

New York Times

Developer Unearths Burial Ground and Stirs Up Anger Among Indians

By Nick Madigan

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With the precision of a watchmaker, an archaeologist clasped a small paintbrush and gently swept the brown, sandy dirt off the spine of a Native American woman buried some 200 years ago.

From the condition of the bones, the archaeologist, Penny Minturn, deduced that the woman was 30 to 40 years old when she died, had suffered from arthritis and had recently given birth, and that her diet had probably consisted of shellfish, native plants, nuts and berries.

"This is one of the most fascinating sites I've been on," Ms. Minturn, an archaeologist for 25 years, said as she worked under a large tent in the Ballona wetlands here, less than two miles from the ocean. "We're finding out a lot about this time period and letting these people tell their story."

But many Native Americans are outraged that the bones of their ancestors are being dug up from the ancient burial ground, known to the Tongva tribe as Saa'angna and filled with the skeletal remains of people whose predecessors hunted and roamed across Southern California 7,000 years ago or more. Archaeologists here believe it is the largest excavation now going on in the country.

The skeletons, most of them female, are being removed for the development of Playa Vista, a complex of condominiums, apartments and townhouses, some selling for more than \$1 million. The burial grounds, which were discovered late last year, stand in the way of a proposed stream that opponents call a drainage ditch and that the developer more elaborately calls a riparian corridor.

So far, about 275 skeletons as well as countless artifacts and funerary objects have been unearthed, and no one knows how many remain.

Native Americans like Rhonda Robles, an elder of the Acjachemen, said the excavation was being conducted over her strenuous objections. "Our ancestors are being put in buckets and boxes, and they're being separated from the things they were buried with,"

said Ms. Robles, whose tribe is commonly known as the Juaneño. Like many tribes, the Acjachemen and the Tongva see themselves as spiritually united.

Ms. Robles said of the developers: "They're being disrespectful. All around the world, cemeteries are respected, even pet cemeteries. We'd be up in arms if our pet cemeteries were desecrated. But our culture and our cemeteries are not respected by law."

Steve Soboroff, a former Los Angeles parks commissioner who is president of Playa Vista, the developer, said his company had hired "the best people with the best experience to do the right job out of respect and out of dignity to the remains that are being disinterred."

Mr. Soboroff dismissed claims by some Native Americans that their objections had been ignored. "There's a big difference between not responding and not giving them the answers they wanted," he said.

He said the remains would be reburied somewhere on the property and that many of the artifacts would be displayed at the U.C.L.A. Fowler Museum of Cultural History on the campus of the University of California, Los Angeles. At Playa Vista, outdoor displays will recall the site's history.

Donn R. Grenda, chief archaeologist at the site, said the discoveries would be scientifically and culturally beneficial. Most of the bodies in the current excavation were buried relatively recently, between about 1770 and 1810, and the deaths were possibly the result of an epidemic. The oldest remains found so far are about 500 years old, but Mr. Grenda said there was evidence of human habitation as long ago as 4,600 years or so.

To the Native Americans, the land is sacred ground. "Our people have lived on this land five times longer than the present culture," Ms. Robles said. "But we were cheated out of our land and cheated out of recognition. We're an extreme minority in our homeland, but that doesn't mean we should be shown such disregard." Playa Vista is the most recent name given to a huge marsh where oil rigs predominated early last century and where Howard Hughes built an aircraft plant in the 1940's. The plant produced the Spruce Goose and, later, helicopters for the Vietnam War. More recently, the land was to be the site of the DreamWorks film studio, until Steven Spielberg and his partners backed out in the face of disagreements with a previous developer and lawsuits by environmentalists eager to save the wetlands.

Similar burial grounds have been found elsewhere in California, many of them south of here in Orange County.

Jordan David is a member of the Tongva, also known as the Gabrieleño, and has been monitoring such sites for 11 years. He was permitted to observe the Saa'angna excavation and has been harshly critical of the work.

Mr. David said that at least three of the approximately 70 archaeologists and osteologists had quit because they were unhappy about what they were being asked to do. Mr. David said some archaeologists had shown "appalling disrespect to the people who have passed."

He said one archaeologist had waved a carved bone tube used to draw out sickness or bad spirits and had exclaimed, "Oh, look, I can do magic!" A supervisor told her to stop, he said.

On another occasion, Mr. David said, he saw someone walking atop a wooden plank on the ground. He lifted it. "There was a cranium underneath, and it was crushed," he recalled. "I cried for 45 minutes. Spiritually, it was like having a hot poker in my eye. It felt like the ancestors were crying through me."

The man who had stepped on the plank was not an archaeologist but an employee of a company erecting a tent on the site, Mr. Grenda said. "When you're working with fragile bones, sometimes they break," he said. "I don't think that comes from carelessness."

During a recent visit, a reporter saw an archaeological team member in heavy boots standing within an inch of a skeleton as he took notes on a clipboard, so close that a misstep could have crushed the bones.

Other experts appeared to be working with great care around the remains, most of which were covered with cloths. Debby Cogan, an archaeologist, spoke excitedly about finding ceremonial shells and beads, as well as tools, bowls, grinding stones and a "beautifully intact" whistle made from a deer tibia.

Another archaeologist, Don Tatum, resigned last month after working at the site for five weeks because, he said, "I wasn't comfortable with the situation."

One of his objections centered on a forced lack of communication with at least one of the designated Native American observers, whom Mr. Tatum said workers were told not to speak to. "Part of his job was to observe and discuss what we were doing, and he wasn't allowed to do his job," Mr. Tatum said in a telephone interview. "It didn't seem right to me."

Mr. Tatum said the problem with digging for bones at Saa'angna came down to human rights.

"If the shoe were on the other foot and this was a cemetery in New England and these were European-Americans, there'd be a huge stink in the community," Mr. Tatum, an archaeologist for 15 years, said.

George Muhlsten, a lawyer representing the Playa Vista development, said the company was not legally bound to consider the Tongvas' wishes because they were not members of any of the 562 federally recognized Indian tribes. The Tongvas acknowledged that they do not have federal recognition but said their cemetery should be respected nonetheless.

Mr. Mhlsten rejected suggestions that the riparian corridor be moved a few hundred feet to accommodate the cemetery. More bodies might be found there, he said, and besides, any change would open the permit process again and expose the project to more lawsuits.

But he said the company was doing everything it could to respect the remains.

"In the old days, this would all be bulldozed," he said. "Now it's done with brushes."

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