

THE 1950 EXCAVATIONS AT SITE 45BN6 McNARY RESERVOIR, WASHINGTON

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THE RIVER Basin Surveys' program, particularly in the Columbia River Basin, has had a peculiar role in American archaeology. Generally speaking, archaeological research programs should be oriented toward a specific problem such as the study of a certain culture sequence or an inquiry into a particular time horizon. In contrast River Basin Surveys' problem has been to examine in detail almost every phase of every culture that is represented over a vast area. True, the field of research has been limited to those portions of river basins that are scheduled to be inundated upon the completion of a number of dams, but because of the aridity of the Columbia Basin a vast majority of the aboriginal population was concentrated along the major streams. Thus the reservoirs planned for those streams will flood a large portion of the cultural material existing in the region.

The procedure for closing with a problem as general as that described above has been to attempt to salvage all that is possible of the cultural remains of each site up to the point where duplication becomes evident. One watches, on the one hand, the amount of work that remains to be accomplished while upon the other one views, often with alarm, the scheduled completion date of the dam with its accompanying flooding. To make haste slowly has been the real problem.

The summer months of 1950 were the most active of any since the River Basin program was started in the Columbia Basin. Four parties of from 8 to 12 men each were excavating in archaeological sites within the region; in McNary, Chief Joseph, Equalizing, and O'Sullivan Reservoirs. It is with the McNary Reservoir and a single site, 45BN6, that this report is concerned. Douglas Osborne, of the faculty of the University of Washington, was in charge of the field work, while the writer as Acting Field Director, was in charge of the River Basin Surveys office in Eugene, Oregon.

Almost all of the work at site 45BN6 was concerned with excavating the remains of the shallow semi-subterranean houses that once had formed a small village. Located some 9 miles east and upstream from the site of the McNary Dam, the village consisted of 60

house pits situated on a long flat terrace above the Columbia River. The terrace itself is composed of recently deposited sands and gravels with a topsoil of loess. A thick deposit of volcanic ash is prominent where the river bank has been eroded. At sites 35UM3, 35UM7, and 35UM8 cultural materials were in close contact with volcanic ash (Osborne and Shiner, 1950), and were probably of nearly the same age, but at 45BN6 the cultural materials were well above it.

There was no indication there had been any settlement plan at the site other than that of stringing the houses along the terrace parallel to the river. A sharp division of the village into parts was noticed at sites 35UM7 and 35UM17, both of which were located almost directly across the river but no such division occurred at 45BN6. There existed a difference in the sizes of houses but there seemed to be a random placement of the different sizes.

The two small house remains which we called house pits 5 and 6 were tangent, giving the appearance of having been occupied simultaneously (Fig. 104). Further evidence for such a conclusion was found, not only in the close similarity of their artifacts but in the fact that in neither pit was there back dirt from the other. Had one of the houses been constructed after the other had been abandoned, the dirt from the excavation would certainly have been deposited in the abandoned pit. If both houses had indeed been occupied at the same time, they would have been very close together if not actually joined. The long narrow house, known as the mat-house, was in popular usage during the historical period in the area, while the circular type, known as the earth lodge, seems to have been abandoned soon after the beginning of the nineteenth century.

House pits 5 and 6 were nearly circular, each being about 13 feet in diameter. The subterranean portions were 2.5 feet deep and were shaped like shallow saucers. Both houses had been occupied several times as shown by succeeding dark streaks that marked the floors. Each streak, composed of charcoal and ashes from the fireplace at the center of the house,

became indistinct as it neared the outside edge of the pit. So far we have been unable to determine the length of each phase of occupation. Each floor level may have represented a single season or several seasons, but the artifact content of each house was much too limited for any conclusions of that nature.

No evidence could be found of a superstructure either in the form of post holes or of the house frame itself. This was true of all of the houses that were excavated at the site.

House pit 7 was slightly larger than the first two and more oval in shape. It was 17 feet long, 15 feet wide, and between 2 and 2½ feet deep. Excavation of the house revealed that there had been three separate floors that represented different periods of occupation. Each floor level almost exactly paralleled the one that preceded it although the most recent one was slightly more shallow in shape than the first or second floors. The same remarks that were made on the floor levels of house pits 5 and 6 apply also to house pit 7.

House pit 59 (Fig. 105, b) was considerably different from the other dwellings at the site. It is the only example of a long mat-house so far excavated. The structure, which would have been approximately 65 feet long, 16 feet wide, and excavated to a depth of only one foot, would fit exactly the descriptions of houses given by the Umatilla Indians in Ray (1942, p. 174). In further contrast to the other houses that were excavated at the site, only one occupation level was found in house pit 59. While only one fireplace was discovered others must have existed, for the mat-house is described as being a multi-family dwelling and would have been much too large for a single family. A small rock oven found in the west end of the house proved to be unassociated with the occupation of the house. Apparently it had been used at some time after the house had been abandoned.

Several test pits were excavated in the steep bank at the river's edge in hope of finding an over-the-bank dump. When little or no midden material could be found we concluded that either the refuse had been carefully thrown into the water or else flood waters had washed it away. In one of the test pits, however, a complete burial was encountered. The remains were of a male somewhat over 50 years of age. All metrical measurements and morphological observations fell within the ex-

pected ranges and no anomalies or pathological conditions could be seen. The teeth were in extremely poor condition, which would be expected for an individual of that age.

A rather small collection of artifacts was obtained at 45BN6. This came as no surprise, for the houses in the McNary Reservoir area have invariably yielded little in the way of material culture. It has been unfortunate for the archaeologist that the Indians in that area were such neat and careful housekeepers.

In house pits 5 and 6 there were quite a number of articles that had been obtained from the whites. They included fragments of tin cans or cups, a large calibre rifle or pistol ball, and a fragment of what may have been a square nail. These articles, which were associated with several small pieces of leather, a basalt cobble chopper (Fig. 105, a, 25), and a cobble hammer (Fig. 105, a, 10), were all found on or above the most recent floors. The leather may or may not have been aboriginal; it was too fragmentary for identification. Below the top floors of the two houses we found two elk-rib fleshing tools and a small number of cobble hammers, choppers, and spall flakes. Most of the choppers and hammers were of basalt while the spall flakes were of quartzite, all crude generalized tools. While no trade goods appeared, the bone fleshers appeared to have been cut with a steel knife. A few fragments of leather and a wooden awl were also found at that level.

In house pit 7 much the same assemblage of artifacts was found. In addition to several fragments of tin cans or cups, we found a quartzite chopper, the tip of a projectile point, and a bone awl. A machine-made mother-of-pearl button (Fig. 105, a, 15) and a horseshoe were also found above the most recent floor level. Since the horseshoe was found only a short distance below the surface, it may not have been associated with the occupation of the house but may have been deposited in the house depression at a later date.

The artifacts from below the latest floor of house pit 7 included three cobble hammers, two spall flakes (one shown in Fig. 105, a, 19), a cobble chopper (20), and a notched net sinker. The only article of trade was a piece of canvas that has yet to be completely studied.

The artifacts from house pit 59 were all presumed to be associated in time since there was only one floor or occupation level found.

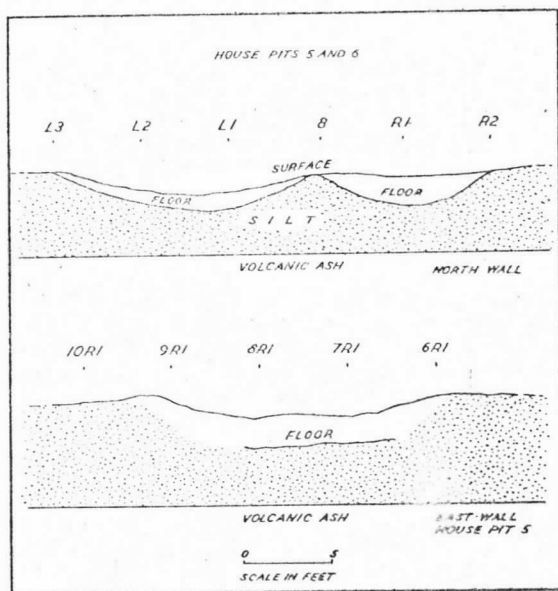


FIG. 104. Sections through house pits 5 and 6 at 45BN6.

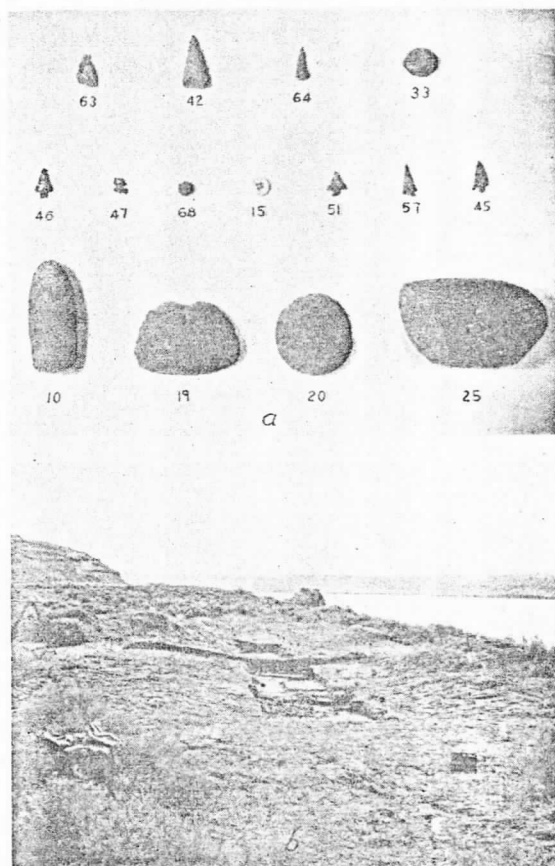


FIG. 105. a, artifacts from 45BN6; b, Excavating in house pit 59.

The trade goods included 2 small fragments of "window" glass, 3 tiny glass trade beads, and a small brass stud (Fig. 105, a, 68) of the type commonly used with leather. The arrow points, of which there were 12, were either triangular and unnotched (63 and 42), notched on the side (47 and 57), or notched from the corner (45, 46, and 51). All of the points were small and the materials included obsidian, jasper, chert, and petrified wood. Other artifacts from the house pit consisted of a few small crude scrapers (Fig. 105, a, 33, 64) made from the same materials as were the arrowpoints, a hammerstone, and a grooved basalt pebble that may have been used for polishing arrowshafts.

No artifacts were found in association with the burial nor were any found in other test pits at the site. There were, however, a number of finds on the surface of the site, the best of which was a stone bowl $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. A large number of choppers, hammerstones, spall flakes, and notched net sinkers were also found on the surface.

Several piles of medium to large sized rocks were noticed along the terrace a short distance from the house pits. They were too far from any talus slope to have been natural formations and seemingly could only have been of human origin. Several were partially excavated with no cultural materials being found beneath them. The only conclusion reached was that they might be the result of spirit quest training as described by Spier and Sapir (1930) for the Wishram who lived approximately 100 miles downstream. According to the informants, children were given a period of vigorous training before being sent on the quest of a familiar spirit. One of the tasks to be performed was the piling up of rocks that were as large as the strength of the child would permit. No other explanation would seem to fit the situation.

The village at 45BN6 apparently was occupied from some time late in the 1700's to approximately the middle of the nineteenth century. This estimate is based on the scarcity of trade goods in the early phases of the occupation and the quite modern appearance of the trade goods that were found in association with the latest occupation levels. Only one historical reference to the village has been found to date. In 1812, Robert Stuart stopped at a village which Rollins (1935, p 61) identi-