

Laguna Woman Skull – Update to Turnbull (2003) article – Laguna Beach Historical Society

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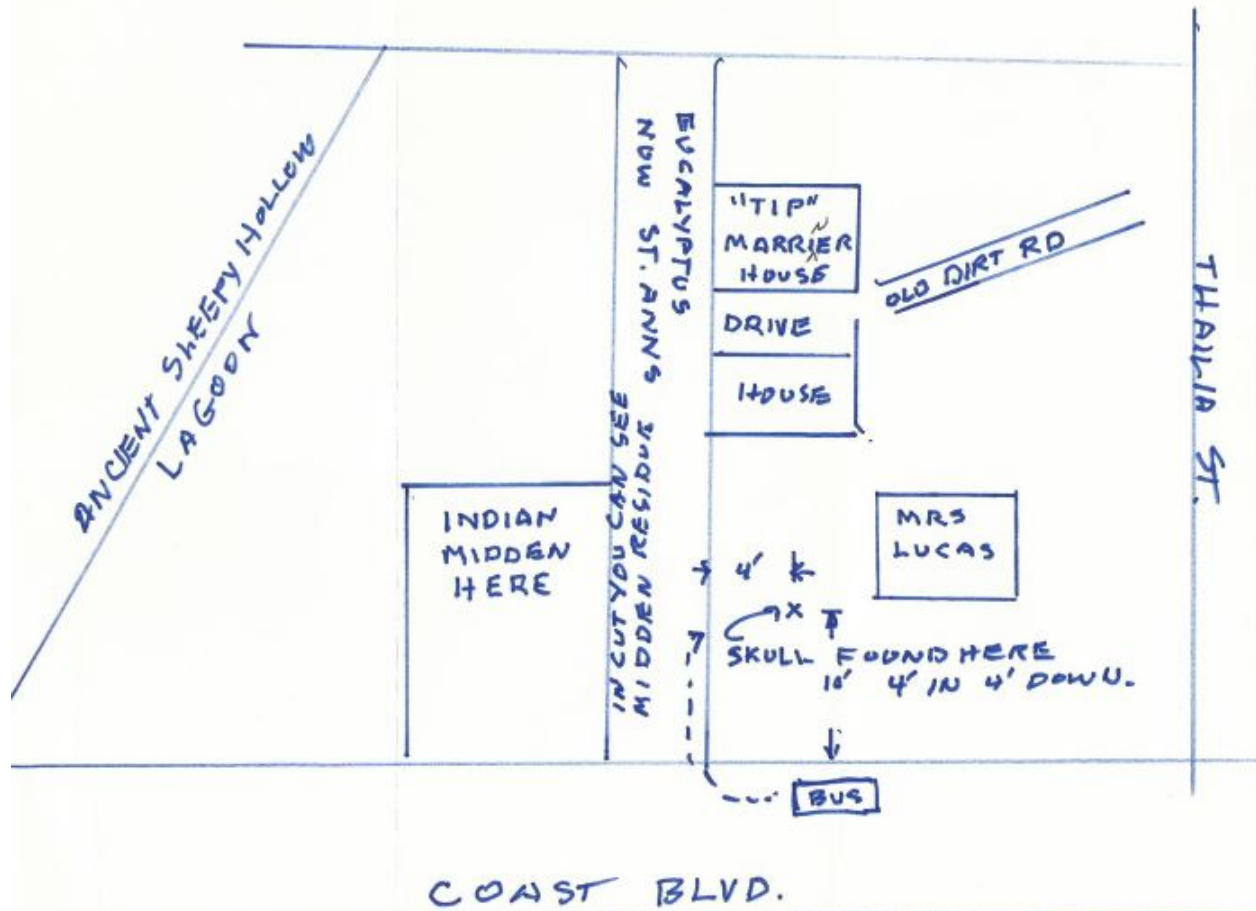
This article is an attempt to correct and update the record, as recounted by Steven Turnbull in his wonderful 2003 article that appears on the Laguna Beach Historical Society's website (http://www.light-headed.com/asite/laguna/laguna_history/laguna_woman_1.php), on the saga of the discovery of the famous Laguna Woman skull, found in 1933 by two young Laguna Beach pals, spending a summer's day as they often did, hunting for artifacts and fossils in old Laguna Beach. The Turnbull article is an exhaustive yet lively recounting of the discovery and recovery of the Laguna Woman skull, the analysis of the skull by some of the most respected archaeologist and researchers in the world, and its initial diagnosis as one of the oldest human specimens in the world. This article adds more accurate information about the location of the skull's discovery and recent analysis by researchers, conducted after the publication of the Turnbull article in 2003, has reassigned the age of the skull.

Howard Wilson and his best friend, Ed Marriner, were returning home from a typical summer day out in sleepy Laguna Beach in 1933. According to Ed's son, Harry Marriner, the two teens were headed by bus back to Ed's place on St. Ann's Street, just up from Coast Highway, after a day out. As they stepped off the bus on Coast Highway and turned the corner onto St. Ann's, they noticed an area where the bedrock had been exposed by construction excavations. Looking closer, they noticed what appeared to be a bone sticking out of the bedrock – on St. Anne's Street, some 10 feet east of Coast Highway and four feet below the ground surface at the time. Howard and Ed often looked for and found arrowheads and other artifacts as well as fossils during their exploration of the surrounding hillsides and canyons of Laguna Beach, so they had a good idea of what they were looking at.

Steven Turnbull's article recounts the discovery of the skull based on the memory of Howard Wilson, who insisted the skull was discovered at the Marriner home at 255 St. Ann's Street. Ed Marriner, however, told his son Harry that the skull was definitely not found at the Marriner house on St. Ann's, but adjacent Coast Highway and St. Ann's, some 200 feet to the southwest.

Harry Marriner provided the following description and hand drawing of the discovery that his father, Ed Marriner, emailed to him on December 6, 2003:

I wrote Orange Coast College trying to find out where they dug and I am sure they dug in the wrong place up at Glenneyre Street and St Ann's. The skull was down 3 ft deep and ten feet back from the [Coast Highway]. The midden was across the street where there was a two story green house . . . Too bad they did not dig there where you could see the midden down to 8 feet . . . Too bad they never contacted me about the skull. Too bad Howard ran home with it and I never saw it again. Dad



Sketch by Ed Marriner, courtesy of Harry Marriner

As stated, Ed Marriner's story differs from Howard Wilson's recounting in one major way: Ed Marriner always insisted that the Laguna Woman skull was not discovered in front of Richard "Tip" Marriner's house on 255 St. Ann's Street. It was indeed found on St. Ann's Street; not at his brother's home, but much nearer to Coast Highway. This is an important fact because any future redevelopment around the structures at 802 Coast Highway—at the corner of St. Anne's and Coast Highway—should be monitored to search for other remains related to the Laguna Woman skull, even though it is possible that the skull itself was deposited in its final resting place by geologic and erosional forces that transported the skull from somewhere higher in the elevated terrain northeast of the site. If Ed Marriner's account is accurate, all the subsequent archaeological excavations at 255 St. Ann's Street were for naught.

Initial radiocarbon dating suggested that the skull was as many as 17,000 years old, which would have made this one of the oldest sites with evidence of human occupation in California and indeed the United States. Later excavations at 255 St. Ann's yielded marine shell dated only to approximately 9,000 years old at similar depths as the skull. These and other inconsistencies led to further investigations.

The disagreement among dates and stratigraphy and a lack of a distinctive archaeological deposit terminated the data collection activities. The Laguna Woman discovery was examined by several archaeologists in later publications. Berger et al. (1971) conclude that, "... the likelihood is great that the origin of the Laguna Beach remains and their subsequent depositional history... may never be known". However, Moratto (1984) concluded that "In any event, the Laguna Beach skull is of dubious scientific

value and does not necessarily indicate early occupation of southern California" (1984:52). While excavations ended, various other lines of research continued, including the application of amino acid dating (cf. Berger 1975) and studies of the morphology of the Laguna Beach specimen and the "Los Angeles Man" specimen which was initially dated to 23,600 YBP (Plhak 1980).

Finally, Erlandson et al. (2007) reported that the several studies completed in the 1970s and 1980s were reanalyzed and it was concluded that the Laguna Woman skull, along with other purportedly "ancient" skulls from Southern California, are Holocene (less than 10,000 ybp) rather than Pleistocene (10,000 to ca. 2.6 million years ago) in age. The Laguna Woman skull itself was reassigned a date of no more than 5,500 years ago.

Steven Turnbull's 2003 article is a lively firsthand account of the discovery, identification, dating, and evaluation of the Laguna Woman skull. Some of the archaeological classifications are outdated, the skull is now not believed to be nearly as old as it was originally thought, and the location of its discovery is disputed. It remains, however, a fascinating story of the archaeological history of the area, detailing the attempts to date and categorize the skull, and recounting the exploits of two young Laguna Beach lads now nearly a century ago.

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