

State Heritage Areas of South Australia



Burra State Heritage Area

Creekbank Dwellers – former Dugout sites

State Heritage Places entered in the South Australian Register

Former Miners' Dugouts, tributary of Burra Creek

Blyth Street, Burra

SAHR 10050 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 24 July 1980

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Former Dugout Sites, Burra Creek

Mitchell Flat, Burra

SAHR 11187 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 28 November 1985

Many Cornish miners and their families made their first homes in Burra by digging into the banks of the Burra Burra Creek and its tributaries.

This was a cheap form of accommodation for needy families, although some sources state that it was actually the result of the rapidly increasing population and a subsequent housing shortage. It has also been suggested that this accommodation choice may have been a protest at the South Australian Mining Association's high rents and their refusal to provide freehold land to miners.



Creekbank Dwellings, 2005



Dugout interior, 1994

Some of the dug-outs were simply one-roomed caves with holes for doors and windows, and sleeping recesses hollowed out of clay.

Others were relatively luxurious, including carpets, timber doors, glazed windows and papered walls.

All homes had chimneys, most were whitewashed and a few had shingled verandahs.

A visitor to Burra in 1851 vividly described life in the creek:

In these strange dwelling places, which take up two miles of the creek on both sides, the great bulk of miners and their families reside, being permitted by the Burra Company to do so rent free. A busy hum pervades the creek, swarms of children are at every door, here and there a knot of gossips is collected, and every now and then the scene is diversified by the chatter of a tame magpie, the barking of quarrelsome curs, the neighing of horses stabled alongside the huts, or the fluttering of red skirts and other apparel drying in the open air.

Heritage Branch files

Another description, by old-timer William Copley MP, relates his memories of the dugouts in the early 1850s:

The Burra Creek when I first knew it was a chain of deep waterholes and magnificent gum trees. On, or rather in, both banks, for more than a mile length, it was as densely populated as a rabbit warren. The first thing a new-chum did, no houses being available, was to excavate in the banks of the creek, a dwelling of one or more rooms according to the size of his family.

These underground abodes were cosy in winter and cool in summer, most of them nicely furnished, and all were kept scrupulously clean and sweet by frequent whitewashings. Light was admitted by a window on each side of the door. Of course, there could only be one entrance, the 'house' having neither back nor sides. A hole from the fireplace to the surface carried off the smoke; but as the road from the township to the mine passed over these dwellings, it was usual to place over these holes a cask with the ends knocked out, so as to prevent nocturnal travellers from falling into the kitchen below. Practical jokers, however, would sometimes remove these protections; and then the family at supper would probably be startled by the hurried and undignified entrance of an unbidden guest, whose language would often be more scriptural than religious.

Observer, 22 January 1898



Dugouts near Blythe Street, 2005

Despite threats from mine managers, up to 2 000 families at a time lived along the creek and its tributaries for many years, until a series of floods in 1851 drove most of them out.

The South Australian Mining Association refused to offer any flood relief to the victims, and discouraged the continuance of the creek bed dugouts, by refusing to hire people who lived in the creek.

A great flood in 1859 finally expelled the few remaining occupants who had not yet shifted to cottages within the townships.

Today two pairs of restored dugouts remain near Blyth Street and are in the care of the National Trust. Depressions along the creek bed, adjacent to the south section of Mitchell Flat, are evidence of other dwellings that were once so plentiful in the area.



National Trust site, 2005



Government of South Australia
Department for Environment
and Heritage

Date: 21/9/84 Item Reference: 6630-11187

HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The integrity of the item is minimal. The site may however, contain evidence underground.

NOMINATION SOURCE/THREAT/OWNER

HERITAGE CONSERVATION BRANCH RECOMMENDATION:

.....
Barry A. Rasmussen

 f Manager

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:

.....
Chairman

South Australian Heritage Act 1978-82	Register of State Heritage Items ITEM EVALUATION SHEET Historic Site	Ref. No. 6630-11187
	Item DUGOUTS, BURRA	Status -
Age 1845-1860	Subject Present Use Code: 1003 Paddock Original Use Code: 0310 Underground Dwellings	Site Type

History

Physical

Environment

Integrity

	E	VG	AG	FP	N
Context Buried ruins of dugouts occupied in the early years of mining settlement at Burra.		X			
Person/Group South Australian Mining Association			X		
Event 1852 flood		X			
Natural Elements A cleared paddock, used intermittently for sheep grazing			X		
Man-Made Elements A series of depressions believed to represent caved dugouts. No other surface evidence. State of underground evidence is unknown.		X			
Representation Scarce example of a rare form of habitation	X				
Continuity					X
Local Character In its present state, the site makes no contribution to the historic character of Burra					
Landmark Inconspicuous			X		
Alterations			X		
Condition Ruinous					X
Compatibility Disused as habitation site			X		
			X		

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Supplementary Information

No comment can be made on adaptation, use or interpretation. It is believed the site has potential for archaeological investigation, but any decisions on its future must await the outcome of that investigation.

Part of the property is available for development without intruding into the area where the indications of former dugouts lie.

History and Sources

Burra is hailed as one of Australia's first mining towns, sharing this distinction with Kapunda. Its early housing arrangements by the predominantly Cornish miners are however, unique in Australia.

Copper was first discovered at Burra in 1844 by two shepherds, William Streair and Thomas Pickett, in separate places along the Burra Creek. Kapunda, approximately fifty miles to the south, had commenced as a copper mining town in the same year, exploiting the deposit discovered on Bagot's land in 1842. At Burra, Streair's find proved worthless, but Pickett's "bubble" of copper became the Burra Mine - a "monster" mine which spawned the townships surrounding it, eclipsed its sister town of Kapunda in production, and restored the colony to a sound financial state during the latter half of the 1840's and 1850's. In 1861, a further discovery of copper at the head of Yorke Peninsula uncovered an even larger deposit of the ore, out-stripping the Burra Mine production. By the time the two mines at Kapunda and Burra closed, they had produced copper worth 5,700,000 Pounds. Of the total, Burra Mines produced 4.7 million Pounds, and in 1859 employed a maximum of 1,170 men (Bailliere's Gazetteer, 1866,47). On a capital of 12,320 Pounds the Burra Mine returned 800,000 Pounds in dividends. (RGSSA Vol. 56,48). By comparison, Moonta Mine subsequently became the first mine in Australia to pay dividends exceeding 1 million Pounds.

The mine attracted miners from Cornwall, who settled in the alien landscape in the best way they could. From contemporary accounts, they preferred to live in dugouts along the Burra Creek, even when the South Australian Mining Association built rows of cottages for rental. The difference between the dugout and company cottage was initially availability, rental (the dugouts being rent-free) and independence. Estimates of the number of people living along the creek bed vary, ranging between 2,500 and 4,000. In 1851, the Census listed a population of 1,763 men, women and children out of nearly 4,000 people living in dugout homes along Burra Creek. The Census stated: "There are no houses, the dwellings being excavated in the banks of Burra Creek". Even allowing for some dwellings on the mine site,

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History and Sources

the census infers no independent building. However, other reports state that by 1846, four rows of cottages had been built by S.A.M.A., and 22 were in the process of construction. A visitor to Burra in 1851 describes the dugouts as follows:

"In these strange dwelling places, which take up two miles of the creek on both sides, the great bulk of the miners and their families reside, being permitted by the Burra Company to do so rent free. A busy hum pervades the creek, swarms of children are at every door, here and there a knot of gossips is collected, and every now and then the scene is diversified by the chatter of a tame magpie, the barking of quarrelsome curs, the neighing of horses stabled alongside the huts, or the fluttering of red skirts and other apparel drying in the open air".

One old-timer, William Copley, M.P., described his memories of the Burra dugouts in early 1850 more explicitly:

"The Burra Creek when I first knew it was a chain of deep waterholes and magnificent gum trees. On, or rather in, both banks, for more than a mile in length, it was as densely populated as a rabbit warren. The first thing a new-chum did, no houses being available, was to excavate in the banks of the creek, a dwelling of one or more rooms according to the size of his family.

These underground abodes were cosy in winter and cool in summer, most of them were nicely furnished, and all were kept scrupulously clean and sweet by frequent whitewashings. Light was admitted by a window on each side of the door. Of course, there could only be one entrance, the 'house' having neither back nor sides. A hole from the fireplace to the surface carried off the smoke; but as the road from the township to the mine passed over these dwellings, it was usual to place over these holes a cask with the ends knocked out, so as to prevent nocturnal travellers from falling into the kitchen below. Practical jokers, however, would sometimes remove these protections; and then the family at supper would probably be startled by the hurried and undignified entrance of an unbidden guest, whose language would often be more scriptural than religious".

(Observer, 22/1/1898)

Floods in 1852 washed away many of the two and four roomed dugouts, and by 1860 most occupants had shifted to the Cornish miners' stone cottages still seen throughout the townships of Koorunga and Redruth. A mass exodus of miners to the Victorian goldfields in 1851 would have decreased the population living in the dugouts considerably. According to the Register of 8/7/1851, the mine on the eve of the gold-rush was employing 988 workers and the population of Koorunga, Aberdeen and Redruth totalled about 4,300, of whom 2,600 lived in dugouts. Others lived in 100 houses owned by the Company and about 330 owned by others (This contradicts the Census of 1851 cited earlier).

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History and Sources

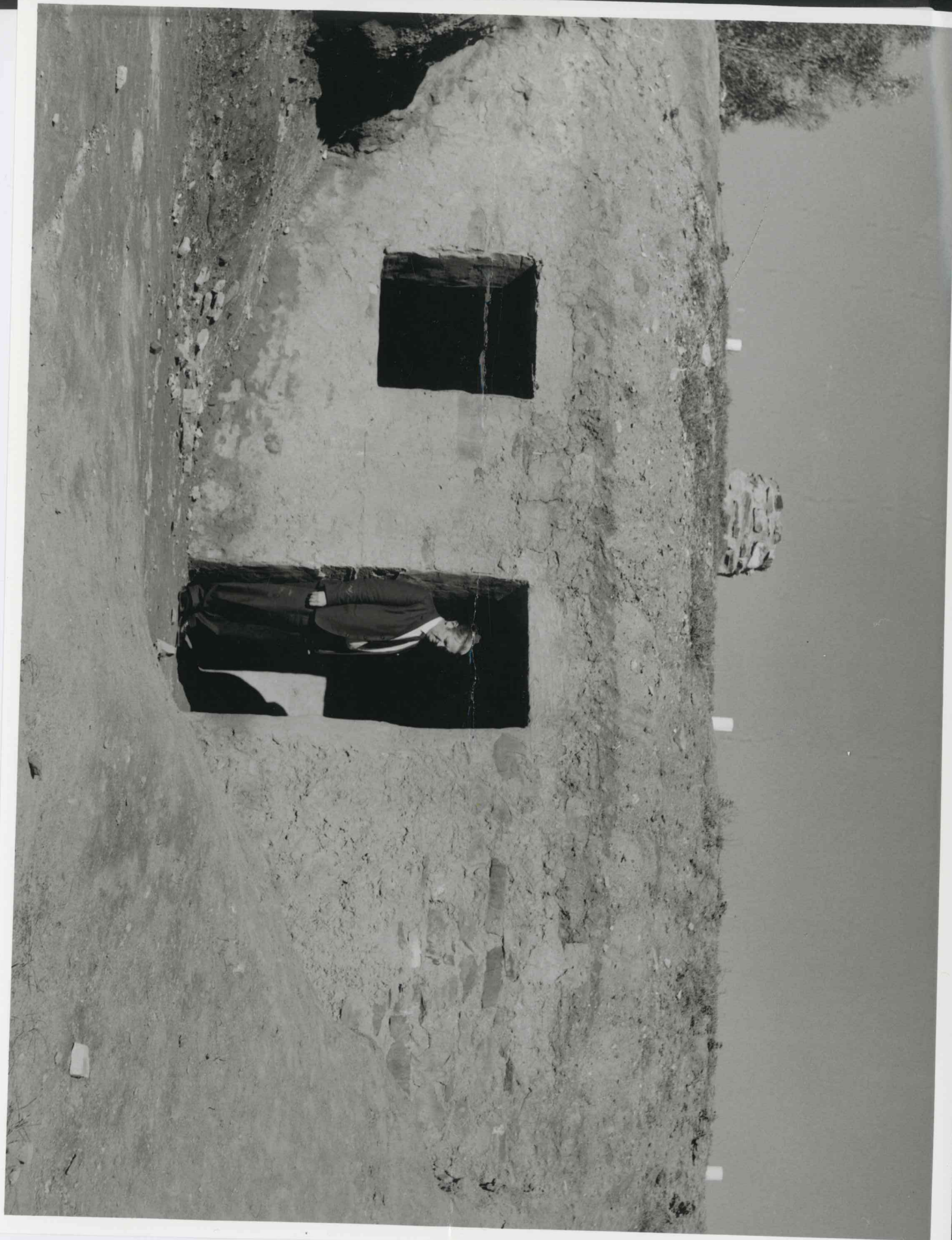
Subsequent building of the township of Koorunga and Redruth, together with the refusal of the South Australian Mining Association to offer any relief to flood victims, discouraged the continuance of creek bed dugouts. A few have been restored by the National Trust and give some idea of the dimensions and scale involved. However, depressions along the creekbed, and in the gully out of Burra on the side of the road leading to Baldina indicate that further remains of dugouts still exist. Because of their rarity in the light of Australian mining history, such remains at Burra warrant careful archaeological investigation prior to any major change in the landscape.

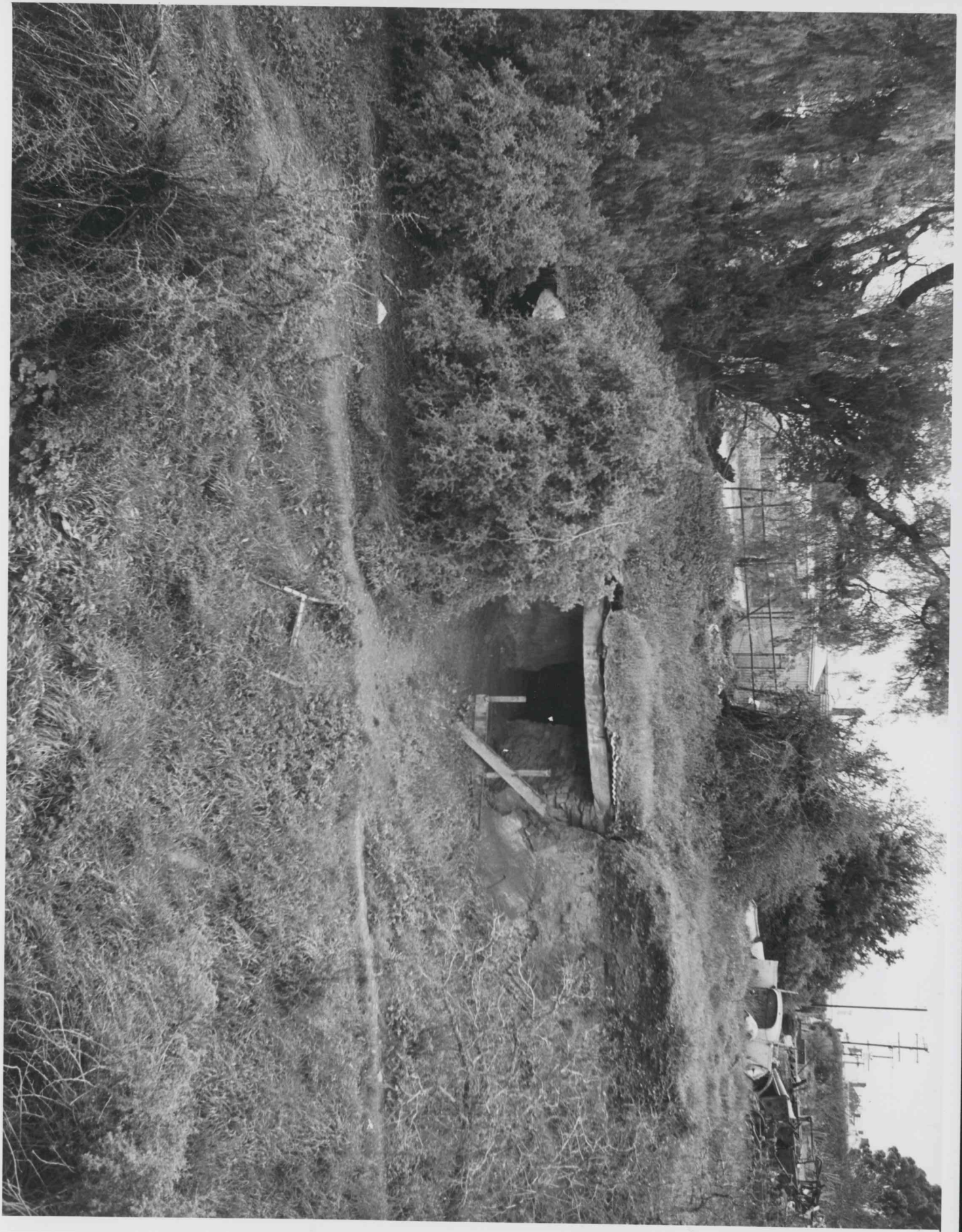
Sources

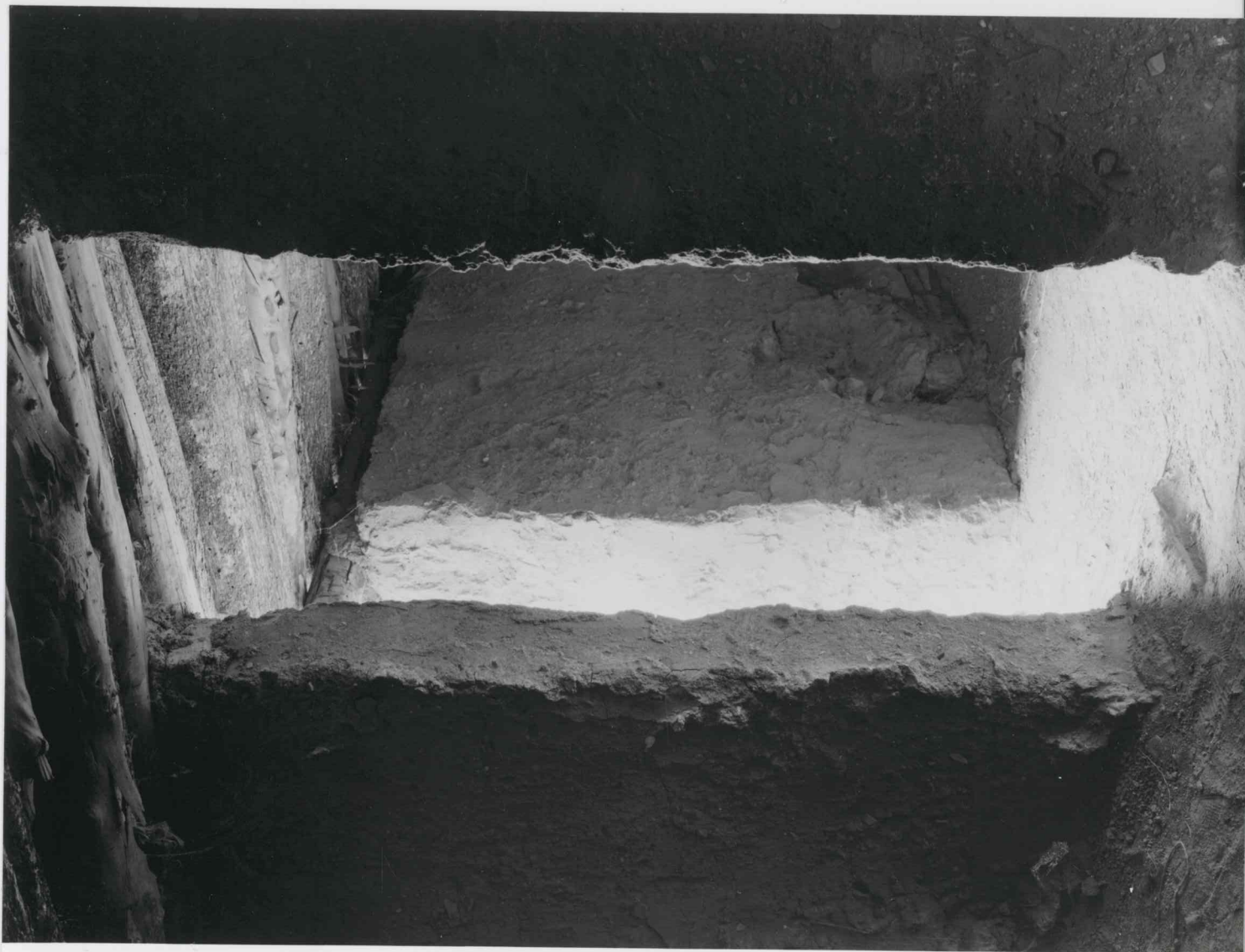
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FILM 7
NO 7

INTERIOR, MINERS DUGOUT
6630 - 10050

BURRA
13-12-78



FILM 7
NO 8

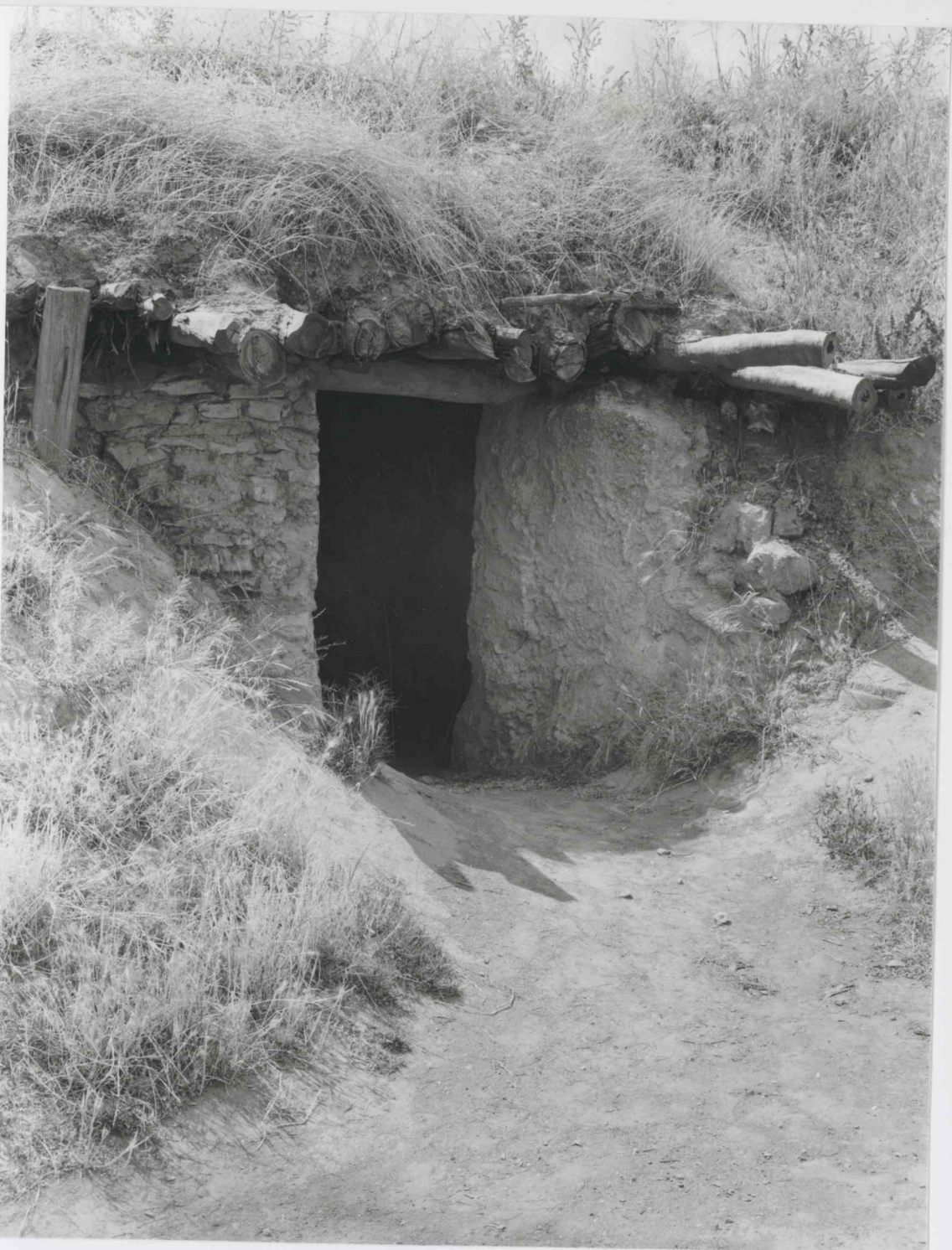
MINERS DUGOUTS

BURRA
13-12-78

FILM 7
No 6

MINERS DUGOUT FROM SOUTH

BURRA
13-12-78



FILM 7
NO 5

MINERS DUGOUTS FROM SOUTH

BURRA
13-12-78

