw Gerry Smith, head of the museum in San Bernardino, drive in (he never came out unless someone important was visiting). Later he found me and told me my presence was threatening the dig's funds as the funders are interested in finding evidence of Early Man, not what geological processes can create. What would I need to leave as soon as possible? Someone else would take down my shack. Sensing little likelihood of conflict resolution, I asked for \$300 to tide me over.