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Uncovering the Story of Tucson's Chinese Gardeners

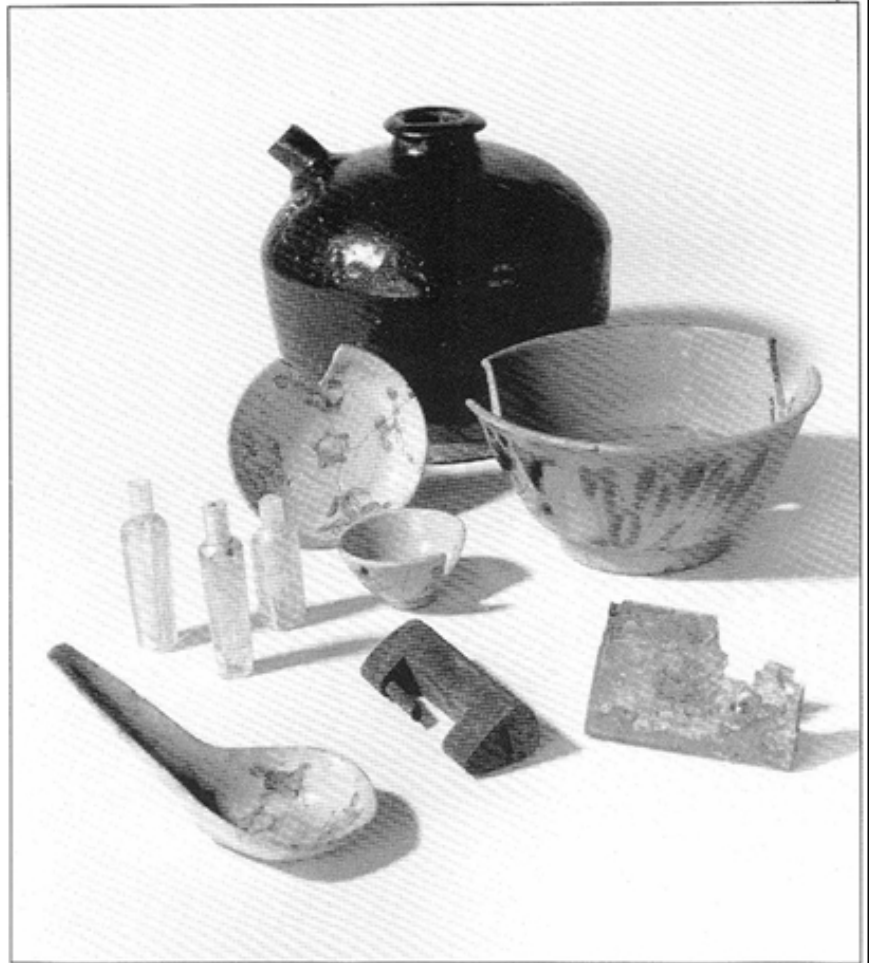
J. Homer Thiel, Desert Archaeology, Inc.

In the fall of 1995, Desert Archaeology conducted excavations beneath Spruce Street at the base of A-Mountain (also known as Sentinel Peak), west of the Santa Cruz River. The City of Tucson planned to place a large storm water drainage system beneath the street and archaeological testing of the project right-of-way was recommended. The likelihood of both prehistoric and historic cultural resources in the area was high. The area was first settled during the Early Agricultural period (about 800 to 400 B.C.). It was the Piman village of San Cosme when Father Kino visited in the 1690s, the site of the Mission of San Agustín in the 1790s, the location of agricultural fields when the Union Army recaptured Tucson from the Confederates in 1862, and was later the site of the Tucson Pressed Brick Company (see *AIT*, Fall 1995, Summer 1996).

In the spring of 1995, a backhoe trench was cut along the south side of Spruce Street, and an assortment of cultural features was discovered. At the west end was a prehistoric pithouse and a historic canal known as the Acequia Madre Tercia. Farther east we found smaller canals, then a wooden barrel buried in the ground, a stone foundation, and lastly a large trash-filled pit. Combing through the trench backdirt we found many Chinese artifacts. A quick glance through Florence Lister and Robert Lister's book, *The Chinese of Early Tucson*, indicated that a small number of Chinese men had once lived in the area. We had found one of their homes.

The Chinese Arrive in Tucson

Chinese immigrants began arriving on the west coast of the United States in the 1840s. The California Gold Rush in the late 1840s increased immigration dramatically. Over the next several decades hundreds of thousands of people, mostly men, made the journey from Guangdong and Fujian provinces. Many followed relatives who had previously arrived. They traveled from major cities, such as San Francisco, heading inland to small mining communities or to work for the railroad. The railroad companies hired many Chinese men, who were well known for working hard and cheaply. Many of these men left the railroad and began their own businesses. The dream of most men was to earn enough money to return to China and live off of the accumulated wealth. It was a dream some realized; others spent their lives living in an often racist, foreign culture. They clung to their roots and often recreated the



A variety of Chinese artifacts were recovered from beneath Spruce Street. A soy sauce jug is at the back, with Four Seasons saucer and a Bamboo rice bowl in front of the jug. Three Chinese medicine bottles and a Four Seasons wine cup are in front of the saucer. In the front row are a Four Seasons spoon, a Chinese padlock, and an opium tin (photo by Helga Teiwes).

China they left behind, settling in Chinatowns and rarely acculturating into the dominant Euro-American culture.

Chinese immigrants arrived in Tucson in the mid-1870s, the first probably a pair of men named Wong Tai and Louy, who opened a restaurant by July 1876. Prior to 1880, a trickle of Chinese came to Tucson, overland by foot or by stagecoach. Travel was still perilous due to attacks by Native Americans. As a result, few Chinese came to Arizona, unlike other western states. However, the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad in March 1880 spurred the growth of Tucson's Chinese community

Southern Pacific employed many Chinese men to lay tracks and cook. Some of these men chose to remain behind in Tucson rather than follow the tracks eastward. These individuals opened stores, operated restaurants, washed laundry, worked as personal servants, and a few moved to the west bank of the Santa Cruz River to farm.

Chinese Gardeners in Tucson

The Chinese had a reputation as good gardeners. An 1869 account about the western United States noted:

Many [Chinese] are vegetable farmers, too. In this even climate and with this productive soil, their painstaking culture, much hoeing and constant watering, make little ground very fruitful, and they gather in three, four, and five crops a year. Their garden patches, in the neighborhoods of cities and villages, are always distinguishable from the rougher... grounds of their Saxon rival.

Chinese gardeners in Tucson are first mentioned in the 1880 census, when six were counted. These men found the land along the Santa Cruz River to be very suitable for raising vegetables and a few types of fruit. They rented small parcels of land totaling about 60 hectares from local businessmen. Much of this land had previously been rented to local Mexican-American farmers.

An 1885 Tucson trial over water rights resulted in descriptions of the differences between Chinese and Mexican farming:

The Chinaman raises cabbages, garlic, and in fact, everything in the vegetable line from an artichoke to the biggest cabbage and the Chinaman makes it a matter of business and he produces all he possibly can, and as often as he possibly can. The Mexican garden produces a few chili peppers, onions, garbanzos, beans, watermelons, etc.

The Chinese gardens were reported to have been watered every week and daily, if possible. A witness named Dalton reported:

Some have seed beds for raising plants. They water them with pots. They keep the ditch full of water and take a pot holding 5 gallons. They take two of these pots one in each hand and walk along and water each side at the same time.

The case was settled in favor of those individuals with fields south of the hospital road (present-day St. Mary's Road), and as a result the Chinese gardeners continued to receive as much water as they needed.

Controversy over water use continued after the settling of the water rights issue. In 1891, a newspaper reported:

A Chinaman was fined \$10 in Judge Slater's court yesterday for stealing water from the Santa Cruz Valley water company. This may serve as a warning to others.

The number of men growing crops along the Santa Cruz declined after 1900, probably for a number of reasons, including the difficulty in obtaining water after the Santa Cruz River was entrenched and the ability to make a better living by being a merchant.



Tucson photographer Henry Buehman photographed Chinese residents for identification papers they were required to have after immigration laws were passed in 1892 (courtesy of Arizona Historical Society, Tucson, photo B8379).

It is apparent that the Chinese supplied much of the fresh vegetables and some fruits to turn-of-the-century Tucsonans. In 1889,

Lin Kee, who rents sixteen acres of rich land from Mr. Van Alstine, raised a good crop of corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, and chille [sic].

The potatoes are a very large size, and a heavy load of the same was started for Tombstone yesterday.

Besides vegetables and fruits, other crops were raised, as noted by local newspapers during the 1890s:

Yesterday Chan Tin Wo took a three years' lease from Allison and Son of their large carp lake, known as Warner lake. It is the intention of Chan to furnish Tucson with fresh carp at all times.

Moo Op, a Chinese vegetable gardener who lives in the valley just west of town, says he will have a box of ripe strawberries next week. He will very likely sell them at auction and with the proceeds go back to China on a special steamer and be a wealthy member of the emperor's court for the rest of his days.

Chinese peddlers from the garden patches are bring-



A Chinese couple from southern Arizona photographed by Henry Buehman. Buehman posed the same sets and costumes for many photographs (courtesy of Arizona Historical Society, Tucson, photo B6183).

ing in cantaloupe and tomatoes to Tucson.

Years later, Maria Urquides, whose father owned a few rented lots, recalled these gardeners from the early 1900s:

There were little stables there, and there would be about four Chinese vendors who would keep their wagons there to have an early start. And they would take their vegetables and you know how artistic they are they'd clean the carrots and the onions and the calabacitas (little squashes) and they'd arrange them on their wagons, cover them with gunny sacks and wet them. And this was in the evening, and I can often remember going to sleep with the sinson of their patter.

They'd sprinkle the gunny sacks with water, and it was just like an evaporative cooler to keep the vegetables fresh overnight. And then they'd start early in the morning and come back at night with empty wagons.

They were a terrific people. I had a very soft spot in my heart for the Chinese. Of course [here Maria smiled like a naughty child], we used to steal a little carrot every now and then from them.

Residents of the A-Mountain area remember "Japanese" gardeners working in the area in the 1930s and a 1936 aerial

photograph indicates a few farms were still present. However, Chinese farming gradually came to an end as the men moved into other occupations.

Archaeology Beneath Spruce Street

Archaeological excavations began by removing the asphalt street surface from a 70-foot-by-15-foot area. Using a wide-bladed backhoe to scrape away the gravel from beneath the asphalt, we almost immediately began finding Chinese artifacts and rocks from the foundation of a large compound wall. Our excavations ultimately uncovered 13 features dating to the Chinese occupation of the site and an additional four dating to an earlier Mexican occupation from the 1870s to 1880s. The most prominent feature was the rectangular foundation wall for the compound; it was 34 1/2 feet long and at least 25 1/2 feet wide. At one time adobe brick walls stood on the cobble foundation, probably forming a protective wall. Inside the compound a small shack or ramada was built against the north wall. Nearby two wooden barrels were set into the earth next to a large outdoor hearth area. One or two rooms were built onto the east side of the compound, one of which may have been stables.

Outside the compound was a shallow pit that may have been an outhouse and a large borrow pit where the residents had discarded their trash. They appear to have reused an abandoned Mexican dwelling. In 1897 student Clara Bloom Ferrin described the homes of the Chinese farmers:

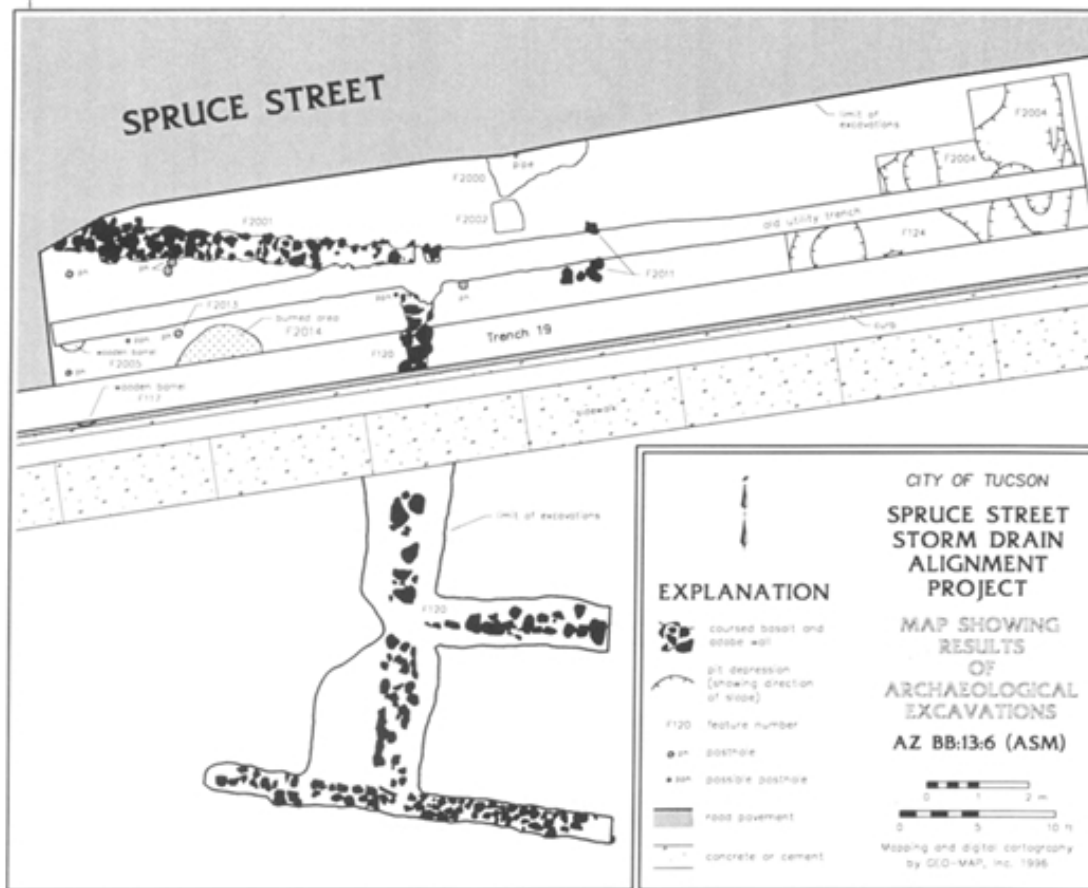
Adjoining their gardens are small huts built of adobes and ornaments of tin cans, barley sack and bushes, in which two or three partners or 'cousins' as they call each other live together.

10,000 Artifacts

Slightly over 10,000 artifacts were recovered during our excavations. Of these items, kitchen and architectural artifacts were most common, as expected. These included broken dishes, bottles, and nails. An unusually large amount of ammunition suggests that self protection and hunting were important for the gardeners. Agricultural implements were recovered including hoes, plow parts, and horse equipment. Period accounts describe the farmers hoeing their fields and using horses for plowing and peddling their crops.

Datable artifacts indicate that the gardeners lived at the site between 1892 and 1905. Slightly more than 12 percent of the assemblage was Chinese in origin. These included food and sauce jars, liquor bottles, ceramic dishes, medicine bottles, a padlock, a fan tan bead, coins, and buttons from a jacket, as well as several Chinese coins.

Non-Chinese artifacts included local Native American water ollas and bowls, English and American ceramics, agricultural implements, clothing remains, and a doll. The artifacts suggest that a woman and a child were present at the site, an unusual occurrence in Territorial Tucson where miscegenation laws enacted by the Territorial legislature prevented Chinese from marrying whites (in 1901 Euro-Americans and Mexican-Americans were classified as "white").



A map of the Chinese Gardener's site. Inside the compound wall (Feature 120/2001) is a hearth area (Feature 1014) and two partially buried woodell barrels (Features 1/7 and 2005). Feature 2002 is a probable outhouse. Feature 124/2004 is a trash-filled borrow pit (prepared by GeoMap, Inc.).

Some Chinese men traveled to New Mexico, where there was no law against mixed marriage, to marry. Others paid for the ship passage of wives or brides from mainland China. Most men remained unmarried or had wives back in China.

Census records indicate that a small number of Chinese households in Tucson had women and children and that most of these were merchant families. Only one household recorded in the 1900 census consisted of a Chinese gardener, his Mexican wife, and a two-year-old daughter, along with the gardener's brother and a male boarder. It is possible that the household we uncovered represents the home of this family.

Chinese Foods

Food choices are probably the most conservative human trait and an examination of plant remains, animal bone, and food containers indicates that the Chinese farmers were attempting to recreate their accustomed diet. Basically, the Chinese diet is noted for its diversity and innovative methods of using plants and animals. In the Sonoran Desert, the gardeners successfully grew the crops they knew from their home

land. They also used local greens to replace some leafy vegetables and gathered saguaro and barrel cactus fruits.

Products manufactured in China, such as sauces, liquor, preserved foods, and long-grained rice, were purchased by the gardeners from local Chinese stores. Unlike the Chinese in other western communities, the Tucson gardeners and their urban counterparts ate mostly beef instead of pork, perhaps because the harsh climate may have made pigs difficult to raise and more expensive. Purchased sauces and condiments, along with the low-quality pork they were able to acquire, helped recreate the taste of foods they had eaten back in Guangdong and Fujian provinces. The use of Chinese ceramic vessels aided in this endeavor. Porcelain

spoons, wine cups, and rice bowls were common. Ceramics manufactured in England or the United States were also found and these were mostly cups and bowls. This recreation of traditional vessel forms through the use of nontraditional vessels is particularly intriguing as it suggests that liquid-based dishes were consumed, rather than harder foods that could be eaten on plates.

Recovering a Lost Past

Excavation of a Chinese gardener's household and a survey of historical records have allowed us to glimpse the lives of a forgotten group of people, perhaps never numbering more than 40 men and a handful of women and children. However, these individuals contributed greatly to the lives of early Tucsonans. They grew much of the produce enjoyed by their fellow citizens from about 1885 to 1915. In a time prior to refrigeration, the Chinese gardeners could be depended upon to provide fresh fruits and vegetables.

The gardeners did not attempt to blend into the dominant culture. Instead they maintained many aspects of their own. Traditional meals were recreated using a combination of Chinese and North American foodstuffs. Recreational pursuits included the consumption of alcoholic beverages and opium and playing games such as fantan and dominos. Euro-American, Mexican, and Native American artifacts replaced items that were impossible to obtain from China. In general, the Chinese gardeners lived a life style similar to the one they left behind. After about 1910 the Chinese farmers



Archaeologists used picks, trowels, and brushes to excavate features. Allison Cohen Diehl and John Mitchell map the location of an artifact (photo by Homer Thiel).

gradually disappeared. The loss of cropland and restrictive immigration laws forced the Chinese in Tucson to move to other occupations. The archaeological investigations at the base of A-Mountain have given us the privilege of learning about these little-known people.

Further Reading:

Chanin, Abe, and Mildred Chanin

1977 *This Land These Voices*. Midbar Press, Tucson.

Lister, Florence c., and Robert H. Lister

1989 *The Chinese of Early Tucson: Historic Archaeology from the Tucson Urban Renewal Project*. Anthropological Papers No. 52. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.

Thiel, J. Homer

1997 *Archaeological Investigations of a Chinese Gardener's Household*, Tucson, Arizona. Technical Report No. 96-22. Center for Desert Archaeology, Tucson.

The Prehistoric Salado and the Historic Chinese

Jeffery J. Clark, Desert Archaeology, Inc.

To an archaeologist interested in understanding human migration, the prehistoric Salado and the historic Chinese, two seemingly unrelated groups, share important characteristics. For both, southern Arizona was a frontier where families were constantly on the move, leaving old homes behind to pursue better opportunities elsewhere.

In the Tonto Basin of central Arizona, Desert Archaeology investigated a prehistoric Salado settlement at Griffin Wash as part of the Roosevelt Community Development project (*AIT* newsletter, Summer 1995). Here, immigrant groups with a puebloan background settled on the margins of a local irrigation community that had a strong Hohokam heritage.

In the thirteenth-century Tonto Basin, corrugated cooking pots and room block construction identified the Salado enclave amidst Hohokam groups residing in open compounds. In late nineteenth-century Tucson, soy sauce jars, rice bowls, and meat cuts indicated the reoccupation of a Mexican home by a Chinese household. In both cases, everyday-use items distinguished the migrants from the local groups and told more about cultural background than conspicuous items such as fineware ceramics or luxury goods. These mundane objects reflect deeply-ingrained behavior that is often resistant to assimilation.

In both examples, prehistoric Salado and historic Chinese, the immigrants used their unique cultural background to create economic arrangements that assured their survival. Land-poor immigrants at the Griffin Wash enclave used their expertise in ceramic technology to mass produce corrugated pottery, and their weaving skills to produce high-quality cotton textiles. These goods were probably exchanged throughout the Tonto Basin for food produced by local households who were expert irrigators and in possession of the best agricultural land. Six hundred years later, for the Chinese, this cultural background included expertise in gardening, and Chinese households found an economic niche by supplying fresh vegetables to late nineteenth-century Tucsonans.

Household immigration, and the culturally diverse communities generated by such immigration, are recurrent themes in the prehistoric and historic past of the Southwest. We could do well to study these patterns carefully as we strive for stability within our own constantly-changing, multicultural society.



Outlines of excavated houses and pits are visible in this low-altitude aerial photograph of the Valencia Vieja site excavations taken by professional photographer Adriel Heisey from a specially outfitted ultra-light aircraft. Note the large structures at right, which open westward into the central village plaza. The diversity in house sizes and shapes as seen here is striking.

Snaketown on the Santa Cruz?

Henry D. Wallace, *Desert Archaeology, Inc.*

The famous Hohokam site of Snaketown on the Gila River south of Phoenix yielded tantalizing evidence of a central plaza with large square structures opening onto it during the poorly known Vahki phase. Archaeologists at Desert Archaeology, Inc. recently uncovered large portions of a settlement dating to the same era as this initial occupation of Snaketown in the southern Tucson Basin and found intriguing similarities to it.

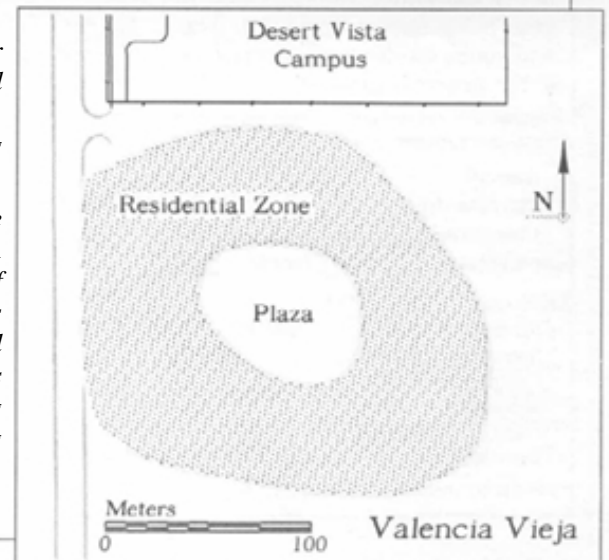
The excavations at the Valencia Vieja site, an early portion of the prehistoric Valencia community, were funded by Pima Community College prior to planned expansion of their Desert Vista Campus. About 300 pit structures are thought to be present at the village, dating about A.D. 500 to 700, a key period of southern and central Arizona prehistory. Only small fragments of villages dating to this era had been excavated prior to this time. The Valencia Vieja site excavations uncovered the general plan of the village and opened detailed windows into residential areas and the plaza. Because the residents of the village abandoned the settlement after a relatively short span of time, an extraordinarily well-preserved slice of Tucson's prehistory was preserved.

Archaeologist Jane Sliva of Desert Archaeology, Inc. (top) carefully trowels a groove where a pithouse wall had cut into an earlier house floor. The linear raised area between Jane and the bucket is a portion of the wall of the earlier structure.



One of a series of well-preserved large square structures (center), similar to those found at Snaketown and other Phoenix area sites, that were found at Valencia Vieja to open onto the central plaza. In this particular spot, archaeologists ultimately uncovered a sequence of four large overlapping structures, all of which are thought to have shared the same orientation.

This map (bottom) shows a fresh-from-the field perspective on the structure of the village that will be considered during analyses of the field data. A central plaza largely devoid of cultural features is surrounded by a ring of habitation areas. The residential areas include almost continuous overlapping clusters of two to three structures arranged around shared courtyards. The large plaza-oriented houses may represent the residences of household leaders. Researchers at Desert Archaeology will be testing these preliminary field impressions in time coming months and exploring their implications to our understanding of southern Arizona prehistory.



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The Center for Desert Archaeology is searching for a new name for the *Archaeology in Tucson* newsletter. The new-and-improved newsletter will expand its area of interest to the Greater Southwest, providing a wider regional coverage. Expect this change next January. In the meantime, we encourage you to submit suggestions for a new name to our newsletter editor Homer Thiel. If your suggestion is selected, you will receive a 2-year subscription to the newsletter.

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For further information about the Center for Desert Archaeology or the *Archaeology in Tucson* program, call Lisa Armstrong at 520-881-2244. For information about the *Archaeology in Tucson* newsletter specifically, please contact the editor, Homer Thiel.

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