

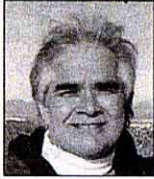
The muffler shop midden in Ventura

By Tony Galván

Just about every town in the U.S. has a Main Street, but I doubt that few have a Main Street like Ventura's. What's the big deal? Well, for starters, it's been a destination point for over 3,500 years.

What started it all

In 1974 a downtown redevelopment project to gentrify an industrial area with condos got underway on the west end of Main Street. Right off the bat, a bulldozer scraped something hard and some "old" looking things were found by the workers.

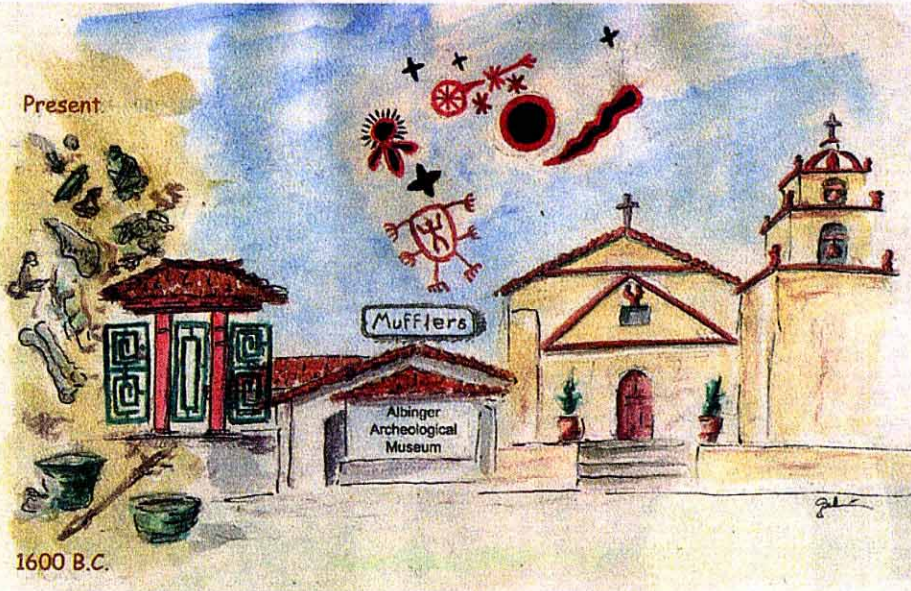


The Day Tripper

The work stopped and an archeologist was brought in. Work really stopped when it was found that some of these things were Chumash shell and bead money piece or anchum—the currency the Chumash made with bits of shell and tar and traded as far east as Nevada.

A bit more digging around revealed more pockets of buried artifacts, and it became apparent this place was a midden, the word archeologists use for a trash pile (one man's garbage is another man's treasure). At some point through all of this an agreement was made with the condo developers and "The Mission Plaza Archeological Project" was born.

The headquarters for this project will be the muffler shop smack in the middle of all this digging. The irony here is that the muffler shop was one of the places folks wanted to get rid of. It became the



archeological dig headquarters. Archeologists, students and volunteers dug and shifted through the dirt and stuff on West Main Street. The workers were housed in a nearby condemned hotel, the Cecil Hotel. The dig workers entered the hotel through windows that were once boarded, and spent the nights in sleeping bags.

Their efforts proved to be astounding. The original foundation stones of the San Buenaventura Mission were found, catalogued and prepared for exhibit. Bits and pieces of the old Spanish fort were also found and set aside.

Eventually, artifacts and items from the Chumash, Spanish/European, Mexican Rancho and California/U.S. periods were identified and prepared for exhibit or storage. But what eventually made the "dig" unique was that as the bits and pieces made their way

to the top, an earthen oven was found almost 20 feet below the surface of Main Street.

Cooking bowls, and stone and bone utensils found in the pit added to the mystery. How old was this stuff? What did it mean? That was the question on people's minds, and eventually they found out; some of the items date back to 1600 B.C.

What was happening in 1600 B.C.? The Egyptians were domesticating the cat; the Greeks were finishing up their alphabet; the Shang Dynasty in China had developed writing and the Hittites began their rule of the Middle East. Gives a new meaning to historic downtown Ventura, doesn't it?

Yesterday's history today

Within a year of digging, the muffler shop (which at one time

may have been a saloon as well) got a reprieve and became the Albinger Archeological Center, named after former Ventura mayor Al Albinger. Today this modest building houses some very interesting artifacts, including a cross section panel of the midden from the site. You can see artifacts from present-day Ventura, including sections of the original Chinatown, which was along Main Street and Valdez Alley; the California Rancho period; the Mexican period; the Chumash era; and prehistoric Chumash times.

The center includes outdoor exhibits of the early barracks and mission foundations; one of the first wells and the midden, or pit, where many of the pre-historic items were found; and a tomol or Chumash plank canoe.

Next door is the San Bue-

naventura Mission, which was established in 1789. Destroyed by fire in 1792, it was rebuilt and moved east from its original location.

Earthquakes, a tsunami and an attack by pirates in 1812 forced evacuation of the mission for a short time. It is still a parish church and open to the public. The mission's courtyard includes a stone olive press that was used to press olives as well as an early wooden bell. You enter the mission through the bookstore on Main Street.

Across the street from the mission and archeological center is the Ventura County Museum of History and Art. As its name implies, it has a bit of history for everyone, with Chumash artifacts and early maps that show where early settlements were located.

The development of Ventura County's citrus industry is also well documented with maps and photos of early lemon and orange groves and the various working groups that made Ventura their home.

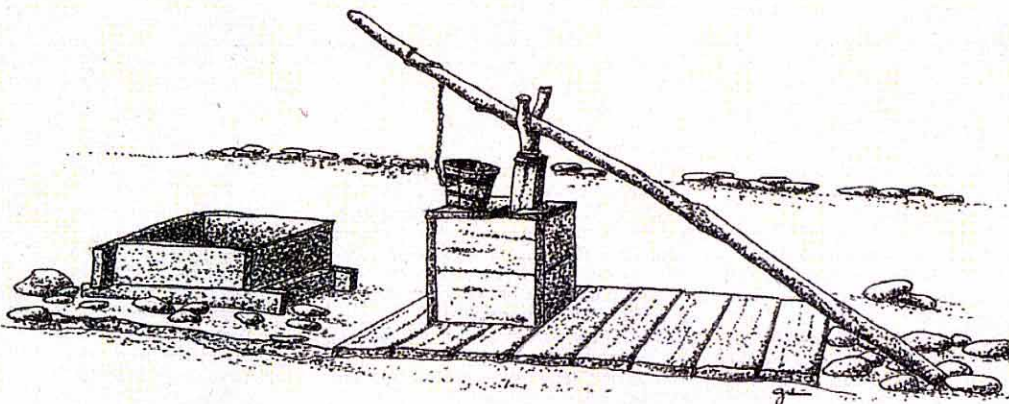
Ventura's early oil-drilling history is also well documented with a scale model of an early oil well similar to the ones that once dotted the coast from Ventura to Carpinteria. It also houses a unique collection of 18th-century miniature figurines created by Ojai artist George Stuart.

Down on Main Street

Walk a few blocks east of the archeological park and you'll find antique shops, thrift stores, book stores and a wide range of restaurants along the route as well. Set aside at least an hour to visit them after touring the archeological park.

Touring Ventura's Main Street is like taking a trip in a time machine. Head south and get a sense of history and more.

If you go...



Ventura archeological park

Getting there: Take the 101 south and exit at the Main Street off-ramp. Turn right at the stop sign and follow Main Street to the mission (second light). Parking is next to museum or along Main Street. The rest of downtown is within walking distance from the park.

Admission: Albinger Archeological Museum, free. San Buenaventura Mission, \$1 donation, children 50 cents. Ventura County of History and Art, \$4 adults, \$3 seniors, \$1.00 children.

Information: Albinger Archeological Museum, 113 E. Main St., Wednesday-Sunday 10 a.m.-4 p.m., closed holidays. San Buenaventura Mission, 211 E. Main St., Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Ventura County Museum of History and Art, 100 E. Main St., Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m.-p.m.

Websites: Mission, www.sanbuenaventuramission.org/; Ventura County Museum of History and Art, www.venturamuseum.org/

Special Events: Sept. 16 through Nov. 26, Saddle Up: Vaqueros, Cowboys and Charros, Ventura County Museum of History and Art.