

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Mystery of Beached Ceramics and Forgotten Shipwrecks

by E. Breck Parkman - 2009

We know a lot about the past, but what we don't know is immense. And so it is with the occurrence of numerous blue-on-white porcelain sherds that have -- and continue to be found -- on the beach at Horseshoe Cove, below the Bodega Marine Lab.

Hundreds and hundreds of water-worn porcelain sherds washing ashore on a small secluded beach is not a normal occurrence. These sherds have a story to tell and that story is part of California's rich history. Somewhere off the coast and beneath the cold Pacific waters, there is a source from which these sherds are coming.

According to those who have found the sherds, the artifacts are almost always found on the southern half of the beach -- in only a few instances on the north side. Sherds have been found year round, but are especially common after storms and high wave action. There is no record of similar ceramic sherds being found on any of the other local beaches.



Discovered over a 30-year period (starting shortly after the Bodega Marine Lab was built), the sherds are small with water-worn edges, which suggest they have been in the water for a while and have traveled a considerable distance.

I became aware of this collection in June of 2005 while meeting with staff at the Bodega Marine Lab and on subsequent visits inspected a total of 751 ceramic sherds and four pieces of water worn glass. These items were collected by three lab employees and curated in their individual offices at work. A fourth and considerably larger collection was described to me but was unavailable for inspection. In all, the four collections added up to more than 1500 porcelain pieces.

The size of the collection was worthy of further investigation to try and document their origin and why they ended up in Horseshoe Cove. Over the course of the investigation, numerous individuals and groups helped facilitate the research, ranging from Lab employees to assistance from California State Parks and the California State lands Commission.

Initially, I wondered if the sherds might prove to be associated with either Sir Francis Drake's 1579 landfall or Captain Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeno's 1595 shipwreck off Point Reyes. Both of those events are thought to be marked by the occurrence of blue-on-white Ming porcelain sherds indicative of the later 16th century. Several porcelain sherds of an apparently early Asian manufacture (early 17th century) have been previously discovered on Bodega Head in 1998. Porcelain sherds dating to the 19th century

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have also been found in the area in 1962 (during archaeological investigations within the then PG&E construction site for the proposed Bodega Atomic Park) and again in 1966 at Bodega head.

After closer inspection, I realized that the porcelain sherds found at Horseshoe Cove date much later than the Ming Dynasty and are unlikely to have been manufactured in China. I also discovered that the Horseshoe Cove sherds are unlike any of the other porcelain sherds found to date at Bodega Head. After considerable research, it is now apparent to me that the Horseshoe Cove porcelains are Japanese wares dating to the later 19th century.



Here is a summary of what we know about the sherds:

- Japanese porcelain from late 19th Century
- Probably Igezara Wares of the Meiji Period (c. 1868-1912)
- No maker's marks and no 'Made in Japan' on sherds
- Predate the McKinley tariff (1890) thus the sherds date to c. 1868-1890
- Made using the transfer-print method
- Blue-on-white
- Decorated using bird motif with egrets and/or herons
- Sherds represent flatware and hollowware
- Sherds are very small and water worn
- Found at Horseshoe Cove and on one beach below Bodega head

It seems likely that the source of origin for the sherds is an offshore shipwreck. Schooners regularly plied the coastal waters of California in the 1870s-1880s, entering all the small dog holes in order to trade their wares. Many wrecks are recorded for the North coast and an unknown number of others have gone unrecorded.

Here is what we know about known shipwrecks

- Marshall (schooner carrying a load of fruit and wine) in 1859 (off Doran Park)
- Ellen Adelia in 1872 (off Bodega Head)
- J. P. Haven in 1880 (off Salmon Creek Beach)
- Joseph in 1880 (off Bodega Head)
- Two Brothers in 1883 (off Bodega Head)

While it is possible that the ceramic sherds are coming from one of these wrecks, the point of origin is more likely an unknown wreck located somewhere off the mouth of Horseshoe Cove. Equally feasible is the possibility that the sherds represent a lost or jettisoned cargo. Either way, it appears that only ceramic sherds are washing ashore.

In September of 2005, a team of six underwater divers (State Park rangers and lifeguards as well as staff of the Bodega Marine Lab) explored locations off the mouth of Horseshoe Cove in two separate locations. The dives were made from the Lab's 42-foot dive boat, the Mussel Point. Divers swam fixed transects

approximately 100 meters long so as to maximize their coverage. The purpose was to inspect the ocean floor for evidence of porcelain sherds or any other cultural material on the cove floor. Nothing was found. However, it is likely that the sherds are only visible or perhaps even present at certain times of the year, depending on the currents. It is also likely that the small blue-on-white sherds are indistinguishable from pieces of blue and white colored mussel shell when viewed together on the floor of the cove.

If the cove is the point of origin for the porcelain sherds, it is likely that they are located near submerged rocks near the mouth on the north side of the cove. The water there is only 8-10 feet deep and much too dangerous to dive most days of the year as the waves crash across the submerged rocks. No dives were attempted in that part of the cove due to the unsafe conditions. That option remains until a time when conditions allow it.

Even after all these years of discovery, it is surprising that so many sherds have found their way to such a small and secluded beach. They are perhaps propelled by particular seasonal currents that move the artifacts in the right direction. By studying the seasonal current one may be able to trace the artifacts back to their source of origin. However, until that time, the source of sherds will remain a mystery. For now, these artifacts are a story without an ending. - E. Breck Parkman is senior archaeologist with California State Parks.

