

## OGILBY: A DESERT STATION ON THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD

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*The historic town of Ogilby began in 1877 as a small railroad siding along the Southern Pacific Railroad in the Colorado Desert. By providing support to both the railroad and the nearby mining activities, Ogilby was able to remain a viable, albeit small, desert town for more than 60 years. Recent historical and archaeological investigations, including an oral history program, have provided insight into this town, which has all but disappeared from the desert landscape. This paper will discuss the results of this work.*

One of the more interesting historic archaeological sites recorded along the North Baja Pipeline (NBP) route was that of the town known as Ogilby (CA-IMP-8191H). Although the pipeline avoided the main part of the town, it was placed along the east edge. Archaeological evidence was sparse in this area, but the historical record provided a wealth of information about the town.

Ogilby was founded by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1877 and lasted nearly three-quarters of a century. The development of the town of Ogilby was completely interwoven with the development of the railroad and the mining activities in the area. It once served as the major supply point for the Tumco-Hedges mining district and played a significant role in the local economy. Ogilby was ultimately abandoned in the 1950s and the remaining buildings were demolished or moved away, leaving only the town cemetery and a variety of archaeological features. What is left today was recorded during the NBP survey as site IMP-8191H. To learn more about this site, EDAW conducted archaeological studies, historic research, and oral histories.

Ogilby began as a small siding on the Southern Pacific Railroad. By November 1877, the town had a cistern, section house, tool house, cook house, and bunkhouse. At the time, it is likely that the only inhabitants were railroad employees—Chinese immigrants employed to construct the railroad and section workers who helped maintain it (Figure 1).

John Peach, a Yuma resident who was interviewed about his early recollections of Ogilby, discussed the cemetery at Ogilby, which was reportedly set aside by the Chinese residents. He states, "I remember going to Picacho. There was a bunch of Chinese that worked out there, and every year, the Chinese families went out

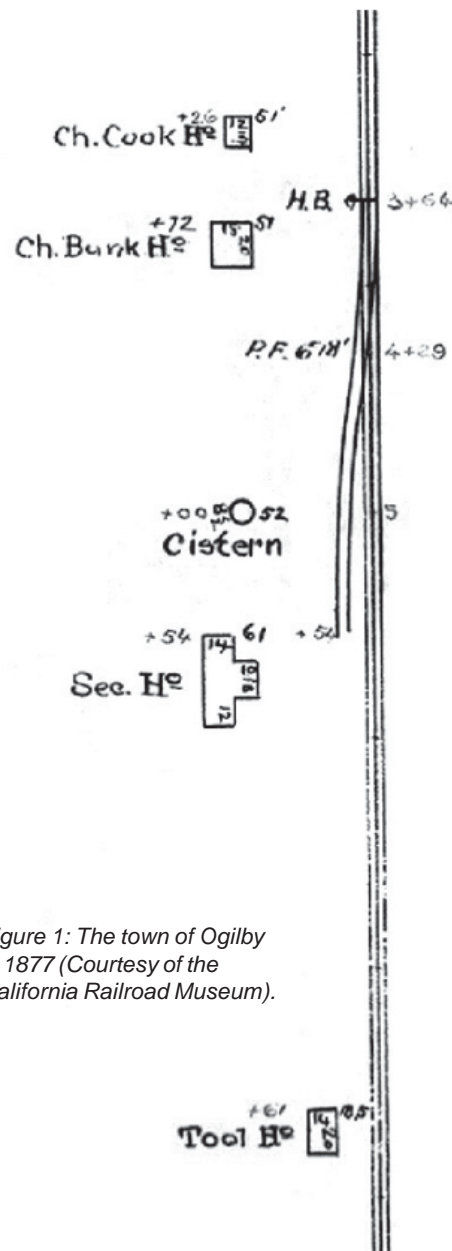


Figure 1: The town of Ogilby in 1877 (Courtesy of the California Railroad Museum).



For one hundred and fifty miles from the pass, to the Arizona frontier at Yuma, the railroad hardly knows what local traffic is. Its route is over the much talked-of "Colorado Desert," in comparison with which the deserts we have seen hitherto, though by no means unimposing... are of small dimensions. There are various stopping places, with designations on the map, but these are rarely more than signal stations and points where the locomotive stops to drink at the artesian wells [Bishop 1883:489].

Most likely the early residents of Ogilby did not share this view, as several people applied for homestead patents in the area during this time (BLM 1856-1991). Many of the residents of Ogilby in the early 1900s are clearly tied to either mining in the area, or the operation of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Phone directory listings show the Ogilby occupants include "miner" and "foreman, SP Co." These same listings show the population declining from 21 people in 1901 to just eight in 1907. This may be due, in part, to the transient nature of both mining and railroad activities. It could also be attributed to inaccuracies in the directories, as exemplified by the 1901 directory that lists the town as "Ogilvy." The population fluctuation could also be attributed to the fact that the Ogilby Post Office, which had been reestablished in 1898, took on mail for the mining towns of Glamis, Hedges, and Tumco when their post offices were closed in 1901, 1905, and 1914, respectively. Residents of these towns may have been listed as Ogilby residents for the purposes of mail delivery. Records show that the postmasters at the Ogilby Post Office were W. F. Shelley in 1905, S. Misner in 1906, and John Lynch in 1907 (San Diego Directory Co. 1905, 1906, 1907).

The 1900 census provides information on nine of the residents of Ogilby. A variety of occupations are listed, including cyanider, engineer, skilled laborer, blacksmith, and superintendent of gold mine. The residents come from Sweden, Ohio, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, New York, Indiana, Mexico, and Wales.

As mentioned previously, the 1900 census listed most of the residents of Ogilby as either working in the mines or for the railroad. It was around this time that two features (Features 35 and 36) uncovered during the construction of the pipeline appear to have been created. Although the features contained artifacts and were used as trash pits, the matrix of each feature would suggest that perhaps it was also used as an ash pit. The purpose of an ash pit was for the disposal of ash from the steam locomotives. Steam locomotives used various forms of coal to operate the boiler. When the steam locomotive stopped at a station longer than a few minutes, the locomotive runner and the fireman would

attend to the grates and the ash-pan. Any remaining clinkers would be removed from the grates. Cinders and ash from the fire would fall through the grate and land in the ash-pan, a light steel receptacle. The ash-pans would be raked out or dumped into a cinder pit to remove the cinders and soot that had gathered. This was a necessary process for two reasons. Neglecting to clean the ash-pan resulted in melting the grate bars and obstructing air to the grates, which prevented combustion (Forney 1875).

Before the steam locomotive reached the last station, the fire would be managed so that as little as possible would remain in the firebox. At the end of the run, the fire would be raked out of the firebox by dropping the drop door to the grate. This allowed the remains of the fire to drop into the ash-pan, where they would be raked out (Forney 1875). As a small facility, handling no more than two to four engines per day, Ogilby's cinder pit would have probably been a small pit shoveled out by hand (Chris Ahrens, personal communication 2003).

Ogilby's population fluctuated with the mining activities in the area. Photographs of Ogilby are rare, but Figure 3 shows the Ogilby Station in 1913. By 1915, Ogilby had two sidings and a spur. The town's economy got a boost with the upcoming 1915 Panama-California Exposition. In preparation, San Diego began planning an automobile road direct from Yuma in 1912. While some automobiles had made the trek prior to this by following the route of the military telegraph line, the sand from the Algodones Dunes and the desert heat proved devastating to most engines. Frederick Law Olmsted, famous for his landscaped parks, came through the area in the 1850s and made note of the need for a road. He called the area "a desolate, barren waste, which can never be rendered useful to man or beast, save for a public highway" (Olmsted 1857:450).

Construction of the plank road began in 1913, and it was completed six months later by volunteers (Westerners 1950:77). As the first plank road began to deteriorate, plans for the second plank road began in 1916. The segments were constructed at a fabrication plant at Ogilby and freighted by mule teamsters out to the Dunes (Figure 4).

After the activities with the Plank Road, Ogilby again experienced fluctuations that were tied to the mining operations nearby. Like the rest of the nation, Ogilby was undoubtedly affected by the Great Depression. However, it appears the economy was stable enough to support two stores. One store on the west side of town was owned by Clarence Montgomery. Montgomery applied for a homestead patent in 1931





Figure 3: The railroad depot at Ogilby ca. 1913 (Courtesy of Robert Morris).

Figure 4: Plank Road fabrication at Ogilby ca. 1916 (Courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management).



(BLM 1856-1991). In 1928, Al and Dora Allen purchased an existing store in Ogilby (Allen and Kerckhoff 1983:9).

As there is not much documentation on how Ogilby looked during the Depression, the following description of the town comes from a single source (Allen and Kerckhoff 1983:61-64). Al and Dora Allen lived in a whitewashed railroad-tie-and-mortar house with a ceiling that was canvas and lathing. They had outhouses and used kerosene stoves. At that time, Ogilby's main structures included section houses for the railroad workers (who were reportedly of Mexican heritage), a school, and a large railroad station. Water was brought in 190-liter drums from about 16 km away. Ice was brought in once a week from Yuma. A Kohler plant generated lights, and the radio ran on a set cell battery. The Allens' store, which supplied nearby mines, was stocked by a once-a-week trip to Yuma. The store grubstaked prospectors, offering them supplies or funds on the promise of a share in any discoveries. There were also homesteaders in the area whose last names included Ashcraft, Irvine, Walker, and VanSandt.

In the 1930s, Ogilby had at least 36 registered voters, although some of these may have come from nearby Glamis, which did not have a voting district. The railroad depot burned during this time and was not rebuilt. Mining activities had waned in the area and there was no longer a need for a depot.

The events of World War II may have breathed a little life into the town of Ogilby. The arrival of so many troops for the Desert Training camps may have had a positive effect on the economy of the community. Local informant Vernon Schad remembers the life of a railroad worker's family. His father, Morris E. Schad, worked for the railroad up until the Depression, when he was laid off. He was hired again in 1935 as a fireman/engineer (he later became a passenger engineer) for the Southern Pacific Railroad. When he got the job, he moved to Yuma. According to Vernon Schad, railroad workers lived wherever they worked. As he put it: "Seniority is everything on the railroad. Wherever you can work is where you live, until you get bumped" (Vernon Schad, personal communication 2003). Mr. Schad's father had enough seniority when World War II began to hold his job in Yuma. It was a busy time for the railroad:

During World War II, months went by when I didn't see my dad. They would work 16 hours on and 8 hours off. If he came into town, and I was at school, I wouldn't see him. Whenever the next train came in, he would be on it and take it back to Gila Bend. He worked from here (Yuma) to Gila Bend. Wherever the 16th hour caught him, even though they

might be on the main track, they had to run a crew out there, stop, and take the crew off. A couple times, he was just outside of Yuma and they would bring him back into town. They ran many, many trains during the war. The Southern Pacific only has one line with some sidings. It is not like the Santa Fe with passing tracks [Vernon Schad, personal communication 2003].

But the 1940s were to be Ogilby's last active decade. There was less and less mining, and the railroad was about to be surpassed by a system of highways. The Ogilby Post Office was discontinued on February 28, 1942, after which mail was sent to Winterhaven (Frickstad 1955). By 1946, Ogilby was listed as a station, but trains no longer made scheduled stops there. That same year, the Ogilby school district was suspended because it averaged less than five students a day (El Centro Public Library 1952:80). In 1959, Fred Carlson purchased the Ogilby schoolhouse and moved it to Felicity (World Commemorative Center 1998). By 1961, the Automobile Club of Southern California map states that the town of Ogilby is abandoned. Like the mining towns it had depended upon, Ogilby was now a ghost town.

What remains today are 36 archaeological features, including refuse deposits, a wood-reinforced dirt ramp, a coal deposit, a railroad tie-reinforced pit with a refuse deposit, three large isolated fragments of formed concrete, two brick scatters, two railroad tie storage areas, a chimney base, a concrete foundation, a set of concrete pier blocks, and two poured cement pads (Figure 5). The artifacts were primarily white improved earthenware, glass, and metal cans (Figure 6).

One of the more surprising observations that can be made from the research is that Ogilby in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a rather diverse group of residents, representing different cultures, states, and countries. This diversity was not particularly reflected in the archaeological record but can clearly be seen in the historical record. The word "cosmopolitan" does not normally come to mind when one thinks of tiny "isolated" desert towns. However, because of the transient nature of both the railroad and mining industries, people came to the west from all over the world and briefly crossed paths in tiny hamlets like Ogilby. They were tied together by the emerging worldwide economic system and were not really isolated at all.

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#### *Acknowledgments*

*Long-time residents of the project area Vernon Schad, Dixie Schad, and John Peach were kind enough to share their memories of southeastern Imperial County. Their*

Figure 5: Map of Ogilby boundaries as defined by historic maps and archaeological features.

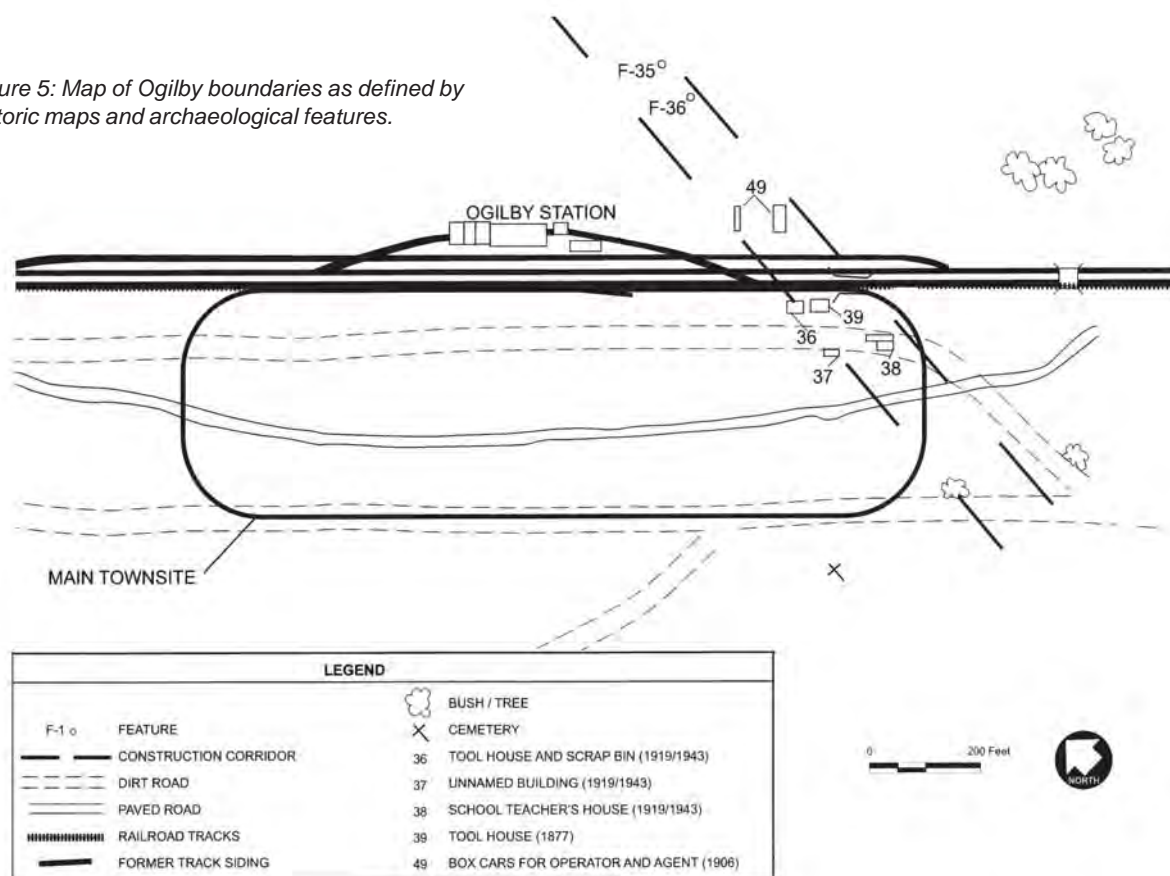


Figure 6: Glass bottle recovered from the Ogilby site.



remembrances were very beneficial, giving life and character to the Ogilby town site.

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