

# Protecting Costa Mesa's Indigenous Heritage

The Costa Mesa Historical Society preserves several documents written by Dr. Keith Dixon, a leader in the effort to protect 4-ORA-58, the Native American site in Fairview Park. Taken together, Dixon's 1971 draft of the site's National Register of Historic Places nomination and his proposal to turn the archeological site into an open-air museum present a compelling case both for the preservation of the site's past as well as a bold, if unrealized, vision for its future.

## BACKGROUND

In 1959 the state of California designated as surplus a swath of land it had previously acquired for the Fairview State Hospital. The 350-acres stretched west from the hospital to the Santa Ana River. Had the land been released immediately, the history of Fairview Park might have been very different. But, as it happened, an ownership dispute tied up the land in court throughout the 1960s, and the title wasn't cleared until 1970.

By then the ecological movement had taken root. Many in Costa Mesa felt squeezed by two decades of rapid suburbanization that had displaced the town's rural character. Moreover, many felt a need to preserve the area's disappearing history, as evidenced by, among other things, the formation of the Costa Mesa Historical Society.

By 1972 nearly everyone believed the land ought to be purchased from the state for the purpose of a park, thanks to early champions of the idea such as the city's Project 80 committee, Estancia High School's Ecology Committee, and Cal State Long Beach's professor of anthropology, Keith Dixon.

Dixon, who directed excavations at the site from 1959-1966, was an ideal advocate, combining scientific credibility, hands-on experience, and passion. Leveraging this background, he nominated the site for the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 to help protect it from urban development.

The National Register, in his words, serves as "the official list of the nation's cultural property that has been evaluated by experts as worth saving. It is a protective inventory of those irreplaceable resources which are of more than local significance."

## NATIONAL REGISTER NOMINATION

In his nomination Dixon argues that the Fairview site is a unique example of what was once typical of the region. "It represents the last well-preserved remnant of an important part of the Indian heritage." The site is of more than local significance, he says, for the following reasons:

It is one of the **largest known Indian sites in the region**, with up to 750,000 cubic yards of deposit. It was **intensely occupied** for at least 3,000 years, giving anthropologists centuries of data from which to reconstruct cultural patterns. It contains a **large number of human burials**, instructive on the diseases, pathology, and nutrition of native peoples. It is the **most securely dated prehistoric site in the region**, providing clear markers between successive civilizations. Its uniquely **clear stratification** further illuminates the relationships between the major cultures in the area. It contains a number of



Costa Mesa Historical Society members tour surplus Fairview Hospital land in 1971.

**cogged stones in their original position** rather than scattered on the surface, giving better insight into the mysterious artifacts. Finally, it offers an **extensive record of past ecology**, through which scientists may reconstruct millennia of ecological history.

## ARCHEOLOGICAL PARK

Dixon also argued that, given the proximity of the site to major population centers, it would attract both locals and tourists with its **unique** educational opportunities. To that end, he proposed an ambitious five-phase project partly modeled on Hancock Park's La Brea Tarpits.

**First**, archeologists would conduct a surface survey by "disking" the upper 12 inches of the deposit to identify differences in human activity across the site, reinforce earlier tests, and guide future studies. **Second**, a landscaped park would be developed over the site, allowing full public use of the recreational area while at the same time preserving the archeological material below. **Third**, archeological research would be conducted in view of the public, much like the tourist-attracting excavations at Hancock Park. **Fourth**, permanent exhibits would "recreate the Indian way of life, to make Orange County's prehistory 'visible' for the first time." Exhibits would include reconstructions of Indian homes, a native plant botanical garden, and an exposed cross-section of the bluff illustrating the archeological deposit and geological strata. **Fifth**, a Museum of Local Ecology would not only house collected artifacts but would also demonstrate how all aspects of the environment — physical characteristics, animal life, plant life, climate, and man — interoperate upon one other as a single system. This kind of interdisciplinary, systematic museum would be, to Dixon's knowledge, unique in the world.

Dixon believed the park could both memorialize past cultures and increase public understanding of the nation's Indian heritage. Early planners seemed to agree, giving pride of place to the cultural zone. By 1978, however, the ambitious project was apparently dropped in favor of a less intensive park. Finally, in 1994, after the city performed one last archeological survey, Dixon recommended that the site be "capped." Archeologists had done all they could to study it, at least for now, he said.

Although Dixon's vision for an archeological park was never realized, his tireless efforts nevertheless played a vital role in preserving the site for future generations. ■