

Land of Extremes

QUESTIONS? Contact Local Content Editor Richard Montenegro Brown at rbrown@ivpressonline.com or 760-337-3453.

EDITOR'S NOTE A series of stories on the history of man in our desert and the efforts of the Imperial Valley Desert museum to tell that story will run through October, replacing the Teen page until a new crop of interns return in the fall connected to the IVHigh journalism program.

WATER IS THE KEY TO LIFE

Intact Fabian olla

tells the story of ancient man, water

BY NEAL V. HITCH | Special to this Newspaper

Water is the key to life in the Imperial Valley. Knowing where the water is, and how to get it, is literally the difference between life and death.

If you moved across the desert 400 or 500 years ago, having a secret water stash might be a good idea. At the time, the ancient Lake Cahuilla that filled the Valley was drying out, and new ways of accessing water on a long journey had to be found.

Native peoples commonly placed olla caches of food and water along the major trails between the Colorado River and the coastal mountain ranges.

By the 1970s it was well known that many such ollas had been found in Imperial County, but they had been removed by private collectors. In 1977, an archaeologist working for the Imperial Valley Desert Museum and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management excavated the first fully documented olla water cache and provided clear evidence of the human adaptation to a changing environment.

In February 1977, Leonard Fabian, a planner with the city of Imperial, discovered an archaeological site near the Fishcreek Mountains.

Fabian found several large potsherds in the bank of a wash that was severely eroded owing to Hurricane Kathleen.

He alerted G.J. Bianchi, from the Imperial Valley Desert Museum, and Boma Johnson, a BLM archaeologist, both of whom went to investigate.

Bianchi and Johnson found a cache of two large ollas buried in a crevice in the side of the wash.

One olla had been crushed by shifting rocks, but one was fully intact. As the BLM representative, Bianchi determined that the site was in danger from both additional erosion and off-highway vehicles.

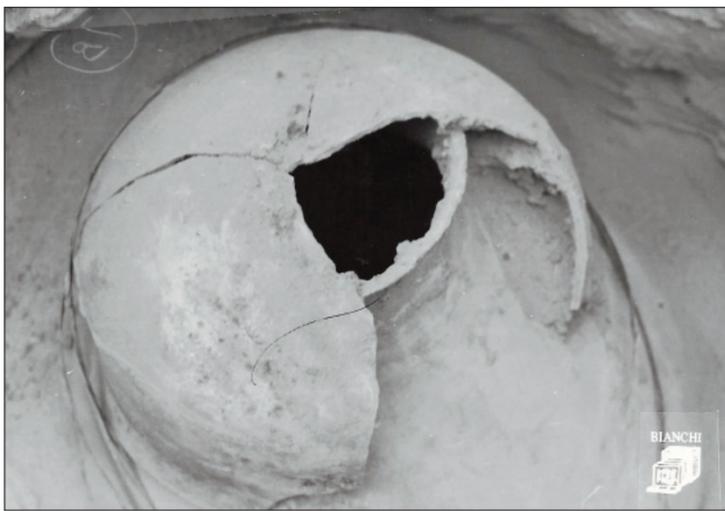
He decided to excavate and remove the ollas.

The excavations revealed one of the best-preserved olla water cache sites ever documented. The site contained two large ollas both buried as a future source of water.

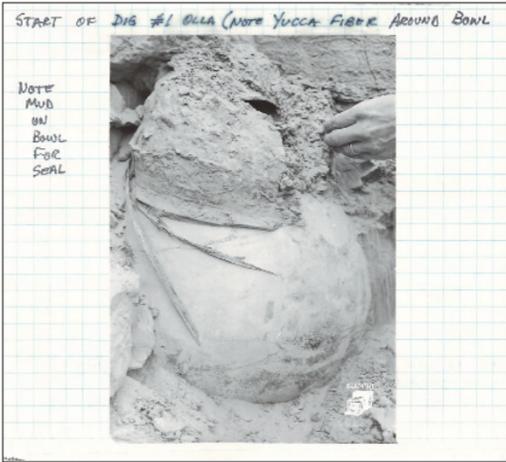
The people who buried the ollas carefully placed them into two divots carved out of the rock of a sandstone shelf.

Then they packed soft sand around the ollas.

After being filled with water, each olla was

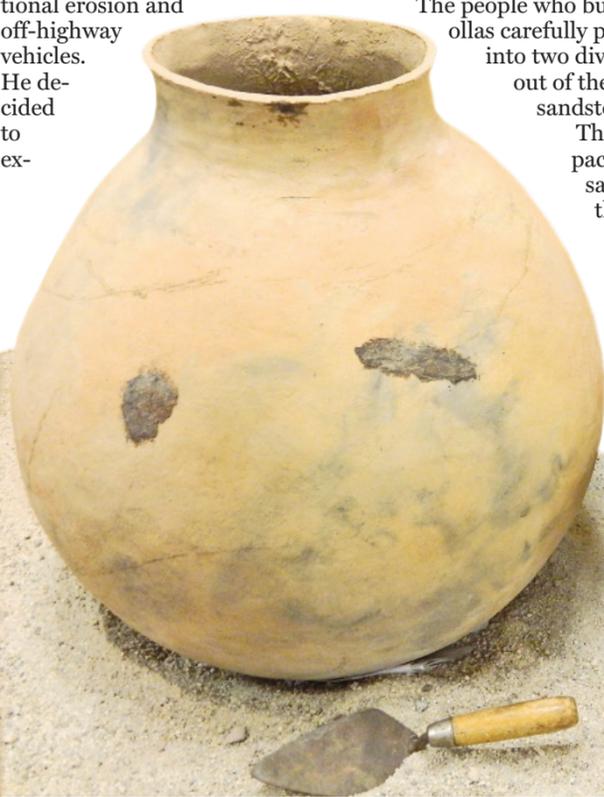


ABOVE: Ceramic bowl used as a cap to seal water inside. **RIGHT:** Page from the Bianchi field book with picture of olla prior to excavation.

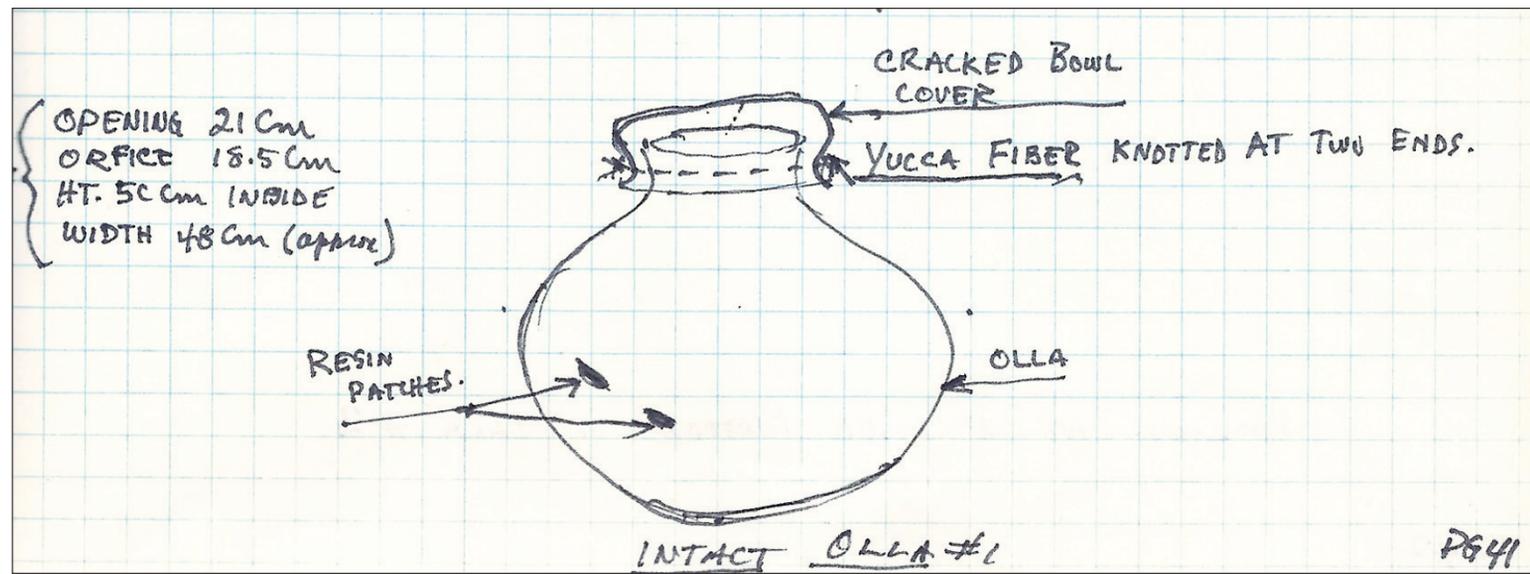


BELOW: Water cache olla at the Imperial Valley Desert Museum was removed from storage on July 8 and shown for the first time since 1999.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM



Drawing and notes from the Bianchi field book. PHOTO COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM



PHOTOGRAPHS, DRAWINGS, MAPS



Guido Bianchi with the water cache olla at the IVC Museum in 1977. PHOTO COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM

Documenting the desert provides connection with past

BY NEAL V. HITCH
Special to this Newspaper

Just a few weeks ago the “Fabian” olla was an artifact without a story. The olla existed in the collection at the museum, but the information about where it had come from was missing.

The re-discovery of G.J. Bianchi’s field notebook with notes and photographs that recorded the excavation changed that.

The story highlights how valuable first-person records are to a museum collection.

Photographs, drawings, maps and handwritten records describing an archaeology site all contain essential information that allows a story to remain with an artifact.

The field books of archaeologists and archaeology students that we have catalogued at the Imperial Valley Desert Museum are helping us to tell the story of the Imperial Valley College’s archaeology collection and the people who were so passionate about the archaeology of the Imperial Valley.

We do not have everything our local archaeologists wrote. For example, we have no papers or field books written by Jay von Werlhof, Michael Barker or Morlin Childers.

All three of these men were instrumental in building the original Imperial Valley College Desert Museum in El Centro.

We do have many of the field books of the students and assistants that von Werlhof brought to dig sites, such as Stacy Vellas, Dollie Champagne, Joe A. Vogel and Pat Welch. As we work to connect the notes they left us with artifacts in our collection, we are developing a more complete picture of how people lived in balance with the desert.

Sometimes field notes are the only information available about an artifact.

They do not tell the whole story, but for some artifacts it is the only story left.

Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum.



Field notebooks in the archives at the Museum. PHOTO COURTESY OF IMPERIAL VALLEY DESERT MUSEUM