

GRANDMA PRISBREY'S BOTTLE VILLAGE  
4595 Cochran Street  
Simi Valley  
Ventura County  
California

HALS CA-42  
CA-42

PHOTOGRAPHS  
PAPER COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES  
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

ADDENDUM TO:  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### GRANDMA PRISBREY'S BOTTLE VILLAGE (Bottle Village)

HALS NO. CA-42

- Location:** 4595 Cochran Street, Simi Valley, Ventura County, California  
34.279459, -118.704645 (Center of lot, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)  
National Register of Historic Places NRIS No. 96001076, California Historical Landmark No. 939, Ventura County Landmark No. 52
- Significance:** Bottle Village is an example of a mid-twentieth century “art environment” created by a self-taught artist. Tressa “Grandma” Prisbrey (1896-1988) created her walled village of themed rooms, whimsical sculptures, mosaic walkways, and succulent gardens from scavenged objects between ca. 1956 and ca. 1965, when she was in her 60s. She maintained and enhanced it until 1982, when she was in her 80s, except for a roughly two-year hiatus in the early 1970s. By 1960, Bottle Village had become an unintended roadside attraction, toured by national and international visitors. Since 1974, Bottle Village has been used as an example in national and international publications and exhibitions. In 1996, Bottle Village was the first art environment by a self-taught female artist to be added to the National Register of Historic Places.
- Description:** Grandma Prisbrey’s Bottle Village is on a 0.32-acre (1295 sq. m) residential lot in the Kadota Fig subdivision of what was once the town of Santa Susana. The lot is a long, narrow rectangle measuring 56’-3” (17.15 m) east to west and 272’-8” (83.12 m) north to south, including the sidewalk. The buildings, structures, and small-scale elements of the village are clustered in an elongated U shape, with the opening of the U on the south side, at Cochran Street. The western and northern boundaries of the village hug the property line; the eastern boundary is set back about 3 to 15’ (0.9 to 4.6 m) from the property line. A tree row and storage areas occupy the setback. The original lot was 43’-1” (13.13 m) wide. A 13’-2” (4.02 m)-wide strip was transferred from the adjacent eastern property in 1977, because Bottle Village spilled on to it.<sup>1</sup>

The lot has an average elevation of about 1005’ (306 m), slightly sloping down from northeast to southwest. Winters are wet with minimums averaging 39°F (3.8°C) and summers are dry with maximums averaging 93°F (34°C). Annual precipitation averages 16.4” (41.7 cm). The dominant native soil type is Mocho loam.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Bottle Village Threatened,” *SPACES Newsletter*; Stup, *Site Plan*; Ventura County, *Assessor’s Parcel Map*.

<sup>2</sup> USGS, *Simi Valley East, Calif. (formerly Santa Susana)*, 1951 topographic map, photorevised 1969; NOAA and DRI, Western Regional Climate Center, “Period of Record General Climate Summary, Chatsworth Heynemann R,

Tressa Prisbrey excelled at massing ordinary objects in creative arrangements of whimsy or transcendent beauty. Most of the objects were man-made, such as bottles, pencils, and dolls; some were natural, such as pine cones, shells, gourds, antlers, and palm fronds. Most of the objects were scavenged by Prisbrey from the local dump; some she recycled from her household and others were donated by friends and visitors. She said that she also liked to go to sales. For her free-standing boundary walls and the walls of her structures, she mortared bottles, especially amber beer bottles and cobalt blue Milk of Magnesia bottles; sometimes she faced the bottles inward and sometimes outward, but always in a consistent direction in a given wall. For the retaining walls of her planting beds and sculptures, she mortared automobile headlights facing outward; she liked how they reflected the sunlight. For mosaic paving, she mortared a myriad of relatively flat objects, such as tiles, scissors, guns, eye glass frames, and license plates. She decorated the village by tying, fastening, or gluing a multitude of objects, such as toothbrushes, tablecloth ceilings, and pencils, respectively. Visitors were, and continue to be, awed by the beauty of the light glowing through the bottle walls, and amazed by her creative re-use of discarded objects.<sup>3</sup>

Bottle Village has lost its sense of enclosure and its street presence. The village used to be a walled environment cohesively enclosed by free-standing bottle walls and bottle structures on three sides. The 1994 Northridge earthquake so damaged the original enclosure that the boundary is now defined by the neighbors' chain-link fences, hedges, outbuildings, and cinder-block walls. The south side used to announce the village's open driveway to passers-by on Cochran Street with decorated poles, a sign, and a curb of mortared bottles. A conventional fence and gate of metal and stone, which replaced a chain-link fence installed in 1981, now closes the south side.<sup>4</sup>

Historic photographs show mature *Eucalyptus* trees outside the village to the east, immature deciduous trees outside the village to the north and west, and no trees outside the village to the south or inside the village. Inside the village, Prisbrey planted cacti and other succulents, because of their tolerance for drought and neglect, and because their desert look set off her village. The cacti included species of *Opuntia* and *Astrophytum*; the other succulents included species of *Aeonium*, *Aloe*, *Crassula*, and *Portulacaria*. She planted them in beds beside her structures, in sculptural raised beds, and in a multitude of re-purposed containers, from a cream pitcher to a water cooler jug. Prisbrey placed most of her structures on the east side of the village, against the backdrop of pre-existing

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California (041679): 1945-1959," <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/>; USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service, "Web Soil Survey: Ventura Area, California (CA674)," 3 Jan 2008, <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/>.

<sup>3</sup> Prisbrey, "Grandma Prisbrey" (film hereafter cited as Prisbrey-1974); Prisbrey, *Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village*, 7 (pamphlet hereafter cited as Prisbrey-1960); Prisbrey and Hansen, "Grandma's Bottle Village: The Art of Tressa Prisbrey" (film hereafter cited as Prisbrey-1982); Prisbrey quoted in Lubas, "Admirers."

<sup>4</sup> Krieger et al., Photos; Ofria, Photos; Prisbrey-1982; Quinn, "Developer;" Reed, "FEMA;" Rosen, Photos.

*Eucalyptus* trees. Most of the planting beds still contain cacti and other drought-tolerant succulents, potted plants are few, the *Eucalyptus* row remains, and the western trees have grown to block the sunlight.<sup>5</sup>

Bottle Village has lost its borrowed landscape. The front portions of the western and eastern boundary walls were low enough to permit views of the adjacent properties. The western view was of an undeveloped field, until a two-story apartment complex for seniors was built in 1987. The eastern view was of a poultry farm in the mid- to late-1950s, and then of an undeveloped field by the early-1960s, until a residence was built in 1977. The northern properties were developed between 1955 and 1962 – the same time as Bottle Village – and Prisbrey's high rear boundary walls screened them from view.<sup>6</sup>

The circulation route is largely unchanged, except for portions that were extended in the 1980s to facilitate wheelchair access. Visitors enter and exit at the south side, at Cochran Street. To the north of the entrance is a former Parking Area of compacted soil. To its north is a wide, straight section of Mosaic Walkway about 12' (3.6 m)-wide. To its north are two parallel walkways separated by small-scale element TV Picture Tube Fence (a single row of television cathode ray tubes). To the east of the TV tubes is a narrow, straight section of Mosaic Walkway about 4' (1.2 m)-wide, and to the west is the Four Mosaic Card Suits Walkway (club-, diamond-, heart-, and spade-shaped mosaic stepping stones in compacted soil). To their north is a curving, narrow section of Mosaic Walkway formerly about 2' (0.6 m)-wide, now about 4' (1.2 m)-wide, which ends in the northeast corner of the village.<sup>7</sup>

The following lists the living trailers, structures, and small-scale elements that the visitor encounters when following the counter-clockwise tour route, starting at the entrance. An asterisk (\*) indicates a severely damaged or destroyed resource. Each structure is, or was, an enclosed or semi-enclosed, one-story room with its own theme, typically constructed with a mosaic floor, walls of mortared bottles and/or re-purposed doors and windows, wood framework, and roofing of corrugated galvanized sheet metal, or plywood topped with crushed glass.<sup>8</sup>

On the east side of the former Parking Area are small-scale elements Pyramid (tiered display for potted plants that was once topped by a light and a clock) and Little Wishing Well. On the east side of the wide Mosaic Walkway are structures Bottle Wall\* (Bottle Fence), Shot House\* (First Pencil House), and Bottle House\* (Second Pencil House) and small-scale elements Shrine to All

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<sup>5</sup> Krieger et al., Photos; Ofria, Photos; Prisbrey-1960, 4, 12-13; Prisbrey-1982; Rosen, Photos.

<sup>6</sup> Duff, "Grandma," 8, 104; Krieger et al., Photos; Prisbrey-1982; Rosen, Photos; Ventura County Assessor's Office, "Property Characteristics and Values," <http://assessor.countyofventura.org/research/propertyinfo.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> Duff, "Grandma," 3, 102; Prisbrey-1960, 13; Prisbrey-1982.

<sup>8</sup> Krieger et al., Photos; Ofria, Photos; Prisbrey-1960, 8; Prisbrey-1982; Rosen, Photos.

Faiths\* (multi-faith shrine) and Leaning Tower of Bottle Village (decorated beer keg and leaning spire). On the east side of the TV tube-fenced Mosaic Walkway are structures Rumpus Room (Grandchildren's Playroom), Meditation Room\*, Hidden Storage,\* Cleopatra's Bedroom (Gold Room, Cleopatre's [sic] Bedroom), and Viewing Room (Old House). On the east side of the curving Mosaic Walkway are structure Round House, small-scale element Spring Garden (large metal springs in a planting bed), and structures Third Pencil House, Shell House (Son's Room), and School House (Relaxing Room). On the north side of the curving Mosaic Walkway are Bottle Wall\* (Bottle Fence) and small-scale element Horseshoe Shrine (horseshoe-shaped raised planting bed). On the west side of the curving Mosaic Walkway are Bottle Wall\* (Bottle Fence) and small-scale elements Heart Shrine (blue bottles on stakes, originally roses for a dying daughter, in a heart-shaped raised planting bed) and Big Cactus Garden (tiered display for potted plants now topped by a birdbath). On the west side of the Four Mosaic Card Suits Walkway are small-scale element Big Wishing Well\* and structures Doll House\* (Parade of Dolls, Home of Little Mothers), Card House\* (Cabana), and Little Hut.\* On the west side of the wide Mosaic Walkway are Second Living Trailer (aluminum Royal Spartanette) and First Living Trailer\* (wooden), which was sheathed in bottle structure First Trailer Enclosure.\* On the west side of the former Parking Area are small-scale elements Table\* (cylindrical table of mortared bottles),<sup>9</sup> Basket (circular raised planting bed that once had overhead arches), Fountain (waterfall over fluorescent light tubes into free-form pool), Pond (small circular raised planting bed that was once a tiny pond), and Doll Head Shrine (dolls' heads on stakes in a circular raised planting bed), and structure Sun Room\* (Little Chapel).<sup>10</sup>

History: Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey (1896-1988) was born Thresie "Tressa" Luella Schaefer in 1896 in Minnesota. Her father was a blacksmith born in Germany, and her mother was a homemaker born in Wisconsin to German-born parents. By 1910, the Schaefer family had moved to North Dakota. There, Tressa married her first husband, Theodore Monroe Grinolds (1861-1931) in ca. 1912. They had seven children – four boys and three girls – by 1926. According to Tressa, by 1928 she was working as a clerk and driving voters to polling places, which inspired her to begin collecting pencils. Her husband, who was not employed at the time of the 1930 federal census, died in 1931. Tressa supported her family in the 1930s (during the Great Depression) in North Dakota by working as a maid. By 1943 (during World War II), she was working as clerk, and her youngest daughter as a riveter, for Boeing Airplane Company in Seattle. By 1952, she had married her second husband, construction worker Albert Prisbrey (1905-1968), and they were living at a trailer park in what is now Bell, California. According to Tressa, they purchased their lot in Santa Susana and

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<sup>9</sup> The Table was semi-enclosed by a late-built (by 1972), short-lived (gone by 1978) structure known as the Thatched House, which was first made of thatched palms frond and later of mortared bottles. [McCoy, "Grandma," 78; McCoy, *Site Plan*; Ofria, Photos; Rosen, Photos]

<sup>10</sup> Paul, "Grandma," Sec. 7; Prisbrey-1960, 3-13; Stup, *Site Plan*.

moved their living trailer to it in 1955. Some of her children, grandchildren, and sister lived nearby, and her husband found a steady job nearby. Tressa – not wanting to move again – took the wheels off their trailer.<sup>11</sup>

Tressa Prisbrey wrote that she spent the first year looking after grandchildren and thinking about what to do with the lot. Unable to afford conventional building materials, such as cinder blocks, she decided to build with bottles.<sup>12</sup> At first, she asked friends and neighbors to save discards for her, but then she realized that it was more efficient to go to the local dump. She started building on the east side with a 30' (9.1 m) bottle wall and a bottle structure for her pencil collection, and liked it so much that she went on building. She designed and built the village by herself, except for help from her sons installing roofs and doors. Structures Bottle Wall, Shot House, Bottle House, Rumpus Room, Cleopatra's Bedroom, Viewing Room, Round House, Shell House, School House, Doll House, Card House, and Little Hut; small-scale elements Pyramid, Little Wishing Well, Shrine to All Faiths, and Cactus Garden; and the Mosaic Walkway were constructed by 1960, and the Second Living Trailer was moved onto the site in ca. 1960. The remaining structures were constructed by ca. 1962 and small-scale elements by ca. 1965. She built some of the village on adjacent, unused property to the east. So many people stopped by to see what she was doing that in ca. 1958 she started charging 25 cents for tours. By 1960, visitors had come from as far away as Europe. In 1962, Pasadena newspaper columnist Russ Leadabrand encouraged his readers to visit Bottle Village. In 1964, nationally syndicated columnist Russell Kirk extolled Tressa's bottle-saving to his readers.<sup>13</sup>

Prisbrey's oldest daughter died in 1954, youngest daughter in 1964, second husband in 1968, and three oldest sons between 1967 and 1969. In 1972, she sold the property and moved to Oregon to care for her terminally ill youngest son. When her son died in April 1974, the owner of Bottle Village invited her to return as caretaker, rent-free. The property was sold again in 1976, and the new owner continued to allow Prisbrey to live rent-free in the village as caretaker. In 1982, Prisbrey moved to San Francisco to live with her middle daughter, who was her last surviving child. Prisbrey died in a convalescent home in 1988.<sup>14</sup>

In 1974, Bottle Village was one of nine works by self-taught artists, and the only one created by a woman, featured at an exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Since then, Bottle Village has appeared as an example in national

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<sup>11</sup> Ancestry.com; Prisbrey-1960, 3-4; Prisbrey-1974.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Knott, inspired by a ca. 1905 bottle house in Nevada, built bottle houses in California at Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park and Calico Ghost Town in Yermo in the 1950s. [Seltzer, "Bottle Houses"] According to Duff, Prisbrey saw the Bottle House at Knott's Berry Farm before 1955. [Duff, "Grandma," 8]

<sup>13</sup> Gladstone, "Grandma;" Kirk, "Bottle;" Krieger et al., Photos; Leadabrand, "As I See It;" Paul, "Grandma," Sec. 7: 10, Sec. 8: 3; Prisbrey-1960, 3-13.

<sup>14</sup> Ancestry.com; "Bottle Village Threatened," *SPACES Newsletter*; Folkart, "Grandma;" Herman in Prisbrey-1960, 15; Paul, "Grandma," Sec. 8: 4.

and international exhibitions and publications. After learning of Bottle Village at the Walker Center, Los Angeles-resident Miki Herman lobbied the City of Simi Valley for a preservation plan for Bottle Village. City staff did investigate the feasibility of acquiring Bottle Village, but concluded that it would be too expensive to purchase the property and stabilize the village. After photographer and art environment-advocate Seymour Rosen founded SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments) in 1978, SPACES was instrumental in establishing the Preserve Bottle Village Committee (PBVC) and nominating Bottle Village for county and state landmark status. Bottle Village was designated a Ventura County Landmark in 1979 and a California Historical Landmark in 1981. The California State Office of Historic Preservation was not successful in nominating Bottle Village to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, because Bottle Village was less than 50 years old and its creator was still alive.<sup>15</sup>

In 1981, the property went into foreclosure and came into the possession of a developer, who fenced the entrance, sent Prisbrey an eviction notice, and announced his intention to raze Bottle Village for condominiums. Prisbrey threatened suicide. Supporters of Bottle Village purchased the property in 1982. However, the City restricted public access to Bottle Village due to seismic safety concerns and parking issues. PBVC acquired the property in 1986 and attempted to raise funds to re-open Bottle Village as a folk art museum. Instead, there were near-foreclosures due to unpaid property taxes. One wall of one structure was damaged during a minor earthquake in early 1989 and ten structures were severely damaged during the Northridge earthquake in January 1994. PBVC successfully nominated Bottle Village to the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. In December 1996, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) allotted \$434,000 to restore Bottle Village, but rescinded the funding in 1997 after it became politically controversial.<sup>16</sup>

Bottle Village is open to the public during PBVC's annual open house, occasional weekend docent tours, and by appointment.<sup>17</sup>

Sources:

**Historic photographs**

Kreiger, [Othea Grinolds] and unknown photographers. [Photographs and postcard.] Ca. 1960-65. In Garcia and PBVC, *Grandma*, "Photos." [Krieger was Prisbrey's daughter]

Ofria, Joe. [Photographs.] 1973, 1978. In Van Ace and PBVC, *Grandma*, "Photo

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<sup>15</sup> "Bottle Village Purchase," *Los Angeles Times*; "Bottle Village Threatened," *SPACES*; Garcia and PBVC, *Grandma*, "History" and "Resources;" Hernández, *SPACES*, "Seymour Rosen – Biography;" Hurtado et al. "Twentieth;" Leach, "Woman;" Lebovich, "Twentieth;" Lubas, "Admirers;" Rosen, "Environments."

<sup>16</sup> Chawkins, "Simi's;" Fuentes, "Simi;" Garcia and PBVC, *Grandma*, "History;" Hyman, "Unique;" Kazmin, "If it goes;" Lubas, "Admirers;" Quinn, "Developer;" Quinn, "Bottle;" Reed, "Bottle;" Reed, "FEMA;" Basic Property Reports for Ventura County APN 625-0-081-150 and 625-0-091-185 as of Feb 2013, HomeInfoMax.com.

<sup>17</sup> Van Ace and PBVC, "Events/Tours."

Gallery#3.”

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Historian: Cate Bainton, HALS Northern California Chapter, 31 March 2013  
2013 HALS Challenge Entry: *Documenting the Cultural Landscapes of Women*

Art environments on the National Register of Historic Places.

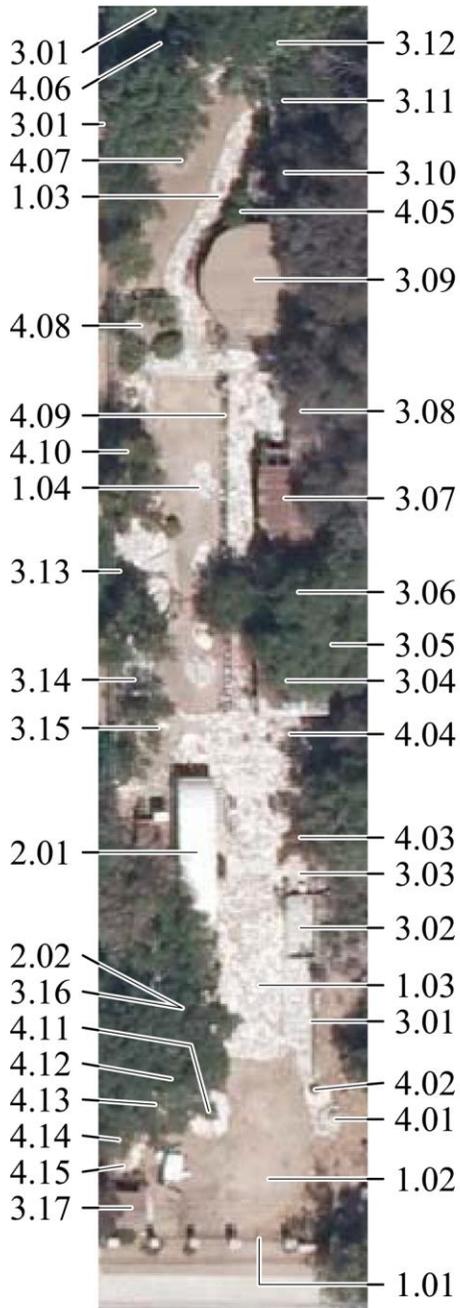
Of the two women below, Prisbrey was a self-taught artist and Nohl studied fine arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>18</sup>

	<b>Name of Property</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Added</b>
1	Garden of Eden	Lucas, Russell County, Kansas	Samuel P. Dinsmoor	1977
2	Forestiére Underground Gardens	Fresno, Fresno County, California	Baldasare Forestiere	1977
3	Watts Towers of Simon Rodia	Los Angeles, California	Simon Rodia	1977
4	Rancho Bonito	Mountainair, Torrance County, New Mexico	Clem Shaffer	1978
5	Desert View Tower	Ocotillo vicinity, Imperial County, California	Robert Vaughn and M.T. Ratcliffe	1980
6	Causland Park	Anacortes, Skagit County, Washington	John Le Page	1981
7	Ave Maria Grotto	Cullman, Cullman County, Alabama	Brother Joseph Zoetl	1984
8	Coral Castle	Homestead, Miami-Dade County, Florida	Edward LeedsKalnin	1984
9	Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village	Simi Valley, California	Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey	1996
10	Ed Galloway's Totem Pole Park	Foyil vicinity, Rogers County, Oklahoma	Nathan Edward Galloway	1999
11	Grotto of the Redemption	West Bend, Palo Alto County, Iowa	Father Paul Matthias Dobberstein	2001
12	Opus 40	Saugerties, Ulster County, New York	Harvey Fite	2001
13	Nohl, Mary L., Art Environment	Fox Point, Milwaukee, Wisconsin	Mary L. Nohl and Henry Harshaw Hay	2005
14	Wisconsin Concrete Park	Worcester, Price County, Wisconsin	Fred Smith	2005
15	Orange Show, The	Houston, Harris County, Texas	Jefferson Davis McKissack	2006
16	Pasaquan	Buena Vista, Marion County, Georgia	Eddie Owens Martin et al.	2008
17	Paradise Gardens	Pennville, Chattooga County, Georgia	Howard Finster	2012

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<sup>18</sup> National Register of Historic Places, NPS Focus, accessed Feb 2013, <http://nrhp.focus.nps.gov/>; Timothy Heggland, "Nohl, Mary L., Art Environment," *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, 10 Jun 2005, Sec. 8: 5.

Designed features of Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village in counter-clockwise order, starting at the entrance. An asterisk (\*) indicates a severely damaged or destroyed resource. (Photographed for U.S. Geological Survey by Geospatial Consulting Services, Aug 2010; delineated by Cate Bainton, Feb 2013.)



— Circulation —

- 1.01 Entrance
- 1.02 Former Parking Area
- 1.03 Mosaic Walkway
- 1.04 Four Mosaic Card Suits Walkway

— Buildings —

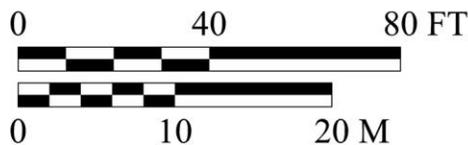
- 2.01 Second Living Trailer
- 2.02 First Living Trailer\*

— Structures —

- 3.01 Bottle Wall\*
- 3.02 Shot House\*
- 3.03 Bottle House\*
- 3.04 Rumpus Room
- 3.05 Meditation Room\*
- 3.06 Hidden Storage\*
- 3.07 Cleopatra's Bedroom
- 3.08 Viewing Room
- 3.09 Round House
- 3.10 Third Pencil House
- 3.11 Shell House
- 3.12 School House
- 3.13 Doll House\*
- 3.14 Card House\*
- 3.15 Little Hut\*
- 3.16 First Trailer Enclosure\*
- 3.17 Sun Room\*

— Small Scale Elements —

- 4.01 Pyramid
- 4.02 Little Wishing Well
- 4.03 Shrine to All Faiths\*
- 4.04 Leaning Tower of Bottle Village
- 4.05 Spring Garden
- 4.06 Horseshoe Shrine
- 4.07 Heart Shrine
- 4.08 Big Cactus Garden
- 4.09 TV Picture Tube Fence
- 4.10 Big Wishing Well\*
- 4.11 Table\*
- 4.12 Basket
- 4.13 Fountain
- 4.14 Pond
- 4.15 Doll Head Shrine



The evolution of the block bounded by Cochran Street (to the south), Fig Street (to the east), Apricot Street (to the north), and Tapo Street (to the west). The Bottle Village lot is outlined in white and black. The tic marks indicate the original eastern property line. (Photographs from U.S. Geological Survey, as noted; delineation by Cate Bainton, Feb 2013.)



When the Prisbreds purchased their lot in 1955, there was a row of *Eucalyptus* trees to the east. (Photographed Sep 1947 by U.S. Geological Survey.)



Tressa Prisbrey built Bottle Village ca. 1956-65. Properties to the north were developed 1955-62. (Photographed Aug 1967 by U.S. Geological Survey.)



Properties to the east and west were developed in 1977 and 1987, respectively. (Photographed Jun 1994 by National Aerial Photography Program.)

