

TAS Logo

Alex Fletcher designed the TAS logo for the tee shirts first sold at the 1989 annual meeting of the Archeological Society of New Mexico held in Taos. The elements of the logo, chosen from rock art we had recorded near the Rio Grande River, included a toad, an awanyu, and a turkey track, to which we added the words "Taos Archaeological Society." The logo became part of the masthead of the TAS newsletter.

THE EXCAVATION OF THE MONDRAGON PUEBLO, LLANO QUEMADO

*An Introduction*³

We were hunched on the Llano Quemado ridge getting ready to begin a dig, half a dozen members of the new Taos Archaeological Society. We had never done this type of work before. Across Taos Valley, the mountain seemed to watch us.

We shared in common a willingness to get down in the dirt in the hard winds of April. Each of us had originally come from some far place where April is when green appears, but on the Llano Ridge the only thing resembling green was the endless gray of scrabbly sage. All else was brown, even Larry Mondragon's trailer hunkered nearby, even the Ranchos valley just below.

At our feet, the more we looked, the more potsherds appeared. They were everywhere. A group of people had lived here hundreds of years ago. What was it like here for them? Their daily routines, eating, homemaking, hopes, and dreams? We all wanted to know. So did the owner of this site, Larry Mondragon. It was 1989. He was planning to put up a house here. At his job with the Carson National Forest, he had told Carson's archaeologist, Bob Lawrence: "There's a pueblo ruin on my land. Is there some way I could get it checked out by archaeologists before we build?" So here we were, new to this, out for hands-on experience. Each one of us wanted to see and touch something new, something that had not been previously interpreted by someone else.

On that first day we had two real archaeologists with us, Paul Williams of the Bureau of Land Management and Bob Lawrence. We had brought our own work gloves, trowels, brushes, spades, buckets;

Lawrence brought a big hinged sifter, string and stakes, graph paper, and a bundle of pink pin flags. By the end of the morning, the ground was a sea of fluttering pink, each little flag marking a sherd or lithic; we were to give each a field number and plot its location on graph paper. Two weeks later we began digging. By centimeters.

As the months passed, shapes grew on the paper and in our minds, and they developed depth. Rocks in alignment--walls? Floors; a hearth. A home, facing the midwinter sunrise? We learned to bring comforts with us: food, folding chairs, sunscreen, kneepads. We learned to tell time by the wind, which came up at 11:00 a.m. We'd go home with dust in our mouths, six to a dozen of us. Pounds of fragments of a few prehistoric lives accumulated in little plastic bags. We had expert advice from Lawrence and Williams, who taught us the basics; Bob Kriebel of the Carson National forest; renowned Southwest archaeologist Dr. Herbert ("Dynamite") Dick; and Dr. Patty Crown, field director of Southern Methodist University's archaeology program at Fort Burgwin. But the outlines we sought kept shifting. Had a structure been built above a crumbled older one? "A complex site," our experts said. "Ephemeral." As temporary dig supervisor, I caught myself wondering: was our dig some kind of cosmic joke?

One sunny morning we were working around a hearth, scraping, brushing. The valley below had greened up. We had plotted the location of a flat unworked piece of micaceous schist, one of now thousands of unremarkable scraps. So far our treasures were things like little fragments of red ware, a bead, bits of bone, and charcoal. Then Bob Lawrence reached down and picked up that rock. There, centered in its imprint, was a perfectly round, black hole as wide as a hand. We stared, and wondered: how on earth did a piece of PVC pipe get buried upright under that rock? It was the open mouth of our first pot.

For hours, prayerfully we dug, then lifted it out, dusted it off. It was black corrugated utility ware, twenty centimeters in height, with double handles, a classic, and whole, not even chipped. The dwellers of the house had buried it in their floor seven hundred years ago; the rock was its lid. No one else had laid eyes on it, ever. We took portrait photos of it. Suddenly, we knew what we were doing.

Later that week I was talking with Professor J. J. Brody at UNM, where I was taking courses in anthropology. I told him about our pot. He grinned: "What did it look like?"

In the presence of the Mimbres guru I was seized with humility and said, "Oh, it's homely, really, sort of ugly."

Brody frowned. "There's no such thing as an ugly pot," he told me. "In fact, I've never met a pot I didn't like. How big was it? Draw it for me."

My art training helped, and I drew him a faithful likeness.

"There," he said. "See? Lovely! Year after year those people turned out these pots, and broke them by the thousands. Every one of them beautiful," he added firmly.

Our pot--Larry Mondragon's pot--was beautiful.

Something had happened: now, our little dig was beautiful. It stayed that way from then on.

Because of the Talpa, Pot Creek, Cornfield Taos, and other archaeological sites that have been dug in Taos Valley, much was already known about the period we were excavating, around 1250 AD. But in the three years we worked the Mondragon Pueblo, we were able to add to and substantiate the existing body of information. We found shell beads from the Gulf of California, Mogollon red-on-black pottery, and stone material, used in making projectile points, from Northern Arizona, all evidences of the proverbial trading vigor of those days. We uncovered layers of living patterns common to the pit houses of the area, although at our site they were above ground. We found four contiguous rooms, with two more at a lower level. The third room had a floor of packed caliche and clay, and wooden posts.

Christine Ponko recalls the day Dan Wolfman, archaeomagnetic specialist, came to help. "He checked our hearth samples and told us they weren't good enough to do the tests," she said, "but from there he was going on to Jeff Boyer's site at Pot Creek. So we all jumped in our vehicles and met him there, sitting near the edge of a beautiful pit house. Jeff told us that when wood is burned, its molecules heat up and land at magnetic north, and since it's known where magnetic north was for each year, we can date pieces of charcoal. It made our day."



Excavation at
Llano Quemado
Site 17, Taos County



Dorothy Zopf exclaimed, "How excited everyone was who worked that dig! Every day, we found something new." Each person had their favorite find; a friend of mine, who happened to be an artist, visited the site for one day and found a stone palette with two different earth tones, ocher and red, still on it.

We found metates and manos, bone awls, bone beads with holes through them, projectile points, hand axes, pipes, shale pot lids. Thurston Toeppen, our laboratory supervisor, put together 33 sherds to form half a pot. We catalogued every bit. With relief, we found no human remains.

We learned that archaeology is truly unfinished. Our site and the Blueberry Hill sites excavated in 1996 have changed the picture. The time will come when sites can be explored with technology that leaves them intact; not one sherd or bone removed.

But we loved standing on those floors in the wind on the Llano ridge, touching those household things, listening for the voices of those people.

Annette Grubiss was the excavation crew supervisor; Thurston Toeppen, laboratory supervisor. Chris Di Lisio, Alex Fletcher, Susan Hill, Bill Lechtenburg, Jean Muste, Bill Phillips, Bill Stevens, Willi Wood, and Dorothy Zopf worked week after week. Virginia Black, Tucker Heitman (Young), Chris Ponko, Greg Sagemiller, Barbara DuBois, Joan Phillips, and Monica Salazar also spent considerable time on the dig; many others worked there too, for one day or a few.

For their generous assistance we wish to thank Paul Williams and Bob Lawrence, who spent many hours in the dirt with us, and Bob Kriebel, the late Dr. Herbert Dick, and Dr. Patty Crown. And our heartfelt thanks go to Larry Mondragon for caring deeply, for calling on us, and for putting up with us for three long dusty summers.

The Llano Quemado Site Report

The site at Llano Quemado can be described as a multi-level site. Several (four or five) contiguous rooms were found having walls at some levels clearly defined with medium-large rocks running along their cores. Doorways were apparent where the rocks stopped. In two of the rooms a hard, thin layer of light



Annette Grubiss (facing camers), dig foreman,
with some of the crew at the Llano Quemado site



Thurston Toeppen, lab chief, (at rear of photo)
and others at the Llano Quemado excavation

gray material coated the floor. Other walls seemed almost ephemeral although on the west side we were able to follow a resistant, packed hard material -almost a shadow wall parallel to the primary wall --all on the same level. Walls indicating rooms were found beneath the surface rooms; however, they were not excavated fully enough to identify well.

We found three hearths at different levels, all of which were judged not hard enough to test date. The archaeologist who specialized in magnetic dating studied them.

At the lowest level excavated and farther to the east during the earliest days of excavation, a complete pot was found buried under a floor level with the stone lid on it. Nothing was found in it. It is a black, utility vessel. We presented it to the property owner, Larry Mondragon, at one of our TAS meetings.

We found, among other artifacts, parts of two burned, wooden posts. One was large enough to turn over to the tree-ring dating lab at Tucson; however, the report stated it could not be dated.

Several tools appeared: two axes, clearly hafted; a tiny, burned corncob; and several beautiful bird points, as well as a great many pottery sherds.

Patty said that the site would likely be dated as early as 1175 AD. We had no datable hearths, no datable wood, but we did have a great deal of pottery. The consensus seemed to be that the site was a summer time, aboveground residence, used intermittently over a number of years.

We were all touched by the beauty and tranquility of the site looking down into the grassy pastures and across the green valley to the town of Taos on the north. Masses of rain clouds would build up in the summer afternoons while we worked and we would wonder if we would get caught and have to scramble to get everything back in our trucks and pull out before lightning threatened.

Looking back on those three summers with the TAS group is a pleasure. Although there are records showing how many members worked and the number of hours they put in, there are no records of the good-natured humor and fun we shared. Various guests visited the site, including classes from Taos elementary and the junior college level. TAS should be very pleased with the enthusiasm and interest brought to the community about archaeology.