Intact Fabian olla tells the story of ancient man, water

By Neal V. Hitch | Special to this Newspaper

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ater 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 boat of water might as well be a good idea. At the time, the ancient Lake Tulare in California that filled the Valley was dry, 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 none 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 cache water site 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 archaeologist’s site near the Farmersville 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 ROM 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 they were working, Johnson determined that the site contained two large ollas both buried as a future source of water.

The people who buried the ollas cuidadosely placed them into two deep caves cut out of the rock of a sandstone cliff. Then they packed soft sand around the ollas. After having filled with water, each olla was capped with an inverted ceramic bowl. A mud and yucca fiber plaster sealed the opening so that the water would not evaporate.

Bianchi and Johnson excavated the ollas, documenting each step with photographs. After completely exposing the intact olla, they removed the bowl. The bowl on top of this olla had fractured into several pieces. The archaeologists deposited the one intact olla at the Desert Museum. In an article published in 1977, Bianchi wrote that the “olla would be preserved for use in a museum exhibit.”

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

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Guido Bianchi with the water cache ollas at the IVDC Museum in 1977. Photo courtesy of Imperial Valley Desert Museum.

ABOVE: Ceramic bowl used as a cap to seal water inside. RIGHT: Pages from the Bianchi field book with picture of an olla in excavation. BELOW: Water cache ollas at the Imperial Valley Desert Museum were removed from stor-age on July 8 and shown for the first time since 1999. Photo courtesy of Imperial Valley Desert Museum.

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

Photographs, drawings, maps and handwritten records describe an archaeology site and contain essential information that allows a story to remain with us for generations.

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

We do not have every-thing our local archaeologists wrote. For example, we have no papers or field books written by Jay von Werlhof, Michael Barker or Meridith Childers. All three of these men were instrumental in founding the original Imperial Valley College Desert Museum in Blythe.

We do have many of the field books of the students and assistants that von Werlhof brought to dig sites, such as Steve Vellos, Delia Champagne, Jay A. Vogel and Pat Welch. As we work to re-construct the notes they left us with artifacts in our collection, we are developing a complete picture of how people lived in balance with the desert. Sometimes field notes are the only information available from an artifact. They do not tell the whole story, but for some artifacts it is the only story left.

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