

# The Bloody Point Archaeological Investigation

*Roderick Sprague and Michael J. Rodeffer*

In the latter half of 1988 Roderick Sprague was notified by Betty Lee, then chairman of the Archaeology Committee of the Oregon-California Trails Association, that Paul and Ruby Tschirky,\* landowners of a possible site of the Bloody Point massacre, were interested in determining if the stone piles (hereafter referred to as features) on their property, which they assumed to be burials, contained remains of American Indians or pioneer Euroamericans. As a member of the Archaeology Committee and as an archaeologist who had removed numerous burials, both Indian and white, Sprague was asked to spearhead the efforts to make this determination. Harold and Sharon Manhart, current cochairmen of the Archaeology Committee, and other members of the committee support publication of this final report. On 24 October 1988 Sprague began to work on the problem.

The classic work, *History of Siskiyou County, California* by Harry L. Wells, gives the following description of an 1852 attack on an emigrant train on the Applegate Trail:

When they reached Bloody Point they were suddenly attacked by the Modocs. All were killed save one named Coffin....Bloody Point is a place on the north bank of Tule lake, where a spur of the mountains runs down close to the lake shore. Around this the old emigrant road passed, just beyond being a large open flat covered with tules, wild rye and grass. This was a favorite place of ambuscade.<sup>1</sup>

There is a location several miles north of the stone features which the U.S. Geological Survey has designated as the site of the massacre, but many historians believe the real location is at the site of the features. The site is located in Sec. 18, T.

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47 N, R. 6 E, MDM. (See map on pages 22 and 23.) Today Tule Lake—shown on the map as Rhett Lake—has been drained and is under cultivation.

California burial law is very complex and is rigidly enforced in most areas. Although the northern border area of the state where the Tschirky ranch is located is not an area of strict enforcement, both the spirit and letter of the law were followed. The law requires that if a burial site is found the county coroner must be notified, and if it is suspected that the individual to be disinterred is an American Indian the California Native American Heritage Commission must be contacted so that a representative of the tribal group concerned can become involved.

Help was provided by the U.S. Forest Service archaeologists from Klamath, Modoc and Trinity-Shasta forests. Also providing advice and help were Earl Green of the Native American Heritage Commission in Sacramento, Modoc County Coroner Bruce Mix and Deputy Coroner Dirk Williams. Based on the information provided by regional archaeologists, Sprague was not willing to make any predictions as to the ethnic identity of the reputed burials. He called upon Michael Rodeffer for help because he and Rodeffer had worked together on burials in the lower Snake River region; Rodeffer had recently conducted a survey within a mile of the Tschirky site, had tested suspected mounds nearby and was reasonably familiar with the site area.

On 29 October 1988, Rodeffer and OCTA president Richard Ackerman of Salem, Oregon, visited the site with the Tschirkys. In a telephone conference, Rodeffer and Sprague agreed, based on the size and shape of the stone features, that they likely marked burials, probably non-Indian. On that visit Rodeffer photographed the series of features and made a sketch map of them in preparation for future work.

The work party gathered in the area on 9 December and started work the next morning with Sprague directing, Rodeffer as codirector and with able assistance from Richard Ack-

erman and OCTA member Jack Holmes. Deputy Dirk Williams served as the observer for the Coroner's office.

The story related by Paul Tschirky was that some 35 years ago, "in the late 50s," he had a crew clearing rock from the area so that he could use a subsoiler to break up a heavily cemented sand layer. One of the workmen stated that the rock piles looked like Indian graves. This was "after we had already removed 19 of the piles." At this point Tschirky stopped the work and had the few remaining stone piles surrounded by railroad ties (Fig. 1) to prevent trucks and equipment from driving over the features. This then was the area, now containing at least six features, that was to be investigated.

Since it was believed that if the features were graves they were probably emigrant graves, the one selected for the initial investigation was the one most atypical of American Indian burials, which are generally round in shape. This feature, labeled as Feature No. 1 (Fig. 1) was a rectangular layer of rock measuring 7 ft. 4 in. long and generally 3 ft. 7 in. wide but reaching a maximum width of 5 ft. at one point and as narrow as 2 ft. 11 in. at one end. Black and white and color photographs were taken at all stages of the excavation. No removal of the skeletal material was anticipated beyond that necessary to establish the racial identity of the deceased. This was the wish of the Tschirkys and was in accord with the desire of all of the other workers and was agreed to by Earl Green of the Native American Heritage Commission. After the feature was measured, drawn and photographed, all vegetation was removed (Fig. 2) and the photography repeated. Next, the fine surface soil was removed and the feature again photographed (Fig. 3). At this point the feature was more clearly defined and still had a rectangular shape and an east-west alignment. The exposed stones were then removed from the western one-third of the feature. The surprising thing about this first layer of rocks was that it was the only layer, a layer of rounded basalt rocks no more than 4 in. deep. Below the rock layer was a thin mantle of topsoil which contained absolutely no cultural material or bone.

Below the thin topsoil was a very dense, sandy material that, in the field, was assumed to be cemented lacustrine

sands. Using the full manpower available, a pit approximately 12 in. x 18 in. and 21 in. deep was excavated with a large crowbar in a period of four hours (Fig. 4). The hole was excavated to determine if a grave outline could be seen in the soil profile. None was observed and the immediate question became, how long did it take for this soil to develop and obliterate any evidence of digging. "Soil" samples were collected and taken to the University of Idaho in Moscow for analysis by Maynard A. Fosberg, a soil scientist with 30 years of experience working with archaeologists. Since no funds were available for soil analysis, a detailed analysis of the topsoil must be postponed but the rest of the samples were quickly described as geological (rocks), not soil. The excavation was through sandstone that required thousands of years to form.

The remainder of the top layer of rocks was removed and the top soil carefully excavated. The same procedure was followed more quickly with Feature 9 but with the same results. The other features were probed to determine if they also had the sandstone layer beneath them. The remaining features and the area enclosed by the railroad ties were all equally dense beneath the top soil.

The only logical conclusion from this excavation is that the rock features do not represent burials. There is not enough rock to have formed any kind of covering over bodies or body parts, including just bone, that would not have been disturbed by coyotes and other scavengers. Also, there is absolutely no evidence of human remains, including teeth or dense parts such as the mastoid process.

Given the fact that these are not burials, it is necessary to explain why there would be such stone features at the edge of the former lake. Several possible explanations were considered. The most likely comes from a review of the literature concerning the Klamath and Modoc Indians. Several possibilities can be rejected from such a review. It is obvious from Spier and Heizer<sup>2</sup> that the rock features are not burials or part of a cremation area. They are not rocks from sweat lodge fires,<sup>3</sup> cooking fires or ovens because the rocks are not fire-cracked. The size and location of the piles would indicate that they are not vision quest piles (piles of rocks made by

Fig. 1. Feature 1 prior to excavation.

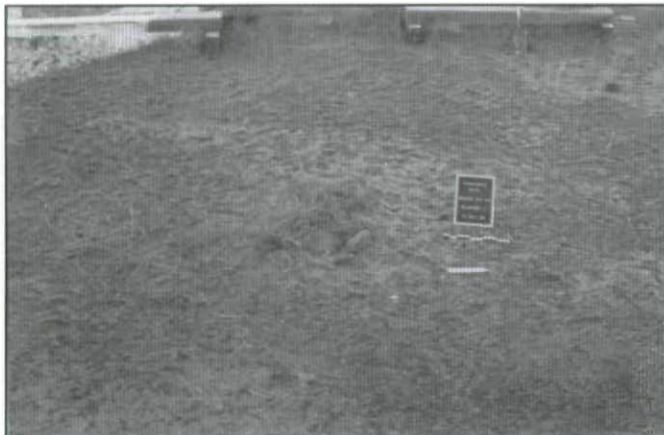
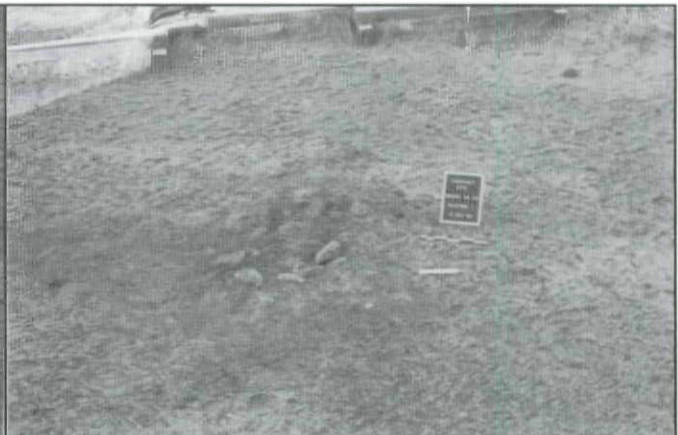


Fig. 2. Feature 1 after vegetation removal.



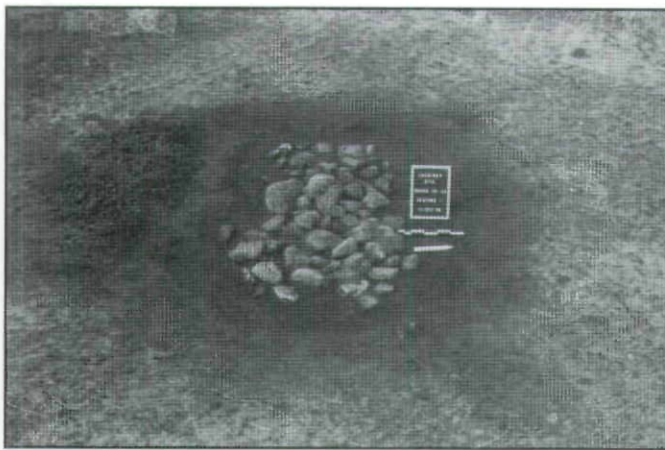


Fig. 3. Feature 1 after removal of the soil.

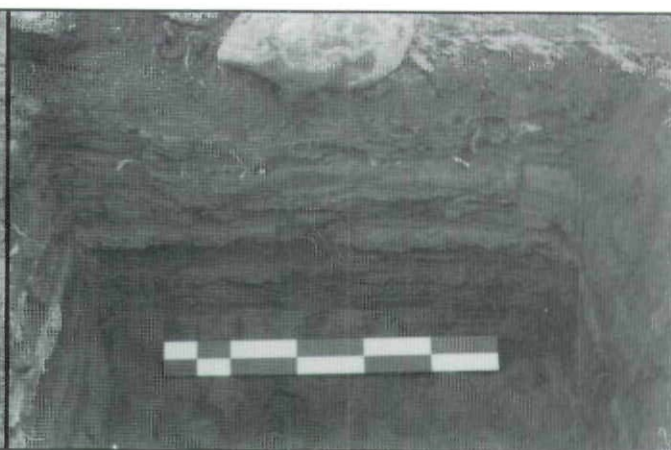


Fig. 4. Feature 1 profile showing sandstone.

Indian youths entering puberty to help in receiving their guardian spirits).<sup>4</sup> Nor does the extensive literature on Plateau stone piling lend any help in explaining their use. It is also evident from Gatschet<sup>5</sup> that this is not near any known historic Modoc village.

Spier<sup>6</sup> states that the Klamath, after using their canoes in an area, will in the fall "...sink the canoes used on the marsh in the water..." While Spier was speaking of one specific location on Klamath Lake, the practice of sinking canoes over winter to protect them likely was found in other locations and among the Modoc. The canoe of the Modoc and the Klamath was made, according to Barrett and Kroeber<sup>7</sup> of fir, not an especially durable wood and one that certainly would have totally disintegrated in 135 years. Several authorities speak of how "The Modoc boat was hollowed out to a remarkably thin and light shell."<sup>8</sup> Spier<sup>9</sup> says that "...a good fir canoe will last for 15 to 20 years or more..." and that "the shell is quite thin, a thickness of about half an inch at the gunwale and not much more in the bottom and ends." Barrett<sup>10</sup> says the Modoc

and Klamath canoe is "half an inch to a couple of inches" thick. The illustration shown in Barrett<sup>11</sup> shows a rectangular canoe with both a square stern and prow. Howe<sup>12</sup> remarks about the Modoc canoe that "It was so thin, in fact, that it was necessary to leave it in the water to prevent warping or splitting."

It is difficult to think of any way to sink a wooden canoe with anything other than rocks. Several of the rocks in the features were grinding stones, another class of object listed by Spier<sup>13</sup> as being left from season to season on a specific site. Thus, it is speculated that the stone features could be the remains of rocks placed in canoes that were thrown out into piles when the canoes were subsequently recovered or, in the case of the rectangular group, they could be all that was left after the canoes rotted away in the water with the stones still in them.

The one conclusion that cannot be challenged is that the Bloody Point stone features at the Tschirky site do not mark human interments or cremations.

#### NOTES

1. Harry L. Wells, *History of Siskiyou County, California* (Oakland: D. J. Stewart & Co., 1881), p. 130.
2. Robert F. Heizer, "Massacre Lake Cave, Tule Lake Cave and Shore Sites." In *Archaeological Researches in the Northern Great Basin* by L. S. Cressman, pp. 121-134. Carnegie Institute of Washington, *Publication 538*, Washington, 1942, pp. 127-130.  
Leslie Spier, "Klamath Ethnography," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. 30, Berkeley, 1930, P. 72.
3. Spier, p. 206.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
5. Albert Samuel Gatschet, "The Klamath Indians of Southwestern Oregon." *Contributions to North American Ethnology*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Washington, 1840, p. xxix.
6. Spier, p. 147.
7. S. A. Barrett, "The Material Culture of the Klamath Lake and Modoc Indians of Northeastern California and Southern Oregon." *University of California Publications in American*

*Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 239-292, Berkeley, 1910, p. 247.

- A. L. Kroeber, "Handbook of the Indians of California." *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 78*, Washington, 1925, reprinted 1976 by Dover Publications, New York, p. 329.
8. Kroeber, p. 329.
9. Spier, pp. 147, 170.
10. Barrett, p. 248.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
12. Carrol B. Howe, *Ancient Modocs of California and Oregon*. (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1979), p. 154.
13. Spier, p. 147.

**\*NOTE:** Paul and Ruby Tschirky were given the Oregon-California Trails Association's Rancher of the Year award at its 1989 national convention in appreciation for their interest in the cause of historic trail preservation and for their cooperation throughout this undertaking.

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