

**UC Merced**

**Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology**

**Title**

An Account of the Discovery of a Whale-Bone House on San Nicolas Island

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/48z0m0t6>

**Journal**

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 1(1)

**ISSN**

0191-3557

**Author**

Morgan, Ron

**Publication Date**

1979-12-01

Peer reviewed

# An Account of the Discovery of a Whale-Bone House on San Nicolas Island

RON MORGAN

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The story of the courage and endurance of Juana María, the lone woman of San Nicolas Island, has been the subject of numerous magazine articles, scientific papers, and newspaper accounts for more than a hundred years. In 1961, novelist Scott O'Dell fictionalized Juana María's tragic life in his *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.), which was filmed by Universal Studios in 1964. Briefly, the Mexican government in 1835 removed all of the aboriginal inhabitants of San Nicolas Island to the California mainland. As the ship pulled away from the island, a young woman, whose child had been left behind, leaped into the sea and swam back to shore. Sixteen years later, Juana María was discovered still marooned on the island—her child now dead—by George Nidever, captain of a sailing schooner. She was brought to Mission Santa Barbara, where she died six weeks later. The few possessions brought to the mainland by Juana María were reportedly sent to Rome with the exception of a twined basketry water bottle, which found its way to the California Academy of Sciences, only to be destroyed by fire in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. A photograph of this basket was published in 1960, together with a brief description, by R. F. Heizer ("A San Nicolas Island Twined*

*Basketry Water Bottle," Reports of the Univ. of California Archaeological Survey [Berkeley] No. 50, pp. 1-3).*

**I**N October of 1977, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History was awarded grants by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Park Service, and private donors for the purpose of establishing an archive of source material relative to the history of the eight California Channel Islands. This project, known as the Channel Islands Photographic Survey, has been involved in the collection of early photographs, diaries, correspondence, and manuscripts; the interviewing of present and former island residents and researchers; and the taking of comparative photographs of areas depicted in the early images or mentioned in the literature.

In the early stages of this work, we conducted bibliographic studies with the extensive collection of Channel Islands literature owned by Dr. Carey Stanton of Santa Cruz Island. This material included an obscure publication that contained an article detailing the successful search for the remains of the hut once occupied by Juana María of San Nicolas Island, written by Dr. Arthur Woodward, formerly of the Los Angeles County Museum (Woodward 1957).

Included in the article is a lively narrative on the rediscovery of the whale-bone hut, as well as a wealth of historical information on San Nicolas Island which Woodward compiled in conjunction with the Los Angeles County Museum's 1939-1941 expeditions to the Channel Islands.

One other publication mentions the shelter in reference to the discovery of sea elephants on a nearby beach (Comstock 1946).

Published historical descriptions of Juana María's hut by Nidever and Dittman are available in the monograph *Original Accounts of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island* (Heizer and Elsasser 1976).

At the suggestion of Dr. Stanton, I located and visited Dr. Woodward shortly before the end of 1978. Although a thorough search failed to locate the unpublished photographs, Dr. Woodward generously lent the field notes (Woodward 1939, 1940) of his expeditions for duplication and inclusion in the archives.

In an unrelated incident, Dr. Charles Rozaire brought to our attention the photograph file from the Los Angeles County Museum's 1939-1941 expeditions, which is now on loan to us. A comparison of the dates and descriptions on the mounts of seven of the photographs with the dates and descriptions in Woodward's field notes revealed that Dr. Rozaire had provided us with the unpublished photographs of Juana María's house.

One photograph from 1939 was attributed to Dr. Woodward, but the six 1940 images were attributed to Marion Hollenbach, the archaeological field assistant for the 1940 San Nicolas Island expedition. Perhaps problems of classification and filing explain why the photographs were never published. Additional information was subsequently acquired in two taped interviews with Don Meadows (1979), which I summarize in this article.

Mrs. Meadows graciously aided my wife, Loretta, in organizing and transcribing the fading characters of Dr. Woodward's field

notes. Loretta also prepared for publication a line copy of Woodward's 1939 sketch of the whale bones and rocks making up the site at the time of its rediscovery. Because of the importance of this material, I was encouraged by Dr. Travis Hudson to prepare the photographs and extract the descriptions of the hut for publication in this journal.

The photographs presented special problems of dirt, processing streaks, and fading. Extensive pencil retouching was necessary to remove the flaws without obscuring the detail. In spite of their shortcomings, the photographs are the most persuasive evidence for the condition and existence of the hut at the time of Dr. Woodward's investigations.

#### THE DON MEADOWS INTERVIEWS

"Beginning in 1939, the Los Angeles County Museum embarked upon a five-year period of field research on the Channel Islands, mainly in biology. The work was to progress in three stages. The first stage was merely a survey or reconnaissance to determine what aspects should be studied in detail later. The second stage was to sample some of the more promising sites in greater detail. The third stage was to have been in-depth studies of particular species or areas. The work was halted part way through the second stage by World War II.

"The search for Juana María's hut was one of two specific things we were looking for in the first expeditions in 1939; the other was Juan Cabrillo's grave.

"I had brought a copy of Nidever's report. We read it over and discussed it after we had been on San Nicolas Island a few days. By that time, we knew the lay of the country, and it gave us a lot better understanding of what Nidever was talking about because we were there and we could refer to the report at any time. Therefore, we knew in general—within a mile or so—approximately where it [the hut] was.

"Art and I started out together; after we got to the top [of the ridge] we split up. I went to the left toward the windward side of the island, and he split to the right. He came back to me a little later and yelled to me that he had found it. We only spent about an hour there. Art came back later to take pictures.

"I had very little to do with it [the discovery] other than I was on the island at the same time. He [Art Woodward] was the one who really discovered it [Meadows 1979]."

#### WOODWARD'S ACCOUNT OF THE EVENTS OF JULY 25, 1939

"At this point I am going to relate my own experiences in the rediscovery of the hut site once occupied by Juana María. On July 25, 1939, in company with Reggie Lamberth, . . . I set out on horseback to ride to the west end of San Nicolas. With [Lamberth's] generous services as guide, we started out from camp, headed west along the beach, covering practically the same route as Nidever and his companions eighty-six years earlier.

"In my knapsack, I had a copy of Ellison's *The Life and Adventures of George Nidever*, published in 1937. It proved a valuable guide to the landmarks we visited. At last we came to the end of the island, just as Charley Brown had done (Woodward 1957:262).

"Shell middens extend back from the beach along the sandy ridges. The point of the island is one long sand dune covered with middens.

"We ate lunch at the Old Garden where the spring issues forth from a shelving rock just at the edge of the tide line. This is Honeymoon Beach. This is a sandy beach in summer but covered with driftwood in winter. Abalone by the thousand cluster on the rocky reefs along this section of shoreline. The sand dunes covered with middens are acres in extent. No wonder this well watered island was a favorite haunt in spite of the drawback of fog and wind.

"Riding out on the west end we saw the

remnants of a whale bone hut—ribs on the ground here. I took a photograph of the old whale ribs.

"This entire ridge is one huge site. All of the ridges here are covered with acres and acres of shell mounds (Woodward 1939:27-29).

"As we rode up the hill I remarked to Lamberth: "If Nidever was right, then we should find the remains of Juana María's house on that high point" (Woodward 1957:263).

"Continuing further up along the ridge, which is broken, we came to a higher point from which the visibility is good. On the apex of the hill were the many ribs, scapulae, etc., of a whale—definitely a hut site. I took a photograph from the south side looking toward the end of the west point [Fig. 1]. The house ruin consists of 19 pieces of whale bone in a fair state of preservation. Here probably stood the hut of Juana María. See sketch [Fig. 2].

"I found a weathered bone barb from a fish harpoon a trifle northwest of the hut site. The midden was dramatized by the huge amounts of red abalone shells—pure shells with very little admixture of sand or other debris.

"This site tallies perfectly with Nidever's account. It is on the high part of the long ridge sloping back from the west end ridge. To the east-southeast is the low sandy place across which the men walked. Charles Brown walked up the ridge from the west and could see María, but she was facing southeast and did not see him. Once on the site this was perfectly obvious. He could signal without being seen by her and yet be almost at her elbow (Woodward 1939:29-37).

"Since [this] was the only evidence of any shelter on the site which corresponded to Nidever's description, it seemed logical that there could be only one answer, this was the wreckage of the whale-bone and brush shelter once occupied by the lost woman of San Nicolas.



Fig. 1. The site of Juana Maria's hut. Reggie Lamberth, caretaker of San Nicolas Island. Photograph by Arthur Woodward, July 25, 1939. All photographs are courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

"In other respects, too, the site occupied by the hut corresponded to the description of the men who found it in 1853. Southwest of it, within plain sight, is an enormous sea lion rookery and the incessant guttural barking of the animals came to us between blasts of wind. From that rookery Juana Maria obtained some of her sustenance. Also plainly visible was the stretch of beach where Old Garden Spring was located, and further east along the coast were the other springs mentioned by Nidever, where Juana Maria had kept her supplies of dried meat tucked into crevices in the rocks and staked out on driftwood poles (Woodward 1957:264)."

#### EXCERPT FROM NIDEVER'S ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY

(This excerpt from Nidever will serve to clarify the matter of Woodward's 1940 re-enactment to follow.)

"Charley and I struck up toward the head of the island. Reaching the place where he had

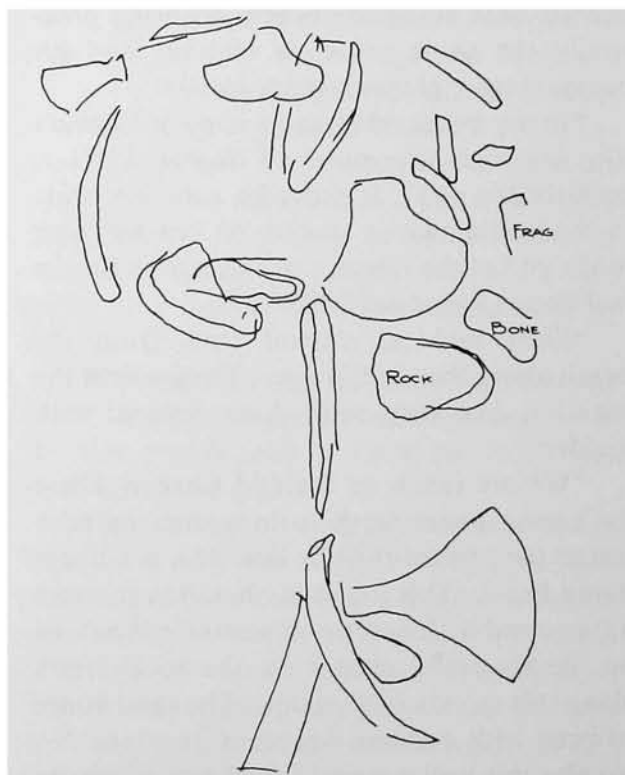


Fig. 2. Sketch of Juana Maria's hut site from field notes of Arthur Woodward, July 25, 1939 (Woodward 1939:31). Redrawn by Loretta Gale Morgan.





Fig. 3. Overall view of hut site before re-erection. Photograph by Marion Hollenbach, December 1, 1940.



Fig. 4. Close-up of large bones and flat rocks in hut site. Photograph by Marion Hollenbach, December 1, 1940.



Fig. 5. Overall view of reconstructed hut. Photograph by Marion Hollenbach, December 1, 1940.



Fig. 6. View from inside hut as it would have appeared to Juana María. Photograph by Marion Hollenbach, December 1, 1940.

seen the footprints the day before, he followed up the ridge. Near its top he found several huts made of whale's ribs and covered with brush. Looking about in all directions from this point, he discovered at a distance, along the ridge, a small black object about the size of a crow which appeared to be in motion. Advancing cautiously towards it he soon discovered it to be the Indian woman, her head and shoulders, only, visible above one of the small enclosures resembling those we had before discovered. He approached as near as he dared and then, raising his hat on his ramrod, signalled to the men who were then recrossing the low, sandy stretch, and were plainly visible from this point (Heizer and Elsasser 1976:11)."

#### THE RE-ENACTMENT, DECEMBER 1, 1940

"Later, on a second trip to the island December 1, 1940, we again visited this place (Woodward 1957:264). At Juana María's site we photographed the hut site before and after restoration [Figs. 3-6]. I found a chert knife



Fig. 7. Marion Hollenbach taking part of Juana María during re-enactment. Chris Henne appearing over hill in imitation of one of Nidever's men. Taken from viewpoint of Charley Brown. Photographer unknown, December 1, 1940.

blade almost inside the hut ring. We also found a number of fish hook blanks. I found a schist bead (Woodward 1940:79).

"We re-enacted the capture of Juana María. We re-erected the fallen pieces of whale bone and Marion Hollenbach, a girl archaeological assistant who was short in stature and possessed of a shock of wiry black hair, sat inside the improvised whale-bone shelter facing the east while the boys came up in a line in front of her. We photographed her [Fig. 7]. In the picture all that can be seen of the girl was her black hair appearing over the top of the whale bone, just as described by Brown and Nidever (Woodward 1957:264, 1940:81)."

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Woodward again visited San Nicolas in 1947, but the field notes are not available. He found that the erected whale bones had again been blown flat by the wind. He concluded (Woodward 1957:264): "There we left them to gradually weather away and become part of

the debris carried by the wind and sand over the west end of the island."

*Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History*

### REFERENCES

- Comstock, John A.  
1946 Brief Notes on the Expeditions Conducted Between March 16, 1940 and December 14, 1941. Contributions from the Los Angeles Museum—Channel Islands Biological Survey No. 33. Reprint from the Bulletin of the Southern California Academy of Sciences 45:94-107.
- Heizer, Robert F., and Albert B. Elsasser  
1976 Original Accounts of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island. Ramona, California: Ballena Press.
- Meadows, Don  
1979 Unedited taped interviews taken January 12 and February 22, 1979. On file in Channel Islands Archives, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Santa Barbara.
- Woodward, Arthur  
1939 Archaeological Survey of the Channel Islands, July - August, 1939, San Nicolas Island: 1-54. Unpublished field notes. Xerox copy on file in Channel Islands Archives, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Santa Barbara.  
1940 San Nicolas Island, April 10-28, 1940, November 23-December 12, 1940. Unpublished field notes. Xerox copy on file in Channel Islands Archives, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Santa Barbara.  
1957 Juana María—Sidelights on the Indian Occupation of San Nicolas Island. In: *The Westerners Brand Book*, Los Angeles Corral, Book Number 7, pp. 245-270. Los Angeles.

