

THE MYSTERY PITS OF OLDUVAI

Back in June 1972 the National Geographical Society announced the discovery by Dr. Mary D. Leakey of a number of strange basin-like pits up to three feet in diameter apparently scooped out by hand, and a child's footprint in the middle of one of them, in an upper level dated half a million years ago at this famous East African site. The footprint was fully human. The N.G.S. release said:

"Working in one of the upper levels of the gorge . . . with the larger pits being about three feet in diameter and about a foot deep. The pits were scooped by hand out of a sandy deposit, which is now rock-hard. In some cases, clear traces of fingermarks remain on the sides. Impressed into one of the pits is the greater part of a human footprint, most likely the left foot of a child . . ." The Society said one theory is that the pits and channels were scooped out and used by the Stone-Agers for water-storage. Mrs. Leakey said, however: "There are puzzling features. The bases of most of the pits and parts of the adjacent areas contain many small, clearly defined depressions. Some of these could have been caused by the trampling of animals, but others look very much like marks made by the end of a stick or staff. It even has been suggested that the pits and channels have been the work of children at play." Still another theory, she reported, is that the pits and channels represent "some quite commonplace domestic activity."

All the suggestions as to what they were for are more than feasible, but haven't we read somewhere that Abo children dig such little water-filled basins to attract small night animals which then can easily be caught in any number of ways even by hand?

We had written this up when word came of Dr. Louis Leakey's sudden death. He was not a young man but he certainly was not old by today's standards. I (Ivan T. Sanderson) knew him in the early days when I was 21 and he presumably only 29, but he was already established and appeared much older. He was one of my sponsors for election as a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, a rather terrifying experience as it is by secret ballot and only one black ball disqualifies you forever. We several times had tea together in the Library of the Royal Geographical Society when he probed me on my efforts in animal ethology, and also what I knew of fossil man. He was terribly kind to this enthusiastic youngster, and I never forgot what he did for me. We all (SITU's staff and Boards) wish we could list his, his wife's, his sons', and an African who has been with him from 1931 when he started digging in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanganyika, full record but space does not allow. The scientific establishment had urged him to go and look for fossil man in Asia, but he persisted in his con-

viction that Man originated in Africa, and between 1959 when he found his first human remains there and the day of his death, he almost singlehandedly proved his contention and drove man's history back 2½ million years.

Ivan T. Sanderson.

Editor's Note: I (MLF) cannot resist repeating one of my favourite tales of Louis Leakey. While at Cambridge he was required to 'pass' a foreign language test. He had been brought up in East Africa and not only spoke but was able to think in Kikuyu (something quite else!). Those in authority had no option but to accept this choice but knew of no one qualified to give such a test. They therefore wrote to all the top linguists in the country asking simply, "Can you give us the name of someone qualified to examine a candidate who wishes to take his foreign language test in Kikuyu?" The invariable answer was: "The only qualified person in this country is one Louis S. B. Leakey."

THE MYSTERIOUS WALLS OF THE BERKELEY AND OAKLAND HILLS

by Sibley S. Morrill

For better than a century now, some ordinary looking stone walls in the Berkeley hills overlooking San Francisco Bay have been a subject of speculation on three principal points: why were they built, by whom, and when.

They are found mainly in heavily wooded or chaparral-covered areas, but whether there or occasionally in the high grasslands, they appear to have served none of the usual purposes of walls—except in two or three places where it seems they may possibly form the remains of fortifications. They survive only in sections, ranging in length from 20 feet to 200 yards or so. Their height varies from 2 feet or less to 5 or a little more, the average probably being between 3 and 4 feet. Their breadth at ground level, however, is great enough—4 feet in some instances—to make it a near certainty that the walls originally were much higher through the use of smaller stones along the top. Digging at their base, of which only a little has been done, reveals that the rock goes down as much as 10 inches below the surface.

While the sites of some of these walls, like those in the Vollmer or Bald Peak (1905 ft. elevation) and nearby Grizzly Peak (1750 ft. elevation) areas, suggest the possibility of a defense purpose, other sites, such as that of a wall which runs straight up the southeastern slope of Roundtop (1763 ft. elevation) through masses of underbrush and poison oak, offer no clue as to why they were constructed. Even if its present height of 3 feet was originally double that, Roundtop wall's length of nearly 100 yards would have made it of no use as a fortification. As to the

possibility that it once extended much farther in either direction, there is nothing to suggest this at either end. And whoever constructed it certainly did not do it for fun; some of the rocks weigh easily over 200 pounds! Furthermore, it is unlikely that they did it for 'practice'. Those who built that and the other walls were persons of some skill and experience, for the walls are not just elongated piles of rock.

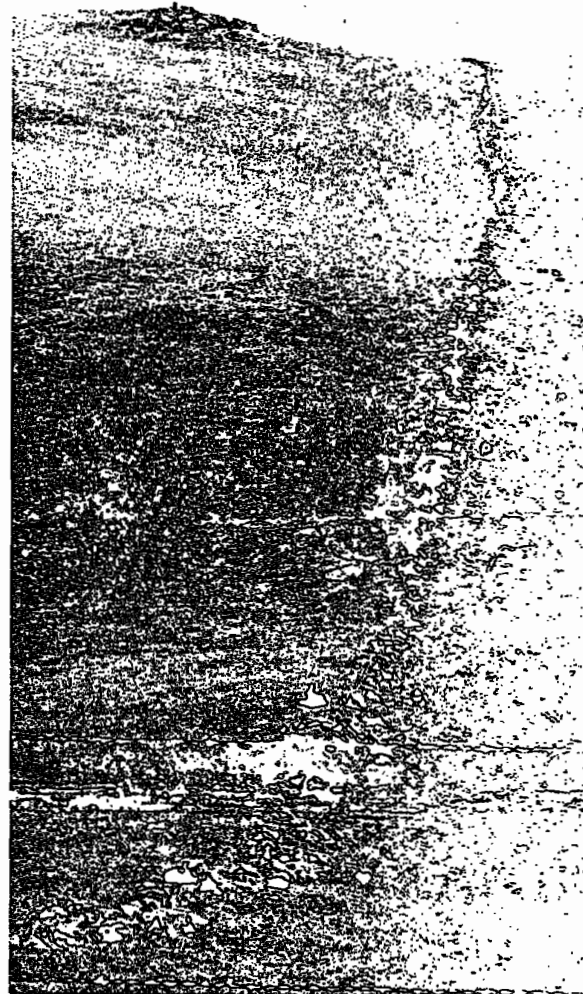
Seth Simpson, of Oakland, California, who has studied the walls as a hobby for several years, and his son Martin, a palaeontology student at Merritt College, say it is plain that some of the stones were chipped and fitted. In fact, a stone found in a wall near Vollmer Peak was actually bored through or holed, and because of the growth of a tree immediately in front of it, plus the length of time the stone must have been in situ, that operation was probably conducted generations ago, when or even before the wall was built. In any case, throughout the greater part of the length of these walls, it is generally evident that the rocks were placed in such a way as to give a locking effect.

Simpson's investigations indicate that the walls are found over an area extending for nearly 7 miles south into the Oakland hills, but he has been quite unable to relate them to any boundary markings. Water company survey maps show that none of the walls has any detectible relationship to boundary lines; except for one case in the Vollmer Peak area, boundary lines parallel no walls nearer than about 600 yards.

Nor is there anything in the construction of the walls to indicate that they are the remains of pens or corrals. They are, for the most part, straight. Some intersect at an angle, and there are instances of parallel walls separated by as much as 10 yards or so, but there are no indications whatever that they formed enclosures.

Simpson attempted to determine whether there were similar structures in other counties around the Bay, but discovered nothing except in the hills behind Milpitas, an extension of the Berkely and Oakland hills some 25 miles to the south. In a way, the walls there are still more baffling. They are in a gently rolling, comparatively treeless country, and except for the remains of one (see photo), they offer no suggestion of the usual purpose of a wall. In fact, from the nature of the terrain, which I have visited, it was not of a character to provide even the reason that New England farmers had for building their famous stone walls — primarily for "storage" of stones removed from fields to permit ploughing. When the New Englanders ran out of "wall space" they dumped excess rocks in the nearest gully. The walls were virtually useless as fences, and grazing land was much more easily fenced by stumps or stakes and rails. In the Milpitas area, the stone walls just run their way for a few score or few hundred yards and then stop. Livestock have no difficulty in walking around them.

As to why and when those walls were built,



Photos courtesy of Seth Simpson.

ranchers in the area whom Simpson interviewed said they didn't know. They had always been there —and had been constructed by "the Mexicans, or Chinese, or some others", in every case long before the ranchers came into possession of the land. In brief, these ranchers know no more about the origin of their walls than the inhabitants of Berkeley and Oakland know about theirs.

That is the way it is today. But, since the walls in the Berkeley and Oakland hills have undergone a certain amount of attrition, even destruction, in recent years (a considerable part of one of them was removed in the construction of a botanical garden at Tilden Park), it is of interest to see what was thought of them fifty years ago or so.

On October 15, 1916, Harold French wrote in the Oakland Tribune that, "since the Nineties, when my attention was first attracted by three ancient rock walls...I have asked many old timers what they knew about them. Two old tramping friends who have ranged these ridges since the Sixties have told me they were just as ancient in appearance then as in later years.

"One of them, the late Captain Albert S. Bierce, brother of Ambrose Bierce, dispelled the last lingering doubt in my mind when one day in 1904, he led me into a thicket of greasewood in a gulch draining the southern slope of Mt. Baldy, and in the jungle which has been growing there for ages he showed me a very distinct old wall completely hidden from view."

French reported that the walls to be found "at various points from the peak known as Round Top . . . to the northerly extension of Baldy Ridge" had a combined length that would "extend two miles in all". The largest walls French reported were those found "on the southerly slopes of Round Top, overlooking Redwood Canyon" where the walls "form a right angle, the longest line of which runs westerly down the slope for about 700 feet, the other points southward some 500 feet".

Noting that some of the "volcanic boulders" forming the walls weighed nearly a ton, French said that those forming the base of the walls "lie embedded in the soil for a foot or more", a matter which, when combined with the coating of lichens and the weathered surfaces of the rocks, "proves they have lain there a very long time".

As for the origin of the walls, French found nothing to indicate they were built by pioneers, Mexicans, or any other people who came after the arrival of the Spaniards in the 1770's. On the contrary, he notes that "there was a tradition among the Matalanes, tribesmen who made their homes among the Thousand Oaks [an area in the foothills of north Berkeley] and

pounded their acorn mills on the rocks near Cerrito Creek...that the walls were fortifications built by 'the hill people' with whom they warred. The very name Matalanes sounds strangely similar to Atlanteans, to whom the Aztecs and their predecessors who lived about Mazatlan, down the Mexican Coast were reputed to be related."

Another source, an undated and unidentified, but very yellowed clipping found by the famous Oakland bookman, the late Harold C. Holmes, tells of walls found "half a mile east of Grizzly Peak" which form "two sides of a right angle, each side being about 100 yards in length and appear to terminate in the dense chaparral, although traces are found showing that they were at one time much more extensive... about 50 feet in length, although it may be seen that it was built to a length of about 280 yards.....in the vicinity are the remains of other walls, at present of no considerable extent. The generally accepted belief is that the place was a city inhabited by some long-forgotten race... Certainly the people who built them understood stone cutting, as the boulders bear evidence of having been split and chipped in order to join compactly." Otherwise, the clipping gives much the same information as French gave.

Regarding professional opinion on these walls, the situation does not appear to have changed appreciably since 1916 when French quoted an unnamed "teacher of anthropology" he consulted, as follows:

"From time to time my students have come and told me about these walls in the Contra Costa hills [an old regional term], but I never took them seriously enough to make the effort to climb way up there in that 'Beanstalk land' to see them. I suppose they are either old sheep corrals or ranch boundaries.

On which French commented, "I suppose he was more interested in far away lands for anthropological prospecting than these relics of the past so near his classroom".

Simpson, who evidently knows more about them than anyone else, believes that they were not built by local Indians since there are no other signs of such construction attributable to Indians of the area.

"It is possible that some of these walls may have been built for the purpose of driving game into a sort of cul-de-sac where they could be easily killed, as some of the Nevada Indians did," Simpson said. "But except for that, all I can suggest, in the absence of extensive digging along these walls, is that they were built by unknown persons, in an unknown year, for an unknown purpose, and very possibly, despite our hopes, they will remain a puzzle for an indefinite future.

The Mitchell-Hedges Crystal Skull

We are informed that the Mitchell-Hedges Skull, discussed in Sibley Morrill's book reviewed in our July 1972 issue, will be on exhibit at the Museum of the American Indian, Broadway at 155th Street, New York City, until the 31st March 1973. It is one of sixty-two examples of the Amerindian use of the human skull as an "art motif". The exhibition is entitled "Visions of Mortality".