



Hands-On...the Homes of the First Tucsonans

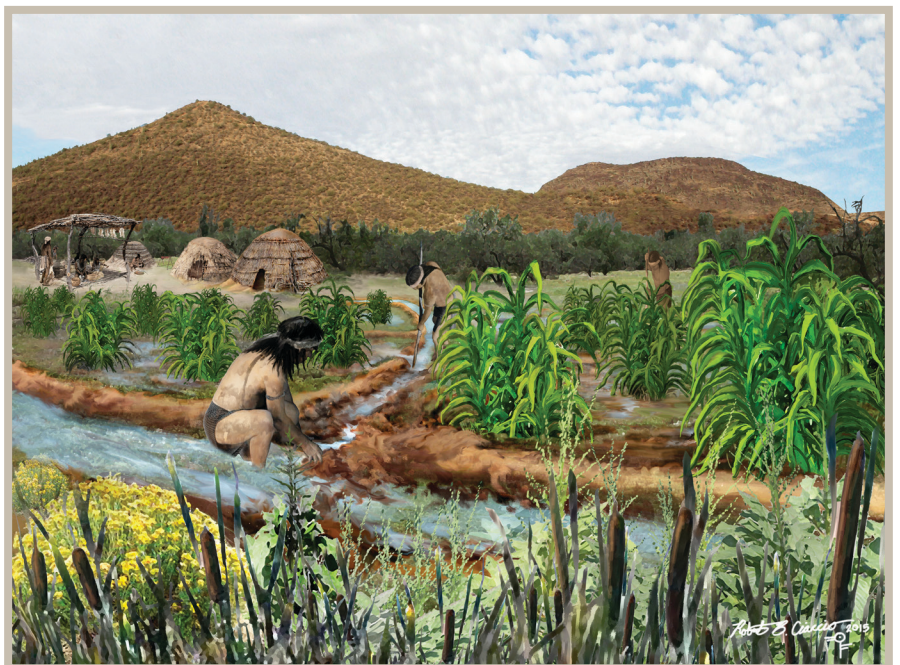
HANDS-ON
Archaeology
at Steam Pump Ranch

This is a model (at half scale) of what many dwellings in the Tucson Basin probably looked like a little more than 2,000 years ago. The people who built structures like this lived during the **Early Agricultural period** (~2000 B.C.–A.D. 50), meaning they were among the first farming groups in the region. What do you think it would be like to be inside this little house? (Remember it is at half scale, so imagine it twice as big.)

We modeled the shelter you see here after a real example that archaeologists excavated in the 1990s. It was located at the site of **Los Pozos** near I-10 and Prince Road. The remains of that pithouse dated to what archaeologists call the **Cienega phase** (800 B.C.–A.D. 50), which is the last part of the Early Agricultural period. (Around A.D. 50, people began making pottery and their villages became more formalized, so archaeologists mark the next few hundred years as the Early Ceramic Period.)

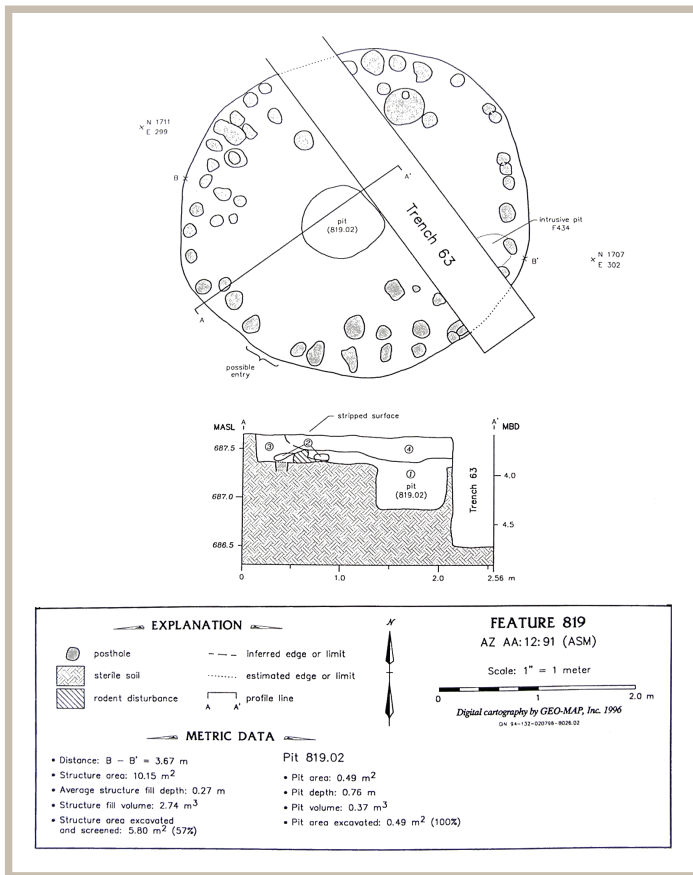
Archaeology Southwest is interested in **the building** and **the destruction** of such houses:

- » How did people build them? How long did it take?
- » What materials and tools did they use? How much of each kind of material did people need to build one structure?
- » How much and what kind of maintenance did these structures require, given prevailing weather conditions in the Sonoran Desert?
- » Because many excavated examples show evidence that villagers had deliberately burned them, we wonder, how did they set fire to a structure and control the burning? (Did they?) What happens after a structure like this burns and sits exposed...and ultimately becomes archaeological?

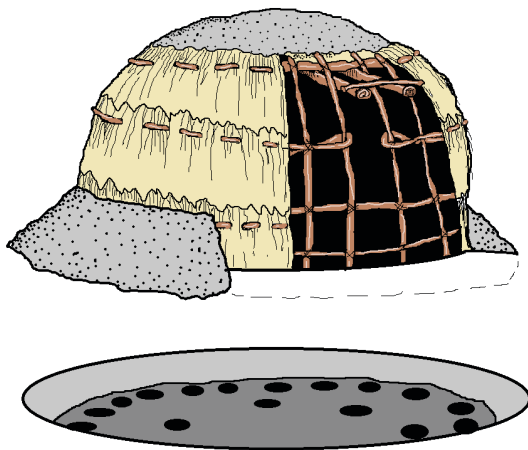


Above right: model of an Early Agricultural period pithouse (at half scale). **Bottom right:** Early Agricultural scene with pithouses in the background.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT B. CACCIO



Map of the original pithouse structure at Los Pozos.



Above: Illustrations depicting the structure and foundation of the pithouse. COURTESY OF ALLEN DENOYER **Right:** Volunteer Jaye Smith using digging sticks and baskets to carve out the foundation.

In order to answer these questions, we are measuring and quantifying the processes involved, as best we can. We are attempting to replicate the processes, materials, and tools, based on what we infer from archaeological excavations. Archaeology Southwest's ancient technologies expert, Allen Denoyer, and his volunteer team used digging sticks and baskets to dig the house pit. They then built the superstructure and framework. The walls are grass thatching, and the roof covering is mud.

This winter, we will burn the little pithouse and study that process, too. After the exposed, burned remains have been filled in and left to sit for awhile, we will "excavate" them to see how that process compares to excavations and remains of actual Cienega phase pithouses.

But before that, we are using the model dwelling as a prop for a new digital video, *Tucson through Time*. Archaeology Southwest's Digital Media Specialist, Doug Gann, will create photorealistic computer models of the pithouse and its burned remains that will appear in the forthcoming video.



Replica Cienega long point.



Archaeology Southwest

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