Taos in Madison?

The Taos Survey Collection

By Nick Smith

How did thousands of artifacts travel from Taos, NM to UW–Madison?

And why did they sit in the Anthropology Collection for 73 years?

The Collection

The Taos Survey Collection comes from walking surveys and test excavations in 1947 of a dozen of sites in the Taos Valley of New Mexico. The collection is housed in UW–Madison Anthropology Collection (UWAC) and includes the partial remains of one individual and thousands of other artifacts, mainly ceramic sherds and lithic fragments, such as those at right and below. Many of the ceramic sherds are decorated in some way, often either painted in the Taos Black-on-White style or incised in the Taos Incised style.

10 ceramic sherds and their original packaging label. Photo by Liz Leith.

11 projectile points from the collection. Photo by Liz Leith.

The collection is in the process of being fully cataloged before the artifacts are sent to New Mexico for research and for the individual to be repatriated to their descendents for proper burial.

Repatriation

Repatriation is the process of returning the remains, funerary objects, and ceremonial objects of Indigenous people taken by archaeologists, historians, antiquarians, and others after contact with Europeans. In the United States, repatriation is required of federally funded institutions under NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act). NAGPRA states that human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony must be returned to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated First Nations.

After being cataloged, Taos Survey Collection will be sent to New Mexico where the associated human remains it includes will be returned and reburied.

David Baerreis

The artifacts and human remains in the collection came to Madison because of an archaeologist named David Baerreis. Born in New York, 1916, and educated at Oxford, Cambridge, and Columbia, he specialized in Plains archaeology and the archaeology of Oklahoma. So why did he conduct a survey in northern New Mexico?

Photo of David Baerreis, c. 1960-1970. Photo by Norman Lenburg, courtesy UW Digital Collections.

His connection to Taos is through marriage. His wife was the daughter of a notable Taos artist, who would've known another daughter of Taos artists, one Helen Greene Blumenschein, who later became an important figure in the area's archaeological community. In 1947 Baerreis became a professor at UW–Madison, and spent the summer visiting his wife's family in Taos. In that time, he became involved with the area's archaeology, and presumably in tandem with Blumenschein, he conducted the field surveys and test excavations that became the Taos Survey Collection.

Map of the area surrounding the Taos Valley.

While there is no record of Baerreis excavating again in the Taos area, Blumenschein conducted numerous excavations in the 1950s and later, and in that time founded what would become the Taos County Historical Society. In her publications, she notes that Baerreis surveyed 51 sites, and picked up her site numbering there, though Baerreis references 85 sites in a presentation abstract for the 1948 SAA Conference—the only known written analysis of the collection. After Baerreis's retirement in 1982, he moved to Taos with his wife and became a member of the historical society Blumenschein founded until both their deaths in 1989.

Why the Wait?

After Baerreis's presentation at the 1948 SAA Conference, there is no record of what happened to the collection for decades—it was not cataloged or research. In 2007, the Anthropology Department hired a curator to manage the Collections for the first time, and the Taos Survey Collection was "rediscovered." Upon returning to UW–Madison in 1947, it is possible that either Baerreis's primary research interests took precedent over his surveys at Taos, or he felt that his analysis was concluded after his presentation. He may have intended to return to the collection at some point, but there is no evidence that he did, and he left no record of it with the department.

It was in this uncataloged state that the new curator came upon the collection. With no paperwork or field notes, there was little to learn about it. In 2018, the Collection's current curator made contact with Taos archaeologists who were able to uncover Blumenschein's relationship to Baerreis and confirm that she referenced his sites on her map, thus giving the surveys a general location, though not locating the specific sites. With this knowledge, there was finally a place to send the collection where more could be learned from it, prompting the current cataloging effort and future transfer of the collection to New Mexico. Until we knew where it could go, there was never a reason to spend time fully cataloging the collection when there were so many other pressing concerns.

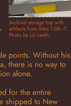
In the Collection

The collection itself spent years in the original brown paper bags used by Baerreis, which can damage artifacts due to their acidity. The artifacts have since been repackaged in sturdy plastic bags and padded with archival foam and non-acidic paper.

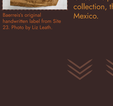
To catalog the collection for its return to Taos, there are a number of steps we take:

- Unpackage and identify the types of artifacts in each bag
- Count the number of artifacts of each type, then mark them in an inventory spreadsheet
- Mark any notes about the artifacts, and transcribe as much as possible of the original handwritten labels on the brown paper bags
- Repackage the artifacts, label their bags, and put them in new archival trays and boxes

Closeup shot of artifacts. Photo by Liz Leith.



Archival storage tray with artifacts from Sites 1-06–7. Photo by Liz Leith.



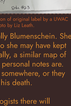
Baerreis's original handwritten label from Site 23. Photo by Liz Leith.

In Baerreis's original labels, he drew some maps and noted some locations, but never in reference to outside points. Without his master map of the Taos area, there is no way to locate them by his description alone.

Once this process is finished for the entire collection, the boxes will be shipped to New Mexico.

The Future

Once the collection is returned and the human remains repatriated, what will happen?



Transcription of original label by a UWAC intern. Photo by Liz Leith.

Because none of Baerreis's sites can be located by his description alone, it will be very difficult to locate them, though there may be a couple possibilities. Baerreis's short descriptions may match sites found later by other archaeologists, especially Blumenschein. She knew of the numbers Baerreis gave to his sites, so she may have kept notes on their locations or even a map. Additionally, a similar map of the area may exist wherever Baerreis's remaining personal notes are. They may be with his next of kin, with an archive somewhere, or they may have been destroyed during his life or after his death.

Once the collection is returned to Taos, archaeologists there will attempt to use the resources and information they have to locate Baerreis's sites and attach specific locations to the artifacts. If they aren't able to find the sites, the artifacts will most likely be used for research comparing them to other known artifacts to learn more about the region.

References and Thanks

Special thanks to Liz Leith, Senior Curator of the UW Anthropology Collections.

"Taos County Historical Society Remembers David A. Baerreis." Ayer y Hoy en Taos, Fall 1989, 12.

Baerreis, David A.. David A. Baerreis to James B. Griffin, April 6, 1948.

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