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# A Washo Pine Nut Camp in Douglas County, Nevada

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**I**n June of 1939, Robert F. Heizer and I were employed briefly in cleaning up a scheelite mill, which had been unused for some years, in anticipation of its reactivation. The mill was located in Douglas County, Nevada, some 10 miles east of the towns of Minden and Gardnerville, and we made bachelors' quarters in a cluster of miners' cabins associated with the mill. We spent most evenings and weekends in explorations of our neighborhood, and archaeological sites were our principal interest.

One of these archaeological sites merits special description, for it consists of the physical remains of a special procurement activity which is of major importance to the economy of the native people of the Great Basin, which includes portions of Eastern California. The activity is the pine nut harvest, discussed in detail by the ethnographers who have worked in the area, including Downs, Lowie, Steward, and Stewart, none of whom, however, has described a particular situation. Nor can I find an archaeological description of a pine nut camp, although D. H. Thomas implies in several papers that they were discovered and identified in the course of his Reese River Valley survey in central Nevada.

Some of the specimens found at the site (three burden baskets and three harvesting hooks) have been described in technological detail by Colin I. Busby ("Pinyon Nut Gathering Equipment from the Vicinity of Gardner-

ville, Douglas County, Nevada," pp. 51-63 in Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility, No. 21, June, 1974). The specimens, as well as the additional ones described here, are in the collection of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley. The Busby report should be read in conjunction with the present notes on the nature of the site.

Some 500 to 600 m. southeast of our camp there was a flat-topped ridge which rose *ca.* 100 m. above the valley floor to an elevation of about 1970 m. (6500 ft.). The rocky summit of the ridge was covered with an open parkland of mixed pinyons (*Pinus monophylla*) and junipers (*Juniperus utahensis*), and contrasted markedly with the sagebrush cover of the sides of the ridge, the grass-sagebrush cover of the surrounding plains, and the willow-lined banks of Ott Creek (also called Pine Nut Creek), which parallels the ridge somewhat to its west. There is the scar of a wagon road which provides access to the summit at the southwestern corner of the ridge. It trails off to disappear near the north end of the ridge. The archaeological site consisted of scattered signs of human activity over the summit of the ridge, an area some 200 m. in length, north and south, and some 50 m. in width from east to west. These signs were concentrated in five loci which I identified as "features" (Fig. 1), but there were artifacts and discarded items which were not associated with any of the features.

Nowhere was the concentration great enough to constitute a midden in the sense of an earthy material which had developed as the waste product of intensive occupation. The artifacts and the features did constitute an incipient midden, a series of very specialized activity areas interspersed in a larger area of somewhat more generalized use, occupied by a small population for short intervals over a relatively brief historical span.

Feature 1 (Fig. 2) is both more complex and would appear to have a more generalized function than any of the others. It consists of an irregular clearing, about 12 m. in diameter, in a clump of juniper trees, made by trimming the lower boughs from the trees on the side facing the clearing. The outline of the clearing is emphasized along its western and southwestern margins by a line of stones, probably picked up from the cleared area. At the southeast corner of the clearing a slight slope has been leveled by filling with earth against the line of rocks. I believe that this was a sleeping platform and that it was probably roofed, although I was unable to reconstruct the details of the shelter cover. There is a similar level area between two lopped trees at the northwestern corner of this feature, but here the details of a possible structure were even more obscure. In the south-central part of the cleared area there is a fireplace consisting of an ash-filled pit with four unshaped rocks at its corners. The fireplace is *ca.* 50 cm. in diameter. Lying just west of the earth-filled platform were four trimmed and peeled heavy poles (or light logs), each *ca.* 3.5 m. in length, and between the platform and the fireplace was a torn rectangular piece of heavy canvas. Either abandoned or stored against the juniper trunks which surround the clearing were a series of artifacts named in clockwise order from the earth-filled platform. At the base of the tree at the southwestern corner of the clearing were three tin cans with tops removed: a No. 1 can, a No. 2 can, and a one-gallon can. There was also

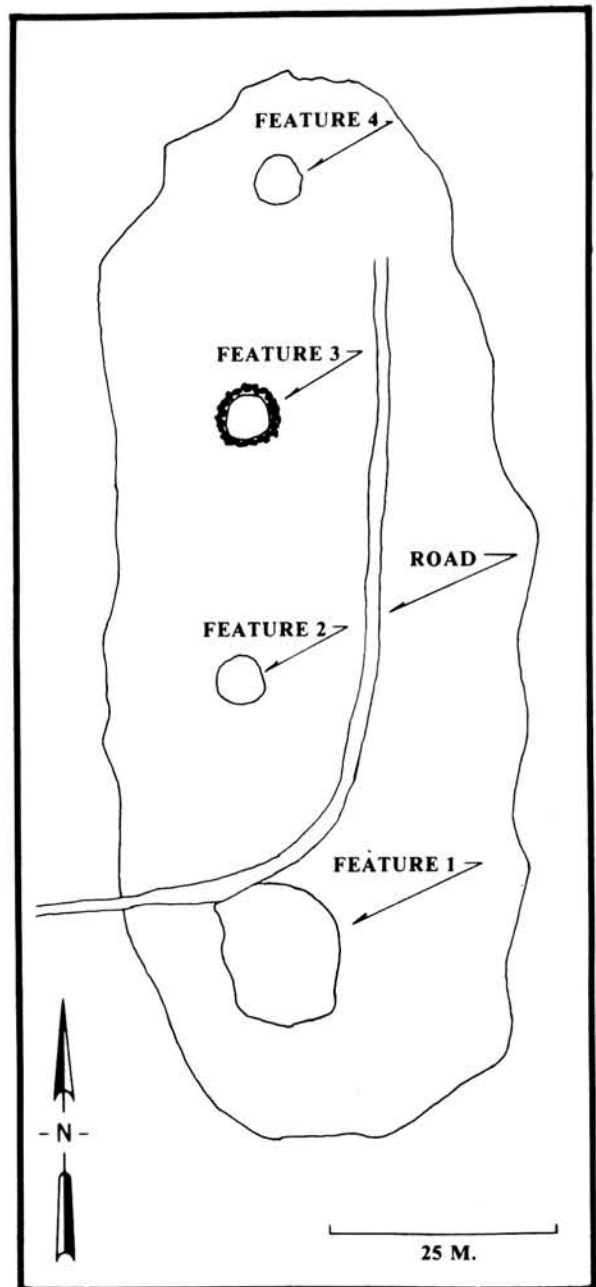


Fig. 1. General layout of ridge-top Washo pine nut camp, Ott Creek (Pine Nut Creek), Nevada. Features are described in the text.

a hooked stick, field identified as being of willow wood, made by cutting a pole so that it included a segment of a branch which would function as a hook. At the foot of the western-

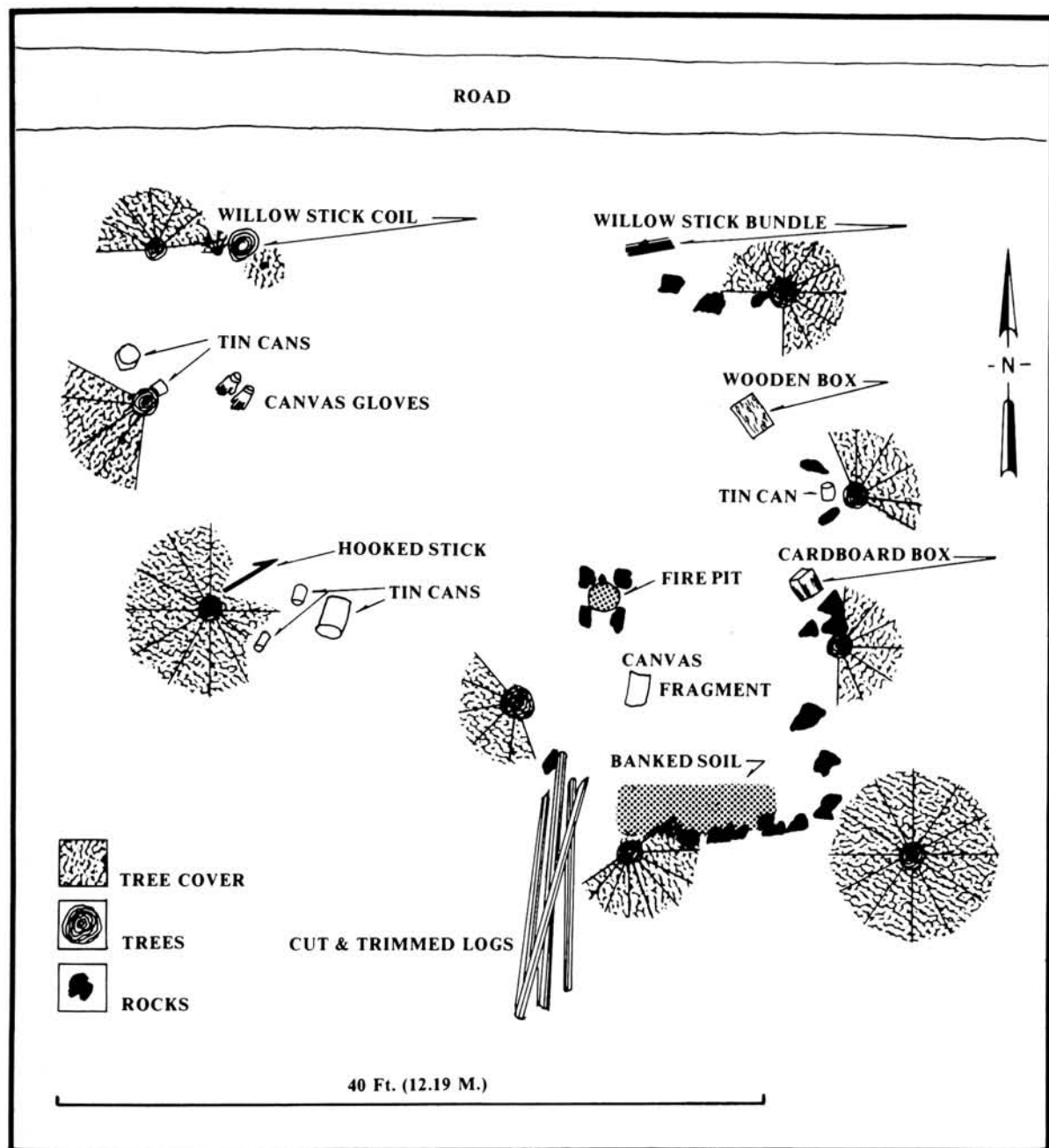


Fig. 2. Feature 1, camp area and associated artifacts and structural remains.

most tree were two No. 2 tin cans, and just to the east a pair of canvas work gloves. Under the northwestern tree was a bundle of sticks; at the northeastern tree was a bundle of peeled willow twigs tied together by a willow with.

Between that tree and the one to the south of it was a wooden box so situated as to suggest its use as a stool. It had originally held dynamite. There was a single No. 2 tin can under the east-central tree, and the remains of

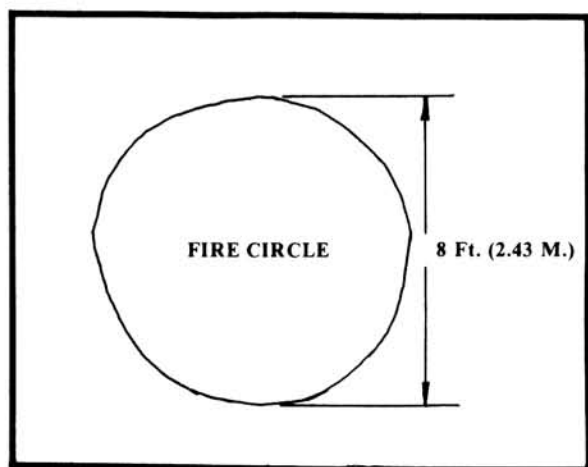


Fig. 3. Feature 2, probable cone-roasting fireplace.

a heavy cardboard carton between that tree and the filled platform.

Feature 2 (Fig. 3) was the simplest of the artificial areas at the site. It consisted of a neat circle of ash and charcoal, 2.43 m. in diameter. The ash formed a plano-convex lens 15 cm. in maximum thickness. At the edge of this circle there was a quartzite mano and an exhausted chert core which had been further modified by battering as a result of its use as a hammer. This fireplace corresponds exactly to Dutcher's (1893) account of the fire used to open unripe pine cones.

Feature 3 (Fig. 4), like Feature 1, was a clearing made in a clump of juniper trees by breaking or chopping the branches from the sides of the trees facing a clearing 4.5 m. in diameter. On this level, cleared area a circle of stones, two or three stones wide and 3.65 m. in diameter, had been laid. The stones were irregular chunks of mesa caprock, typically 20 to 30 cm. in diameter. There was a cut and trimmed pole 3 m. in length at the northwest edge of the clearing. The pole is too heavy to have been used in pine cone recovery, and it probably served as part of the support of the conical superstructure which once roofed the area outlined by the circle of stones. There were no other artifacts associated with Feature 3.

Feature 4 (Fig. 5) is a sleeping camp constructed by lopping all except one branch off the eastern side of a juniper tree and trimming this remaining branch so that its 3 m. length would serve as the ridge pole for a roof over a banked earth floor 3 m. long and 2 m. wide. This banked earth is supported along its low eastern and southern margins by rows of rock of irregular size and shape derived from the local caprock. Wedge-shaped pegs had been driven into the northwestern, northeastern, and southeastern corners of the banked earth, and these certainly held the ends of a tarpaulin which was supported medially by the ridge-pole, which was 1.5 m. above ground level. A one-gallon tinned lard pail at the south end of the bank was the only artifact associated with this architectural complex, and there was no associated fire area.

Feature 5 was the only concentration of portable artifacts not associated with a structure to be found at the site. It consisted of three openwork twined, conical burden baskets and an openwork twined, flat harvesting or winnowing tray (Fig. 6). They lay under the shelter of a juniper tree about 10 m. east of Feature 4, and it seems probable that they were cached there, or in the branches of the tree, with the expectation of later recovery. Two of the burden baskets are larger than the other and are provided with tumplines. The larger baskets are probably to be identified as women's burden baskets, the smaller as a man's collecting basket.

Other artifacts (Fig. 7) found on the site were not associated with one another, nor with any structural feature. They appeared to have been abandoned and forgotten where they were used. At the time of our exploration their distribution was viewed as meaningless, and their specific loci were not documented. They included two peeled willow wood clubs. One is 81.3 cm. in length, the other 1.27 m. in length. The longer club has four incised tally marks along a slightly concave side. Both specimens

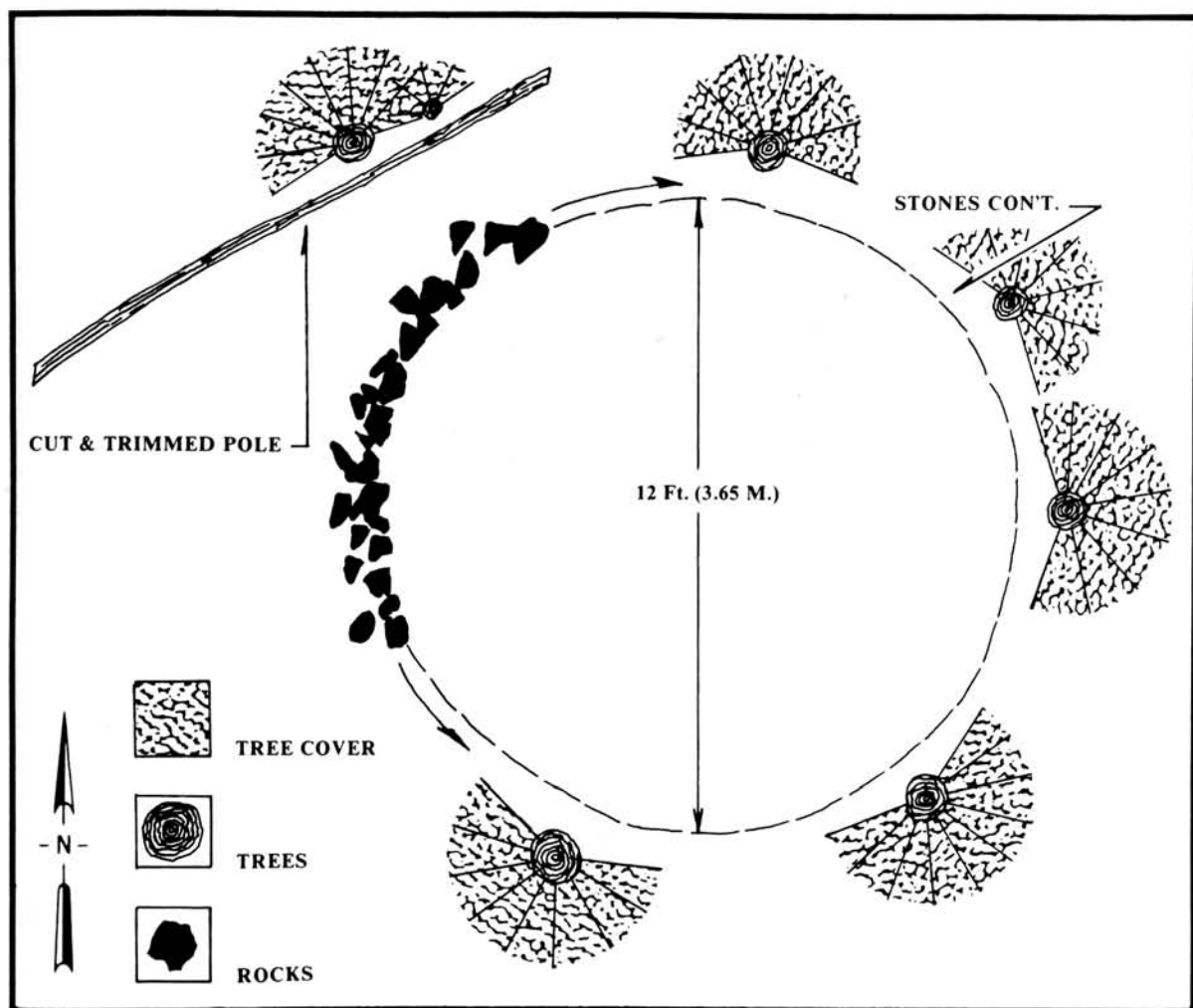


Fig. 4. Feature 3, structural remains, including rock circle and modified juniper trees.

had been well-smoothed and then slightly battered from use. A willow bow, 1.27 m. in length, with an enlarged grip and quite slender limbs was found, and also a willow cone-hooking pole with the hook formed by wiring a "J"-shaped second piece of wood to the slender end of the pole. The specimen is 6.71 m. in length. A second pine cone hook, 1.83 m. in length, with its hook formed by beveling and fitting a second piece of wood and wiring it firmly to the distal end of the pole, was also present.

The other artifacts were all of stone, and

metrical observations have not been made on them. They include: 12 manos, all small, 11 being bifacial and the twelfth having two shaft-sanding grooves on one face; an exhausted basalt core which has been used as a hammerstone; and one basalt flake knife and one chert flake knife, each retouched along one convex edge. The large number of manos present and the absence of milling slabs requires some comment. There are no nearby shepherders' monuments or house foundations, which might explain the absence of the milling slabs. I believe the manos were brought to the site to

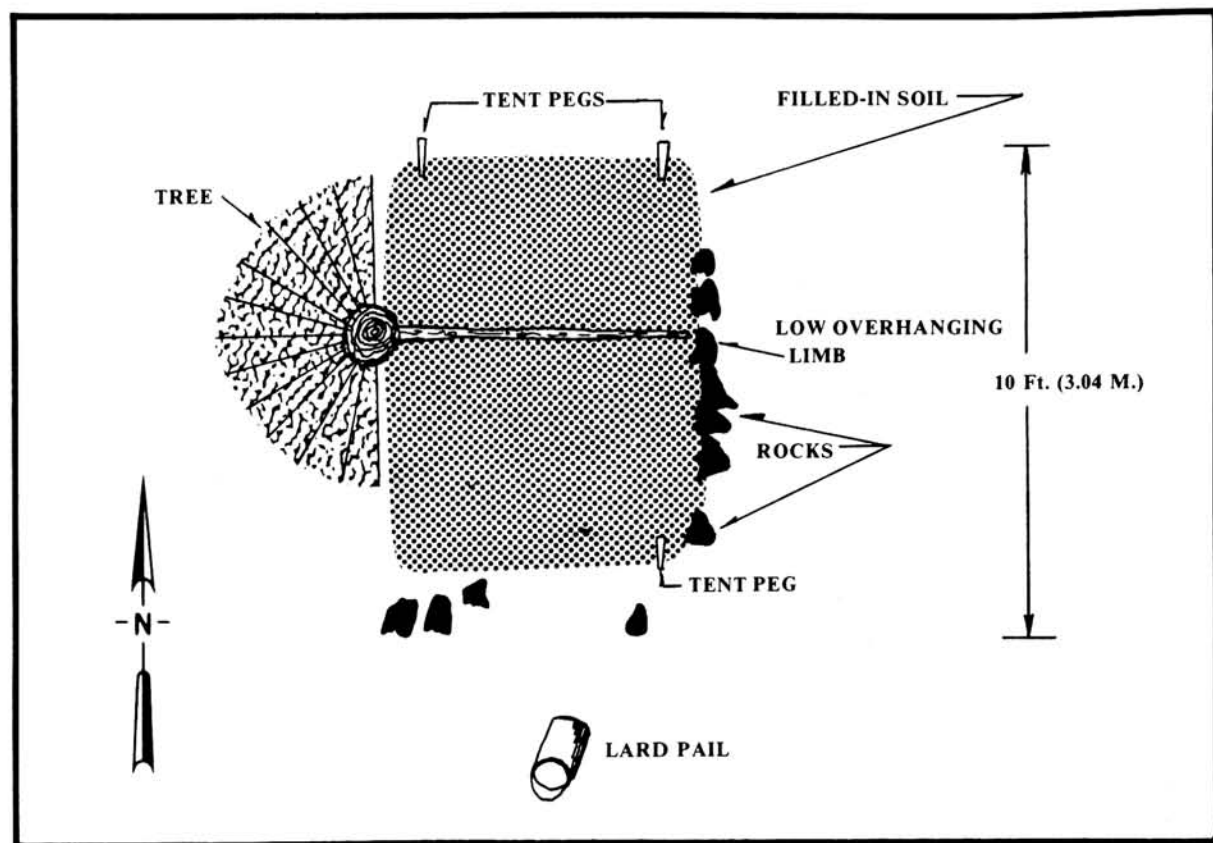


Fig. 5. Feature 4, structural remains of former shelter and associated pail.

serve as hammerstones for smashing the pine cones to recover seeds.

#### DATING THE SITE

The survival of surface artifacts of biodegradable materials (cardboard, canvas, basketry, and wood) and of readily oxidizable metals (tinned cans and baling wire) suggests that the site had been occupied within a few years previous to our visit in 1939, perhaps as an attempt to recreate an earlier subsistence base to compensate for limited employment opportunities during the depression years of the early 1930s. On the other hand, the large number of mano-hammerstones found distributed randomly over the site, and not associated with any of its feature areas, suggests that the site had been similarly used on occasions in the more remote past. The absence of a de-

veloped midden suggests that such occasions were infrequent and of brief duration.

#### SUMMARY

The character of the remains indicates a site visited cyclically, but briefly, by a small band of people for specific economic purposes. The very strong inference would be that this purpose was the October harvest of pinyon nuts, in part because this is the economic resource most available in the microenvironment, in part because the individual camps match available ethnographic accounts of pinyon gathering camps, and, most conclusively, because the artifacts found represent the entire tool kit necessary for the pinyon harvest: the hooked poles, the burden baskets, the hammerstones, the baking fire, and the beating clubs. Only the bow is not specifically functional in

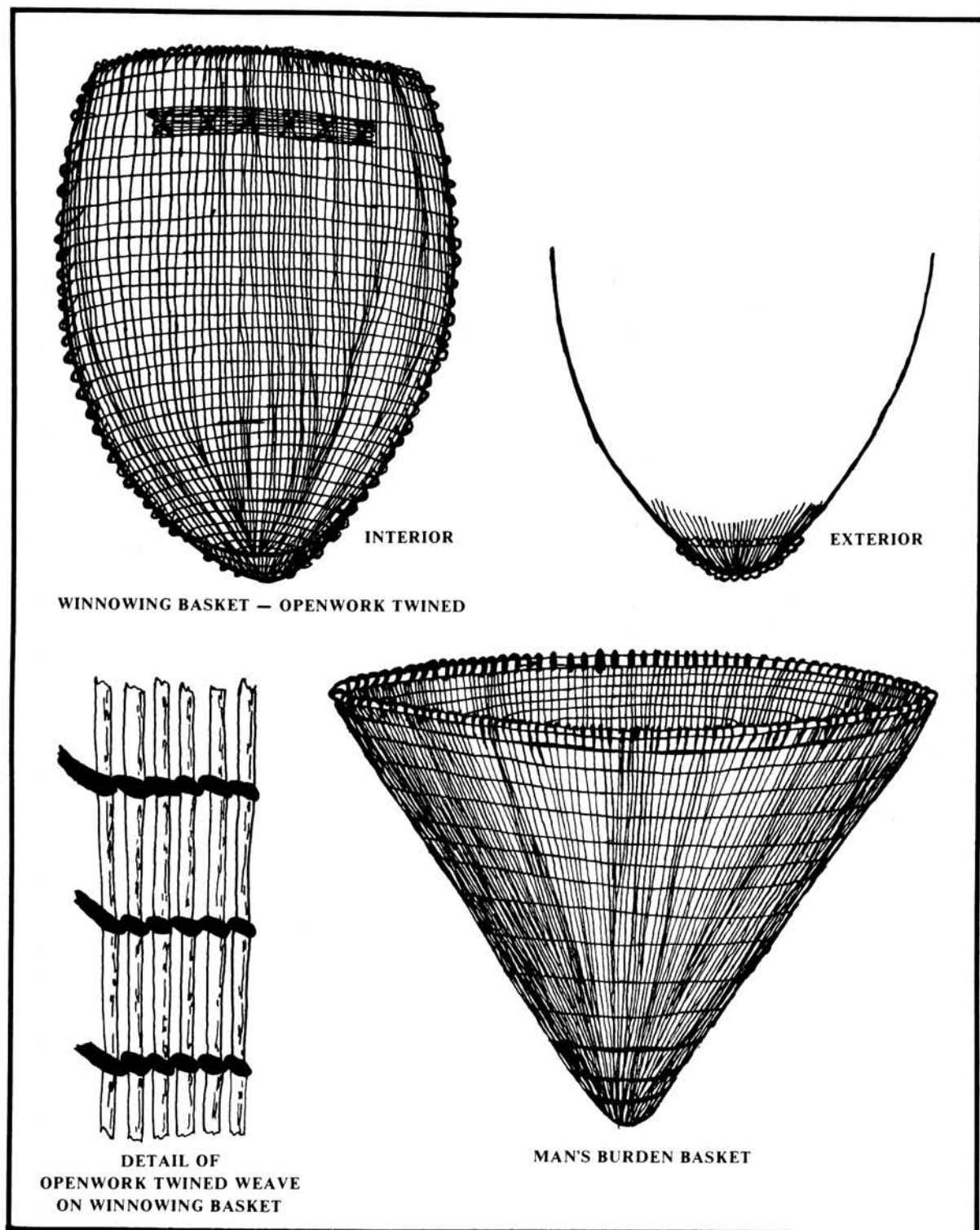


Fig. 6. Baskets from Feature 5.



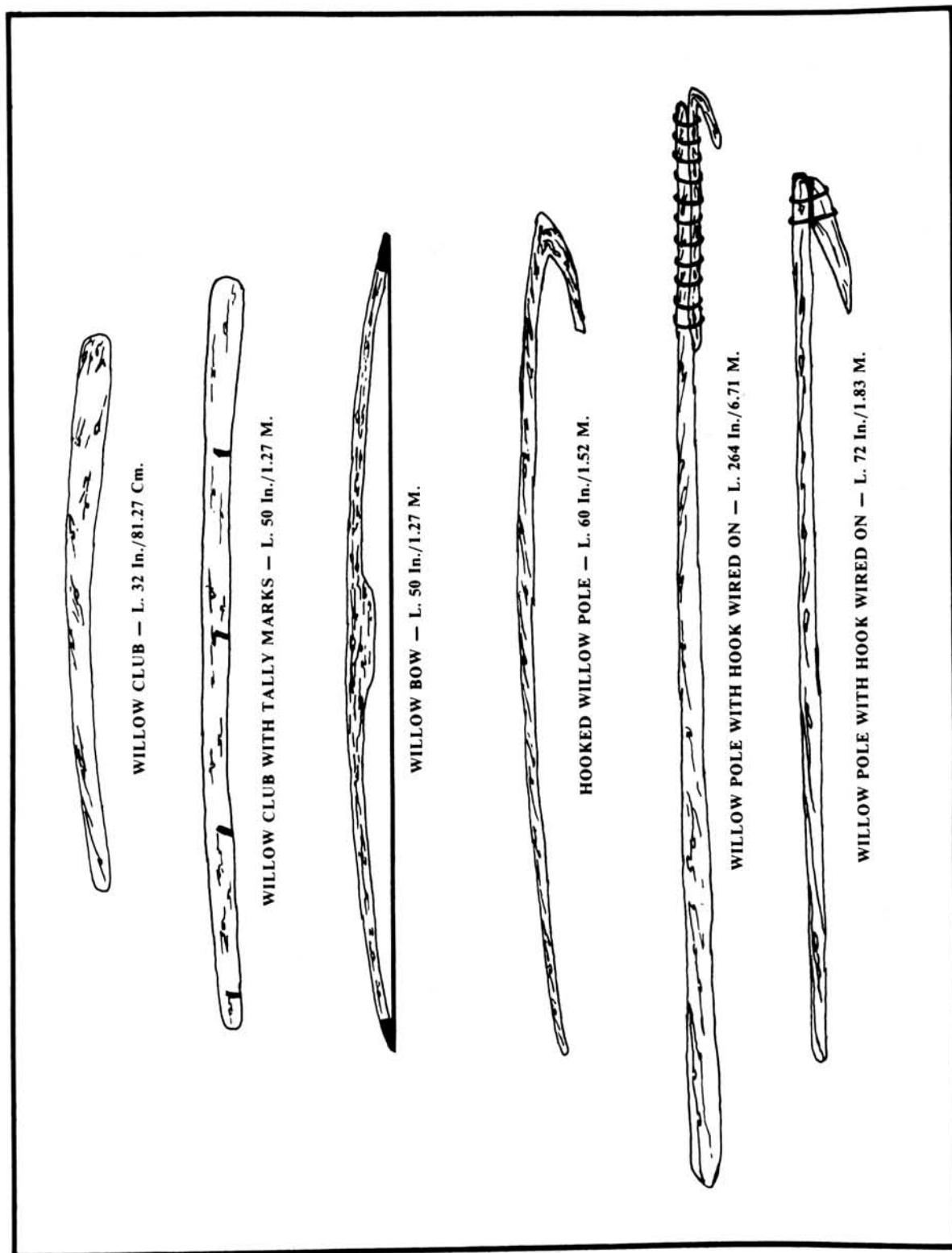


Fig. 7. Clubs, bow, and hooked poles. Not associated with structural remains.

this inferred context, and only the trimming of tree branches to create a clearing has not been described as characteristic of such camps.

A Washo band would certainly seem to have been responsible for the remains. The site is in territory claimed by the Washo to the exclusion of other peoples, and the technical details of the basketry manufacture strongly suggests Washo origin.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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