



Once Upon a Time in Archaeology

Kenneth G. Hirth

Occasional Papers in Anthropology No. 34

Penn State University

2023



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A Research Diary from Central Honduras

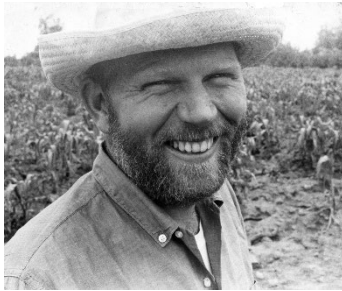
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About the series

Penn State's *Occasional Papers in Anthropology* series was established in 1965 with an enduringly valuable research report by William Sanders (at left, in the 1960s Teotihuacan Valley), *Cultural Ecology of the Teotihuacan Valley*, or, as we now know it, <http://journals.psu.edu/opa/article/view/59754/59501>. This work and others originally published on paper for the series are now available on an internet journal platform, <https://journals.psu.edu/opa/index>, recently

developed by Penn State University Libraries. Our university shares in the global effort to publish cultural resources as freely as is possible. President Barack Obama in 2012 prioritized timely open access to research results funded by the United States government, and scholars are responding enthusiastically, quickly seeing the great advantages of a shared digital data bank. Web sites for distribution of research reports have been established by publishers, research institutions, and academic departments, and present a practical way to distribute research results and curate databases, at least as long as the institutional host (here, Penn State University) exists.

And cultural trends follow – and prompt -- this kind of sharing. Increasingly, the net has become a primary resource for research. Free internet access to many scholarly articles and books is commonly available through academic servers, for use by all members of the academic community, including undergraduates, who, as native-speakers-of-digital are devoted to their tablet-based knowledge systems. This increasing dependence on the tablet and web has serious disadvantages if misused, but the advantages for scholars are terrific, not just for publication but also for increased clarity in presenting their work. In an online open access publication, the scholar may include as many publication-quality images as are appropriate and shareable, including those available for common use on various websites.

Generous illustration greatly enriches our understanding of the analyses and interpretations of any data set, and this potential will be increasingly realized in publications of this *Occasional Papers* series. In the case of No. 34, *Once Upon a Time in Archaeology. A Research Diary from Central Honduras*, I hope the stories presented here provide some insight into how archaeology was conducted under challenging circumstances in the 1980s. This volume is dedicated to the memory of Dr. George Hasemann for his great work as archaeologist, field director, friend, and general *consigliere* for the El Cajón Archaeological Project.

Susan Toby Evans, Series Editor

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In the Beginning

Archaeology is an exciting profession. Those who practice it get to explore ancient societies and think about the way people lived thousands of years ago. The exploration of lost civilizations is the staple of films, documentaries, and a good deal of modern fiction. In these media, archaeologists are often characterized as swashbuckling types chasing treasures or great discoveries, when more realistically we are more nerd-like, looking through someone's ancient garbage for clues to answer big cultural questions. At social gatherings archaeologists often get asked what their most exciting discoveries were, or what is the oldest thing they ever found. Adults that watch the History Channel or other documentaries often confess to wanting to be an archaeologist, "if they could do it all over again." Likewise, students often ask their professors for stories about how archaeology is done. While the profession can certainly capture the imagination, it can also be frustrating. In some ways it can be like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing. Archaeology has its challenges. But meeting those challenges can be both its own reward and an adventure. That is the story this essay explores.

I remember getting a telephone call in the fall of 1979 when I was teaching at the University of Kentucky. It was from David Grove at the University of Illinois who had just finished directing a large-scale project in Mexico. Dave had been contacted by the Honduran government's *Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia* (IHAH) about directing a large-scale regional archaeological project in Honduras. His other obligations prevented him from taking on the project. Instead, he thought of me since I had worked for two years

conducting archaeological research for the Mexican government in one of their regional archaeological centers (INAH-Morelos) and conducted field research in Peru. Would I be interested?

Being young and wanting to organize a large project from start to finish, I told him that I was. After preliminary discussions with IHAH officials in Honduras, I let them know that I was interested in the project. Although I had never been to Honduras, I was keen to test my abilities and work in an area of the tropics that had never been explored. That was a perfect description of the El Cajón region (Figure 1). The challenge and adventure of the project caught my interest and the El Cajón Archaeological Project was begun. Its goal was to rescue archaeological remains that would be flooded and destroyed in the reservoir when construction on the El Cajón high dam was completed. The idea of saving archaeological material from imminent destruction appealed to my fanciful notions about preserving the past. Construction on the El Cajón high dam had already begun (Figure 1), so time was of the essence to begin the research.

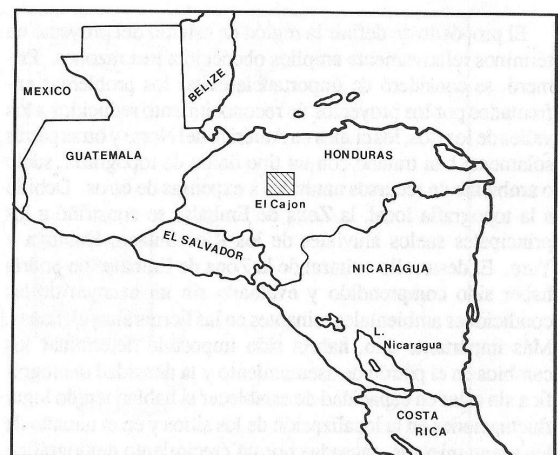


Figure 1: The Location of the El Cajón region in north central Honduras

The El Cajón region is located in north central Honduras. It was an optimal location for the construction of a hydroelectric power facility. The area was mountainous and was lightly populated (Figure 2). The dam itself was located at the confluence of the Sulaco and Humuya Rivers, which meant flooding the reservoir would displace several thousand subsistence farmers scattered throughout the zone (Figure 3). It was a historic infrastructure project that was funded by the World Bank. When completed, the facility would generate electricity for a good deal of Honduras.



Figure 2: The El Cajón region along the Sulaco river



Figure 3: Local life along the Sulaco river

It also represented the first large-scale archaeological project undertaken by the IHAH in a non-Maya area outside of the important Maya site of Copán. The research extended over a decade from 1979 to 1989, which also was a historic time in Central American politics. It was the period of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the involvement of the U.S. government in Honduras to support the counter-revolutionary guerrilla army known as the Contras. While the archaeologists stayed clear of political issues, this was the backdrop for working in Honduras, which added a level of tension and uncertainty over the course of the project.

The following narrative chronicles some of the demands and difficulties of conducting archaeological research in Central Honduras between 1979 and 1989. It is **not** a research narrative. Instead, it captures some of the high points and amusing stories that I, along with other project members, remember from our experience in El Cajón. Make no mistake, it was a challenging area to work in. None of us would probably tackle the demanding work again. We are either all too old or too comfortable in our current pursuits to do so. But it is fun to imagine from the comfort of our easy chairs what we would have done differently. Everyone made personal sacrifices in the process and most would agree that they benefited from the experience. Looking back over the intervening years, there is satisfaction from knowing that we survived the rigors of the field and had personal experiences that we will never forget.

So what follows is an attempt to capture some of those project memories,

which started as we looked for photographs for a summary publication on the El Cajón research (Hirth et al. 2023). What became apparent in the process is that we had taken a lot of pictures of rocks and dirt to document the archaeology, but very few photographs of the people who dedicated their time and made personal sacrifices to uncover them. This is an attempt to fill some of that void and I thank Julie Benyo, Gloria Lara-Pinto, Skip Messenger, Phyllis Messenger, Alex Rush, Paul Webb, and Steve Wurzback for providing many of the images that this work contains. If there is a motto appropriate for the El Cajón experience, it has to be Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." We all survived and I think we became better people and archaeologists in the process. I don't think many of us would trade those youthful experiences and memories for less invigorating ones. It is also nice to look back at the photographs that we do have and see what we looked like over 40 years ago. While we can easily recognize each other in the photos, today we might need nametags. I hope some of the images and just-so stories collected here bring back a few of those memories.

The presentation that follows is organized into three broad sections. The first section provides a chronology of how the fieldwork proceeded. This might be considered the boring or technical part of the narrative by some. But it struck me that as Project Director I am the only remaining member of the project who was there the entire time. George Hasemann was the other and he passed away in 1998. And it is good for all of the project's many participants to know how their contribution fit into the broader scheme of the research. This is followed by what I consider the fun part of the writing: summarizing the stories and

memories of the participants. The photos are all real, though faded, and the stories may have been polished by our recollections over the years. The presentation concludes with a short retrospective: who we have lost, who we have lost contact with, and what we would perhaps do differently if we could do it all over again.

1979: Assessing the Challenge

The research at its most fundamental level consisted of registering and excavating archaeological remains before they were covered by reservoir flooding once the wall of the El Cajón dam was completed in 1984 (Figure 4). The El Cajón reservoir was designed to cover 94-98 sq km and hold up to 5,700 million cubic meters of water at full capacity. But prehispanic adaptation in the region could not be understood by simply focusing on the reservoir zone. Past populations also would have exploited the highland areas between the rivers. This meant broadening the research and redefining the study area to include portions of the 1,200 sq km between the Sulaco and Humuya Rivers (Figure 5). This expanded the study, but it was the only way to get the maximum research benefit out of the salvage project and still stay within budget.



Figure 4: El Cajón high dam, completed 1984

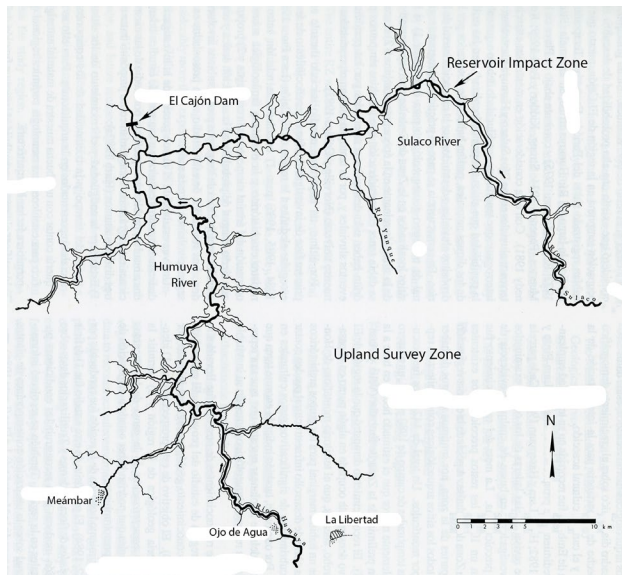


Figure 5: The Reservoir Survey Impact zone

The topography of the Sulaco and Humuya River valleys was ideal for the construction of the El Cajón hydroelectric facility. But what was good for the construction engineers was **not** necessarily good for the archaeologists. The dam site was connected to the outside world by roads, electricity, telephones and other modern conveniences. Not so the reservoir zone. Our study area lacked most, if not all, modern infrastructure. This meant that we had to organize a large-scale archaeological project in an area without housing, roads, electricity, medical facilities, telephone, or other forms of communication. Today we could buy a couple of solar panels, a *Jackery*, or some other electrical storage system, and have access to power. But that was not an option in 1980. There were no cell phones or land lines. We obtained a short-wave radio to communicate with the IHAH office in Tegucigalpa 100 km to the southeast. Unfortunately, topography and atmospheric conditions made direct contact impossible. The only way to communicate a message was through the IHAH radio at the archaeological site of Copan 125 km to the

west, during a narrow window of time in the mornings. Messages were relayed to Tegucigalpa from there. But we all know how word-of-mouth messages get changed when they are passed down-the-line. A satellite phone would have been great, but they were not commercially available until 1989.

No roads entered the reservoir zone, which meant that all supplies and project personnel had to walk in or enter the region from the few dirt Forest Service roads in the uplands (Figure 6). This difficulty was compounded by the fact that the reservoir study zone was stretched across over 120 lineal km of river frontage that had to be surveyed and evaluated for archaeological materials (Figure 2-3). Furthermore, not enough workers lived in the reservoir zone for the excavations needed at the largest sites. Fortunately, enough individuals were willing to walk from two to four hours each day for the wages the project could pay to get the work done (Figure 7).



Figure 6: Digging out our 4-wheel drive vehicle mired to the axle in mud



Figure 7: Workers waiting for equipment and work assignments at the Salitrón base camp

All these issues were underscored in November 1979 when I made an initial five-day trip into the reservoir zone with George Hasemann, Daniel Milla, and Sr. Fidelio Oviedo to assess the scope of the archaeological work and how it needed to be organized (Figures 8 and 9). Out of necessity, this trip was made by mule on pack frames (not saddles), always painful for those who don't regularly ride mules. Hiking or riding mules (when they were available) became the main mode of transportation within the reservoir zone.



Figure 8: The first trip in. Traveling down the Sulaco river



Figure 9: Mules were the lifeline of our supply chain

On the first night we stopped at an elderly farmer's house and asked if his wife would cook dinner for us if we supplied food for the entire family. That was the normal and non-intrusive way of requesting assistance throughout the region. Food was valued and was more fungible than money in establishing relationships, especially if some unique canned goods could be contributed to the menu that were not available because there were no nearby stores to purchase them. After dinner the host graciously offered to let us sleep in a small outbuilding. We expected a quiet night in the countryside. Instead, we were serenaded by

a night-long cacophony of barking dogs, baying mules, oinking pigs, and crowing roosters. Clearly the interlopers had upset the balance of nature. In the morning, all the animals looked as exhausted as we felt. It was a rural version of the *Musicians of Bremen*.

After breakfast George Hasemann observed a large set of alligator jaws that were mounted over the door of our host's domicile and asked if they were from the region. Our

host then told us a story about how he obtained them. Forty years earlier on his wedding night, he went down to the Sulaco river to bathe. As he was washing his face, an alligator lunged from the bottom and clamped his jaws firmly on either side of the man's face. He fought off the alligator and survived without medical care, but with significant facial damage. After recovering, he made it a point to find the alligator, kill it, and mount the jaws on the wall above his door, a concise statement about local determination. He confirmed that alligators still could be found in some parts of the river but they were small and largely insignificant. For the rest of the project, we bathed in the river thinking about alligators (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Cooling off in the river

This brief trip made it clear that logistical conditions were going to present the biggest challenge for conducting archaeological research. The rest of 1979 was used to plan the project, devise a logistical plan, find experienced archaeologists willing to live under

nineteenth-century conditions, buy field equipment in the U.S. that wasn't available in Honduras, and figure out a way to ship it all to Honduras. George Hasemann was an experienced archaeologist and resident of Honduras who was immediately contracted as the project's indispensable field director. He spent the rest of the year making arrangements for initial studies to begin in January of the following year (Figure 11).



Figure 11: George Hasemann contemplating the task before us

A team of seven mules was bought for moving supplies into the region and packing archaeological artifacts out (Figure 12). The study area was too large to think in terms of a permanent base camp. So after much discussion, we opted to purchase high quality Eureka tents with large-screened sides (Figure 13). This was one of the best decisions that the project made. Besides being able to be moved from site to site as needed in subsequent years, they could be zipped up tight to keep the bugs out while still providing a little ventilation at night. Two Toyota four-wheel drive land cruisers were bought to transport everything to the field and back from Tegucigalpa.



Figure 12: Our seven mule supply line



Figure 13: Basic project housing

Another need was a processing laboratory where artifacts could be washed, catalogued, and prepared for future study, since there was no way that this could be done in the field. The town of La Libertad was the best option for this, even though it lacked electricity. But it did have a few *comedores* and some housing that could be rented for archaeologists who came out of the field to write reports and engage in preliminary analyses (La Libertad). The United Fruit Company graciously solved part of our shipping problem by transporting our equipment from Louisiana to Honduras on one of their banana barges. George Hasemann spent the remainder of the year

building shelves, tables, and beds for our La Libertad facilities and traveling throughout the region letting local authorities know what an archaeology project was and what we would be studying. Arqlo. Vito Veliz served as project co-director for 1980 (Figure 14); he was replaced by Dra. Gloria Lara-Pinto in 1981. Gloria has remained the project's co-director to the present day (Figure 15).



Figure 14: Vito Veliz in 1980



Figure 15: The indispensables, Gloria Lara and George Hasemann

The Fieldwork Begins

Several books have been written about the results of the fieldwork conducted between 1980 and 1984. Those scientific results can be found elsewhere (Hirth et. al. 1989, 2023). The timeline for fieldwork and laboratory activities is presented here, but that is not the focus of this memoir. The memoir's purpose is to recount the experiences of project members over the ten years from the inception of fieldwork until laboratory analysis was largely concluded in 1989.

1980 was the first year of fieldwork, which was dedicated to surveying the reservoir impact zone (Figure 16). Its goal was simple. We needed to know how many archaeological sites there were, whether they were big or small, and which sites needed to be targeted for excavation. Mobile base camps were established for surveyors who traversed the narrow *vega* lands located along both sides of rivers where most sites were located (Figure 17). The method used to locate sites is called pedestrian survey. This involved walking the *vega* fields through thickets of tropical vegetation looking for prehispanic remains. This was done with machete in hand as the archaeologists and an occasional worker cut paths through the thick undergrowth (Figures 16-17). Occasionally this included making small shovel probes to look for ceramics.



Figure 16: Cutting through the undergrowth



Figure 17: Brian Bauer and John Yonk preparing to map a structure after clearing brush from it

Archaeologists had to pack light because they were always on the move. They also had to repeatedly cross and re-cross rivers to check the small agricultural fields on either side of the rivers where sites were concentrated. To minimize the discomfort of working in wet boots and clothes, archaeologists often stripped down to their underclothes or birthday suits while fording rivers (Figure 18). Once a site with standing architecture and house mounds was located, archaeologists would map it using a transit or plane table and alidade (Figure 19).



Figure 18: Crossing the river. Photograph used with the permission of the individual involved

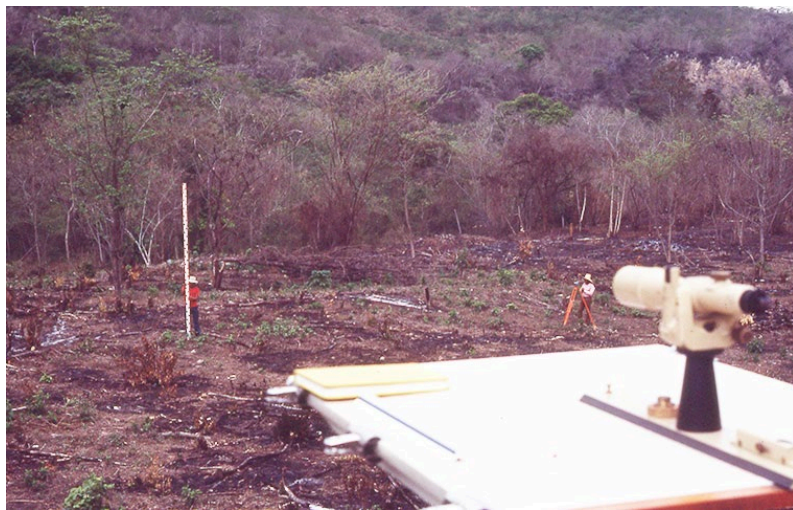


Figure 19: Mapping structures at Salitrón Viejo after clearing and burning

While most of the survey was done this way, the project added a new wrinkle to the approach: **air mattress reconnaissance**. Portions of the Humuya River had very steep valley sides that made it impossible to move along the river margins. For these areas, air mattress served as a rapid and creative solution for moving along and across rivers to pockets of vega land that might contain sites. Normal rafts couldn't be purchased in Honduras, so archaeologists would strip down, bundle their boots, clothes, and equipment (notes, compasses, tape measures) in large plastic bags, and paddle, float, and navigate down river from vega to vega. Not only was it the fastest way to get to survey parcels in hard to reach areas, but it also was a good way to cool off in the tropics (Figure 20). After navigating to a vega, archaeologists would redress and then confront the heat and the insects, while clearing tropical bush with machetes. The same air mattress technique was used by Dennis Cosgren and George Hasemann to study the regional geology by floating up to and checking rock outcrops along major rivers.

The **1981** field season focused on

archaeological excavations and testing along the Sulaco River (see Figure 5). This was where the greatest concentration of large and small sites was located. Base camps were set up at the three large sites of Salitrón Viejo, Guarabuquí, and La Ceiba, where intensive excavations were carried out. But the large number of small and intermediate sites also had to be excavated, so a regional testing group was established that moved its base camp along the Sulaco river by mule and on foot (not on air

mattresses). While survey could locate sites based on house mound architecture, excavation was necessary to date them, because the tropical undergrowth obscured surface ceramics and other remains except in prepared agricultural fields.



Figure 20: Raft survey on the Sulaco

1981 was the project's largest field season in terms of the scale of work, the personnel needed, and the logistical issues associated with moving supplies into and out of the four base camps. A total of 22 large and small sites were excavated by the four research teams. The project employed over

200 workers and 32 archaeologists and other specialists in field studies and laboratory processing during this field season. One hundred and twenty workers were employed at Salitrón Viejo, the largest site in the region. The concentration of these workers created another unanticipated logistical problem: the recruitment of workers into the Honduran army. Because of the United States' involvement in the Sandinista-Contra conflict, the Honduran army was enlarging its army using the draft. The process of "drafting" young men into the military was one of forced conscription.

One common approach used by the military was to surround a theater (or some other locale) where young men congregated with dates, and simply herd them into a bus when they came out. It was then a short trip to basic training. Because of these tactics, we were concerned that our concentrated work force could be a target for forced impressment into military service. Fortunately, we were able to get a tentative agreement from the regional commandant not to conscript our labor force "for the good of the country." In retrospect, even if the military had tried this form of conscription, our workers would have seen it coming and fled into the bush before they got there. It worked, although the military never forgot where we were, as will be recounted below.

All of the work in 1981 was important, but the most surprising find was the excavation of thousands of carved jade and marble artifacts in ritual cache deposits in the Iglesia Precinct at Salitrón Viejo (Figure 21). Paul Webb was the first to encounter a number of caches on the west side of Structure 12 (Figure 22). At the time of their excavation, nothing like this was known from Honduras. Later analysis revealed that a large percentage of the jade artifacts came from the Rio Motagua source

located 180-185 km to the west. A variety of other semi-precious materials in these cache offerings came from still unknown sources. The marble artifacts were another issue. While carved marble vessels were known from the Ulúa valley to the north, the coarse marble used to fashion the pendants, beads, and earflares in our offerings had never been reported previously. Because of this, marble items were classified preliminarily only as *piedra blanca* (white stone).



Figure 21: Jade recovered in situ in the Iglesia Precinct



Figure 22: Paul Webb at Structure 12 in the Iglesia Precinct

At the time of discovery this was the largest cache of jade and marble artifacts recovered from *in situ* deposits in the New

World (Figure 23). The collection of jades from Chichén Itzá was larger, but these were dredged up from the bottom of the Sacred Cenote and were not recovered with controlled excavations. Since their recovery, a larger collection of jade and other lapidary artifacts has been recovered from the Aztec Templo Mayor in Mexico City. But what is absolutely remarkable about the Salitrón jades is that they were **not** assembled by a large and powerful society like the Aztec or Maya. Instead, they were obtained and deposited by a community of only 1,000 inhabitants (Figure 24)! They obtained these materials by engaging in long-distance trade for the purpose of dedicating and sanctifying their central civic-ceremonial area. The complete story (and analysis) of how and when this was accomplished can be found elsewhere (Hirth et al. 2023).



Figure 23: Paul Webb and Jim Young evaluating a day's excavation of jade at Structure 12

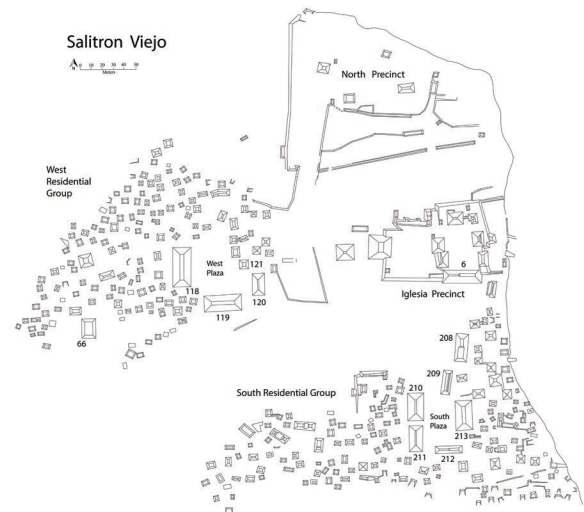


Figure 24: The site of Salitrón Viejo

A number of other important studies were conducted in 1981, in addition to excavations. A small portion of the reservoir survey that remained unfinished from 1980 was completed at this time. Mike Collins and Chuck Norville undertook a geoarchaeological study to understand the formation (and destruction) of vega lands on which archaeological sites were located. David Lentz and Jorge Herrera conducted a regional botanical survey as well as an ethnobotanical survey of natural resource usage among the native Jicaque community in the Montaña de la Flor (Figure 25). Malinda Stafford conducted an ethnoarchaeological study of contemporary ceramic manufacture (Figure 26). Large-scale processing of materials began in La Libertad under the direction of Phyllis Messenger (Figure 27). This vital work made it possible to conduct targeted studies of ceramics, lithics, jade, animal bone, floral remains, and other materials that came out of the excavations during the subsequent months (Figures 28-29). One of the important developments from these studies was the establishment of a preliminary ceramic chronology by Nedenia Kennedy,

which continued to be refined in subsequent years. By year's end, Gloria Lara-Pinto initiated a study of the regional ethnohistory to recover references to historic groups that occupied the region.

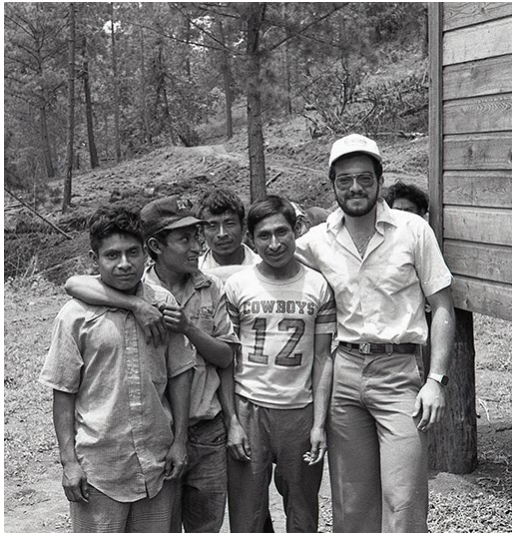


Figure 25: Jorge Herrera in a Jicaque village



Figure 26: Malinda Stafford doing ceramic analysis in La Libertad

The **1982** field season was reduced in scope because the funds budgeted and promised for the project from Honduran sources were not forthcoming. In an emergency response, the IHAH called together an advisory committee of Ricardo Agurcia, William Sanders, David Grove, and John Henderson to assess the needs and importance of the project. They visited



Figure 27: Zoila Rodriguez and Phyllis Messenger in the La Libertad laboratory



Figure 28: Susan Hirth and her flotation crew



Figure 29: Russel Meigs and the son of Chombo Reyes, foreman of Salitrón Viejo drying flotation samples

Salitrón Viejo early in 1983 and suggested avenues for additional financial support.

While they felt that the field project was exemplary, these financial problems were never resolved and plagued the research for the remainder of the project. It takes time to get funding for fieldwork and we had a limited timetable to complete field investigations. The result was that the project was restructured to fit the new budgetary reality. All remaining funds were funneled into salvage activities. Where this hurt the project was in the area of data analysis, which increasingly had to rely on funding from international sources (e.g. the Fulbright Commission, the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the Heinz Foundation, the University of Kentucky and other universities supporting their students). The unfortunate result was that a number of materials analyses could not be completed.

Fieldwork in 1982 was reduced to a two-month field season conducted at the site of Salitrón Viejo. Explorations focused on the Iglesia Precinct, which was the region's largest architectural structure (Figures 30-31), and expanding the excavation sample of the site's small domestic structures. Personnel during this season consisted of three archaeologists, two archaeological assistants, and 25 workers. Processing of archaeological materials continued in the La Libertad laboratory along with an analysis of ceramics and lithic remains. Eric Fernandez initiated a study of excavated faunal remains as part of the broader reconstruction of paleodiet. Likewise, a source analysis was initiated by Ronald Bishop at the Smithsonian Institution on jade artifacts recovered in the Iglesia Precinct. By year's end, funds had been obtained to continue field research on a reduced level during 1983 and 1984.



Figure 30: Gloria Lara excavating Burial 1-17 at Structure 3 in the Iglesia Precinct



Figure 31: Kazuo Okamura excavating the adobe wall of Structure 21 in the Iglesia Precinct

In **1983** field investigations were divided between the Sulaco and Humuya River valleys. Three field camps were established for this work. Archaeologists at Salitrón Viejo explored the large elite range structures in the West Plaza (ref Salitrón map). A second base camp was established at the site of Intendencia, which was the only large site located along the Humuya river. A third mobile base camp was used

for a regional testing group that sampled small sites along the Humuya River. Finally, a small survey of 40 sq km was initiated late in the upland areas of the El Cajón region to explore how these zones were used by populations living in the river valleys. The results of this study revealed little permanent settlement in upland areas.

Several auxiliary studies also were conducted. William Loker (dissertation) initiated an ethnographic study of contemporary agriculture and rainfall patterns to identify the productivity of maize cultivation and its ability to support prehispanic populations. Daniel Wolfman collected archaeomagnetic samples at Salitrón Viejo and Intendencia to date archaeological deposits using that technique (Figure 32). The paleozoological study continued and an obsidian source study was initiated, which included a visit to the La Esperanza and Guinope source areas (Figure 33).



Figure 32: Dan Wolfman taking archaeomagnetic samples



Figure 33: George Hasemann and Jerrel Sorensen at the La Esperanza obsidian source

In 1984 the El Cajón dam was completed and flooding commenced. It was now a race against time with the rising reservoir flood waters. Nevertheless, a limited amount of field work was undertaken. The recovery of the large number of jade artifacts at Salitrón Viejo led to increased looting across the site beginning in 1983. Because these materials were a national treasure, it was decided to accelerate their recovery using power equipment before the site was completely flooded. A 28 ton D7 Caterpillar bulldozer was contracted because it was small enough to be driven into and out of the site. The bulldozer opened long stratigraphic exposures across the site. This was combined with traditional excavation techniques to profile the Iglesia Platform (Figure 34) and four elite range structures in the South Residential Plaza. The bulldozer also created four stratigraphic exposures in

the North Precinct. These controlled cuts provided important information on the construction sequence of monumental structures and recovered additional carved jade artifacts from the Iglesia and North Precincts. Exposures in the North Precinct were important because it was the second important civic-ceremonial area in Salitrón Viejo, which only had limited excavation in previous years. Use of heavy equipment was carefully monitored by George Hasemann, who supervised the controlled excavation of 110 archaeological features. Explorations ended just as the water reached Salitrón Viejo and began to cover the site.



Figure 34: Heavy machinery from the CELCA Consortium used to prepare a profile in the Iglesia Precinct

The recovery of jade and marble artifacts had become well known as a result of the publication of *Ventanas al Pasado* in Honduras and the exhibition of artifacts in both the Nacional and Regional museums in Tegucigalpa. Looting at Salitrón Viejo was the result. On April 4th at 7:30 pm the looting became more formalized when two armed members of the Honduran security forces (FUSEP) and two agents of the National Identity Registry (DNI) showed up at Salitrón Viejo armed with M16 automatic rifles looking to steal the jade artifacts recovered in the 1984 excavations. Fortunately, the artifacts had *all* been sent to Tegucigalpa that afternoon, so the cookie jar

was empty. After searching the camp at gun point, they went to the site the next morning and tried to bribe workers for any jade artifacts they might know of. They left empty handed. It was a tense moment and, fortunately, nobody was shot or otherwise hurt. And of course there was the national press. By the time the archaeologists were out of the field, the reporters were accusing foreigners of looting jade from the El Cajón region. I would like to say these were once-in-a-lifetime occurrences for an archaeologist, but they are not. I personally have been shot at, arrested, and accused of looting multiple times in Latin America simply for carrying out archaeological investigations as an employee or guest researcher for national governments. While archaeologists always attempt to conduct their research without incident, things sometimes happen.

1984 was our last year of fieldwork, but analysis continued through 1989 and, to a certain extent, beyond. The summer of **1985** was when project findings were presented publicly at the Third Symposium on Honduran Archaeology held at Tela, Honduras (Figure 35). This was the first time project members could reflect collectively on research conducted to date. The papers presented provided a baseline for the publication of the project's first research monograph (Hirth et al. 1989). But analysis wound down in 1989 as funding ended. Two of the accomplishments in that year were final illustration of the important jade artifacts (Figure 36) and the bioanthropological analysis of human skeletal remains (Figure 37).

Archaeology can produce some exciting stories. But it also affords those who undertake it a number of beautiful experiences and memories. That is the topic I turn to now.



Figure 35: Participants in the Tela Symposium. From the left are Susan Hirth, Skip Messenger, Phyllis Messenger, David Lentz, Nedenia Kennedy, Gloria Lara, George Hasemann, and Ken Hirth



Figure 36: Cynthia Ott illustrating jade

Those Beautiful Days and Nights

El Cajón has a modified tropical environment. Large sections of the natural forest found along the river margins had been cleared for agriculture. Nevertheless, its rustic beauty was still evident and similar to what we imagined prehispanic groups would have seen and experienced. One of the last majestic stands of cedar and mahogany at Salitrón had been cut commercially before we arrived and the logs

floated down the river. But there were enough of these huge trees scattered along the river margins to frame the region's beauty. The vegas and nearby slopes had been cleared for slash-and-burn agriculture using hand tools. Farming created a more diverse landscape with fields in various stages of regrowth (see Figure 2). Diverse landscapes support a more varied wildlife than uniform environments, and that was apparent in the El Cajón region.



Figure 37: Rebecca Storey analyzing human bioanthropological remains

The tropical wildlife was impressive. Birds provided a daily serenade of sounds and colors that are memorable even after 40 years. It's hard to forget the brightly colored parrots that flew in groups squawking, both in flight and sitting in trees. Macaws, toucans, and other brightly colored birds nested and sang to us from above. Iguanas were abundant and even the small fish were friendly, as we found out bathing in the river when they would nibble on the hair on our legs as if we were unintentional anglers. A wide array of mammals including deer, peccary, aguti, skunk, and others roamed the region, although they tended to be skiddish because local inhabitants hunted them for

food. Nevertheless, our interest in building a comparative fauna collection for archaeological analysis resulted in workers bringing us live animals that they thought we would be interested in. A deer fawn and a baby peccary were brought to our camp, both of which were fed and raised as pets for a while, underscoring how imprinting young animals can partially tame them. George Hasemann adopted the young peccary as his personal pet and named it *Chuleta* (Spanish for pork chop). It stayed in camp with us for two years before falling off a vehicle and getting lost during a camp change. Chuleta introduced us to peccary behavior and some unpleasant aromas. It liked to roam under our dinner table foraging for scraps between our legs while we ate. All but Kazuo Okamura, our Japanese JICA volunteer archaeologist (see Figure 31), learned not to kick the foraging peccary, because males are cantankerous after they develop tusks.

But nights were the most spectacular. There wasn't an electric light anywhere in the region, which made the night sky a dynamic canvas of vivid constellations and lunar stages. My wife, Susan (Figure 38), made me realize this on the second day in El Cajón as we struggled to set up camp, get organized, and deal with the different requests and questions of newly arrived personnel. I was hot and dirty, and we were already behind schedule. One of our workers had almost cut his thumb off with a machete while peeling bark from partially sawn sides of trees called *capotes*. I was thinking it was going to be a hard and miserable five months in the field when she pointed to the brilliant and beautiful night sky, commenting how lucky we were to be able to experience this every day. It was time for me to focus on the positives. She was right and we all came to love the nights. Some loved them for the coolness they brought

after a very hot day, some for the spectacular celestial views, and others for the accompanying night sounds of evening fauna. Toads (*bufo marinus* and others) came out at night, watching us from the shadows as we gathered around our Coleman lanterns. What they were interested in was snapping insects out of the air that were attracted by the light. But in the process they sang to us in their low resonant voices.



Figure 38: Susan Hirth during our first days in El Cajón

The days were beautiful in another way, but they brought with them a series of annoyances that made the work hard. Heat, flies, mosquitos, and other stinging insects were constant companions. But the two main concerns were poisonous snakes and ticks. The fer-de-lance is a small aggressive and deadly pit viper that we constantly had to be alert for. We were especially alert when we had to use the bathroom at night. One of our workers who was bitten by one as a young man when he was alone in the bush told us he cut off his own hand with his machete just to survive the bite. While we

thought this might be a bit of bravado intended to impress us with his fortitude, it was confirmed by several other workers. It was a statement about the level of available medical care in the region that we took seriously.

Our most ferocious day-to-day menace were the little bundles of seed ticks that clung to the underside of weeds. These little clusters of misery would drop on your boots when you walked by and instantly start crawling up your pants looking for a tight place to burrow in. The ticks were a product of cattle grazing and you could pick up 100 ticks in a few minutes walking across old fields. Archaeologists spent a lot of time checking their pants for ticks and grooming each other (Figure 39). The local remedy most of us adopted was filling a sock with a DDT-related chemical and pounding it into our pants to keep the ticks off our skin. Of course, DDT is a carcinogen and those of us who developed cancer later in life suspect that was the cause. But we were young and didn't think that far ahead. It was the local remedy for dealing with ticks that had the ability to reach the most distant portions of your anatomy.

Prehispanic life in the El Cajón region had always been focused on the rivers. Communities were located on the vegas along river margins which had the deepest and richest agricultural soil. Camp life revolved around the river, as well. It was where we bathed and could sit in the shade of the imposing cedar trees that still grew along its margins. While the shoreline was often strewn with lunchbox-sized boulders, there were stretches of sandy beaches that were magnets for setting up camp. La Ceiba had an especially scenic beachfront camp spot (Figure 40) that coincided with one of the region's largest archaeological sites where excavations were carried out.



Figure 39: Archaeologists grooming each other by scraping off ticks



Figure 40: The scenic camp at La Ceiba

But we learned to be careful about establishing camps too close to the river. Narrow river channels in combination with heavy tropical thunderstorms could rapidly swell streams and create flash flooding. This became clear in 1980 after the mobile survey camp set up on a nice river front location near El Mango. John Yonk and Brian Bauer had made the move and after pitching the tents, were busy writing notes and taking care of personal needs. As John

worked on his notes, (Figure 41) he noticed a change in the sound of the river. Sure enough, the river was rising rapidly and quickly flooded the camp. Quick action saved the tents and the personal gear. One near casualty was Brian's field clothes, which he had been soaking in a tub on the river's edge. One of John's favorite memories from that year was watching Brian chase his clothes in his skivvies as they sailed downriver into the sunset. Brian says he doesn't remember the incident. That only indicates that he caught up to his tub of clothes before they got away.



Figure 41: John Yonk in camp dealing with an attack of poison ivy

Logistics Again

Most archaeologists tend to be pacifists, but in many ways organizing an archaeological field project is a lot like planning a military campaign. In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu said, "The line between order and disorder lies in logistics." Archaeologists like to structure their research around interesting theoretical questions and devise appropriate

methodologies for answering them. But in archaeology the best conceived archaeological project stops in its tracks when you can't get bags for your artifacts. To coin a modern business saying, "it's not an emergency until the supply chain guy (or gal) can't take care of it." This was most certainly true for the El Cajón project.

To a greater extent that we often want to admit, the conditions we live in, or are forced to live in, shape our lives and perceptions about them. Two factors shaped our lives in El Cajón: the difficulty of transportation and the nature of the supply chain. Let's talk about those separately to properly frame the logistical challenges. No electricity, communication, hot showers, medical facilities, adequate food, and other twentieth-century creature comforts were all annoying issues, but those could be dealt with, if other basic logistical problems could be resolved.

I've already mentioned that no roads entered the reservoir study area where our field camps were located, and excavations were conducted. But dirt roads could be navigated in dry weather, so it was more a problem of time and distance. The IHAH headquarters was in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, and since we worked for them, all logistical support began there. Under normal circumstances, a one-way trip into the zone took three days. It was one day's travel from the capital to La Libertad via Comayagua. Then it was a second full day from La Libertad to the end of the four-wheel drive dirt road. Depending on where the project mules were, it could take part of another day to transport supplies down the mountain to the first base camp at Salitrón Viejo. This was less of a problem for people since they could just walk in, once they got to the end of the road. However, there were multiple base camps during the 1980, 1981,

and 1983 field seasons, so a fourth day would be needed to get supplies to outlying camps. Even under the best of circumstances (with the driver sleeping with the vehicle), it took three to four days at the beginning of the project to move supplies into the region and get them to where they were needed.

It was natural, therefore, that the first order of business in 1981 was to build a road that ran directly into the main base camp at Salitrón Viejo. This was when the project was at its largest and the need for supplies was greatest. That shortened potential delays by a day, since vehicles could unload supplies directly at the base camp. Mules were stationed there as well, so they could quickly move supplies to groups working in a four- to six-hour walking radius from Salitrón. Building this road was a challenge, as it had to traverse a steep mountainside. The route I suggested was quickly vetoed by Pastor Gomez, one of our capable project *chofers*. He found an easier and more circuitous route, which still tested the ability of both our four-wheel-drive Land Cruisers.

Without question, one of the most memorable moments was seeing the look of amazement on little children's faces when they saw a car for the first time. Of course, they had heard about trucks and cars, but seeing one was another matter. It should have been one of our project vehicles, but it wasn't (Figure 42). It was payday Saturday, and as we were waiting for the payroll to arrive from Tegucigalpa, a Land Cruiser driven by a stranger pulled into camp. It was an entrepreneurial shopkeeper from one of the highland towns loaded with goods to sell workers with cash in their hands. Somehow, he learned it was payday. It was a little annoying not to be the first to use our dangerous little road, but the looks on the kid's faces were priceless. Our entrepreneur became a payday regular, supplying several

of the region's favorite refreshments, warm beer, aguardiente, and banana soda pop. News of our scheduled paydays traveled fast, something that became somewhat problematic later on.



Figure 42: Our vehicle was the 2nd one in to Salitrón on our new road on payday

So if a three day turnaround was the quickest we could get to and from the field, imagine what that did for weekend breaks? It pretty much eliminated them. People would have gotten as far as La Libertad before they would have had to turn around and head back in. So a different solution was implemented. Archaeologists worked 20 days straight and then took an eight-day break. Three rotation cycles were established so that the work could keep going while some personnel were on their break. Yes, it was a hard work schedule. Fieldwork ran from Monday through Saturday with Sundays used for catching up on notes. Everyone enjoyed their vacation breaks, but nobody looked forward to the four days it took to get in and out of the zone. The hardest parts of those trips were the eight hours of bone-jarring travel over four-wheel drive dirt roads.

While the Land Cruisers were incredibly durable, space was limited and every available nook and cranny had to be

packed with bags of artifacts leaving the zone, and food and supplies coming in. The travel routine was quickly established. Archaeologists would leap into vehicles for the trip out (Figure 43) and crawl into them for the trip back (Figure 44). Once in the vehicles, the archaeologists staying behind would fill every available space with artifact bags up to their knees. Fragile items like human burials or whole pots were placed on their laps. It was not a comfortable way to travel, but the anticipation of a cold beer, different food, and a warm shower after 20 days in the field got people to the vehicles quickly. Returning was a little different. Instead of being surrounded by artifact bags, people would literally be up to their knees in food and other supplies. Watermelons often were the items riding on laps during the trip back as the land cruisers lunged down the mountainside.



Figure 43: Happy archaeologists heading for their break after coming out of the zone. Malinda Stafford, Ken Robinson, Paul Webb, Julie Benyo, Susan Hirth, Phyllis Messenger, Nedenia Kennedy

Navigating the supply chain was another challenge. In other projects that I had directed, the director was the head of the supply chain and responsible for all cash purchases. This often required getting up early, working all day, and although tired, going to a store at night and buying whatever supplies were needed. Although

exhausting, it was the tried-and-true way of getting supplies needed in the field. The Honduran supply chain was more intricate than that. First, what was needed and what was available at any point in time did not always match. Two large hardware stores in Tegucigalpa were the go-to places for equipment. Food was available, but the diversity of goods was severely limited in the 1980s. It was a staples-only type of market. I remember trying to find cookies in one supermarket and the closest I could find were small packs of Ritz crackers. We had “starving person syndrome” in the field. Food became the focus of endless discussions, and is a topic that is explored separately later. But everything we purchased faced one indomitable obstacle: the Honduran accountant.



Figure 44: Less enthusiastic archaeologists after their break heading back into the zone

The job of Honduran accountants is to count, and they must count everything. The reason is that they are personally responsible for anything inventoried and on the books. So when we bought seven mules they had to be accounted for from the start to the end of the project. When one mule died during the project, a mule skull had to be added to the inventory where it probably

still remains today. This sometimes got out of hand. I remember when a group of accountants showed up at the main Salitrón base camp in 1981 with the goal of counting and inventorying all the archaeological remains recovered. The accountants seem to have gotten nervous about all the artifacts accumulating that weren't being inventoried on a regular basis (Figures 45-46). Well and good. We pointed them in the direction of the hundreds of bags of unwashed ceramics that had been excavated that week. That probably represented 20,000 or so potsherds. They quickly lost interest. Instead, while we were gone during our *Semana Santa* (Easter) break, they decided to check all of the project's equipment against the existing inventory. What they actually did was go into the tents within the camp and start inventorying all the archaeologist's personal possessions (sleeping bags, air mattresses, clothing, clocks, etc). Needless to say, after the shouting stopped, we all had a congenial dinner and they returned to Tegucigalpa the next day.

We can't fault the accountants for the work they did. They were just doing their job. But we could complain about it. Where things became problematical was the place of accountants in the supply chain. In Honduras *all* institutional purchases had to be *cotizado* to protect against graft. That meant that all items (food, equipment, etc.) had to be purchased at the lowest fair market price. This is logical because it prevented buying items for the government from your cousin (or friend) at inflated prices. To avoid that peril, every item purchased had to be price checked. The way to do that was to get quotes from two or three suppliers for every item on your "urgent supplies" list. This included all food. So accountants, working in pairs for the sake of honesty and accountability, started with your list. They

took a bus (because it was inexpensive) to at least two different stores, recording the prices for each item on the list. If an item was missing at one store they would go to others until they found it. If they were lucky and worked fast that would take at least one day, maybe two. Once the quotes were collected, an administrator would check their price quotes and get approval. That usually took another day. By the third day they were ready to make the purchases. A check would be issued and they would retrace their steps (by bus) to each store. If some items were sold out, the accountants would have to return to IHAH to get a new check.



Figure 45: The accumulation of material in the La Libertad lab

Of course, food and hardware were not sold in the same stores, so extrapolate by the various types of items needed. Once items were purchased and all receipts collected, supplies were theoretically ready to be shipped. But hold on. A report documenting the purchases also needed to be made, which went beyond just compiling a list and turning in receipts. Because handwriting often was illegible on store receipts, accountants normally recopied them all! Argue as we may, they never seemed to grasp the fact that this last recopying step nullified much of their anti-

graft protection principle. There were many nights in camp when we argued over whether the principal requirement of being an accountant was clear handwriting.

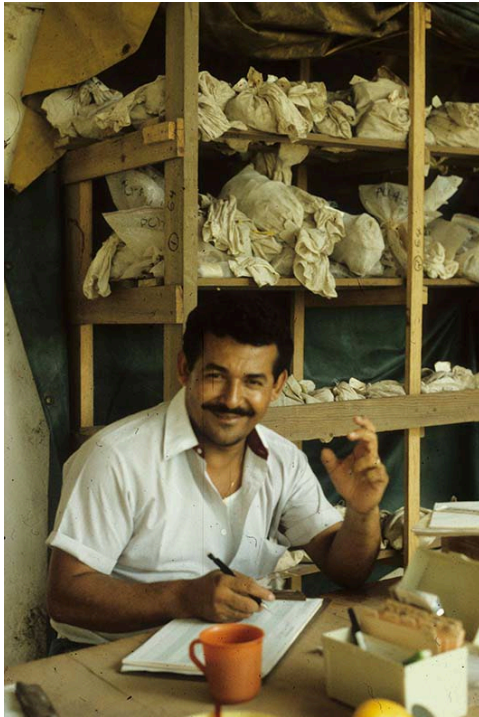


Figure 46: Ildefonso (Foncho) Orellana analyzing materials in La Libertad. Notice the manta bags on the shelves

Take transportation difficulties, the rapid consumption of field supplies, accountants, and delays in the supply chain, put them all together and you had the ingredients of a logistical nightmare. Fortunately, we learned this early and planned accordingly. In the 1981 season, we put in a request for additional artifact bags. We knew from the previous year that paper bags wouldn't survive the trip over four-wheel roads to the laboratory. Similarly, plastic bags were too thin and expensive for collecting ceramics and lithics in the field and then storing before and after analysis. The best solution to collection and storage were cotton *manta* bags (see Figure 46). Of

course they couldn't be bought and had to be made. But between the cost of the cotton cloth and the salary of a seamstress, they were reasonably priced and would last 20 years. By the third week of the project, our supply of cotton bags was getting low, so we placed an order for several thousand. Two weeks later our supply of cloth bags had run out, but we couldn't stop the excavations just for that.

So we moved into emergency mode. We spent one Sunday creating bags by condensing lots. What that involved was making sure that all artifacts from the same level, but excavated on separate days, were placed in a single bag. Once those bags ran out, we started emptying and making little piles of artifacts with their tags in our tents and under the main tarp we had at Salitrón. But soon the tents got filled and people drew the line about using all the tent space for piles of artifacts and sleeping outside. I couldn't blame them, but we still didn't have bags and the excavations were about to stop until I walked by Paul Webb's tent and saw that he had filled his socks with artifacts. Ingenious! We had a new lease on life. It might be hard to imagine, but we then started transferring bags of artifacts with their tags into both dirty and clean socks and then stacked them in our tents. Several things worked in our favor. The first was that after weeks in the field, all of our clothes had been washed in the river and beaten on rocks, so they stretched to unimaginable proportions. Our bigger socks could hold more artifacts. But second and most importantly, a new load of bags arrived on payday. Although we had been screaming for bags for several weeks, shouting didn't help. When we asked why there was such a long delay in getting them, we got the simple answer—after they were made, they had to be counted.

Tensions can increase in direct proportion to the difficulty of the work. That said, we soon learned not to complain too much. Complaining usually just slowed things down. That is illustrated by some of the ordeals that Gloria Lara and I sometimes had to go through to make our bi-weekly payroll. In Honduras, like many areas of Latin America, if a worker showed up on Monday, he/she was committing to work the entire week. So on the second Monday of each pay period, the names of those who had worked one week or two weeks would be recorded and immediately driven into Tegucigalpa by vehicle. That way the payroll could be calculated, and the cash drawn from the bank in appropriate small denominations so people could be paid. This, of course, required that the accountants recopy the list before the payroll could be withdrawn from the bank.

As weeks went by, it took longer and longer to get the payroll cleared. Workers were paid on Saturday afternoon after a half-day's work, so the normal procedure was to get the money on Thursday so it could make the trip to the Salitrón base camp by Saturday to pay the workers, and still have time to walk the payroll downriver to pay workers at the outlying camps. Banks in Honduras close on Friday afternoon at 4:00 pm, at which time they lock the doors. But if you are inside the bank when the doors are locked, all business transactions are completed. People aren't turned away. I remember Gloria standing inside the bank on one Friday and my sliding the finished withdrawal slip under the locked door at 5:00 pm. We were the last customers served, but we got the payroll. It is a disconcerting experience to stand in front of 120 workers with their machetes on payday and tell them there is no money to pay them (Figure 47). After one of those harrowing experiences,

we decided to give the accountants more responsibility. We put them in charge of the payroll, so they could explain to the workers (with their machetes) why the payroll was late. While this allowed us to sympathize with the workers, we always felt the stress. But in almost every case, the workers were incredibly patient and understanding about delays. Things got measurably better as we worked out the logistical kinks and got Mario Ardón as our primary accountant. Mario's popularity can be measured by the fact that he shows up in many project photographs.



Figure 47: Mario Ardón and Gloria Lara paying workers at Salitrón

Camp Life in El Cajón

Thinking back on camp life is where we have some of our best memories. For the most part there were few diversions or things to do, so we talked, interacted, and took note of day-to-day events (Figure 48). We lived in well-constructed and ventilated tents that could be sealed up against the insects, slept on cots or air mattresses, and used a few Coleman kerosene lanterns to light the night for work or group interactions. The Colemans were the equivalent of our sitting around the campfire (which we also had), and they threw off

incredible light along with a comforting hiss. I remember having to walk back to the Salitrón camp at night from Guarabuquí, which wasn't a problem, because it was a cloudless evening and the moon was bright enough to light the way. Although still over a mile away, I noticed a haze of light reflecting off the high canopy of trees in the direction of the site. It was the light from the camp's three kerosene lanterns. It was evident that it would be impossible to get lost even on the darkest of nights because our kerosene lanterns could always guide us home.

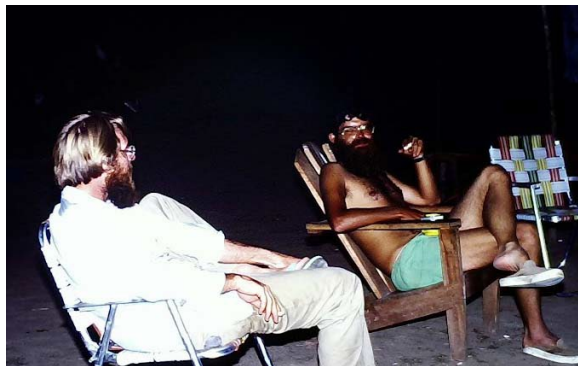


Figure 48: Jeff Walker and Skip Messenger in an evening conversation near a Coleman lantern



Figure 49: Life inside the tent with Mark Tucker and Jonathan (Bomba) Pollack

You don't notice the limitations of space until you don't have it. There were tents to sleep in but with two to three archaeologists in each, space was limited

and crowded (Figure 49). Everyone slept on air mattresses and there was one evening when an individual felt a lump under his air mattress. It turned out to be a machete and as he pulled it out the next sound heard was a long steady hiiiiiiiii. The air mattress was the only project casualty that year and it is why air mattress repair kits were on the recommended list of things for archaeologists to bring with them from the States. All activities including cooking took place outside. That meant lavatory facilities, tables, benches, and covered spaces had to be built using the natural materials available to us. Here we copied some of the same solutions that local residents used. We built using the wood products we could obtain on-site. Workers were contracted to help us and, in the process, we gained tremendous respect for their ingenuity and ability to make do with limited means. The first structure built after an outhouse was a small storage shed that was needed to house equipment, supplies, the short-wave radio, food, and some excavated materials. This structure was needed because all our tents were occupied by people. It also had to be sturdy enough to be locked. The construction of the storage shed was an eye-opening testimonial to Honduran ingenuity.

Cedar is the best material for construction in the tropics because the wood is resistant to termites and other boring insects. So we built the storage shed out of cedar planks (Figure 50) that were produced in the same way the local population did. A tree was cut and scaffold was built onto which the large trunks were winched. Wide cedar boards were created by sawing down the length of the tree using a two-man team and an old-fashioned buck saw (Figures 51-52). One man stood on the top of the tree trunk, while another stood below. The man on the top guided the cutting and pulled the

saw up, while the man on the bottom served as the power, pulling the saw down which provided the cutting motion. The log would be sawn from one end to the other. After completion, these same steps would be repeated until the entire log was reduced to planks and another log would be rolled into position. The first and last cuts on logs produced rounded, bark-covered surfaces called *capotes*. These also were valuable materials that were used for roofing, the construction of our camp kitchen, and most of our camp furniture (shelves, tables, benches). Because of the effort required, the project adopted a rustic, minimalist tradition.



Figure 50: Skip and our cedar plank storage shed



Figure 51: Cedar logs ready to saw into planks



Figure 52: Sawing the planks with a 2-man crew

Camp entertainments were those that we could invent ourselves. Novels brought in by archaeologists were read, reread, and circulated between camps. Musical instruments were played if people brought them (Figure 53). David Lentz, Rigoberto Lanza, and Ken Robinson were all great guitar players. Although reading was a great diversion, it was primarily a daylight activity, so it was limited to the end of the day, in the light of a Coleman lantern, and when there was time on Sundays. Card games were a more common diversion since a single lantern produced more than enough light for a game for three or more people to play. The two most popular games were cribbage and poker. George Hasemann was an avid cribbage player and in 1980, he used a drill to make a cribbage board from a piece of wood. Players carved their own pegs and playing began (Figure 54). Games were

played for money and winnings went into a tin can that was used to buy beers and other refreshments during R-and-R breaks from fieldwork.



Figure 53: Ken Robinson playing his guitar

Poker games evolved into more vigorous and entertaining events, both for the archaeologists playing and the two or three local residents who watched these contests (but didn't participate). Saturday night games were the largest, especially on payday when the local entrepreneur showed up to sell his wares to those with cash. Beer and an excellent rum called Flor de Caña were popular refreshments among the archaeologists. This enlivened the poker games, which were always fun with a lot of good-natured kidding and sarcasm. But they did accelerate into the night, with winners and losers becoming more animated as rum was consumed. Players would gradually drop out over the course of the night and the stakes of each hand would increase. By the early morning hours, games became more animated as winnings circulated around the table, culminating in a final winner-take-all hand that could have as much as \$40-50 (US). Our few local onlookers watched in stunned silence and were amazed that players didn't kill each other when those hands were lost, which might have been the

outcome if they were playing. We remember late one Friday night where a man brought a mule into camp on his way to the highland town of Montañuelas. Strapped to the mule was a man who had been badly injured in a machete fight during a poker game. The fight broke out over a pot consisting of three Lempiras, the local currency equivalent \$1.50 (US). The injured man had already been tied to the mule for three hours and had two more to go. Daniel Ortega one of the foremen at Guarabucú lost two of his sons in fights resulting from card games where the winnings was less the two dollars US. One local belief was that if you wanted to get even with somebody just give them a deck of cards and let nature take its course.



Figure 54: George, Brian, and John playing cribbage

One constant concern was over sickness and injuries because there was no immediate medical care beyond what we could supply. Our medical kit consisted of a few first-aid kits, a couple of anti-venom suction kits, two vials of anti-venom medicine, and three army stretchers that were eventually commandeered as sleeping cots. Other than basic antibiotics and aspirin, we relied on being careful. One iron-clad rule established at the start of the project was never go out alone. We always wanted to have project personnel travel with a local

worker, who could be counted on to help them back to camp if they got injured.

Archaeologists remained remarkably healthy throughout the project despite having to drink boiled water from the river. I specifically remember getting a cup of boiled water one afternoon and, as I began to drink, noticed a piece of cow manure in the bottom of the cup. From that day forward, all water was strained before being boiled. Another concern was the presence of malaria and dengue fever carried by mosquitos. Susan Hirth, Gloria Lara-Pinto, and Jerrel Sorenson contracted dengue fever during the summer of 1981 once we were back in La Libertad to do analysis. Both Eric Fernandez and Dennis Cosgren came down with histoplasmosis from visiting caves in other areas of Honduras. When faced with the possibility of having histoplasmosis, Dennis hoped that he might have leprosy instead, since there was a known cure for that in the 1980s. But miraculously, other than infected tick bites, the worst injury that occurred among the archaeologists in the field was in 1980 when Brian Bauer cut open his thumb putting a razor-sharp edge on his machete. The story goes that George Hasemann eagerly stitched him up with a needle and thread, and the pain was assuaged with Flor de Caña, aspirin, and antibiotics. Brian still carries the scar to this day. Thinking back over all the potential health hazards, it is clear that our better angels were watching over us.

Each camp had their own dynamic and amusing stories. The camp at Guarabuquí supervised by Skip Messenger was one of these. Skip participated in the initial 1980 survey and was well aware of conditions throughout the region. Out of curiosity he brought a small thermostat with him in 1981 to record ambient temperatures that otherwise could only be guessed at.

Well, one day the temperature in the tent at the end of the day was 120 degrees. This was a scientific breakthrough, because suffering could now be quantified and directly measured in tent-degrees (Figure 55). Whether we liked it or not, anyone visiting this camp could count on getting a report on the latest tent temperatures at Guarabuquí.



Figure 55: Steve in his Speedo bathing suit as interior tent hot weather attire. Photograph used with Steve's permission.

An incident of cow suicide guaranteed that discussions of temperature always were a topic of conversation. On the hottest days, cows liked to stand in the river to cool off. They were smart, just like people. One morning the archaeologists noticed a cow standing up to its knees in the river bellowing mournfully. At noon the archaeologists went down to the river and found the cow had walked further out and was up to its chest in the river, still bellowing. In the afternoon they went back down to the river and found the cow up to its neck in the river. Then, before their very eyes, the cow put its head under water, fell over on its side, and floated away down river. This was diagnosed as a clear case of cow suicide. The cow was certainly diseased, but from that time onward the case of cow suicide was always brought up in discussions of how hot it was. When I thought of the cow, I always checked to make sure our water was being boiled.

Food, More or Less

Some moments are more humorous in retrospect than when they occurred. That certainly was the case with food. When you are stuck on a desert island, food and water will consume your thoughts. The same can be true when you are cut off for long periods of time from preferred or favorite comfort foods. Being in the field led to what can only be described as “food madness” or “starving person syndrome.” Nobody starved in El Cajón. But everyone lost a little weight. The thought of food, whether sweet or sour, salty, or savory, hot or cold, was constantly on people’s mind. It emerged in discussions of food preferences. What they would eat when they got home. Food even crept into dreams. For many, it was the inability to get a cold drink of water or any other beverage that made it a constant longing. Lukewarm was the best you could get.

But before saying anything about food, let me say we all *loved* our cooks. Doña Maria was the beloved cook at Salitrón Viejo (Figure 56). She took on the task of keeping track of supplies, providing lists of things that had to be bought, and making sure everyone had coffee in the morning along with hearty meals. She must have thought we were an entertaining bunch since she continued to work for the project all the years we were in the field. Cooking and boiling water for drinking was no easy task. All cooking was done over a locally made clay hearth that burned firewood. The hearth was ingeniously made of small stones and mud constructed on an elevated wooden platform for ease of use (Figure 57). The need for firewood was constant, and Brian Bauer remembers bringing suitable branches back from the field for Pilar the cook who

greatly appreciated it. The cooking and boiling of water never stopped, especially when you think of how much water 12 to 15 thirsty archaeologists at Salitrón could consume seven days a week. Except for the *Semana Santa* Easter break, Doña Maria and all the cooks at the other camps never got a day off. We greatly appreciated all their work. Sometimes we tried to help by trying to make tortillas. It was always a great source of hysterical amusement for our cooks, because nobody could ever do up to their standards. Everything said about food below has to be framed against the difficulties in which something as basic as “cooking” took place.



Figure 56: Doña Maria the beloved cook at Salitrón Viejo with Bill Loker



Figure 57: First you build the stove, then you put a roof and sides around it

There was no mistaking the fact that there were severe limitations on the types of food that could be purchased in Honduras and how slowly it could be procured, given our normal supply chain. We could get plenty of staples like beans, rice, yucca, sugar, oatmeal, jam, corn flakes, and canned goods. But fruit and vegetables took a severe pounding on the drive in or after being packed downriver on a mules to outlying camps. Gloria Lara was always concerned about our diet and, on one occasion, she bought a full crate of oranges and put it in a vehicle headed for Salitrón Viejo. By the time it got to camp the oranges were bounced, bruised, and battered to the point of being largely inedible. Meat was an even bigger problem. It had to be purchased fresh in Tegucigalpa or La Libertad and then had to survive the 2-day trip in the vehicle and another day or so by mule. While it was packed in a cooler, ice often wasn't available and the rural solution of using sawdust as an insulator didn't seem to help. Of course, some of this could have been remedied if we had a portable generator and an electric or kerosene refrigerator. But those options were not available or practical for us in the 1980s. Pork was never on the menu because of spoilage issues. Beef and chicken didn't fare much better. On one ill-fated day, we tried to dry and preserve beef by smoking it over a fire. The beef spoiled in the process and the only thing we accomplished that week was smoking all the washed clothes that were hanging on a nearby line to dry. We always were worried about spoilage, so meat was a rare commodity unless it could be consumed quickly upon arrival.

Given these challenges, it seemed we had two alternatives: buy chickens in the region and butcher them ourselves or get what meat we could through hunting. We

didn't have accountants in the field to work through the process of buying local chickens. Even if we had, the process of butchering and removing the feathers from chickens is labor intensive. Neither fit our situation. Instead, we turned to hunting, with iguana becoming an important source of protein in our diet (Figure 58). This represented a full step into the local cuisine since our workers referred to iguana as *pollo Hondureño* (Honduran chicken). It works best as a meaty addition to soup, and the name aptly describes the flavor. Brian Bauer tried hunting iguanas with his razor-sharp machete. While amusing for onlookers, it never yielded results. There were two 22-caliber rifles and one shotgun on the project in 1981, and Pastor found great sport in providing us with a steady supply of iguana when he was not driving one of the project vehicles. Everyone was always hungry and iguana is tasty, even if the idea of eating it runs contrary to individual cuisine preferences.



Figure 58: Iguana ready to eat, also known as *pollo Hondureño*

Each camp had a dedicated cook who kept us fed while toiling over their raised mud hearths. But all our cooks shared two interesting cultural foibles. One was their love for preparing hot soup for the mid-afternoon meal after archaeologists had spend a hot day in the field. The standard fare was several envelopes of Sopa Maggi soup mix combined with yucca, rice, a can or two of mixed vegetables (and maybe iguana) to prepare a piping hot mid-summer meal. One day in 1980, as the archaeologist began their meal, they noticed that the soup had a noticeably different favor that they hadn't experienced before. The explanation became clear when one of the archaeologists fished a maraschino cherry out of the soup. The cook normally navigated her recipes by looking at labels on cans, which in this case had rubbed off during mule transit. She had added a can of fruit cocktail to the soup instead of vegetables. Tutti-frutti soup was on the menu that day.

A second feature of our Honduran cooks was that they liked warm milk. We found this was true whether we were in the field where we had powdered milk, or in a restaurant in town that used whole milk. Warm milk is soothing, and it is just the thing you want in your oatmeal, hot chocolate, or before you cuddle up with a book and go to bed. But it is *not* what you want on your corn flakes for breakfast (Figure 59). All project members can vouch for the fact that corn flakes will congeal into a sodden mass of corn gruel exactly one second after applying hot milk. Experiments were run to see if you could get even one spoonful of normal corn flakes into your mouth after hot milk was applied. Our field science confirms that this is impossible to achieve. Without refrigeration we knew it was impossible to get cold milk for our cereal. But even begging for lukewarm milk

did not phase our cooks. They knew we needed hot milk to face the challenges of the day. Despite this issue, corn flakes with a little sugar on top remained the breakfast of champions for many North Americans on the crew.

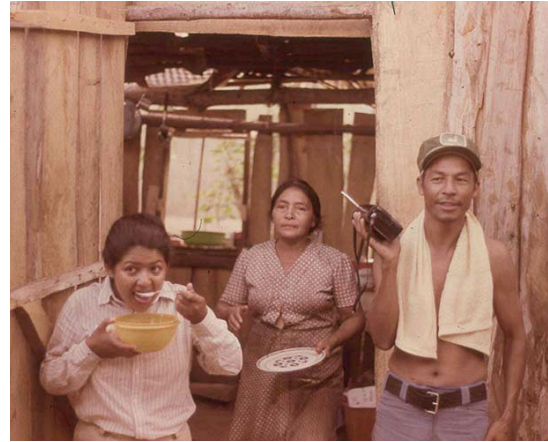


Figure 59: Breakfast at Salitrón. I think Gloria is having oatmeal

Taste buds are one of the most powerful senses that humans have. This, combined with limited culinary options, led to an interesting phenomenon within the project. Ketchup and mustard emerged as forms of currency that were exchanged between two of the camps in 1981. The rumor was that you could get sugar and almost any other food from Guarabucú for ketchup. The result was that the La Ceiba camp had an abundance of sugar that their cook used to bake little cakes and other sweet treats for the archaeologists there. But no matter what was on the daily menu, each meal was started and finished with a cup of delicious hot (naturally) coffee. After all, Honduras was a natural coffee-producing area and our cooks would roast the beans on a *comal* griddle mixed with a little sugar (see Figure 57), grind the beans on a metate, cook them in an old-fashioned coffee pot, and strain the brew into your cup. It was a one-of-a-kind flavor that many of the

archaeologists who are coffee lovers still remember.

There are a number of other quirky memories linked to food. Jorge Silva was an archaeologist from Peru who became known as “El Gringo-Peruano” among the workers, because he didn’t like tortillas. Bread, not tortillas, is the staple in his country (Figure 60). Similarly, I remember an entertaining debate between Gloria and George that ran throughout one evening over whether the accountants had purchased and sent black or red beans in the 50 lbs bag that had just arrived. The debate continued for several hours with neither individual wanting to actually look in the bag. The conversation was too interesting to end it with a simple peek.

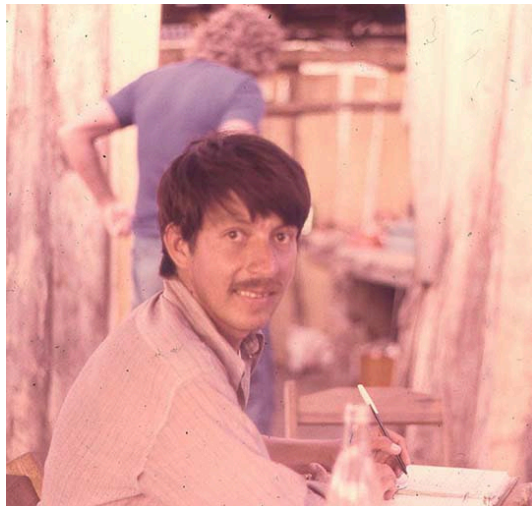


Figure 60: Jorge Silva working on notes from excavations in the Iglesia Precinct

Julie Benyo and Scott O’Mack (Figure 61) became legendary super-heroes in their quest for taste. After a full day of working in the field they would occasionally undertake a two-hour walk up the mountain to the little town of Terroritos, where there was a kerosene refrigerator that “sometimes” worked where they could buy *topogigos*. *Topogigos* were the equivalent of

cold or frozen Kool-Aid in a bag. Everyone was envious, but as a rule nobody could imagine making the four-hour round trip for a *topogigo* after a full day of work in the field. Well, maybe for a beer. All that can be said is that we did the best we could. At the end of the field season when the accountants totaled up all the expenses, they told us with some pride that the project had fed people for a cost of just under one Lempira per person/day. That was just under 50 cents (US). Not something to be proud of, but in the big picture, we ate much better than the families that lived in the region and the people who worked for us.

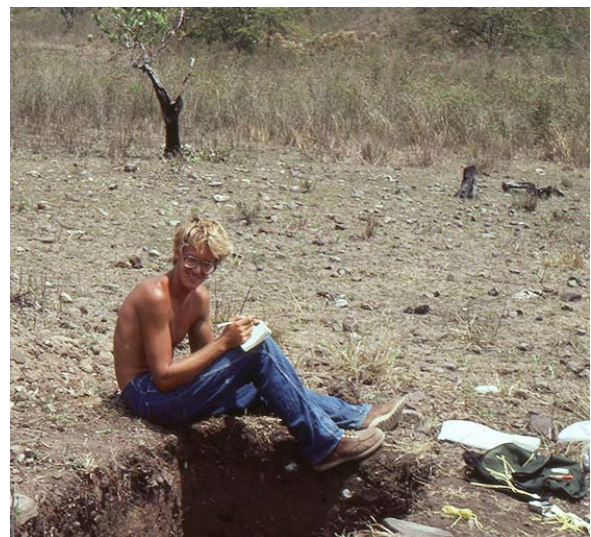


Figure 61: Scott O'Mack in La Ceiba thinking of *topogigos*

Archaeologists on the regional testing program were the most difficult to provision, since they frequently changed their camp location as they moved from site to site. The result was that they had more leeway from the accountants to hire cooks and workers, as well as buying provisions where they could find them. Or at least that is what was argued. They also had regular access to the mules so they could make their moves. Boyd Dixon (Figure 62) remembers the great camp they set up at the site of El

Mango upriver from Salitrón. It had a great tree for slinging their hammocks next to the river, a rancho where a woman was willing to cook their food, and another rancho 30 minutes uphill where a woman sold warm beer. He also remembers that you could buy a bottle of cheap Caña Brava *guaro* there that was billed as a "chicken" for accounting purposes. As project directors, Gloria, George, and I were always concerned about the remoteness of our camps in case somebody got sick or injured. Remoteness, of course, is a relative term. Jeff Walker remembers that the archaeologists on the project, particularly Boyd Dixon, defined remoteness in a different way....as the distance to the nearest cold beer.

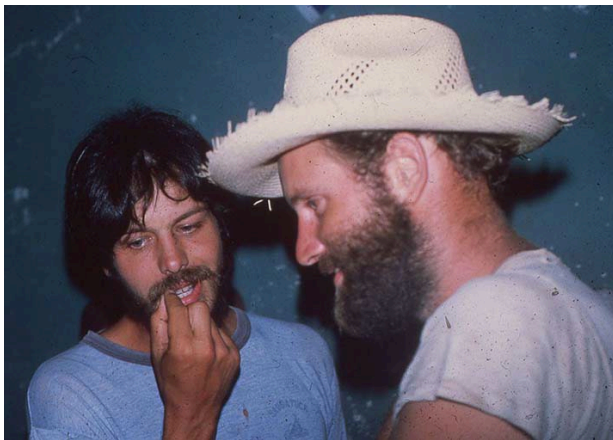


Figure 62: Mark Tucker and Boyd Dixon

But the regional testing crew made do, even when they had equipment losses. The project had several orange 50 m plastic tapes that were laid out and used for site mapping. One day the tape was laid out, and when the archaeologists went back to retrieve it, it was gone. Actually it had been dragged into the bush by a cow that decided it looked good enough to eat. And it did. Cows are ruminants that chew their cud, and by the time the archaeologists found the cow, it had already consumed a little over six meters of tape. After some concerted

pulling, they retrieved about three meters from the cow's stomach, leaving us with a 47 m tape. They searched cow pies for a couple of days but never found the other three meters. The 47 m tape, complete with a few green stains from cow chewing, continued in use for the rest of the project with the appropriate correction in measured distances being made. The orange tape must have looked tasty from the cow's perspective, or it was hungry enough to at least give it a try. I guess even the cows were looking for a more varied diet in El Cajón. Boyd also said that the cow also ate his profile that day. Or maybe that was one of those "dog ate my homework" days.

Notes from the Field

There are always memorable experiences and eye-opening occurrences in the course of conducting research in different countries around the world. While most were happy occurrences, some were sad. I remember seeing Honduran children with blond hair in a number of different places including Tegucigalpa. I asked how common that was and was told it was the unfortunate result of infant malnutrition. That was a condition I had not known about or seen in Mexico or Peru. There was one instance where a parent offered my wife and I one of their children if we could care for them and take them back to the United States. The reason was poverty and malnutrition. Likewise, one Sunday morning while walking to the lab in Comayagua, I saw a newborn child in a basket sitting on the steps of a nice house. I thought the mom had run inside to get something. Twenty minutes later when I returned, the child was still there, and people were talking about who had left the child. It was the old story of leaving your child on somebody else's doorstep, because you couldn't take care of it.

While malnutrition is present in some areas of Honduras, it was not a problem in El Cajón. There was enough land to cultivate and there was plenty of fish, wild game, and seasonal fruits to flush out the diet. People also raised chickens and pigs and, in many ways, had a better diet than the archaeologists. Gloria Lara also pointed out to me that some of the immigrant *judeoconverso* populations from colonial Spain were Christianized Sephardic Jews who phenotypically had fair skin, blond hair, and green or even blue eyes. Human variation is a beautiful thing, especially when it's the result of genetics and not a deficient diet.

A good memory is about one of the workers who I got to know well because he lived with his family at the end of the road above Salitrón Viejo. It was the Monday after our first payday and with a smile he asked me to guess what he did over the weekend. I made a few attempts, but never got close. He told me he had become a dentist. With his two-week salary he had bought an old pair of clamp-on pliers for pulling teeth and three bottles of *aguardiente* (white lightning) for anesthetic and had gone into business (Figure 63). Dentistry in the region consisted simply of pulling teeth. When I asked him if he had any customers over the weekend he said yes, but only for the *aguardiente*. I've always wondered about how much of his anesthetic was consumed without medical treatment. One way or another, it seemed like a worthwhile entrepreneurial investment.

All of our workers were respectfully curious about photographs. We took a lot of pictures of walls, floors, and burials to document the finds we made. We also wanted pictures of the archaeologists and workers engaged in the excavations. The goal of the photos was to provide a glimpse

of the work in action. It was amusing, therefore, that as we developed our pictures, we never got many pictures of workers working away. Instead, we had a lot of pictures of workers leaning on their shovels and dutifully looking into the camera (Figure 64). Everybody worked hard, but that wasn't captured in the photography. Everything came to a halt when the camera came out.

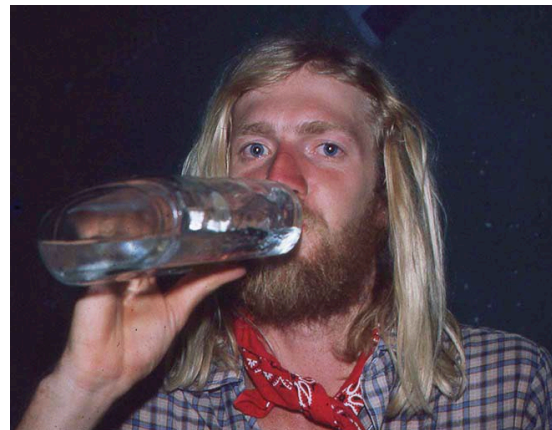


Figure 63: Paul Webb demonstrating the proper way to drink *aguardiente*



Figure 64: Workers at attention for the camera as Jeff and Vaughn worked at Guarabuqui

But out of every 100 workers, you will find a few who prefer to sit and watch instead of working diligently. There were a couple of these individuals at Salitrón Viejo, so as an experiment, we decided to pair

them together and put them in a spot where all they had to do was move rocks, and where their work could be monitored by a nearby archaeologist. The place we chose was the center of the Iglesia platform, a structure constructed largely of river cobbles the size of basketballs and watermelons. Although not complex, the work was tedious because the cobbles were heavy and with the sun shining down the rocks would heat up over the course of the day. They had only worked for about an hour, when they started shouting and waving their hands to come over. By some twist of fate, they had started to come down on the largest cache of jade artifacts ever recovered in the course of our investigations. A total of 1,304 artifacts were recovered in that deposit. Not only were the workers proud of their find, but it had a transformative effect on their outlook. They worked with enthusiasm thereafter (Figure 65). Like all archaeologists, they had been bitten by the discovery bug.



Figure 65: Two newly enthusiastic workers excavating jade

When we take a step back, it is hard to imagine what the local residents thought of us. We must have seemed a strange group of Hondurans and foreigners who arrived en masse to look for potsherds and to excavate old piles of rocks. People are always suspicious of strangers, and foreigners are not always to be trusted. One interesting myth that was told to kids was that foreigners had small “tails.” The way we liked to think of this misunderstanding was that archaeologist “told” tales, but didn’t actually have tails. This story may have been generated by parents to keep their kids away from strangers, which is completely understandable. What it seemed to do, however, was attract the few kids that lived in the area to sneak around and watch us bathe in the river. We must have been a disappointing spectacle because we usually wore our bathing suits when we ventured into the river.

One of the best story lines came out of the camp at La Ceiba where Julie Benyo was the supervisor. Her camp was at the end of the mule line and the most difficult to provision and pack out excavated materials. In the course of her excavations, she recovered 46 human skeletons that were buried in an around the house mounds where they had lived (Figure 66). Human bone is always fragile, especially in the tropics where acid rain can turn bone into the consistency of wet graham crackers. Julie’s solution was not to send the burials out on mules with other materials, but to store them on-site until they could be removed carefully without damage. As burials were excavated, bones were laid out on bags and aluminum foil, then moved into her tent. As the excavation progressed, her tent became somewhat crowded with her collection of skulls and long bones. And of course, she slept in her tent with them. Her workers

were always friendly, but they viewed her with deference and respect. Jorge Herrera, who worked at the site with Julie, said the workers thought of her as the “skeleton lady” (Figure 67). I don’t think they viewed the skeleton lady as a *bruja*, but I’m sure the workers had good stories to tell their kids.



Figure 66: A prehispanic burial from La Ceiba



Figure 67: Julie Benyo in repose. We might say sleeping with the dead because they are in there.

The site of Guarabuquí, supervised by Skip Messenger, had its own dynamic. The workers there were drawn from a remote settlement by the same name that was a two-hour walk or so up in the mountains. Guarabuquí had its own

interesting history. It was remote and had the reputation of being an area where individuals could flee to if they were pursued by the law. Whether that was true or not is unclear. But there was an unsettling dynamic to its population. The worker who had cut off his hand after being bitten by a fer de lance viper, as well as the man injured during the three-Lempira poker game were both from this area. An awareness that something special was afoot there occurred the second or third day in 1981 after the camp was established. We had hired a man named Calixto to be the foreman at Guarabuquí. Calixto was tall, rode a black horse, and had a pistol tucked into his belt. This, together with his well-spoken demeanor and his cowboy hat, projected an image of authority (Figure 68).



Figure 68: Calixto leaving for Guarabuquí

Well, on the second day after he was hired, he rode back into the main camp at Salitrón and said he needed somebody to

guard over him while he slept. He had passed the night with his pistol in his hand because the workers were all cut throats. Gloria Lara and George Hasemann, as regular IHAH employees, went down to the camp to “evaluate” the situation and everything seemed fine and he was just being paranoid. Later, however, Skip fired Calixto, after he was overheard telling the other workers to split open the head of one of the archaeologists. The threat was real enough that Jeff Walker went across the river to hide in the bush for several days until things quieted down and Calixto was replaced by a calmer crew chief, Daniel Ortega. While nobody got their throats cut, there remained an unsettling current around the camp. However, a side benefit of Daniel’s arrival was that he brought his wife along who worked as a cook. And she was an excellent cook (Figure 69).

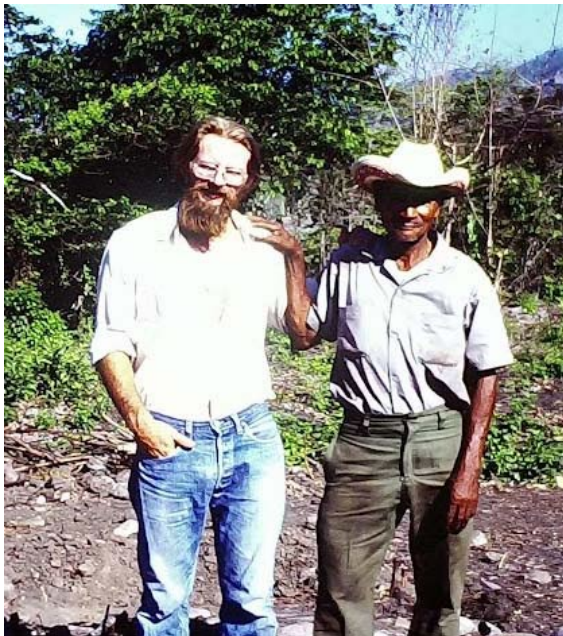


Figure 69: Jeff Walker and Daniel Ortega at Guarabúqui

It was mentioned above that the responsibility for making the payroll was turned over to the accountants in 1981.

Scheduling was always tight, but if workers were paid at Salitrón Viejo by mid-afternoon on Saturday, the accountants could still walk down river to Guarabúqui and La Ceiba by nightfall. It was on one of these Saturday afternoons that Jeff Walker went into his tent and overheard two workers talking in low tones about how they could head upriver, waylay the accountants, and steal the payroll! The subtleties of the conversation were not lost on Jeff, who had worked in Puerto Rico and spoke fluent Spanish. There was not much that could be done except to keep all the workers in camp until nightfall, when they unhappily left for home. As it happened, the accountants were so late that they didn’t show up until Sunday to face an unhappy crew. Whether the talk was just bravado or whether these two workers actually contemplated pulling off the robbery is unknown. But thinking forward to how they played poker, Jeff gave those workers his deck of playing cards at the end of the project as a sort of revenge dividend.

Project Directors can be a little Machiavellian, especially in the face of the unsettling emotions that young archaeologists can have when they travel and work outside the United States for the first time. We anticipated some culture shock, especially under the conditions we knew they would experience in the El Cajón region. But there was surprisingly little. To introduce the field crew to the region in 1981, everyone spent a couple of days doing survey to finish up some of the upland slopes that still needed to be covered. We knew this area would have few sites, and it could be reached by vehicle from La Libertad. Machetes were issued to everyone to clear bush, and small groups of new archaeologists led by experienced project members set out to survey. By the end of a

few days, one student was convinced that the terrain, the ticks, the heat, and the conditions were beyond his ability to endure and felt that he needed to return home. But he didn't share his sentiments with anyone until we had gotten everyone to the base camp at Salitrón and the project work was about to begin.

The dilemma, as I recall, is that the project vehicles had already left for Tegicigalpa, so there was no way to leave the zone until they returned with our new shipment of food and supplies. This would take at least a week because, as explained above, all purchases had to cost-compared and assembled by accountants. Also, there was the fact that everyone was needed for the work ahead and IHAH would not have understood why one archaeologist would want to leave before the work began. So a compromise was struck. We decided to team this individual with Skip Messenger and Jeff Walker, who were set to work at Guarabuquí. In addition to those two being very experienced archaeologists, Skip is naturally paternal. In fact, years later, his kindly and patient disposition won him the distinction of being named *Beloved Professor* by his students upon retirement from Hamline University. The instructions for the skiddish newbie were simple. Help set up the camp, and if he still was uncomfortable at the end of the week, just walk back to Salitrón and catch the next ride out.

Here is where a little divisiveness met practicality. We anticipated that it would take a little time for North American archaeologists to adjust to the living conditions in El Cajón. I felt that the stability of camp life together with the excitement of starting new excavations alongside two seasoned archaeologists would settle everyone's spirits. Guarabuquí

was a good three-hour walk downriver from Salitrón, and I figured if the student walked out on his own before our mules could return to resupply the camp in a couple of weeks, that would be an indication that it was time to return to the States. As it turned out, it just took getting settled in camp to restore enthusiasm for the research (Figure 70).



Figure 70: The crew at Guarabuquí

Spontaneous Occurrences

There were numerous small and spontaneous occurrences during the project that are some of our fondest memories. One of the most often recounted stories from the 1980 survey season has become memorialized with its own title. It is known as "George and the skunk." The El Cajón project was organized as a multi-disciplinary and ecologically oriented endeavor, which required the collection of seeds, types of wood, and animal bones that would be used as type collections to compare to the residues recovered in the excavations. There was no comparative collection of extant fauna in Honduras, so George Hasemann took on this task with a great deal of personal enthusiasm because he loved animals. He put the workers on the alert for animal carcasses, which were brought back to Salitrón Viejo and allowed to decompose

at a respectable distance (and mostly downwind) from camp.

Saturday afternoons always ushered in a day of rest and camp work on Sunday. It also was when alcoholic refreshments and cigars from Copan were broken out to accompany the good-natured card games and accompanying philosophical discussions. There was one Saturday evening that one memorable event occurred as a bottle of rum was being shared while playing cards. During the game George spotted a pair of luminous eyes walking through the camp. It was a skunk. With the bolstered confidence that rum can produce, he decided that it would make a great addition to the faunal collection, if not a camp pet. He decided to capture the skunk by deftly placing a large wash tub over it (Figure 71). Despite multiple protests and warnings from the other card players, he managed to trap the skunk under the wash tub, but the inevitable happened. He got sprayed.



Figure 71: George gets ready to play capture the skunk

Well, the skunk was not happy. By the time the card game broke up, the skunk had pushed the wash tub across the camp. George, feeling no pain and in an especially good mood from the refreshments, went to check on it and was sprayed a second time by the agitated animal. After putting rocks on the wash tub, everybody went to bed. However, instead of everyone sleeping together in the same tent, George was banished to the outdoors. That was bad enough, until the next morning when George, against everyone's energetic advice, went to check on the skunk and got sprayed a third time. At that point, the skunk was liberated and went on its merry way (Figure 72). There were no further attempts to add a skunk to our comparative faunal collection.



Figure 72: The skunk goes its merry way.

Another mysterious occurrence involved the case of a runaway mule. It occurred on a Saturday night, well into one of those festive card games, so those involved claim foggy memories. It was close to midnight when I retired from the game and went to bed. Suddenly there was

shouting that a mule had gotten out and was running through camp. The “eyewitnesses” claim that it ran right by my tent and, in the process, upended all tent pegs and poles, bringing it completely down. I classify this as a mystery, because I don’t recall that there were mules grazing near the camp that weekend. Now it is true that mules were crafty, had cranky temperaments, and could be revengeful. But everyone knows a mule is lazy and not efficient at tent raising. The eyewitnesses (George, Boyd, and John) said they went looking for the mule the next day, walking several hours up to the town of Montañulas. But the report that I got is that it actually was an expedition in search of finding cold beer.

There was a semi-surprise visit to Salitrón Viejo by the National Geographic Society in 1983. The word was they would “try” to stop in after their trip to Copán, the beautiful Maya site 125 km to the west. Well, they did arrive, but not by car. Instead they flew in on a helicopter (Figure 73). They had heard about the large quantity of jade that had been recovered in the Iglesia Precinct, which sparked their curiosity. I think they arrived expecting tall pyramids and magnificent sculpture, sort of the Central Honduran version of Copán. They arrived, looked around, and left disappointed. There were no magnificent sculptures, hieroglyphic stairways, reconstructed structures, or a museum with artifacts tastefully displayed. Instead they found a hot site loaded with ticks, no cold beverages, and eroded cobble structures that looked like piles of dirt and rock. It is easy to underestimate the non-Maya sites of Honduras, because they lack the tourist-worthy architecture of sites like Copán. But if there is one thing that the El Cajón project can teach us, it is the cliché not to judge a book by its cover. More jade has

been recovered from Salitrón Viejo than has been excavated from all the excavations at Copán. It speaks to the power of the ritual economy and how religion can motivate even small populations to undertake a tremendous amount of work to serve their communities and spiritual beliefs (see Hirth et al. 2023 for a more elaborate discussion of ritual economy at Salitrón Viejo).



Figure 73: National Geographic arrives by helicopter

Despite careful planning, sometimes the unanticipated occurs and things have to be dealt with as they come up. One such incident occurred at the very beginning of the 1980 field season as project members flew into the Tegucigalpa airport to begin the reservoir survey. While we usually picked people up at the airport, for some reason we did not meet the flight that John Yonk and Steve Wurzback were coming in on. It must have been a delayed flight. But we weren’t worried. Both had traveled internationally, and we gave instructions to everybody that if they were delayed to take a taxi to the Hotel Marichal where we were staying. And if we weren’t there, we would be eating at the El Patio restaurant one-half block away. Remember, this was the era of no cell phones or text messaging.

The El Patio restaurant prepared delicious beef and goat kebabs (*pinchos*) over an open flame. The kebabs had just arrived at our small group of assembled

archaeologists, when John and Steve arrived along with two members of the Federal immigration police. Steve was under arrest. To maximize luggage space, Steve had decided to dress in a well-pressed set of field cloths: khaki shirt, khaki pants, field boots, and bush hat. This was the time of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, and the military had been informed to be on the alert for suspicious military types. Steve was suspicious looking and did not have enough Spanish to be able to explain that he was not in the military. Instead, having an excitable personality, Steve tried to explain in his best Italian that he was working on a government project. Also suspicious. The situation was so unusual that the good-natured policemen decided to accompany Steve and John to the Hotel Marichal and/or the El Patio restaurant before taking him off to jail. They were happy to find us enjoying our kebabs and we got the matter straightened away. We offered to buy the policemen dinner, but they declined. Instead, they were content to simply enjoy a cold beer at an adjoining table. The lesson learned was that you can't prepare for everything. I wrote a "what to bring" list for the large group of archaeologists coming down for the 1981 field season and urged everyone to wear brightly colored tourist style clothes.

No moments were more enjoyable than the breaks from field work. After 20 days of heat, insect bites, limited food, and everything that went with living beyond the comforts of twentieth-century life, people were ready for a their eight-day break. Nobody seemed to mind that the travel time to their destinations could eat up anywhere from two to four days of their eight days off. If they decided to stay in La Libertad, that only would take up two days of their vacation. Any place beyond, like Tegucigalpa, San Pedro, or a visit to Copán

Ruinas would take a day or two more by bus. La Libertad had a small airport with a dirt runway and a four-passenger Cessna that was owned by a coffee company. Alex Rush became good friends with the pilot and negotiated a flight out to Utila in the Bay Islands that only took an hour instead of 10-12 hours by bus, plus additional time by boat. The price of the flight was worth the additional time on the beach (Figure 74).



Figure 74: The flight to Utila

But any place beyond La Libertad had hot showers and alternative food choices. The greatest selection of creature comforts could be found in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro. Hot showers were a blessing, but unless you stayed in a more up-scale (and expensive) hotel, your first "Brazilian" hot shower could be a little daunting. The reason was that hot water was produced by an electrified shower head (made in Brazil) that often had exposed wires hanging a few inches from the water. North Americans often took their first shower with a little fear that they might be electrocuted in the process. After all, didn't our mothers warn us not to stick our fingers and toys in electrical sockets?

One of the largest personnel groups on the project were students, faculty, and

contract archaeologists from Kentucky. In retrospect, the Kentucky contingent was larger than I realized during the project, since individuals joined and left the project intermittently over time. The members of this informal group are indicated in the table at the end of this memoir with an asterisk in front of their names. There were two reasons for this. First, I was teaching at the University of Kentucky and was able to evaluate the students' experience and ability to adapt to El Cajón living conditions firsthand. Second, there were a lot of similarities between the hill country of eastern Kentucky and the El Cajón region. I realized this during my first trip into eastern Kentucky to do some small CRM surveys with Steve Wurzback who had grown up there. I had no idea where we were half the time as we twisted through the mountain "hollers." But Steve had no problem reading the landscape and pinpointing our location on USGS quad maps. The Kentucky contingent understood something about being remote and working in conditions that lacked modern conveniences. Steve was impressed with the electrified shower heads found in most Honduran hotels. He asked me to bring one back to him so he could install in the house of a relative living in eastern Kentucky. They were sturdy gadgets, so it may still be operating somewhere.

One of the biggest attractions during days off and in town was getting access to a wider food selection. In Tegucigalpa, a real American breakfast with bacon and pancakes could be had at the Holiday Inn, which was a great way to start the day. The Astro Harmonico was a real (but expensive) 5-star restaurant with steaks and seafood. The Hotel Maya had fantastic club sandwiches and El Patio, as already mentioned, had an excellent grilled kababs.

Many a lunch or supper were finished off with a ice cream cone at Pops. And, of course, cold beverages were everywhere.

Honduras had many interesting places to see and visit on vacation breaks. Copán was one. Lake Yojoa had world-class bass fishing. The Bay Islands was another attraction. George Hasemann had spent several years living on the island of Utila in the Bay Islands and knew it well. While Utila was not a resort center like several of the other islands, it had beautiful beaches, swimming, fresh seafood, and hammocks to while away a few hours (or days) on the beach (Figure 75). The trips to Utila from the mainland were usually via local fishing boats (Figure 76) and George arranged several vacation expeditions over *Semana Santa* (Easter Holy Week), when work on the project stopped.



Figure 75: The beach on Utila

The trip to Utila in 1980 characterized how things could work. Archaeologists took a bus to the coast and George arranged passage to the island. He surveyed the wharf and found a working fishing boat that agreed to take the archaeologists to the island that evening once they loaded their return cargo: cement blocks. The fish from the trip in had been sold and the blocks were needed for a construction project back on the island. All

goods are cheaper on the mainland, so before the trip could be made, the cement blocks had to be loaded and spaced around the deck to balance their load for the trip out into the Atlantic. It was a simple three-step process. Load the maximum weight of blocks on the ship, sail the boat around the harbor to see how it handled, and if it didn't seem like it would sink or capsize, return to port to load more blocks and repeat.



Figure 76: Archaeologists traveling to Utila on a fishing boat

This took several hours, during which time the archaeologists sat on the wharf drinking cold beer. Once the maximum cargo of cement blocks was loaded, the archaeologists came on board. Only then, with the fishing boat loaded to the gunnels, did it set off for Utila. Steve Wurzback remembers that the boat rode so low in the water, that it was fortunate the archaeologist's courage had been bolstered by a large dose of *Salvavida* (life preserver) beer. But the fishermen knew their boat and how to handle it in the open sea. Of course, there were no actual life preservers anywhere to be seen on board beyond the *Salvavidas* they had already consumed. Although this form of transportation was not for the faint of heart, the short version of the trips to Utila was that a good time was had by all. One of the favored spots to visit was

bar called The Bucket of Blood. The name says it all for what it possessed in terms of local color.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the fieldwork was that, despite the logistic difficulties and lack of creature comforts, there were no serious personality conflicts or rampant complaining within the crew. Perhaps it was the result of everybody sharing the same hardships. Yes, there were complaints about the food and tent temperatures, but it was obvious to everyone what the limitations of our situation were and how hard people were working to keep the provisions coming in. Perhaps it was the stalwartness of youth. But looking back, one thing is certain, we left the field looking a bit bedraggled. All the guys were unshaven and our clothes were the worse for wear from being beaten on rocks to get them clean. The La Ceiba camp may have suffered the worst. Their clothes regularly were hung on barbed wire fences to dry after being washed. This led to the accumulation of multiple small holes in all their clothes (before it became fashionable). Julie Benyo pointed out that all her clothes were shot through with holes by the time she left the field, which we delighted in pointing out to her every time we spotted one (Figure 77).

Life in the Laboratory: La Libertad

As mentioned above, the project's initial laboratory was in the town of La Libertad. The space was rented from Sor Inez, a Catholic nun and nurse who used the space as an orphanage, pharmacy, and school for cast-off children. The space was shared. The laboratory occupied the bottom level, while the children remained in the upper floors. La Libertad was a good base of operations and it was where artifacts were sorted, washed,

cataloged, and stored as they came out of the field. In general, facilities in La Libertad were limited. The town lacked electricity and there was only one small *comedor* (restaurant), where a basic meal could be bought. Moreover, there were no hotels where archaeologists could stay in transit to and from the zone. And there was no room in the laboratory where all the archaeologists could work or write up the final reports of their excavations after they left the field. So to provide more workspace, the project rented two unfurnished houses that served as auxiliary dormitories and work areas. In his amicable style, George Hasemann put his carpentry skills to work and built all the tables, drying racks, and the bunks that the project needed from wood that could be bought locally (see Figures 45-46).



Figure 77: All our clothes were well worn by the end of the project including my own

A tremendous amount of processing went on in the La Libertad laboratory. Phyllis Messenger was the lab manager and she did a remarkable job keeping track of all the material that over 200 workers could excavate every week in the field (Figure 78). Materials had to be separated by site and excavation; ceramics and lithics had to be sorted and washed; all the organics

preserved; flotation and carbon samples registered; and finally, all the ceramics were counted, weighed, and cataloged on the back of the lot cards used in the field. It was an impossible task to keep up with the tidal wave of material coming in from the field. But somehow Phyllis managed it.



Figure 78: Archaeologists analyzing material in the lab's exterior corridor

Most of 1981 went by in a blur, but one incident in La Libertad stands out that July when we had returned from the field. I was walking to the lab when, much to my surprise, I spotted a jeep and two American military trucks in the town square. While most of the soldiers were sitting near their vehicles, there were a couple of young servicemen trying to set up a small satellite dish. Out of curiosity, I asked what they were doing and they told me they were trying to figure out where they were. I realize now they were trying to set up their GPS system, but in the moment, I figured they were just lost. In an effort to be helpful, I pointed to the small bus with the placard in the window that read "La Libertad" and told them that was where they were. Furthering my attempt at being helpful, I suggested to one of the non-commissioned officers that the easiest way to get back to Comayagua

was to follow that bus. I am sure they thought I was being a smart-ass.

In all fairness, they were just as surprised to find a Gringo walking through town in what they considered the middle of nowhere as I was finding the U.S. military there, so we struck up a conversation. I told them what we were doing and one of the soldiers was really interested and followed me to the lab. Unbeknownst to me, he was the regimental archivist. He took a couple photos of what we were doing that day, which included washing and sorting through the contents of one of the few intact polychrome vessels recovered from Salitrón Viejo (Figures 79-80). Several of those photos and our activities are now registered as part of the Ronald Reagan national library, since the U.S. military presence in Honduras during the Sandinista years was part of his legacy as president. The lesson from that is you never know when the government is watching you.



Figure 79: David Lentz cleaning excavated offerings from a polychrome vase in the lab

La Libertad was a comfortable and relaxing place to come back to after being in the field. But like the field, it lacked electricity. This meant that any report writing needed to be done during the day, by a window or outside under a roofed portico. The pace of life was set by the rising and setting of the sun. Once the sun was down,

most people were at home and if you had to walk the streets at night it was with flashlight in-hand. The exception was going to the movies. There was one theater in town that had a generator. So, when there was a film available, the generator would be started, theater lights would turn on, and people would go to the movies after dark. I don't remember what movies I saw there, but any movie was a diversion.



Figure 80: Ken Hirth explaining to the soldiers what we were doing. The vase from Figure 79 is on the table.

Several things stand out about going to the movies beyond whatever they were showing. The first was that they also had a popcorn machine that worked, so that was a treat in-and-of-itself. The second was the ingenious technique they used to improve the acoustics in the theater made of cement block. To reduce echoes, they pasted a continuous layer of egg cartons across its ceiling. Not only was it an interesting innovation and sight to behold, but it worked pretty well. Third and finally, the solemnity of the town was striking once the movie let out around 9:00 or 9:30 pm. Dusk in Honduras occurs around 7:00 pm during the summer, because the sun is further to the north. It was remarkable to walk back to our rooms at night because of how absolutely quiet the town was at that hour. Most of the town was in bed and already fast asleep.

La Libertad also had a communal swimming pool that provided a good opportunity to cool off on hot days. It was fed by the river, so you swam in the company of small fish that liked to nibble on your legs when you stood still. It was like being back in the field (Figure 81).

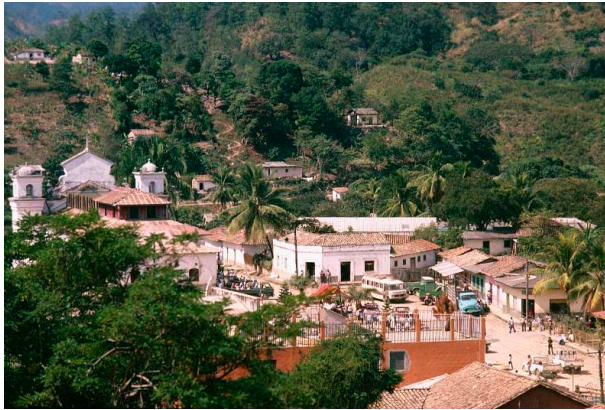


Figure 81: The town of La Libertad

La Libertad on the whole was very peaceful and tolerant of outsiders who periodically showed up in town and walked the streets. I am sure people were curious about who we were, but there were no incidents of belligerence or hostility shown to any outsiders. Some of this may have been due to seasonal labor patterns and the need for receiving non-local workers each year during the coffee harvest. But we certainly tipped the scales on the strange side of the ledger. The only time I witnessed any hostility was on Holy Saturday (also called Easter Vigil) in 1981 when I had come back early from our break during Semana Santa. There were two religious groups in La Libertad: Catholics which made up the majority of the population and a group of evangelical protestants. It was shades of the Reformation all over again. Processions and walking the saints are an important part of Catholic religious celebrations and one was in process. The

evangelicals had gathered in chairs in front of their houses along the procession way with every battery powered boom-box and radio they owned playing heavy metal rock music to disrupt the passersby. Those in the procession were stoic, and maybe a few requests were made for respect or to lower the music. While there likely were some resentments, it seemed like something on the order of a passive-aggressive theological debate.

Toleration was a standard in La Libertad. This became clear when Susan and I were invited to have lunch with the town's two Catholic priests. We had never met them, but we definitely could not turn down lunch. Neither was from Honduras. The head priest was a robed Franciscan from Malta, who had taken a vow of poverty. The assistant priest was a displaced Afro-American priest from the south side of Chicago, who had been "sentenced" (his words) to a two-year "apprenticeship" to learn humility. He indicated that he had **not** taken the vow of poverty. It was an unlikely pair. The Chicago priest did **not** speak Spanish, but he was given the responsibility of writing and reading prewritten homilies (sermons) in Spanish on Sundays in outlying parishes in the mountain towns where he officiated over Mass. I can only envision how humbling and effective (or ineffective) that was. But he was a great conversationalist in English, happy to have a couple of North Americans to talk with for a change. While neither Susan or I can recall what we talked about, we keenly remember the mountain of delicious fried chicken that was set before us (and we consumed). Vows of poverty aside, we can testify to the fact that they did not extend to lunch.

One very popular spot in La Libertad that I am sure most of the archaeologists remember with fondness was Estela's bar,

which we found in the summer of 1981 after we were finished in from the field. I asked Paul Webb if he remembered where it was after more than 40 years since his last visit and he said, “Sure, you walk down the hill, go past the abandoned Toyota Landcruiser station wagon and it is on the left.” Calling it a bar does Estela’s a disservice. It was too friendly, well run, and was more like sitting in the front room of her house (which was the case). It felt like a place where adult beverages were served by your favorite elementary school teacher who knew all the boys growing up and would not allow any misconduct or bad behavior. That was Estela’s. It had a pool table and she served aguardiente and cold beer from her kerosene refrigerator when it was operating. You were welcome to drink, but disorderliness was not allowed.

It became a favorite place to go in the hope of finding the refrigerator working (Figure 82). Estela was always friendly except for the first time we showed up with the idea of drinking beer and playing cards. Then she gave us her stern face and said she would not tolerate fighting or gambling. We understood her sentiment and told her we were playing cribbage and gin rummy. We promised not to play poker and gamble. We may have played for the cost of refreshments, but there was no money on the table. With that, her normal welcoming smile returned. It became our favorite place. And beyond drinks, we loved her snacks. She made a few *boquitas* on a stove, but what we especially loved were the packets of saltine crackers and little cans of jalapeño peppers that she sold. The peppers were exactly what we needed to wake up our taste buds. We consumed more cans of them in a weekend than Estela usually sold in a month.



Figure 82: Ken Robinson talking with Estela

The Move to Comayagua

The archaeological laboratory eventually was moved to the newly formed regional museum in Comayagua, where both storage and analysis spaces were available without charge in a rehabilitated Colonial building. The years of processing artifacts in La Libertad had built up a huge volume of materials and the task of moving archaeological collections to this new facility was monumental. We put in a request to the U.S. military stationed at the Palmerola Air Base and to our delight, got some assistance to help with the move. They supplied four, two-and-a-half ton trucks and two jeeps, and helped transport tons of material and equipment to museum storage over several days (Figure 83). They used the move as a training exercise, and it wasn't until all of the collection was moved that we realized the enormity of the analysis that awaited us.

Comayagua was a modern city with a population of about 125,000 people. It was the country's original capital founded in 1537. It had a number of important modern amenities for the researchers doing analysis there. It had electricity, a theater (also with popcorn) and a few good restaurants. The only issue in the theater was that mice and possibly rats would scurry across the floor

looking for stray bits of popcorn between your feet. As a result, it was considered OK to put your feet up on the seat in front of you. There was always room to do so.

Comayagua also had a basketball court, so that the lab crew regularly engaged in pickup games after work and on weekends with the local kids. We may have been tall and could shoot, but we were still old and slow.



Figure 83: The US military vehicles moving the laboratory to Comayagua

Comayagua, like most communities in Honduras, was composed of permanent residents. The result was that there were no apartments for rent in the 1980s and most houses with cooking and toilet facilities were occupied. This meant we had to take advantage of available housing opportunities when we found them. Mary Spink Neumann, who did the ground stone analysis, slept on a cot in the old office of the Comayagua museum. One night bats came in through the ceiling. When a snake slid in under the door, Mary dispatched with the heel of her boot. Taking a shower was a daily expedition for Mary. The shower was a water pipe sticking out of the wall in the bodega storage area. To take a shower she had to go out the front door of the museum, walk around the block to the back of the bodega, lock herself in, take a cold shower,

and then reverse the process to return to her room. Hair washing was done in the courtyard *pila* to avoid drawing attention to her daily showering habits. We rented rooms wherever we could find them. During the summer of 1986, Susan and I rented a room above a bar that previously had been used for “other nightly entertainments.”

Fortunately, it had a cement floor so that when gunfire erupted on the floor below, stray bullets would stay there. Likewise, we never got any knocks on the door late at night (that we heard). Furnishings in that room consisted solely of a bed. Halfway through the summer the termites that lived in the bedpost swarmed and we awoke to the sound of hundreds of male termites buzzing around the room. Susan and I spent a good portion of the night killing flying termites. It reminded me of a scene from the novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Comayagua was home to the Palmerola Air Base, which became operational in 1981 with the U.S. involvement in the Sandinista conflict. By 1985, this had a few small, but indirect, benefits for the town. The presence of American GI's led to several new restaurants opening, which we took full advantage of. One house restaurant had a large TV and a VCR where you could actually enjoy “dinner with a movie” on the weekends when it was open. Unfortunately, the air base discouraged interaction with the community. The GI's started having local women wash their clothes, which were hung out to dry on the barbed wire around the air base. Besides putting small holes in the fatigues, the base commander thought this looked unsightly, so clothes washing was banned. Soldiers sometimes got sick over the weekends, which was blamed on eating in town. The GI's liked the restaurants and said the food was fine. The bigger problem,

they felt, was the extensive partying that soldiers engaged in during their weekend down time. So eating in town also was discouraged, even if the purpose was to just get a cold beer off base. Both issues were solved, in the commander's eye, by flying all the soldiers' dirty clothes from Palmerola back to Florida on C-130s to be washed there. And the cold beer problem was remedied by the return flights (referred to as the beer run), which brought multiple skids of American beer from the States every day. It was a tremendous waste of money and a lost opportunity for improving the local economy and interjecting a little good will into the community.

The air base eventually did provide one benefit for Susan and me as we analyzed material in Comayagua. A group of U.S. civilian contractors employed at Palmerola who understandably did not want to live on base with their families. Instead, they wanted to live off-base in reasonably modern accommodations. The result was that one enterprising Honduran businessman constructed a small apartment building that rented a few comfortably furnished apartments with a stove and refrigerator to foreigners. This was the lap of luxury. The contractors were American aviation mechanics that serviced "special" non-military aircraft. What comes to mind during the Sandinista years in Central America? They or their spouses were always willing to visit with other Americans, and through various direct and indirect references it was clear that they were employed by the CIA. Politics aside, they were great people. They also were our entree to a new food universe through the American Commissary LLC on the Palmerola Air Base. This meant that we no longer had to ration the few imported Snickers bars that we sometimes got through contacts at the American embassy.

The laboratory in the Comayagua museum was a great place to work, once you got used to the bats. The laboratory was in a huge Colonial building that was a large enough to hold all the shelving needed for the tons of project materials. The downside of the facility was that it also was the home of a colony of about 200 bats that lived in the upper rafters of the bodega. They didn't bother us during the day, except to poop on the boxes of archaeological material stored there. This was less than salubrious, so it helped to hold your breath and work fast when retrieving a box of the material you wanted for analysis. We tried to keep the material as clean as possible by covering the upper shelves with collapsed boxes that collected the bulk of "bat rain." But the most glorious part of the facility was the wide-roofed Colonial colonnade that extended around the north side of the building. We conducted several happy years of ceramic analysis there between 1985 and 1989, working on tables during the day with great outdoor light (Figure 84). We made it a point to close down the analysis as the light started to fade because a cloud of bats would emerge from the bodega just after dusk.



Figure 84: Ken Hirth and Mike Mucio working on ceramics under the colonial portico

In Retrospect

I am proud of the work that the project accomplished over the course of our field work years. And I am more proud of what project members have gone on to accomplish in their many faceted personal and professional lives. Gloria Lara-Pinto is professor at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán. A number of individuals pursued employment in academic institutions, others worked in museums or entered the CRM arena. A few others continued to work in cultural preservation through the U.S. National Parks and Forest Services. Still others moved from archaeology to other professional pursuits. The list of their accomplishments is too long to include here. But it has been substantial.

One of the great things is how well everybody got along under difficult conditions in the field. As one project member said in retrospect, “it was lovely how tight the crew was.” That pretty much summed up how the project operated. Yes, people worked together. But a good number of friendships also were forged during that period. One thing that I tried to do in recruiting project members was to paint an absolutely gruesome picture of the hardships that could be expected if they joined the project. I think from there people self-selected and we only got individuals who enjoyed the adventure, were self-reliant, and wanted to do something different in archaeology. But we all quickly realized that the project needed all hands on deck to operate. I know I couldn’t have directed the project without George and Gloria, and the other archaeologists with supervisory responsibilities. The El Cajón project was truly a team effort.

I often shake my head when I hear my colleagues (archaeologists included) in the States complain about the conditions

they work under. Things like the air conditioning isn’t working well in one of the labs, or the computers in the department are two years old and that somehow is a determining factor in their productivity. It makes me tired. But I do like to reflect on how we could have done things differently if we were all young and were starting the project now. We still would have the remoteness to deal with, but modern technology would have alleviated some of the problems. Satellite phones would have made communication smoother with Tegucigalpa, and solar recharging stations would have made it possible to use laptop computers in the field. And there would be wider food choices in the stores for us to buy. But we still would have had accountants and would have had to rely on mules for moving things within the zone.

Retrospectives also have regrets. The loss of project funding after 1981 had a devastating impact on the project in two ways. First, while the project was able to achieve most of the original fieldwork objectives, the lack of funding drastically impeded the scale of the laboratory analysis that could be completed. Most of the analysis had to rely on external grants and fellowships and there weren’t sufficient funds for all the specialty lab work and dating that was needed. Second, there was no funding to publish the results of the project in Honduras, as our original contracts required. While we would like to think otherwise, academics have to publish or they will perish. Without that outlet or opportunity, professional academics cannot dedicate a lot of volunteer time to analysis if they can’t publish the results.

But the greatest of my regrets is losing contact with people after they left the project. Some people were easier to stay in contact with if they used project materials as

part of their PhD dissertations (e.g. Julie Benyo, Craig Goralski, George Hasemann, David Lentz, William Loker, Lewis/Skip Messenger) or MA theses (Charles Norville, Malinda Stafford-Blustain), or continued to work in Honduras on other projects (Edward Schortman, Patricia Urban). But several of those who worked during the large 1981 field season dropped out of sight as the project struggled to keep going after the funding was restricted. But even sadder are the number of former project members who are no longer with us. George Hasemann died in 1998. Others who have passed away include Emilio Aguilar, Randy Fouts, Mike Mucio, Ildefonso Orellana, and Vito Véliz to name a few (Figures 85-86). I fear that there are more, since we have been unable to track down a number of former project members to include their remembrances in this memoir. If there is a fault to CRM-focused archaeology, it is often on getting the job done within budget and on time. Personnel are also important to do that, but after the work is done it is easy to lose track of people as they move on to other projects.



Figure 85: Emilio Aguilar typing a report in Salitrón Viejo



Figure 86: George Hasemann and Ildefonso Orellana having a beer in La Libertad

I look back on the El Cajón project with fond memories of the challenges met and the lessons learned. Many of the project members that I still have contact with feel the same. Others may have a mix of different memories and that is an opportunity for more interesting tales and just-so stories of archaeological adventures in Central Honduras.

Kenneth Hirth, Director
The El Cajón Archaeological Project
1979-present

Acknowledgements

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Members of the Proyecto Arqueológico El Cajón

Directors

Kenneth Hirth	Director (1979 to date)
Gloria Lara-Pinto	Subdirector (1981 to date)
Vito Veliz	Subdirector (1980)
George Hasemann	Field Director (1982 to 1998)

Archaeologists

Diane Ballinger	Human Osteology
Brian Bauer	Survey
Julie Benyo	Excavation Supervisor
Boyd Dixon	Excavation
Randy Fouts*	Survey, Laboratory Supervisor
Thomas Fouts*	Laboratory
John Hansen*	Survey

Archaeologists

Susan Grant Hirth*	Excavation, Flotation
George Hasemann	Survey & Excavation Supervisor
Jorge Herrera	Excavation Supervisor
Kenneth Hirth	Excavation Supervisor
Gloria Lara-Pinto	Excavation Supervisor
William Loker	Excavation Supervisor
Lewis Messenger	Excavation Supervisor
Phyllis Messenger	Laboratory Supervisor
Mike Mucio*	Laboratory
Kazuo Okamura	Excavation
Scott O'Mack*	Excavation
Ildefonso Orellana	Excavation, Laboratory Analysis
John Picklesimer*	Laboratory
Jonathan Pollack*	Excavation
Kenneth Robinson*	Excavation Supervisor
Alex Rush	Excavation, Topography
Edward Schortman	Survey
Russel Sheptak	Excavation
Jorge Silva	Excavation
Vaughn Skidmore	Excavation
Sandy Stevens	Survey
Mark Tucker	Excavation
Patricia Urban	Survey
Jeff Walker	Excavation
Paul Webb*	Excavation
John Yonk*	Survey, Excavation
James Young*	Excavation

Archaeological Assistants

Emilio Aguilar	Excavation
Isabel Fugón	Laboratory
Sid Hisle	Laboratory
Rigoberto Lanza	Excavation
Sally Loker	Flotation
Albina Mendoza	Laboratory
Zoila Rodríguez	Laboratory

Specialized Analyses

Rani Alexander	Fauna
Marilyn Beaudry	Material Sourcing
Julie Benyo	Ceramics, Mortuary Analysis
Ronald Bishop	Material Sourcing
Gina Buckley	Human Osteology
Ana Mara Carias	Ceramic Reconstruction
Maynard Cliff	Ceramics
Michael Collins*	Geoarchaeology
Dennis Coskren*	Geology
Brendan Culleton	AMS Dating
Ann Dowd	Technical Illustration
Larry Feldman	Malacology
Steve Ferguson	Material Sourcing
Eric Fernandez*	Fauna
Alejandro Figueroa	Obsidian Sourcing
George Hasemann	Obsidian Hydration
Kenneth Hirth	Ceramics, Jade, Lithics
Kacey Hirth	Statistics
Susan Hirth*	Ceramics, Jade
Emily Kate	Mortuary Analysis
Nedenia Kennedy	Ceramic Lab Supervisor
Gloria Lara-Pinto	Ethnohistory
David Lentz	Ethnobotany
Taylor Lenz Cliff	Technical Illustration
William Loker	Modern Landuse
José Luis López Nol	Museum Exhibits
Russel Meigs	Botanical Taxonomy
Charles Norville*	Geoarchaeology
Cynthia Ott	Technical Illustration
Alex Rush	Topography
Jerrel Sorenson*	Lithics: Flaked Stone
Mary Spink	Lithics: Ground Stone
Malinda Stafford*	Ethnoarchaeology
Rebecca Storey	Human Osteology
Daniel Wolfman	Obsidian Hydration
Steve Wurzback*	Survey, Topography

*University of Kentucky

Photo Gallery



Figure 87: Ken Hirth laying out excavation grids in the Iglesia Precinct at Salitrón Viejo



Figure 89: Gloria and George were a great research team. They also were married and were a great matrimonial team

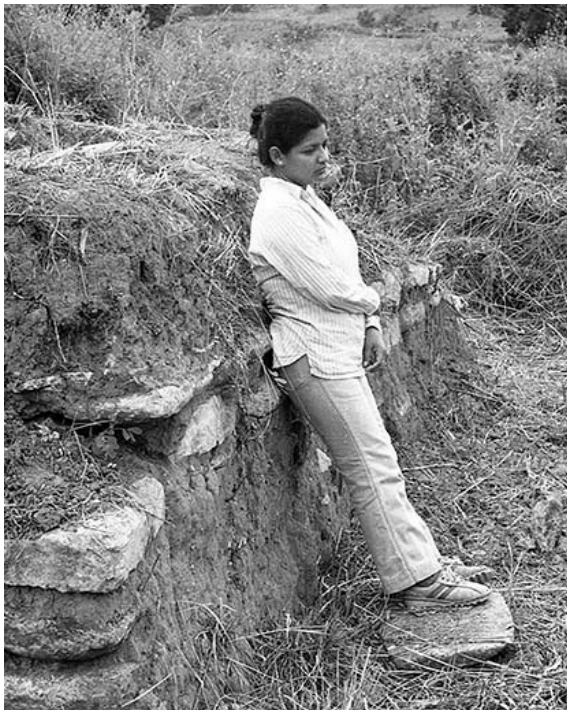


Figure 88: Gloria Lara deep in thought during the visit to Meambar to recover a rock face stela. She is wondering about what a structure with cut stone architecture in Yoro means.

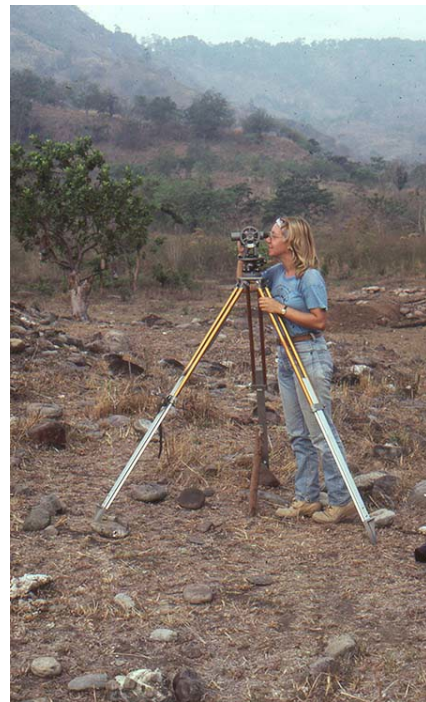


Figure 90: Julie Benyo doing some transit work at the site of La Ceiba



Figure 91: Skip Messenger and Alex Rush at the river at Guarabugui



Figure 94: Bill Loker in excavations in the West Plaza at Salitrón Viejo



Figure 92: Phyllis Messenger paying workers in the laboratory at La Libertad



Figure 95: Sally Loker cataloguing materials in the Salitrón base camp



Figure 93: David Lentz demonstrating a shoe pot vessel in the laboratory at La Libertad



Figure 96: Boyd Dixon on the guitar at the end of a field season



Figure 97: Ken Robinson excavation jade caches on the summit of Structure 1 at Salitrón Viejo



Figure 98: Ken Hirth excavating jade at Structure 12. Notice the jade ring on his left hand. The workers thought we were going to make rings out of the jade.

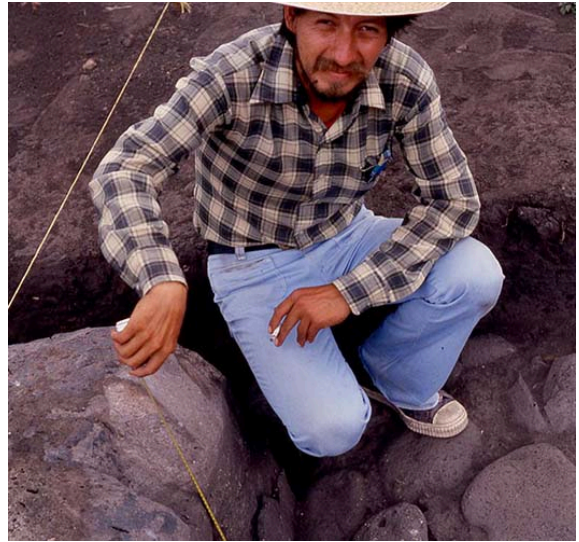


Figure 99: Jorge Silva excavating Altar 1 in the Iglesia Precinct at Salitrón



Figure 100: Alex Rush excavated and mapped areas at Salitrón, Guarabuquí, and La Ceiba



Figure 101: Susan Hirth in excavations at Salitrón Viejo



Figure 102: Jonathon (Bomba) Pollack in resting at Salitrón



Figure 103: John Yonk, George Hasemann, and Brian Bauer playing cribbage after work

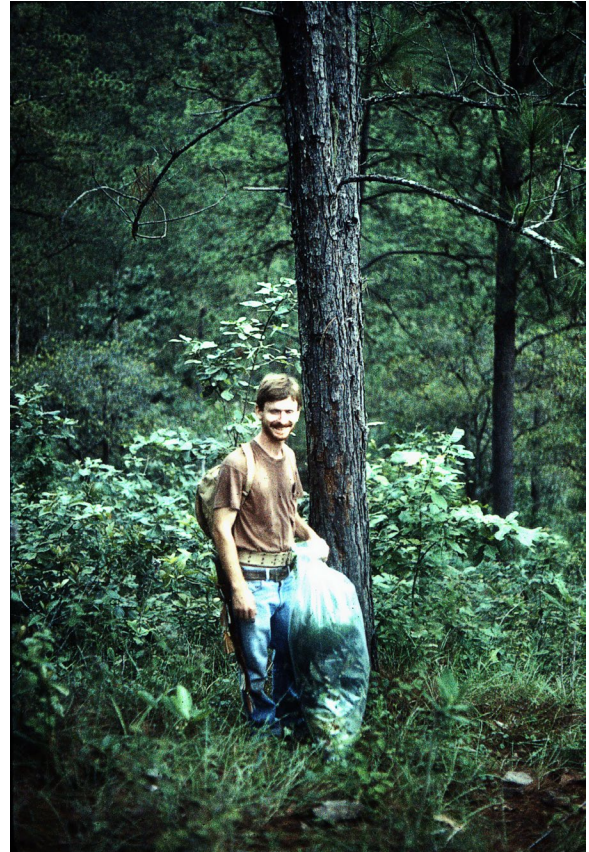


Figure 104: Russel Meigs worked with David Lentz on the regional botanical survey



Figure 105: C. Earle Smith and Bob Hayes, consulting botanists who worked with David Lentz on the regional botanical survey

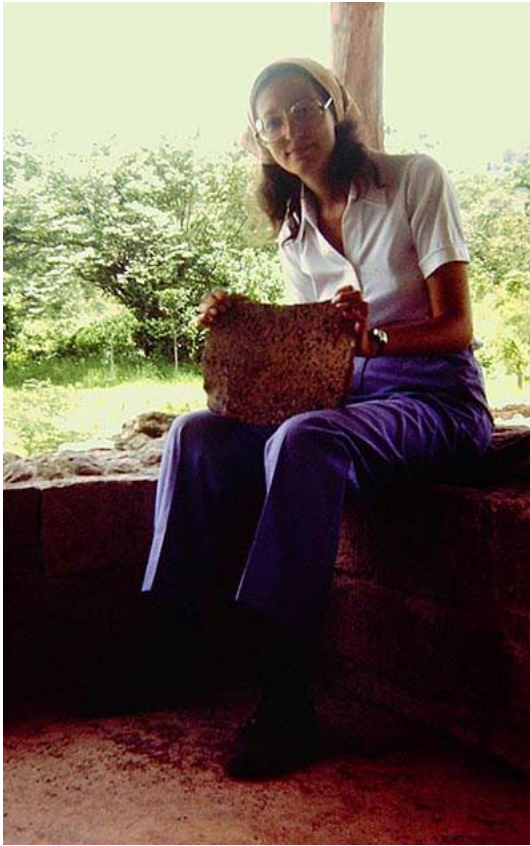


Figure 106: Mary Spink Neumann conducted an excellent study of ground stone artifacts in both El Cajón and in Copán



Figure 108: Scott O'Mack worked with Julie Benyo at La Ceiba and is shown here in the laboratory in La Libertad

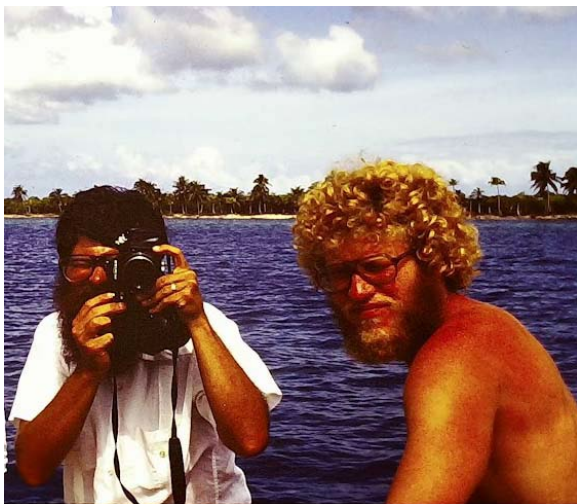


Figure 107: Oh those sunny days on Utila. Vaughn Skidmore is shown here with Skip Messenger enjoying their vacation



Figure 109: A group of the archaeologist who worked at Salitrón. From the left: Mark Tucker, Jorge Silva, Ken Robinson, Paul Webb, Bomba Pollack and Bill Loker



Figure 110: Mark Tucker, Ken Robinson, and David Lentz at a party with their host in Montañuelas



Figure 112: Gloria and Jorge Silva contemplating a meager breakfast at La Libertad



Figure 111: Everyone was hungry after work. Here Emilio, Jeff, Alex, and Vaughn dive in at Guarabuquí



Figure 113: Another picture courtesy of the Ronald Reagan archive. Ken took over the ceramic analysis after the move to Comayagua



Figure 114: Brian Bauer and John Yonk clearing bush in the early days of survey in 1980



Figure 116: Jeff Walker at work at Guarabuquí



Figure 115: Rigoberto Lanza at Structure 12, Salitrón Viejo



Figure 117: Brian Bauer relaxing at the Hotel Marichal in Tegucigalpa (on his break from the field)



Figure 118: The archaeologists and great field crew at Salitron Viejo in 1981 on payday



Figure 119: Alex Rush setting out on survey with a worker

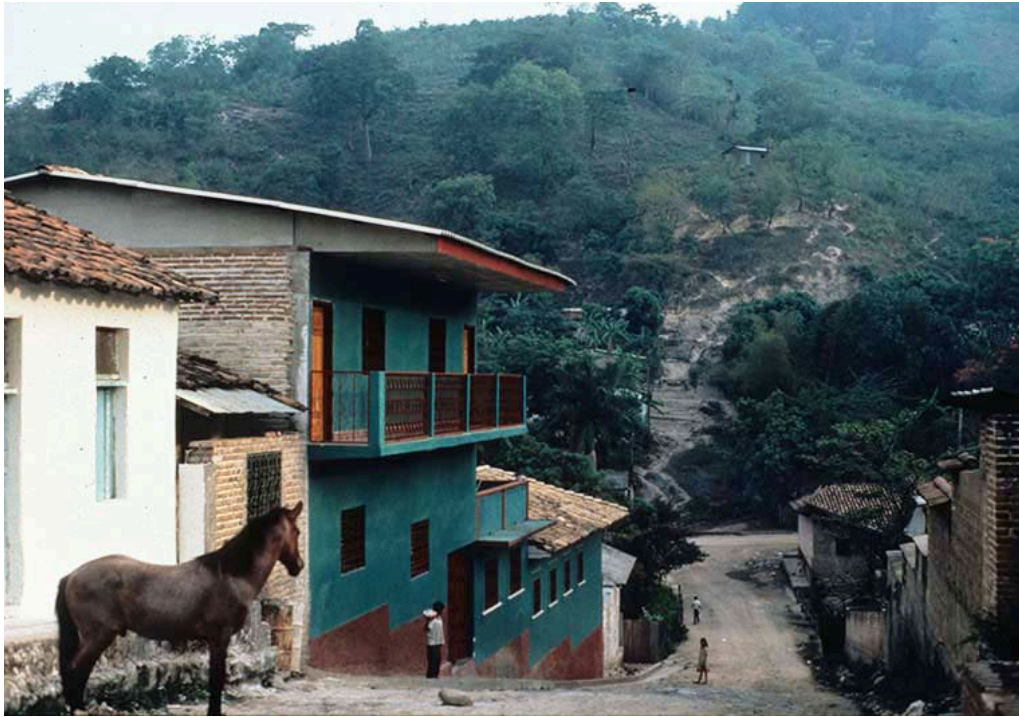


Figure 120: A final look at La Libertad. It was our jumping off spot for working in El Cajón



Figure 121: And most of all a Thank You to the great people of Honduras who were always kind and gracious