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Archaeological Investigation at Misión Nuestra Señora de La Soledad MNT-233—MONTEREY COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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On September 29, 1791, just 10 days before the official founding of the mission, Fr. Fermin Lasuén wrote to Governor José Roméu: "Today eleven Indians have departed from here with tools to construct a shelter at Soledad for the padres and the supplies." Thus started the 13th mission in the chain, and after receiving final instructions from Viceroy Revilla Gigedo, Frs. Lasuén, Sitjar and García and Lieutenant José Argüello journeyed to the spot which the Indians called Chuttúsgelis. On October 9, a crude brush *enramada* was constructed for a church, and by the end of the year eleven convert Indians were at the mission.

By 1797, "an adobe church with roof of straw" was constructed. By 1800, 493 neophytes were working at the mission, and prosperity seemed imminent. However, in February, 1802, a tragic epidemic caused five or six deaths daily, and many Indians fled to their rancherías in the wilds.

In 1805 the mission achieved its greatest population with 688 souls. In 1808 another adobe church was built, which is probably the greater portion of the church now in

ruins. In 1810 Soledad had the smallest Indian population of all the existing California missions.

The death of Fr. Vincente Francisco de Sarría in 1835 marked the death knell of Soledad. Weakened by malnutrition but still faithful to his small Indian flock, Fr. Sarría succumbed while saying mass and was buried at Mission San Antonio.

By 1840 there were only 70 Indians living at the mission, and in 1846 it was sold to Feliciano Soberanes for \$800. Around 1850, Soberanes constructed an addition onto the "provisional church" of 1832, and it was this addition that survived until 1954 when the church was restored by the Native Daughters of the Golden West.

The most prominent person buried at Mission La Soledad was former governor of Alta California José Joaquín de Arrillaga. While touring the California missions, Arrillaga became ill and, feeling that death was near, came to Mission La Soledad to be in the care of his old friend Fr. Florencio Ibañez. He was buried beneath the center aisle of the original church nave in 1814.

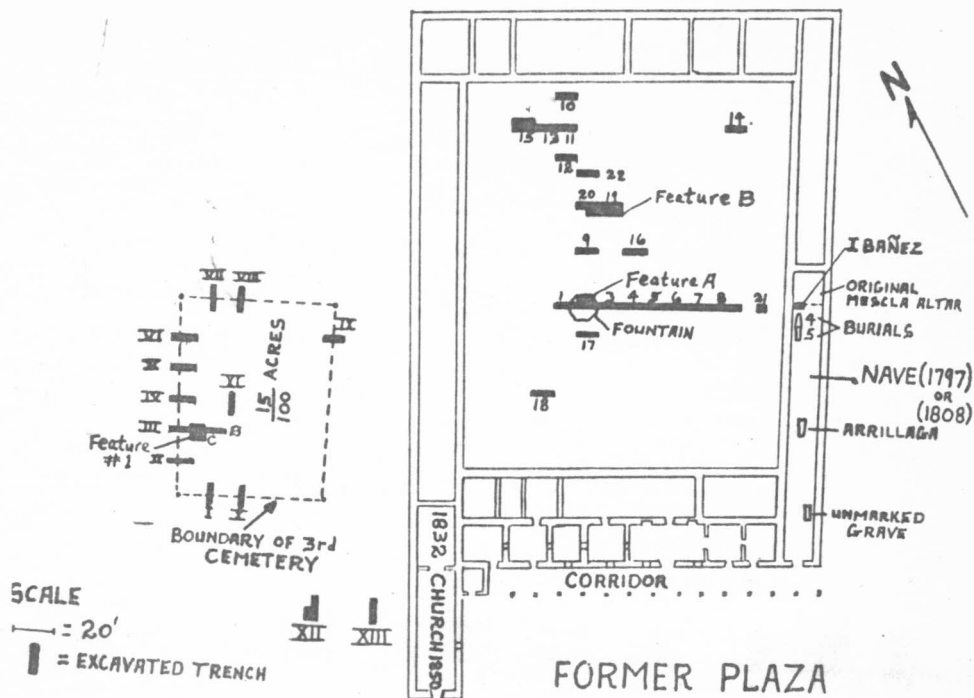


PLATE I

Mission La Soledad excavation plan showing the three areas in which excavations were conducted by the author: third cemetery, quadrangle compound, and 1797 church.

His coffin was discovered by Oliver Pesch in 1961 during clearing of the rubble at the original church.

Very few detailed accounts of life at the mission survive, as life was lonely and difficult. The padres faithfully filled out their *Informes* (Annual Reports) every December, but mention nothing of their personal feelings in this lonely outpost.

Perhaps the Henry Miller account of 1856 is the best: "A French-Swiss kept a little grocery shop and restaurant here, where I took some miserable coffee and bought some crackers."

SUMMARY OF EXCAVATIONS

During the period July 8-August 27, 1969, field archaeological testing was done in three previously unexcavated portions of the mission complex. Under the auspices of Harry J. Downie, Monterey Diocese historian, a program was initiated to explore the cemetery wall, excavate in the quadrangle

compound, and test the original church of 1797 for burials.

One of the primary tasks at the mission was to ascertain the exact boundaries of the cemetery so that a wall could be reconstructed around its periphery. Three criteria were used to locate the approximate dimensions of the wall: the Mission La Soledad plat made by B. M. Henry in August, 1858, Henry's written survey measurements, and an 1870(?) drawing showing the cemetery wall in ruins.

There is evidence that this is actually the third and last of the cemeteries to receive interments. The first cemetery was located in the field south of the original church. According to Archie Silveria, many human bones were plowed to the surface in this area years ago by his father. The second cemetery was apparently laid between the Indian ranchería and the chapel of 1832. This was the common burial area for Indian

neophytes and travelers that may have died during the epidemics in the early 1800s.

It is my opinion that the third cemetery serviced only the chapel of 1832. Some insight was gained as to the position and abundance of burials in the third cemetery from oral communication with Silveria and Joe Binsacca. Archie Silveria's father, John Silveria, did the actual grading of the cemetery plot. Grading was done by horse-drawn scrapers in 1940. At this time it was not known that a cemetery existed in this area.

A land exchange took place between Father John Hunt, parish priest at Soledad, and John Silveria by which the mission acquired seven acres in the orchard area and seven acres in front of the mission. Grading took place for agricultural use and in the process skeletons in redwood coffins were unearthed. Five or six feet of soil was scraped off the cemetery surface. Two vertical tiers of burials were noticed approximately three feet below the surface. It was reported that most of the upper tier burials were not in coffins, while those in the lower tiers were all in coffins. Many of the interments were buried in skins and blankets; Silveria reported that he found part of a leather jacket while earth moving was in progress, but has unfortunately lost the specimen. Many rosary beads were found in the cemetery after grading took place.

From verbal information given by local pioneers it seems that only the southeast quadrant of the cemetery was actually used for burials. An examination of early drawings of Mission La Soledad, especially the Henry Chapman Ford and A. Harmer drawings, indicates that at least four burials were placed just north of the 1832 chapel, and this fact is corroborated by Binsacca's statement that a coffin had been found near Trench XII (see Plate I). Cranial fragments and human teeth found in Trench XII archaeologically corroborate this.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY

OF CEMETERY NUMBER THREE

On the basis of the US Land Commission map of 1858, the writer was able to plot on the surface of the ground the exact cemetery boundaries. Corner stakes were placed on the four corners of the cemetery. In the 1858 plat these corners have been designated Post C Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4.

In order to ascertain if any foundation remnants of the cemetery wall still existed, a plan to excavate trenches perpendicular the wall was initiated. Trenches 30 inches wide and 10 feet long were spaced at 15 foot intervals. By this technique it was hoped to locate some vestige of the wall foundation. Eleven trenches were dug in the cemetery as defined in the 1858 plat. Two and one half trenches were dug in the area shown in the Henry Chapman Ford etching of 1881 (Trenches XII and XIII).

It was found upon excavation that the first eight inches or so had been disturbed by plowing. Below this level the ground appeared to be undisturbed by human agency. From the total amount of excavating done within the cemetery limits it can be said that all of the burials in the cemetery have been disturbed by ground leveling and agricultural activity. The removal of five to six feet of soil would naturally have removed all burials in situ, and undoubtedly most traces of the cemetery wall as well. It is possible that the cemetery wall never had a rock foundation to preserve, and Silveria could supply no pertinent data about wall foundations. He said he recalled many rocks in the area, but no foundation patterns.

The most significant discovery within the cemetery boundary was the location of Feature #1 (see Plate II). This feature was composed of butchered cow and sheep bones in a disarticulated pattern, many fish vertebrae and some mammal bones, egg shells, gneissoid rocks, two spikes and one nail, and fresh water pelecypods (*Anodonta*) and marine mollusks (*Mytilus* and *Littorina*). The primary concentrations of the feature were in Trench B and Pit C. One of the most interesting finds in this feature is the abundance of Mexican earthenware shards and the presence of glass trade beads. Feature #1 was apparently a slaughtering site for only a short time. The actual thickness of the artifact and bone bearing stratum was about eight inches and represents the mission's declining period (1820-1832).

The presence of glass trade beads and *Olivella* saddle beads within the feature is an enigma. It seems that the beads were scattered over the cow and sheep skeletal material, perhaps as a ceremonial offering,

or that they were simply lost during preparation of slaughtered animals. Considerable burning was done in this feature, as witnessed by a charcoal stratum 1.5 inches thick and 26 inches in depth. Many of the glass trade beads were melted from heat and some of the gneissoid rocks in the feature showed fire breakage and burning.

Analysis by Dr. Roderick Sprague indicates that both mandrel wound and tubular beads are present in the Soledad collection. The beads apparently date from the period 1820-1840 (see Chart 1).

Since the entire area of the third cemetery had been scraped away, it is certain that the excavated material pre-dates 1832. A better knowledge of the time sequence could be obtained from a critical analysis of the Mexican earthenware shards from Feature #1. No really usable stratigraphy was found to cover a wide area in the .15 acre that the cemetery embraces. Only Feature #1 showed stratigraphy to a marked degree.

Avian bones and the distal end of a California jack rabbit (*Lepus californicus*) femur were collected in Feature #1 in the 1.5 inch charcoal layer. One of the most intriguing discoveries in the feature was a

scattering of human teeth just above the charcoal stratum, with some below. These teeth may have been introduced through rodent activity or through a purposeful introduction into the feature. A human cervical vertebra, a patella, and a phalange were found in the feature also, but scattered human remains were found throughout the cemetery and represent remnants from the leveling activities of 1940. Most of the human remains that were disturbed were pushed over near the line of Eucalyptus trees; it is here that portions of human skulls and artifacts were noticed.

According to the death records in Englehardt (1929, p. 81) a total of 1,891 burials is recorded between 1792 and 1841. It may be assumed from the blank space after the year 1791 that no burials were reported between the founding date of October 9 and January 1, 1792. Undoubtedly these burials were scattered in all three cemeteries and may include the five known burials in the original church of 1797. If the hypothesis that the third cemetery serviced the chapel of 1832 is correct, then we can get some idea of the number of burials interred there.

In the *Informe* of 1832, under the *Fabricas*, Fr. Vincente Francisco de Sarria says: "*Se ha echo una Iglesia provisional bastante decente para el culto Divino . . . Se han aumentado en la Santa Iglesia unos pintados para su decencia.*" (A provisional church adequate for divine worship has been built. They have improved the Holy Church by the addition of several paintings.) It would seem from this that the "*Iglesia provisional*," or provisional church, would have a cemetery to go with it. If this is the case, then burials would have been started in 1832, as the church was completed before December 31 of that year, the date of signing of the 1832 *Informe*.

The last year for which interments are listed by Englehardt is 1841, so to determine the number of burials in the third cemetery we should take the 1832 figure (1,705) and subtract it from the 1841 total deaths (1,891) with a result of 186 burials. There seems to be some discrepancy in Englehardt's 1831 death figure of 1,705. In the *Informe* of 1832, Fr. Sarria lists the

CHART 1

A summary of the 54 beads recovered by the author at Mission La Soledad.

Bead Type	Color	No.
Glass Trade	Green	7
Glass Trade	Red	1
Glass Trade	Light Blue	17
Glass Trade	White Fusiform	2
Glass Trade	Purple	8
Glass Trade	White	3
Glass Trade	Amber	1
Glass Trade	Brown	1
Glass Trade	Dark Blue	2
Haliotis		
Periostracum	Pink	2
Olivella Saddle	White	4
Large Glass Trade (fragment)	Sapphire	1
Medium Glass Trade (Trench II)	Sapphire	1
Miscellaneous beads		4
Total		54