

*Archaeological field school participant Norris Spence digs for artifacts at Mission San Antonio.*

# Mission Life: Can You Dig It?

*by Michelle Broom*

**I**t's less like summer school and more like an extended field trip. It's called a field school.

For six weeks, students in the Archaeological Field School at Mission San Antonio de Padua are intensely immersed in the history of Spanish mission life. Since 1976 this Cal Poly summer extension course has emphasized the integration of excavation, recording, laboratory processing skills, and classroom presentations. And in an effort to discourage specialization or segmentation of tasks, all students record, clean, catalogue, weigh, measure, and interpret data.

The relationship between Cal Poly and Mission San Antonio began 22 years ago when Anthropology Professor Robert L. Hoover received a phone call from a padre who said he wanted to learn more about the mission's archaeology. "The only previous excavation was in the late 1960s," says Hoover. "So we discussed developing a summer extension program."

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*Cal Poly Extension students  
Heidi Deutsch and Wei-Fu Liao  
clean excavated artifacts  
in a wash bucket.*

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As director and coordinator of the field school, and professor at Cal Poly since 1970, Hoover says the program is one of a kind. "Mission San Antonio is scientifically unique because there is no town around it," he says. "It also has a unique historical ambiance. Students feel like they're in the 18th century — it's a spiritual experience."

Located 26 miles west of Highway 101, 23 miles southwest of King City, near the small town of Jolon in a remote region of Fort Hunter Liggett, Mission San Antonio was founded in 1771 and is the third of 21 missions along the California coast between San Diego and Sonoma. In 1805 it reached its peak population of 1,300 Indians, who were baptized and converted to the Spanish uses of agriculture, architecture, and domestic animals. With time the population tapered off because of the Indians' lack of resistance to European diseases.

Mission San Antonio was secularized in 1834 after Mexico received its independence from

Spain, and everything but the church and the padres' rooms were sold off. Most missions became public churches except for Santa Barbara, San Luis Rey, San Miguel, and San Antonio. Mission San Antonio is one of four still run by the Franciscan religious order, urban social workers concerned with the needs of the poor.

Every June, Mission San Antonio opens its doors to 20 field school students as guests of the Franciscan friars. Students stay in individual rooms with water, electricity, closets, and furniture. The bathrooms and medieval dining hall are communal.

The 1998 fee of \$1,103 includes room, board, and salaries. Hoover shares his salary with two assistants who return every year to be a part of the program. The lab director is a high school teacher from suburban Washington, D.C., and the field director is a retired programmer. Hoover also hires a chef, and the Franciscans eat with the Cal Poly group. "It's a mutual relationship," Hoover says. "Students also help clean the

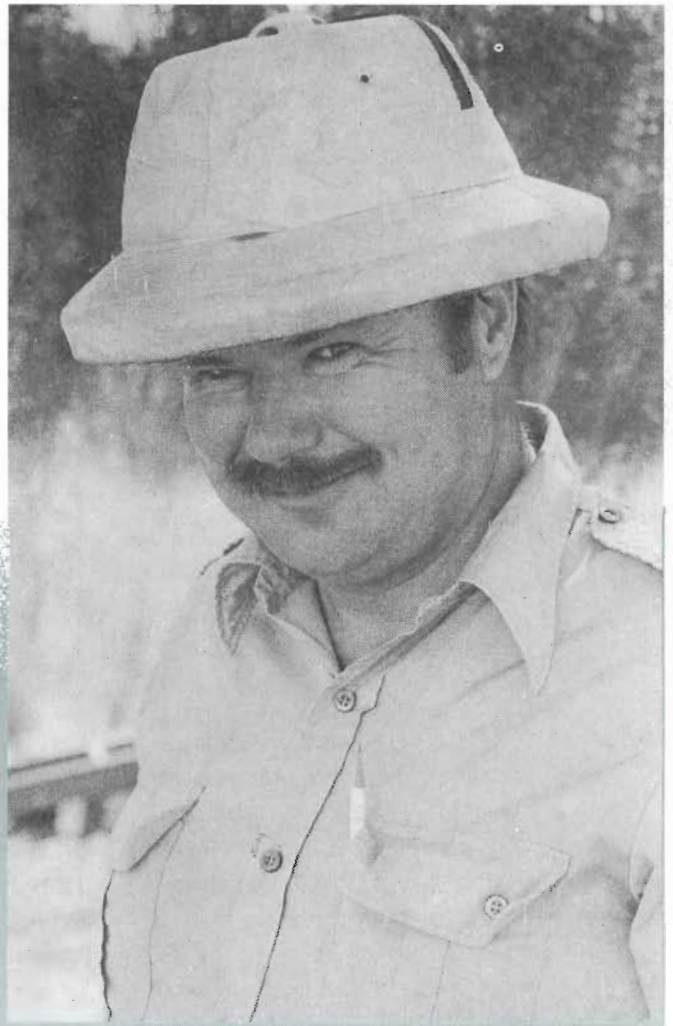
museum and volunteer for other work in their spare time."

Due to the warm dry climate of the Jolon area, the greater part of outdoor excavation activities is conducted in the mornings. The bulk of the laboratory processing is done during the afternoons and some evenings inside the mission buildings, where the adobe structures are insulated from outside temperatures. Other evenings are spent in lecture and discussion. For a couple of hours after lunch students receive free time to sleep, read, or swim in the nearby Army base pool.

Hoover invites guest lecturers to speak about history, music, agriculture, architecture, and art. For the past four years, History Professor Paul Hiltbold has lectured on the Spanish colonial empire from the Spanish perspective. "The best thing about archaeology is that it marries the humanistic and the scientific," Hiltbold says. "And the field school is a wonderful place to learn this and look for real objects."



Robert  
Hoover



Photos courtesy Robert L. Hoover

It is Hoover who creates the research designs to determine when and what areas of the mission and its surrounding land will be excavated. Over the last two decades field school participants have explored corrals, a mill house, a reservoir, an orchard, the myriad quarters, the single men's dorm, and the water system. Hoover says his motto is: "Work carefully. We're in no hurry — we're learning."

Hoover remembers that one of the most exciting finds was "a beautiful bronze crucifix in a drain covered with stone slabs in the soldiers' barracks." It is now housed in one of the many museum display cases. Another special find was a square floor tile with a footprint of a Salinan child (the Salinan Nation are neighbors of the Chumash Indians to the north). "One of the Salinan students made a cast of the tile to take home."

Recently Hoover was contacted by descendants of the Salinan Nation to enlist his help. According to Hoover, they are

attempting to gain recognition as a tribe and have asked the field school to explore boundaries of the cemetery. Hoover has agreed as a gesture of his respect for, and effort to maintain strong relations with, the Franciscans and local Indians.

Hoover's dedication to the field school extends beyond the perimeters of the mission. At an archaeology seminar, Hoover met a Bay-area geophysicist who, this summer, is allowing the field school to use his new ground-penetrating radar and magnetometers to detect metals and resistance underground. "It's an exciting opportunity," says Hoover.

Each year Hoover receives 75 to 100 inquiries about the program. Initially, enrollees were regular students at Cal Poly. However, the field school's reputation for rigorous and intensive training has attracted

students from other California institutions, most states across the nation, and five foreign countries. "Anyone can apply," Hoover says. "It's most important to have interest."

Previous participants have ranged from advanced high school students to senior citizens. "The variety of people bring different things to the program: knowledge from the classroom, practical experience, and enthusiasm," Hoover says. "The students are as much fun as the archaeology!"

Hoover plans to continue with his involvement well into retirement. "A person can spend two or three lifetimes and still not find everything." 