

Via Mail and Email

March 17, 2021

California State Parks
Strategic Planning and Recreation Services Division
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Re: Comment on Pismo State Beach and Oceano Dunes SVRA Draft PWP and Draft EIR

To Whom It May Concern:

The Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Pismo State Beach and Oceano Dunes SVRA Draft Public Works Plan (PWP) omits consideration of the Dunes as a 20th century cultural resource with statewide and national significance. Consequently, potentially significant impacts of the PWP on the historical and cultural legacy of the Dunes have not been analyzed in the EIR.

The Oceano Dunes Are a Cultural Landscape with Historical and Aesthetic Significance

As detailed in the attached Historical Report, the stunning sandscape of the Oceano Dunes was the backdrop for some of California's most influential 20th century art and cultural movements. From the 1910s through the 1960s, the so-called Dunites came, searching for inspiration and solitude; they sent what they found here back out to the world through their photography, painting, music, literature, invention, and teachings. Some of the Dunites built vernacular cabins—now destroyed or buried beneath the sand—and lived amid the Dunes, while others visited or lived nearby. At the same time, members of the Pure Photography movement, including Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, also came to the Dunes and interacted with the Dunites. The work they produced here is an enduring tribute to California's coast and has been included in major exhibitions and museum collections around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

The National Parks Service defines a Cultural Landscape as “a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.”¹ California State Parks has adopted this definition, explaining on their website that “[t]his recent recognition of cultural landscapes as significant cultural resources in their own right, offers State Parks a new opportunity, and a new perspective, for exploring the intricate mosaic of California's past.”²

¹ Preservation Brief 36: Protecting Cultural Landscapes: Planning, Treatment and Management of Historic Landscapes, Charles A. Birnbaum, 1994.

² http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=22854, accessed March 15, 2021.

Even a cursory reading of the aforementioned Historical Report will show that the Dunes are eminently qualified for designation as a Cultural Landscape. Despite the lack of surviving Dunite structures, the Dunes retain the only significant feature that the Dunites themselves cared about—the undisturbed natural landscape—largely intact. Furthermore, State Parks lists both “Utopian Colonies in California” and “Arts and Literature” as “themes in California human history that are recognized as cultural resource deficiencies in the State Park System.”³ There is no more significant site for either of these themes on the central coast, potentially in the entire state. And, because the Dunes are already within the State Parks system, all that is required is recognition.

State Parks Can (and Should) Immediately Recognize the Dunes as a Cultural Landscape

The Dunes were nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. For reasons unknown, that application was never completed. Work is underway now to nominate the Dunes for the California Register of Historical Resources as a Cultural Landscape. Meanwhile, as the lead agency for the PWP, **California State Parks can and should immediately recognize the Dunes as a resource for the purpose of environmental review** in connection with the PWP and EIR. 14 CCR 15064.5 (a)(4) [a lead agency is not precluded from determining that a resource is historical by the fact that the resource has not yet been evaluated for eligibility in state or local registers].

In a small way, the PWP itself does acknowledge the significance of the Dunites and the public fascination with their art and lifestyle. As part of the conceptual Phillips 66/Southern Entrance Project, the plan proposes a collection of “20 Dunite-style cabins reviving a part of the area’s cultural history.”⁴ What the PWP misses is that the undisturbed natural environment of the Dunes is the very feature that the Dunites exalted. The destruction of the vernacular cabins where some of the Dunites lived is unfortunate but does not lessen the ability of the remaining (and as yet overwhelmingly intact) resource to communicate its historical and aesthetic significance.

State Parks cannot rely on the Dunite legacy on the one hand to inspire public interest and inform interpretation while on the other hand refuse to recognize the surviving Dunite Cultural Landscape or take steps to ensure its continued survival by analyzing potential impacts as required by California law. As stewards of the state’s natural and cultural resources, held in trust for the people of California, State Parks has a duty to safeguard this remarkable piece of our collective heritage.

According to director Lisa Ann L. Mangat, writing to the California Coastal Commission on July 5, 2019, “DPR protects and preserves California’s most significant natural and cultural resources.” By imbuing the Dunes with artistic, cultural, and spiritual meaning, the Dunites transformed one of California’s most significant natural resources into an equally significant cultural resource. Recognition of the Dunite presence is key to effectively

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Plan: 3-55.

analyze the impacts that any changes to the Dunes may have on their ability to continue to communicate that meaning.

Deepening and safeguarding the connections to the Dunite and Pure Photography history in the Dunes also provides a compelling narrative that will attract new waves of cultural tourism to the State Park. A series of tourism studies conducted by Visit SLO Cal (the County's Tourism Business Improvement District) as part of their ongoing "Destination Management Strategy" has consistently found that the County struggles to attract culturally motivated tourists. Culturally motivated tourists tend to be affluent and spend a large percentage of their vacation dollars within the local economy, according to the Arts and Economic Prosperity IV Survey.⁵

By Ignoring the Dunites, the EIR Failed to Analyze Potentially Significant Historical Impacts

California law requires an EIR to consider all potentially significant effects on the environment, including impacts to historical resources. Pub. Resources Code, § 21100; 14 CCR 15064.5 (b). CEQA Guideline 15064.5 defines a significant impact to a historical resource as "alteration of the resource *or its immediate surroundings* such that the significance of an historical resource would be materially impaired." Emphasis added.

In other words, if the proposed project will even potentially impact any of those features that help the resource communicate its significance, then those possible impacts **must** be analyzed in the EIR. Additionally, "*[w]hen a project will affect state-owned historical resources . . . and the lead agency is a state agency, the lead agency shall consult with the State Historic Preservation Officer . . . in a timely fashion with the preparation of environmental documents.*" 14 CCR 15064.5 (b)(5), emphasis added.

If a potential impact is found to be significant, e.g. because it could lessen the public's ability to understand the historical or cultural meaning of the resource (14 CCR 15064.5 (b)(2)), the EIR must also identify "feasible alternatives or feasible mitigation measures which will avoid or substantially lessen such significant effects." Cal Pub Resources Code § 21002; see also, 14 CCR 15064.5 (b)(4).

"The purpose of an environmental impact report is to provide public agencies and the public in general with detailed information about the effect which a proposed project is likely to have on the environment." Cal Pub Resources Code § 21061. Even impacts that the lead agency believes will be insignificant still need to be addressed: "Where the agency determines that a project impact is insignificant, an EIR need only contain a brief statement addressing the reasons for that conclusion. (CEQA Guidelines, § 15128.)" Mira Mar Mobile Community v. City of Oceanside (2004) 119 Cal.App.4th 477, 493 [14 Cal.Rptr.3d 308]. "Certification of an EIR which is legally deficient because it fails to adequately address an issue constitutes a prejudicial abuse of discretion regardless of

⁵ SLO County's participation in this national survey was coordinated by Arts Obispo in 2015/2016.

whether compliance would have resulted in a different outcome. [Citations.]” Citizens to Preserve Ojai v. County of Ventura (1985) 176 Cal.App.3d 421, 428.

By not including the Dunites or the Pure Photography movement at all, the EIR fails its public informational purpose. The glaring omission of 20th century history from the Cultural Resources and Tribal Cultural Resource section of the Draft EIR frustrates the decision-making process because there is a dearth of information about an entire class of potentially significant impacts.

Furthermore, substantial evidence exists that the PWP has the potential to impact the Dunes as a Cultural Landscape. 14 CCR § 15384 (substantial evidence is “enough relevant information and reasonable inferences . . . that a fair argument can be made to support a conclusion”). Proposed changes to the character and location of public use, increased noise, light, and air pollution, as well as other factors that cannot be known without an EIR-type analysis all have the potential to cause irreparable damage to the Oceano Dunes’ significance as a Cultural Landscape by impeding the public’s ability to experience, appreciate, and understand the Dunes from the Dunite perspective and harming various aspects of the Cultural Landscape’s integrity, including setting, association, and feeling.

Once potentially significant impacts have been identified, the EIR must include a discussion of any feasible alternatives and mitigation measures that could “substantially lessen the significant environmental effects” of those impacts. Pub. Resources Code, § 21002. To the extent that consideration of the Dunite Cultural Landscape resource has been entirely omitted from the EIR, the existing discussion of alternatives and mitigation measures is also inadequate.

There is Also the Potential for Significant Aesthetic Impacts

“As guidance for evaluation of aesthetic impacts, the CEQA Guidelines suggest agencies consider whether a proposed project would ‘[s]ubstantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.’ [Citations.]” Protect Niles v. City of Fremont (2018) 25 Cal.App.5th 1129, 1141 [236 Cal.Rptr.3d 513]. In Niles, the court found that the collective opinions of community members regarding the aesthetic impacts of a proposed project on a historic district constituted “substantial evidence” and necessitated preparation of an EIR to “facilitate the informed self-government process of evaluating the Project's aesthetic impact.” Id., at 1149.

The Dunites and their compatriots flocked to Oceano because of the aesthetic grandeur of the Dunes. Their visions, captured in art and literature, are still reflected in the surviving landscape. The allure of the Dunes is not merely visual; it is found equally in the sounds, the smells, the changing wildlife, and the wild solitude of the Dunes. The PWP, by shifting patterns of use and redirecting vehicle traffic, etc., has the potential to significantly alter and impair the aesthetic experience of visiting the Dunes.

Many community members have already spoken out about the disruption caused by vehicles on the Dunes. Their opinions, that it is impossible to appreciate the Dunes in the way the Dunites did while off-road vehicles are roaring by, constitute substantial evidence of aesthetic impact, warranting discussion in the EIR.

For the reasons listed above, and in light of the attached Historical Report, the Draft EIR must be revised to include analysis of the PWP's potential impacts on the Dunes as a 20th century Cultural Landscape. Certification of the Draft EIR, without the addition of analysis of the cultural and aesthetic impacts outlined here followed by at least partial recirculation, would be a failure to proceed in the manner required by law and therefore an abuse of discretion under Public Resources Code section 21005.

Sincerely,

Nick Alter	Robert L. Inchausti	Mary L. Renard
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Enclosures

Cc: California Coastal Commission

HISTORICAL REPORT

**Response to the Pismo State Beach and Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area
Draft Public Works Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Report**

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Summary: The Absence of Impact Assessment of Proposed Changes on the Oceano Dunes as a Twentieth-Century Aesthetic and Historic Resource

Historic resource In the early through mid twentieth century, the Oceano Dunes formed one of four nodes of West Coast avant-garde culture, with the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Carmel. Through Halcyon, the Dunites, and the West Coast Photographic Movement, the Dunes are associated with events, persons, and groups that from 1916 to 1963 had a profound influence on the history and cultural heritage of California and beyond. Major figures and works in Ultra-Modern music, rhythm and wave science, Pure Photography, the avant-garde magazine movement, the introduction of Eastern religions to the West, gay rights, and modern veganism came out of the Dunes, as well as some of the most important literary and musical extensions of the Celtic Revival.

Aesthetic resource The natural aesthetic appearance of the Oceano Dunes was represented in some of the most important photography of the twentieth century: the *Dunes, Oceano* series of Edward Weston, Brett Weston, Dody Weston Thompson and Ansel Adams and the *Nude on Sand* series of Edward Weston, as well as in film by Willard Van Dyke; paintings and graphics by noted California Impressionist John O'Shea and Abstractionist Elwood Decker; literary descriptions by Celtic Revival figures John Varian and Ella Young and Modernist poets Ellen Janson and Hugo Seelig; and music by Ultra-Modernist composer Henry Cowell.

Failure to assess impacts Though the PWP and Oceano Dunes District Visitors Center tout Dunite association, the EIR fails to assess impacts on the Oceano Dunes' ability to communicate this historic and aesthetic significance, in which the dunes do not "intervene" or "shield" surrounding areas from aesthetic impact—in the language of the EIR—but *are* the aesthetic and historic resource, the experience of which itself is impacted.

Some proposed changes, such as enhanced education, will have positive impact; others, such as expansion of parking, vehicular camping, and OHV access and the refusal to consider OHV phase-out, will certainly have negative ones. Increased OHV trails, dune traffic, noise, light, and air pollution and erosion, as well as new OHV access points at historically and aesthetically key points, will degrade a twentieth-century cultural landscape whose significance and defining characteristic for half of that century was egalitarian and sustainable access to a landscape of undisturbed nature for meditation, inspiration, and creation.

The legislative intent of CEQA is to "take all action necessary to provide the people of this state with ... enjoyment of aesthetic ... and historic environmental qualities, and freedom from excessive noise." Without assessment of the Oceano Dunes as one of California's most important aesthetic and historic resources—through which California was long defined to the people of the state and to the outside world—accurate assessment of impacts is impossible.

Response prepared by

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14 March 2021

Cultural Chronology of the Oceano Dunes in the Twentieth Century

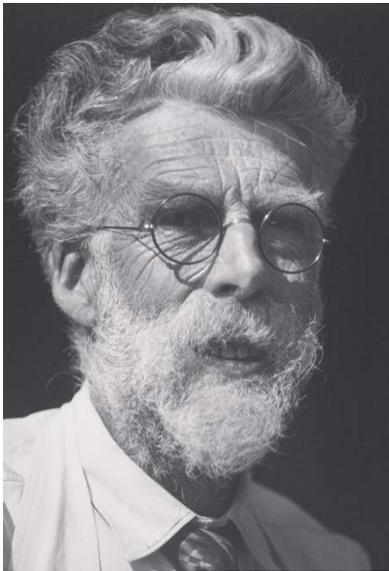
- 1903 Francia LaDue and Dr. William Dower found Theosophist community Halcyon.
- 1905 Golden State Realty Co. of Los Angeles purchases the dunes and beach south of Oceano, name it La Grande Beach, and subdivide it into 7,000 1/12-acre lots, adding a pavilion and pier in 1906 and 1907.
- 1913 Fifteen-year-old “boy composer” Henry Cowell meets Irish poet and Theosophist John Varian in Palo Alto by writing a sonata to Varian’s son Russell.
- 1914 Varian moves with his family to Halcyon.
Cowell tutors Ansel Adams in piano.



Poet John Varian on the Oceano Dunes, late 1920s, likely by Ansel Adams, who photographed a similar close-up. Russell and Sigurd Varian Papers, Special Collections, Stanford University.

- 1916 La Grande Pavilion is slated for demolition, La Grande Beach having failed.
Cowell begins to spend time in Halcyon, becoming a member of the Temple of the People, and is photographed on Oceano Dunes. With Russell Varian discusses rhythmic theory that will lead to Cowell’s rhythmicon, the first rhythm machine in music, and Russell and brother Sigurd’s klystron tube, the first effective amplifier for microwaves and the foundation for radar, particle accelerators, and communications technology.

- 1917 *The Building of Banba*, a pageant based on Irish myth with words by John Varian and music by Cowell, premiers next to the Dunes. The tone cluster prelude, “The Tides of Manaunaun,” will become a classic of Ultra-Modern music.
- Poet Hugo Seelig retreats to the Dunes as the United States enters World War I. Poet Edward C. St. Claire and Paul “Strongman” Henning are already living there.
- ca. 1921 George Blais, later to become a crusading vegan and nudist, moves to the Dunes.
- 1922 Photographer Edward Weston visits architect Rudolph Schindler and Pauline Gibling Schindler’s new and revolutionary Kings Road house in West Hollywood.
- 1923 Cecil B. DeMille builds the largest movie set in history in the Dunes for *The Ten Commandments*, fictionalized in Luther Whiteman’s 1947 *The Face of the Clam*.
- 1924 Poet Ellen Janson and Little Theater movement founder Maurice Browne move to Halcyon.
- 1925 The Halcyon Press publishes St. Claire’s *Wind-Blown Rhymes*.
- 1927 Pauline Schindler leaves Rudolph and moves to Halcyon, then to Carmel to help found the journal *The Carmelite* and a gallery showing Weston and Adams.
- 1928 Irish mythographer Ella Young moves to Halcyon to complete *The Tangle-Coated Horse*, reconnecting with Gavin Arthur (Chester Alan Arthur III), the grandson of the president, who was active in the Irish Revolution. Janson and Browne tell Young and Arthur about the Dunites, whom Arthur later joins.



*John Varian and Ella Young
by Ansel Adams*



*Gavin Arthur by Brett
Weston*

- ca. 1929 Ansel Adams photographs John and Agnes Varian and Ella Young at Halcyon and likely photographs Varian on the Dunes.
- 1930 Edward Weston’s son Chandler, with a studio in Santa Maria, begins to photograph the Oceano Dunes, joined by brother Brett Weston the next year.

Rudolph Schindler introduces Edward to Blue Four art dealer Galka Scheyer, whom Edward credits with introducing him to the Dunes.

Troubador Press publishes John Varian's poem cycle *Tirawa*, envisioning "a new race birthing here in the West," "a new civilization now starting round the Pacific."

Léon Theremin builds the rhythmicon for Cowell.

Hugo Seelig meets San Francisco artist Elwood Decker, discovers a mutual interest in Hindu mystic Ramakrishna, and convinces him to move to the Dunes.

1931 John Varian dies and Henry Cowell sells his Halcyon house.

Gavin Arthur and Carl Beckstead camp with the Dunites, and Arthur rents a house in Halcyon, later in the year constructing a Dune compound, named by Ella Young Moy Mell after a paradise in Celtic mythology. Arthur is bisexual, and open gay, lesbian, and bisexual relationships are a characteristic of Moy Mell. Moy Mell and the Dunes generally also offer refuge to followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, and astrology.

1931–32 Artist Elwood Decker's first period in the Dunes.

1932 Pianist Edwin Hughes plays "The Tides of Manauanaun" at the White House following Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration.

Photographers Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, John Paul Edwards, Sonya Noskowiak, Henry Swift, Willard Van Dyke, and Edward Weston found Group *f.64*, write a manifesto for Pure Photography, and mount a show at San Francisco's De Young Museum that includes Edward's son Brett.

Arthur hosts actress and perfumer Princess Matchabelli and Meredith Starr, followers and promoters of Indian spiritual leader Meher Baba, at Moy Mell.

1933 Dunham and Marion Thorp and daughter Ella move to Moy Mell.

Modern dancer Paul Draper and his mother—writer, salonnière, and political activist Muriel—dance at Moy Mell.

1933–34 Author and activist Upton Sinclair repeatedly visits Moy Mell, seeking assistance from Arthur and Dunham Thorp in his campaign for governor on the EPIC (End Poverty in California) platform.

Arthur—assisted by Dunham Thorp, Ellen Janson, and Pauline Schindler—publishes the monthly *Dune Forum* out of Moy Mell. *Time* magazine quotes its intent to "express the creative thought of America looking not toward Europe but toward the West." Including writers and artists of international renown and Dunite and Halcyonite poetry and prose, it features Rudolph Schindler's first essay on space architecture, John Cage's first known essay on music, and five covers by Pure Photographers, with three Dune photographs by Edward and Chandler Weston and Willard Van Dyke. Funding dries up after seven issues.

1934 In January Willard Van Dyke brings Edward Weston to photograph the Dunes. Weston describes it as "a new epoch in my work" and vows to return. Ella Thorp

Ellis, who as a girl carried photographic plates for Weston on his Dune trips, recounts visits in spring 1934; spring 1936 with John Steinbeck, Brett, and an unidentified woman; summer 1937, assisted by Carl Beckstead; and for a 1938 party at Moy Mell hosted by Arthur to mark a gallery show.

*poor Belinda had sunk almost out of sight. A braver
little car never went down to a more noble death in
the line of duty.*



From the Dune Forum, February 1934

Belinda, the Thorps' Ford coupe—carrying either the *Dune Forum* pages for February or a number of guests including John Cage or both—sinks in Arroyo Grande Creek and is restored by Russell Varian in Halcyon.

California Arts and Architecture publishes a Dune cover photo by Brett Weston.

Halcyon Press publishes John Varian's *Doorways Inward and Other Poems*, including "Sand Dunes," which Ansel Adams will later quote in a portfolio title.

John Steinbeck visits Moy Mell and reads from the manuscript of *Tortilla Flat*, which in 1935 will become his first success.

Sinclair loses to incumbent Republican Frank Merriam after a bruising campaign by big business interests against Sinclair and the splitting of the Democratic vote by the Commonwealth Party. Arthur and Dunham Thorp leave for New York in *Belina* to join Mankind United.

In December Meher Baba visits the Dunes and stays at Moy Mell, later portrayed in *The Face of the Clam*.

1935 In summer Arthur and Dunham Thorp return from New York. Arthur has married a third time, to Esther Murphy Strachey: heiress of the Mark Cross Company; sister and sister-in-law of Jazz Age avatars Gerald and Sara Murphy; divorced wife of Marxist Evelyn John St. Loe Strachey, later minister in Clement Atlee's government; and lover of author Sybille Bedford.

ca 1935 Pauline Schindler permanently returns to the Schindlers' Kings Road house.

1936 Hugo Seelig publishes *Wheel of Fire*, a collection of poems written in the Dunes between 1925 and 1929. It is bound by Hazel Dreis, designer of the *Dune Forum*.

In the fall Edward Weston visits the Dunes with Charis Wilson, staying at Moy Mell. Weston photographs dunescapes for *Dunes*, *Oceano* and Wilson in the *Nude on Sand*, both groundbreaking series.

Thomas Crowell Co. publishes *Glory Roads: The Psychological State of California* by Dunites Samuel L. Lewis (a Sufi murshid) and Luther Whiteman.

- 1936–46 Elwood Decker’s second period in the Dunes.
- 1937 Russell and Sigurd Varian invent the klystron tube, a foundational technology in radar, UHF transmitters, microwave communications, and particle accelerators.
- 1938 Gavin and Esther Arthur build Hill House between Halcyon and Oceano.
- 1939 Weston photographs nudes of renowned African American dancer Maudelle Bass in the Dunes.
- 1942 Wartime security is heightened; Gavin Arthur turns over Moy Mell, whose property he owns, to the Coast Guard, which turns it into a machine gun nest. It is not reoccupied after World War II.
- 1943 George Blais dies.
- 1945 Longmans publishes Ella Young’s memoirs, *Flowering Dusk*, containing substantial descriptions of the Oceano Dunes and the Dunites.
- 1946 Edward Weston’s 1936 *Dunes*, *Oceano* and *Nude on Sand* series are featured at his Museum of Modern Art retrospective in New York and the smaller selection in a book by Nancy Newhall, who calls them “a classic and majestic series.”
Artist Elwood Decker leaves the Dunes after fifteen years on and off residence, moving to Los Angeles and making abstract paintings and films, the latter including *Color Fragments* (1948) and *Crystals* (1951), preserved by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science.
- 1947 Random House publishes former Dunite Luther Whiteman’s *The Face of the Clam*, centered around a vegan character based on George Blais.
- 1947 Willard Van Dyke films Edward Weston, assisted by the future Dody Weston Thompson, photographing in the Dunes in *The Photographer* (1948) for the US Information Agency.
- 1949 Rudolph Schindler designs an innovative house with translucent plastic panels in the Hollywood Hills for Ellen Janson, by then his mistress.
- 1948 Catherine Nimmo and Rubin Abramowitz found the Vegan Society in Oceano.
- 1951–53 Brett Weston and Dody Weston Thompson photograph the Dunes.
- 1954 First documentation of the New Jersey beach buggy on the Central Coast.
- 1955 Pat O’Hara, Los Angeles journalist, nudist, lover of Pauline Schindler, and recurrent Dunite returns to the Dunes to commit suicide after the closure of the Los Angeles Daily News.
- 1962 Paul Henning, one of the earliest Dunites, is driven from the Dunes by the noise and intrusion of beach buggies and dies soon after.
- 1963 The Sierra Club publishes Ansel Adams’ *Portfolio 4, What Majestic Word, In Memory of Russell Varian*, containing his fourth and last Dune photo from four decades. Text is by Ansel Adams on Russell Varian and by Russell Varian on the environment. The title is a quotation from John Varian’s poem “Sand Dunes.”

Russell Varian, whose Varian Associates is Stanford Research Park's first tech company, leaves an endowment to the Conservancy Association, which promotes conservation of the Oceano Dunes.

- 1965 Ellen Janson marries Gavin Arthur—who has been working with Jacqueline Kennedy to reassemble White House furniture—as his fourth wife.
- 1966 Arthur publishes *The Circle of Sex*, which proposes a wheel of twelve overlapping sexual orientations based on astrology.
- 1974 Bert Schievink, the last Dunite known to be living in the Dunes, dies.
- 1984 Brett Weston photographs an Oceano Dunescape that becomes the cover for *Brett Weston: A Personal Selection* (1986), his fourth book.
- 1992 Elwood Decker, “the last of the Dunites,” is killed by a train in Oceano.



Brett Weston, Dune, Oceano (1984)

The Oceano Dunes as a Twentieth-Century Aesthetic and Historic Resource

Functioning as an informal artistic and religious retreat, the Oceano Dunes fostered both solitude and association. More intimate than LA or San Francisco, more wild and ascetic than Carmel, the Dunes connected artists and thinkers with each other and with the natural environment for cathartic results. Edward Weston's thirty years as a photographer had been marked by a capstone folio in 1932 with tributes by Charles Sheeler, Lincoln Steffens, and Arthur Miller, yet in early 1934 he could write, "I made several dune negatives that mark a new epoch in my work. I must go back there,—the material made for me!"¹

Some Dune figures, like photographers Weston and Ansel Adams, composers Henry Cowell and John Cage, and inventor Russell Varian made a revolutionary impact on international culture. Others, like mythographer Ella Young, critic and curator Pauline Schindler, and book designer Hazel Dreis, achieved a permanent influence and renown. Still others, like poet Hugo Seelig, sought obscurity, or like George Blais, evangelist of veganism and nudism, the purity of a remote existence.

These figures and their works were intertwined in a cultural network for which the Oceano Dunes were refuge, subject, and identifier for writers, painters, photographers, composers, social and spiritual reformers, and scientists; a place of natural grandeur whose access was defined not by wealth or poverty but only by maximal stimulus from—and minimal impact on—the visual and aural environment. Dune culture from the 1910s to 1960s was not only a unique historic phenomenon but one that embodied California innovation. Documented in both contemporary and subsequent press, monographs, exhibitions, and ephemera, Oceano Dune culture grows in interest today with a plethora of online resources.

The Tides of Manaunaun

Story according to John Varian

Manaunaun was the god of motion, and long before the creation, he sent forth tremendous tides, which swept to and fro through the universe, and rhythmically moved the particles and materials of which the gods were later to make the suns and worlds.



Period of Significance: Halcyon and the Dunites, 1916–1947 The Oceano Dunes first entwined with California cultural history during World War I. The poet John Varian arrived in Halcyon (now on the National Register of Historic Places) with his wife and sons in 1914; composer Henry Cowell followed in 1916; and John Varian and Cowell's first major collaboration, the Celtic mythic pageant *The Building of Banba*, premiered in a field

1. Nancy Newhall, ed., *Daybooks of Edward Weston*, vol. 2 (New York: Horizon, 1966), p. 282.

looking on to the Dunes in 1917, its prelude the revolutionary tone cluster piece “The Tides of Manaunaun,” which would become an icon of Ultra-Modern music.²

Simultaneously, John Varian’s son Russell—who, wrote Ansel Adams, “spent hours on the nearby Oceano sand dunes”³—was discussing with Cowell wave and rhythmic theories, including rhythms in counterpoint.⁴ This notion would blossom in two directions: Cowell’s rhythmicon, which Léon Theremin built in 1930, and Russell and Sigurd Varian’s klystron tube, which they invented at Stanford in 1937—the same year fellow Stanford scientists Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard formed a partnership in their (now California Historical Landmark) garage. The klystron tube became the foundational technology for radar, UHF transmitters, microwave communications, and particle accelerators and Varian Associates the first company to set up at the Stanford Research Park, the epicenter of Silicon Valley.

The poet Hugo Seelig took refuge in the Dunes around 1917, with the United States’ entry in the war; the poet Edward C. St. Claire was already living there.⁵ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, more writers, composers, artists, photographers, critics, visionaries, and spiritual figures visited and lived in the Oceano Dunes, or oscillated between the dunes and Halcyon, culminating with the 1933–1934 publication of the avant-garde magazine the *Dune Forum* out of the Dune hamlet of Moy Mell. The *Dune Forum* introduced the word “Dunite” into print and defined the Dunite counter-culture movement, connecting it to sympathizers in the outside world. It published composer John Cage’s first known essay on music, architect Rudolph Schindler’s first article on his concept of space architecture, and cover photos by three of the seven founders of Group f.64, who had written their manifesto on Pure Photography only the year before.

Bohemian life in the Dunes became difficult under the security of World War II, and death or wartime activities claimed a number of the major Dunites. A machine gun emplacement was installed in Moy Mell (Hammond 97). But artist Elwood Decker continued to live, paint, and meditate in the Dunes, as he had from 1931–1932 and 1936 on, recording 104 visitors to his cabin in 1945—including the yogi Rishi Singh Gherwal and his students (95, 97, 100–101). Decker’s departure in 1946 and the publication of Ella Young’s description of the Dunites in *Flowering Dusk* in 1945 and Luther Whiteman’s Dunite roman à clef *The Face of the Clam* in 1947 capstoned the Dunite experiment. Dunite ideas—and many of the Dunites themselves—had joined the mainstream.

Period of Significance: Pure Photography (the West Coast Photographic Movement), 1931–1963 The first published Oceano Dune image of Pure Photography was Chandler Weston’s on the cover of the *Dune Forum*’s 1933 Subscribers’ Issue.

Chandler had been photographing the Dunes since 1930, and Weston family lore attributes that photograph to 1931.⁶ Brett began photographing the Dunes in 1931, and their father

2. Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 83, 85–86.

3. Ansel Adams, “Russell Harrison Varian,” *What Majestic Word* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1963).

4. Steven Johnson, “Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon,” *American Music*, Spring 1993, p. 2.

5. Norm Hammond, *The Dunites* (Arroyo Grande: South County Historical Society, 1992), p. 16.

6. Brett Leigh Dicks, “Footprints in Time,” *Santa Maria Sun*, 22 Oct. 2008, p. 1 and following.

Edward Weston made his first photographic foray with fellow Group *f.64* founder Willard Van Dyke (who had previously photographed them) in January 1934.⁷ Edward's photograph from that series appeared on the *Dune Forum's* penultimate cover in April, with one of Van Dyke's Dune photos on the February issue. Brett's first Oceano Dune cover was for *California Arts and Architecture* in August.

Right: Chandler Weston's Dune Forum cover photo



Edward Weston returned in 1935 and 1936, photographing what are considered his two most important Dune series: the Dunes themselves and *Nude on Sand* in collaboration with Charis Wilson. In 1939 he photographed nudes of renowned African American dancer Maudelle Bass there. Willard Van Dyke, who had turned from photography to documentary filmmaking, in 1948 made *The Photographer*, a study of Weston's craft, for the United States Information Service. Minutes 10:46–12:34 in the film show Weston photographing the Oceano Dunes, with apprentice Dody Harrison—later Dody Weston Thompson (wife of Brett)—helping transport his equipment. This was the last year Edward Weston was able to photograph due to the onset of Parkinson's disease. Brett continued photographing the Dunes, and Dody Weston Thompson's photograph *Brett Weston on the Dunes, Oceano* (1953) was exhibited as part of MoMA's 1966–67 show of selections from the McAlpin Collection, now part of MoMA's permanent collection.

Ansel Adams published four major Oceano Dune photographs, one each from the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. His 1963 *Dunes, Oceano, California* was one of fifteen photographs in *Portfolio 4, What Majestic Word, In Memory of Russell Varian*, published by the Sierra Club in that year. Adams had met Varian through the Sierra Club (Adams, *op. cit.*), though he may well have known of him through Henry Cowell, briefly Adams' piano teacher when Adams was twelve.⁸ Adams took the title *What Majestic Word* from John Varian's poem "Sand Dunes," published in the Halcyon Press's *Doorways Inward and Other Poems* in 1934, three years after the poet's death. "What majestic word are you speaking now, out of your ages and ages of growth?" One of Adams's few published poems was a

7. John Charles Woods, *Dune: Edward and Brett Weston* (Kalispell: Wild Horse Island Press, 2003); "Willard Van Dyke," *Dune Forum*, Feb. 1934; *Daybooks*, vol. 2, p. 282; note from John Cage to Pauline Schindler on the back of the typescript of Cage's "Counterpoint" for Feb. 1934 *Dune Forum*, January 1934.

8. Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 15.

tribute to John Varian after his death in *Troubador*. Adams' prose tribute to Russell Varian in *What Majestic Word* included this description: "These shimmering dunes, with their ever-changing patterns stretching as far as the eye could see, between the wild surf and the deep blue mountains, remained one of the places he loved throughout his life." Adams donated the use of his 1930s Oceano Dunes photograph to the Conservancy Association, funded by Russell Varian and devoted to Dunes conservation.⁹



Dody Weston Thompson, Brett Weston on the Dunes, Oceano (1953), Museum of Modern Art permanent collection

Oceano Dunes photography would continue (Brett Weston used a 1984 Dunes photograph for the cover of his fourth book, *Brett Weston: A Personal Selection* [1986]), but the core of Pure Photography's transformative Oceano Dunes work—as it appeared in publications, major exhibitions, museum collections, and critical assessments—was executed between Chandler Weston's Dune photograph of 1931 and Ansel Adams' tribute photograph to Russell Varian of 1963.

9. "Local Environmentalists Remember Ansel Adams: He Traveled the Pismo Dunes," *Five Cities Times-Press-Recorder* 9 May 1984, p. 29.



Ansel Adams, Dunes, Oceano, California (1963)

The Oceano Dunes as a Cultural Landscape

Halcyonites and Dunites Explore the Natural and Supernatural The cultural life of Halcyon and the Dunes was deeply intertwined. Not only did the Dunes provide inspiration and a day destination for poets John Varian, Ella Young, and Ellen Janson, composer Henry Cowell, and physicist Russell Varian, but others, like Gavin Arthur (Chester Alan Arthur III, grandson of the president) and vegan George Blais lived in both.¹⁰ Halcyon-Dune exchanges included members of the Theosophist Temple of the People (Templers) and bohemians of other or no religion (Arthur was an astrologer; Blais remained Roman Catholic). This collaboration was recognized in a multi-day 1995 festival *DuneSpirit: Halceano Art, Music, and Culture*.¹¹



Left: Henry Cowell in the Oceano Dunes, circa 1916. Cowell Collection, Music Division, NYPL for the Performing Arts.

It might have been different if—two years after Francia LaDue and Dr. William Dower founded the Theosophist town of Halcyon in 1903—the Golden State Realty Co. of Los Angeles had been successful in its effort to divide its newly named “La Grande Beach,” the beach and dunes immediately to the south, into 7,000 lots. The company got as far as building a towered and electrified pavilion in 1906 and 740-foot pleasure pier in 1907, and they did succeed in selling lots speculatively to people out of the area. San Luis Obispo’s *Morning Tribune* responded skeptically to the absentee purchaser of one such lot: “There is absolutely no doubt that some day the lot will be inhabitable even though it be one of the back lots and somewhat lost at present in the maze of unidentified sand which ever and anon skites across the undulating landscape.”¹²

It is possible that a few cottages were actually built. In the late 1920s George Blais was referred as inhabiting the Wotherspoon Cottage in the Dunes, the Wotherspoons being Templers and William Wotherspoon an attorney and developer.¹³

La Grande Beach failed, Dunites moved, and the physical circumstances of Halcyonites and Dunites may not have been that far different in the early days of each: Charles Seeger, Henry Cowell’s teacher, described Halcyon as “a group of very poor people who just squatted on the land” and lived “more or less from hand to mouth” (Johnson 6). Halcyonites were imbued with a sense of discovery and destiny, but unlike the centrifugal Dunites, they

10. Ella Young, *Flowering Dusk* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1945), pp. 237–238; “George Blaise [sic] of the sand dunes has come up to Halcyon for the walnut season and is located in the Hillyard Place,” “Halcyon News,” Arroyo Grande *Herald-Recorder*, 27 Sep. 1929, p. 4.

11. “Still Plenty to See in DuneSpirit Celebration,” Santa Maria Times, 11 Sep. 1995, Life p. 1.

12. “A Sand Dune Project,” San Luis Obispo *Morning Tribune*, 21 June 1905.

13. Arroyo Grande *Herald-Recorder*: “Halcyon,” 13 Dec. 1929, p. 5; “Halcyon,” 10 Jan. 1930, p. 5.

were organized around a single centripetal religion and leadership, even if it was nascent and sought to be inclusive of all religions. Their town was also attracting seekers and artistic bohemians, and some of these gravitated to the Dunes and ended up as day or permanent Dunites.

When John Varian, wife Agnes, and inventor sons Russell and Sigurd arrived in Halcyon in 1914, the Theosophist colony already had a burgeoning artistic bent, including, from 1911, the production of Halcyon Art Pottery. In his native Ireland John Varian had adopted both poetry and Theosophy, a combination that attracted Irish Literary Revival figures W. B. Yeats and Æ (the pen name of poet George Russell, after whom Russell Varian was named). John Varian, a musician and inventor of musical instruments—built and unbuilt—was to bring not only poetry and invention to Halcyon but an evangelistic desire to replace the music with which the Theosophists worshipped, which he described to Henry Cowell as “sangtified ragtime” and “rehyrnafied hymn music” (Johnson 15).

John and Russell Varian and Henry Cowell Meld Poetry, Music, and Science John Varian inherited myths and imagery tied to the sea of his island birthplace, strengthened by his relocation next to the Dunes. A mystic cosmology imbued his nature poetry; nature imbued his mysticism. In writing to Cowell—who was taught Irish folk music by his Irish father, and who had just put one of Varian’s poems to music—Varian noted, “I have one to the sea fog mysteries & one to the night spirit & two to a wave of the ocean of Life” (7).

Varian and Cowell’s fifteen-year shared residence in Halcyon—Cowell’s off and on as he made European and American concert tours—created the greatest collaboration of either of their lives and the most revolutionary music of the Irish Revival. Cowell invented the tone cluster—diatonic use of the hand or forearm on the piano—for *Adventures in Harmony*, which he premiered as a sixteen-year old in 1913 in Carmel. But it wasn’t till he connected the tone cluster to Varian’s cosmology, introducing the lyric melody, mythic drive, and crashing sound of “The Tides of Manaunaun,” that it seized audiences’ imagination.

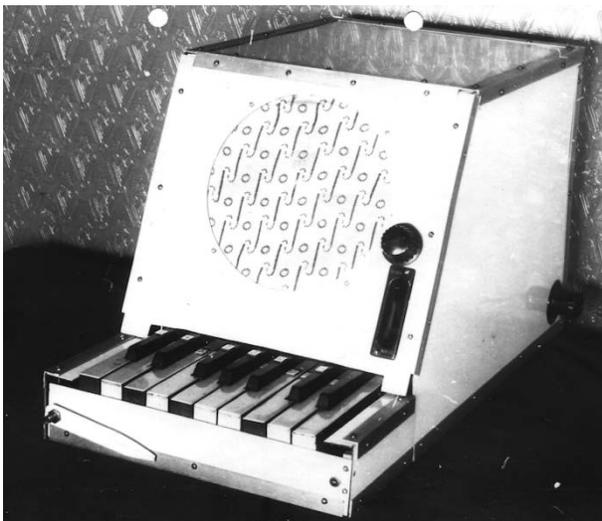


Russell and Sigurd Varian photographed by Ansel Adams.

“Manaunaun was the god of motion, and long before the creation, he sent forth tremendous tides, which swept to and fro through the universe, and rhythmically moved the particles and materials of which the gods were later to make the suns and worlds,” reads Varian’s narrative for the piece. A contemporary account, “Oberammergau in America” described it as “rather queer music, a piano out of doors, played boldly and freely” (Hicks 86). Extraordinarily for a piece of Ultra-Modern music, “The Tides of Manaunaun” was played at the White House after Franklin Roosevelt’s inauguration and also when John F. Kennedy was president, three decades later,¹⁴ as well as orchestrated and recorded by Leopold Stokowski with the All-American Youth Orchestra and Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra (as “Deep Tides”) in 1941.

John Varian’s description of how Manaunaun’s tides “rhythmically moved the particles and materials of which the gods were later to make the suns and worlds” could serve also as a prelude to the building of Silicon Valley’s Varian Associates. Cowell’s discussions with Russell similarly focused on waves and rhythms. Among John’s instrument ideas was drums played through a keyboard and a vast resonating concrete head, neither built. Though more abstract, Cowell and Russell Varian’s discussions on contrapuntal rhythms, preserved in letters, ultimately resulted in two revolutionary pieces of technology.

The Rhythmicon and the Klystron Tube In October 1916, eighteen-year-old Russell Varian wrote to nineteen-year-old Cowell about the audion vacuum tube, the first widely used electronic amplifier (Johnson 12). Varian invented a keyboard for it to be played with graphite-dusted gloves. In December they discussed monorhythms; contrapuntal rhythms; two “rates of speed ... in counterpoint to each other,” one steadily getting faster and the other slower (Cowell); and “light sound and rythm [sic] working under the same laws in three planes of vibration” (Varian) (13). Cowell wrote about some of these ideas in 1919 in *New Musical Resources* (published 1930) (14 and note).



Theremin’s rhythmicon, Moscow



14. Jeremy Grimshaw, “Henry Cowell,” in Chris Woodstra *et al*, eds., *All Music Guide to Classical Music* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005), p. 324; Program notes, Henry Cowell: The Whole World of Music, Other Minds, Portola Valley and San Francisco, 12–13 Nov. 2009.

The rhythmicon, built in 1930 by Léon Theremin at Cowell's direction, was the first musical rhythm machine but far more sophisticated than those that followed, playing loops of contrapuntal polyrhythms rather than a background beat for a Hammond organ or Techno Pop. Its perforated spinning disks interrupt the flow of light between bulbs and photoreceptors, creating oscillations perceived as rhythms or tones, depending on the speed of the disks: light, sound, and rhythm in three planes of vibration. Cowell wrote some compositions for it, including *Rhythmicana/Concerto for Rhythmicon and Orchestra*, but the machine did not catch on, even with him. Two working rhythmicons survive, one at the Smithsonian in Washington and one in the Theremin Center in Moscow, and in 2019 one was built for a performance of *Rhythmicana* at Tufts University.

In the klystron tube, an electron beam passes through an input cavity resonator, where radio frequency energy creates standing waves whose oscillating voltage causes the electrons to bunch. When the electric field opposes the electrons' motion they slow; when it is in the same direction, they accelerate. The electron bunches enter the output cavity during deceleration, their kinetic energy converted to potential energy, increasing the oscillations' amplitude, making the klystron the first significantly powerful source of radio waves in the microwave range. A descendant of the audion tube—where radio waves disturb the electrical conductivity of a gas, producing sounds in headphones—the klystron goes back to the notion discussed by Russell Varian and Cowell of one rhythm or wave being deflected by another, contrapuntal wave.

The Templers were fascinated by the tones and rhythms of the cosmos, which they tried to use (and Cowell wrote about) for healing. They experienced ocean waves and the wind ripples on the Oceano Dunes and “fishtail friezes” of its disturbed sandbanks in the constantly moving sand. (“If you examine [Edward Weston's] dune pictures carefully, you can almost always find a soft spot of moving sand somewhere in the landscape.”)¹⁵ These beliefs and experiences are hard to disambiguate in the innovation of John and Russell Varian and Henry Cowell: artists, technologists, and lovers of seascapes and dunescapes. John Varian may express it best in his poem “Joy,” writing of the

Joy ...
I to be here in Halcyon ...
Where the ocean word in the pondering wave
Is a broad word of peace, strong peace, deep rest,
Where the sand whispers marvelous intangibilities,
Reveals itself in magical lights and colors that might be imagination ... (Johnson 23)

Russell, more practical than John, made a fortune through science. He lived long enough to see the unsustainable degradation of the California coastal environment and helped set its environmental protection in motion through the Sierra Club and Conservancy Association.

Dune Poets Edward St. Claire and Hugo Seelig Halcyon had not only a pottery but a press, and the Halcyon Press published Dunite Edward C. St. Claire's *Wind-Blown Rhymes* in 1925, before the Halcyon Sanatorium eased his departure from life in 1927. Seelig, of the Dunite poets the most precise and delicate in his connection of natural description and

15. Charis Wilson and Wendy Madar, *Through Another Lens: My Years with Edward Weston* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1998), p. 111.

metaphysical construct, writes in the preface to his 1936 book of poetry, *Wheel of Fire*, that the poems in it

were written in the years from 1925 to 1929 while living in isolation on the Dunes at Oceano, California. [...] They are published approximately in the order of writing. That something of a sequence has resulted is merely because there was, during those years, a progression from untenable separateness toward what has been termed Cosmic Consciousness ...

Cultural Vortex: Young, Dreis, Janson, Schindler, and Arthur

Irish mythographer Ella Young, whose arrival in the United States was heralded by a full-page spread in the *New York Times Magazine* headlined “ELFLAND SENDS AN AMBASSADOR TO US,”¹⁶ wrote Seelig’s foreword, describing the Dunes and Seelig’s writing poems on paper scraps and his friends’ efforts to save them from a pack rat in his tent. Young included poems from Seelig in the May 1929 issue of *Troubador*, devoted to California poets (where she also included poems by Ansel Adams).



Hazel Dreis's binding of Seelig's Wheel of Fire (1936)

Two of Seelig’s poems set in the Dunes were in issues 1 and 4 of the *Dune Forum*. Hazel Dreis, who designed the *Dune Forum* and became a notable Modernist bookbinder, bound the five hundred copies of *Wheel of Fire* two years later.

The youthful poet Ellen Janson, already with an international reputation, and her partner, Little Theater movement founder Maurice Browne, arrived in Halcyon in 1924. In 1927, when Pauline Gibling Schindler left her husband, architect Rudolph Schindler, and their groundbreaking Kings Road House in West Hollywood, she joined Janson and Browne in Halcyon, before moving on to Carmel to co-found and edit *The Carmelite*. When Ella Young moved to a house behind the Varians’ in 1928 to finish the Newbery Medal-winning *The Tangle-Coated Horse*, Janson and Browne

told us (Gavin and myself) of hermits who lived in that sky-devastated wilderness. Lived year in and year out, for they had found hidden oases where willow trees grew and water could be had for the digging. Every hermit had an oasis all to himself. It was his territory. He needed to be about two miles away from his nearest neighbor. His little tent or cavelike shack must be securely hidden: it must not affront any eye, even his own. He must feel that he discovered it, stumbled upon it by accident so to speak, when he returned from a foray, seaward with net and clamfork, or landward to a lettuce field or carrot pleasaunce. The hermits, nurtured by Providence, they could meditate on eternity, write verses, or in beneficent mood ray out blessings to the Universe. (236)

16. 18 Oct. 1925.

Janson and Browne described the poet Seelig, the vegan and nudist George Blais, and Arthur the Navigator (Arther Allman), who was also working on a book. “Some day,” said Gavin, “We must go in search of them!”



Hindu Dunita Sam Cohen, Meher Baba, and Dunites Hugo Seelig and John Doggett, on Meher Baba's visit to Moy Mell, December 1934. Photo by Rudy Gerber.

XXXIV. THE WANDERER RETURNS

I was ambushed by the commonplace,
 Led confidently to believe that I was merely walking from
 the ocean into camp,
 Carrying my pack and eager to get the load off my back,
 But always welcoming the grand freedom
 when I could come to the top of the dunes
 and look over into the little valley
 and the straight backdrop of sand beyond.
 I had reached the crest of the sand, and was dropping down
 with the afternoon sun,
 Observing the curious length of my shadow,
 dipping into the gully between me and the next ridge.
 The wind had exposed the rootage; and innocently I
 watched my shadow
 Sliding over straggling root tendrils beaded with sand;
 Idly enough, watching myself gliding over the naked
 rootage of the mesembryanthemum and greasewood,
 Suddenly I felt myself free to journey
 Into the archetypal penetralia of the dunes before they had
 taken form
 While some lesser part of me moved down the slope and
 carried the pack into camp . . .

A Dune poem from Seelig's Wheel of Fire

Soon Gavin Arthur, whom Young knew from his involvement in the Irish Revolution, “is camping in one oasis, sleeping under the stars, gathering driftwood for a fire—clam-hunting, forcing the wilderness to sustain him. He plans to live after this fashion for quite a while, and write a book” (238). And then Young follows him.

It makes me wish to be a hermit. As the next best thing I've come out to spend some hours on the Dunes. We sit on the sun-baked sand: Gavin, Carl, Hugo, and John Dogget. I am looking at cloud patterns, but the others are talking of Plato, of cosmic cycles, and recurrent periods of civilization, talking of Atlantis and the lost continent of Mu. We do not succeed in solving even one cosmic problem, and presently Hugo and John go their ways each to his own territory. Carl stretches himself on the sand, and Gavin proposes that he and I set forth on a visitation to George the Evangelist and Arthur the Navigator.

Gavin Arthur and Carl Beckstead installed cabins in their own “cove,” plus a guest cabin and Community House. Young christened it Moy Mell for an otherworldly “pleasant plain” in Irish mythology and wove a mythic Irish poem around it in Arthur's *Dune Forum*, the journal Dreis would design and Schindler and Janson help edit and write and recruit for.

Visitors to Moy Mell included John Steinbeck (before and after the success of *Tortilla Flat*); the dancer Paul Draper, filming and performing in Hollywood, and his mother Muriel, the New York salonnière, writer, and radio commentator, who danced together in togas; Upton Sinclair; Edward and Brett Weston and Charis Wilson; John Cage; and many others.¹⁷

17. Ella Thorp Ellis, *Dune Child* (Berkeley: El León Literary Arts, 2011), Sinclair pp. 9–10, 24, Paul and Muriel Draper, 14, Edward Weston 16, 52, 96, 110, 138; Brett Weston, 96, 110, John Steinbeck, 52, 96–99; John Cage, note to Pauline Schindler on typescript “Counterpoint,” February *Dune Forum*; Charis Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

Gay Rights at Moy Mell Ella Thorp Ellis recounts that as a child at Moy Mell, “I’d heard grown-ups say [Gavin Arthur] was bisexual and, though I had no idea what that meant, I got the idea that this was part of what made Gavin so special. His relationships with his first [actually second] wife Charlotte, and with two men and a woman he took into his house, fascinated me. He and his friends laughed, kissed, and talked more animatedly together than anyone else I knew” (*op cit.* 13). In the outside world—of San Francisco, no less—as late as 1964 Arthur still went to the effort of publicly quashing a rumor that he had been arrested for homosexuality in Los Angeles in 1926, by proposing the existence of a double.

Gavin Arthur had a complex set of beliefs including astrology and reincarnation, and in the Dunes he wrote a novel, *Sea Change*, based on a soul transmutation in a love triangle of two men and one woman (Hammond 38). It went unpublished, but at the cusp of the Sexual Revolution and booming interest in astrology Arthur would finally publish the book that combined his Dune-era spiritual and sexual beliefs, *The Circle of Sex* (San Francisco: Pan-Graphic Press, 1962; expanded edition New Hyde Park: University Books, 1966). It proposed a circle of twelve overlapping categories of gendered sexual attraction, a more nuanced alternative to the linear seven-level Kinsey scale. It received serious attention in the mainstream press—among the first gay-oriented books to do so, including from philosopher Alan Watts in a 30 August 1963 column for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Stereotypes of the World—Revolt!”¹⁸



Two views of Moy Mell: above, from Pauline Schindler’s 1934 *Westways* article



Virgil Hodges, *Bennett-Loomis Archives*

Eastern Religions in the Dunes Ellis recorded among Moy Mell’s residents Dolores, a Buddhist (27), and when Meher Baba visited, Arthur assigned Hindu Dunite Sam Cohen to build the Baba a cabin so it would be pure (40). Baba’s entourage paid for Cohen’s passage to India, where he stayed thirty-five years in the Baba’s ashram (71). Samuel Lewis, a Zen master, Sufi murshid, and founder of Sufi Ruhaniat International, lived in the Dunes in the 1930s, co-authoring *Glory Roads: The Psychological State of California* (1936) with Dunite Luther Whiteman.¹⁹ Dunite practice of Eastern religion, meditation, and astrology, referred to throughout this text, was diverse and widespread, visits by outside mystics welcomed.

18. Edwina Bowe, “Chester A. Arthur III,” *California Weekly People* in the *San Francisco Examiner*, 19 Jan. 1964, pp. 12–13.

19. “Hazrat Murshid Sam (Samuel L. Lewis, Sufi Ahmed Murad Chisti), 1896–1971,” ruhaniat.org: accessed 14 Mar. 2021.

George Blais, the Vegan Evangelist George the Evangelist—George Blais—demonstrates that the Dunite culture was far broader and more egalitarian than scholarly focus on intellectual celebrities suggests. Blais was born in Canada in 1867, and his family moved to Fall River, Massachusetts. In 1890 he was a laborer when he married Cesaimé Bouchard, a speeder tender in a thread mill.²⁰ George’s brothers remained in Fall River, and the fate of Cesaimé is unknown, but George was in Oceano by the 1910s, where he worked as a bartender at the Oceano Hotel “and was one of his own best patrons,” as well as acquiring seven lots of Oceano property.²¹ In 1920 he took out a \$675 mortgage on five of these lots, but by 1928, he was a long-haired and bearded reformed alcoholic and soon-to-

A Treat On the Shores of Oceano



The
Famous
Sand
Dunes
at
Oceano

OCEANO BEACH SAND DUNES

For the Conchologist, good hiker, lover of Dunes, there is a treat on the shores of Oceano. Drive to Oceano, park your car and walk south on the packed sands. Take a bag or two for shells; wear bathing or wading suit or beach pajamas, discard footgear, and give weary nerves relaxation, to the tune of wide spaces, surf music, and fascinating lights and shadows. Should you desire mental stimulation plus a bit of new philosophy, turn left off the sandy beach about two miles south of Oceano toward the Cross which shows above the dunes. In the hollow back of the Cross, nestled in a grove is the hermit, George Blais, a distinctive character, who LIVES his theories. Mr. Blais will extend a cordial welcome.

11 November 1932 Pismo Times piece with unattributed pre-Dune Forum dunescape and a recommendation to park the car, walk, look at and listen to the Dunes, and visit George Blais

20. Massachusetts Marriages, 1695–1910; Fall River, 1890, p. 105.

21. “Last Rites Held Saturday for George Blais of Oceano,” Arroyo Grande *Herald-Recorder*, 21 May 1943, p. 3; Ernest Harrison, “Hacyon News,” *Pismo Times*, 20 Mar. 1931, p. 5; “Recorder,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 9 May 1916, p. 3.

be windfall vegan and nudist living in a “swept and garnished” cabin in the Dunes (Young 239). He was “one of the few people who lived in a cabin that was out in the open, unsheltered by willows from the wind” (Hammond 23), possibly the Wotherspoon Cottage, vestige of La Grande Beach development days.²²

Blais’s veganism was ethically-, health-, and resources-based, presaging the range of modern arguments for the practice (Young 240–241; Hammond 23–24). Initially he wore overalls with the legs and arms cut off and ate clams.²³ Later he wore nothing (except a loincloth when leaving the Dunes), and whether vegetarians could eat clams became the theme of Luther Whiteman’s roman à clef *The Face of the Clam*. “Frenchy” in the novel and Blais in real life gave them up. Although the Dunites are shown somewhat comically, if sympathetically, the novel provides a thorough presentation of the ethical theories behind vegetarianism, veganism, and windfall veganism in particular.

“He has many disciples, folk who pilgrimage from cities, eager to make a short trial of a new way of life,” Ella Young writes in *Flowering Dusk* (241). Reporting in local papers in the late 1920s and early 1930s bears this out: there are dozens of references to Blais/Blaise from the late 1920s to his death in 1943. “George Blaise’s colony in the sand dunes has become a Mecca for Halcyon friends and visitors, many of whom visit him and are imbued with the delights of ‘the simple life.’”²⁴ An issue of Arroyo Grande’s *Herald-Recorder* announced that “Dr. Bilton Brunning [sic] of San Francisco, who has put out a new book, a complete health encyclopedia entitled *Eat and Be Healthy on Twenty-Five Cents a Day*, is visiting George Blais at La Grande Beach” and “Judge E. E. Neal is visiting this month with George Blais of the ‘Dune’ Colony.” (Neal was “for many years a Republican Party wheel horse” in Indiana.)²⁵ On 21 April 1933, the *Pismo Times* ran a front page headline “Dr. Brunings, Famed Ophthalmologist, Will Locate Here,” attributing his decision to a visit to Blais.

The *Pismo Times* gave frequent, friendly coverage to Blais, calling him the Nature man, “a picturesque figure ... long hair and whiskers, bare legs and feet, and a skin as brown as a coffee berry. ... The picture of health, twenty-five cents a week covers all his expenses, and he enjoys a varied menu at that” (Harrison, *op. cit.*). A 1931 profile, “Oceano’s Hermit,” attributed his relocation to the Dunes at ten years earlier. “A shattered physique has become rugged, a cynical brain has found the satisfaction of charity, and a warped soul has discovered “the peace of God which passeth understanding” (10 July 1931, p. 7). The *Times* encouraged people to visit Blais. “He will welcome you, the pilgrim; will show you the way to a correct simple diet, logical thinking, and devout reverence to the Creator. Such an interlude to your stay at Pismo Beach will make this vacation an outstanding one.” He became so public a face of the Dunites that the *Times* referred to him as the “originator of the Sand Dune Colony” in their 1933 front page article.²⁶

22. “Mortgages,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 25 Jan. 1921, p. 3.

23. Harrison, *op. cit.*; “Mr. Jahren and George Blaise [sic] gave a clam chowder dinner to Halcyon friends this week,” “Halcyon, Arroyo Grande *Herald-Recorder*, 24 Ja. 1930, p. 5.

24. “Halcyon News,” Arroyo Grande *Herald-Recorder*, 12 Sep. 1929, p. 3.

25. “Oceano,” Arroyo Grande *Herald-Recorder*, 21 Apr. 1933, p. 6; “GOP Editors to Hear Congressman James Back,” *Richmond Palladium and Sun-Telegram*, 8 Mar. 1934, p. 2.

26. “Dr. Brunings, Famed Ophthalmologist, Will Locate Here,” 21 Apr. 1933, p. 1.

Blais also traveled, and in an article headlined "Sand Dunes Sage Delivers Lecture in San Francisco," the *Pismo Times* reported that

on September 10 Mr. Blais delivered a lecture on "Love and Friendship" and right living in the Psychic Research hall before approximately 500 interested listeners. He spoke and answered questions for an hour and three-quarters, holding his audience until the close. (7 Oct. 1932, p. 6)



Blais, Seelig, Princess Matchabelli, British occultist Meredith Starr, and Dunite Pete Koski, ca 1932. Photo by Rudy Gerber.

Blais's connection to modern organized veganism likely runs through Catherine Nimmo, a Dutch schoolteacher who became a vegetarian around 1912 and a registered nurse during World War I, emigrated to the United States in 1922 with intended destination the West Coast, converted to Theosophy in San Francisco, and became an "ardent vegan" in 1931, reputedly after seeing a cow and her calf separated in fields on opposite sides of the road.²⁷ She is documented as making extended visits to Halcyon from her home in Hollywood by 1933 and attended the Temple of the People's annual convention in 1936.²⁸ Given Halcyon-Dune connections, she likely knew and almost certainly knew of Blais, and like other locals may well have been influenced by him.

When Nimmo returned to Oceano full-time in 1948 after completing her training as a chiropractor, five years after Blais died, she founded the Vegan Society with Rubin Abramowitz, a Brooklyn vegetarian who had joined a group of post-World War II pacifists attempting self-sufficiency in Oceano (by subsistence farming on 50' by 100' lots where they would drill for water, not unlike the Dunites).²⁹ The Vegan Society, the first of its kind in America, was succeeded by the American Vegan Society in 1960. Whether Blais was a direct influence is unknown, but he certainly proselytized publicly and popularly in Oceano throughout the 1930s and early 1940s and became the first literary presentation of a

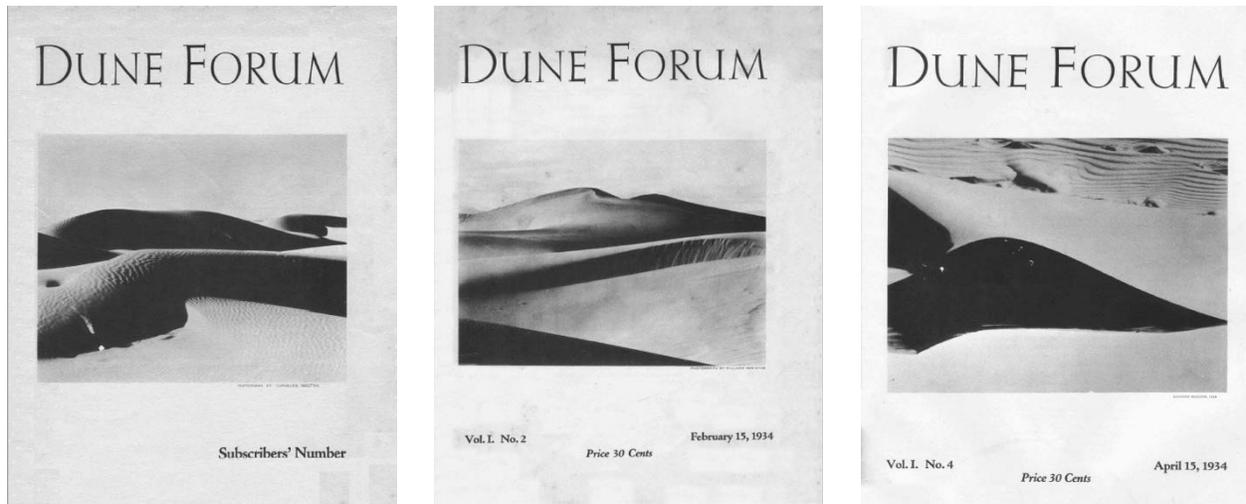
27. Rosemary Thole, "With Wisdom of 91 Years," *Five Cities Times-Press-Recorder*, 20 Sep. 1978, p. 9; Idaho, Eastport, Arrival Manifests, 1/20/1922; Joanne Stepaniak, *The Vegan Sourcebook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000), p. 6; "Throwback Thursday: Dr. Catherine Nimmo, Vegan Pioneer," 23 Jan. 2020, americanvegan.org, accessed 1 Mar. 2021.

28. "Halcyon News," *Pismo Times*, 8 Sep. 1933, p. 6 and 14 Aug. 1936, p. 5.

29. Stepaniak 6-7; Catalog of Copyright Entries: Musical Compositions, Part 3 (1943) (Abramowitz registered the copyright for a "Vegetarian national anthem" from Brooklyn); Rubin Abramowitz, "A Specific Experiment," *Alternative*, Mar.-Apr. 1949, p. 1.

vegan—in Ella Young’s *Flowering Dusk* (1945) and Luther Whiteman’s *The Face of the Clam* (1947)—immediately before the society’s founding.

The Supernova of the *Dune Forum* John Varian died in 1931, and Henry Cowell sold his Halcyon house soon after, but the Dune cultural experiment would reach its zenith with the fall 1933–May 1934 *Dune Forum*, a monthly edited by Gavin Arthur and co-edited by Ellen Janson; Pauline Schindler; Robin Lampson, a Bay Area–based bestselling author of book-length histories in free verse; and sometime Hollywood scriptwriter and journalist Dunham Thorp, who had moved with his wife and daughter from Los Angeles to the Nipomo Mesa and then, at Gavin Arthur’s invitation, to Moy Mell.

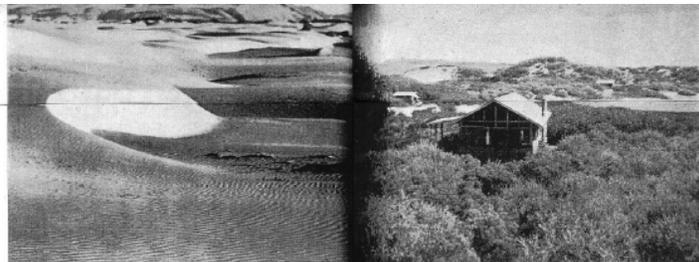


Chandler Weston’s, Willard Van Dyke’s, and Edward Weston’s covers of the Dune Forum

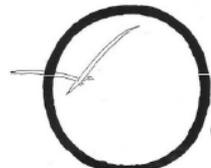
Though short-lived, the *Dune Forum* comprised perhaps the greatest concentration of major artistic talent of any twentieth-century avant-garde journal, with cover photographs by Edward and Brett Weston, Willard Van Dyke, and Ansel Adams; illustrations by Monterey painter John O’Shea, Bay Area theatrical designer Joseph Paget-Fredericks, Thomas Handforth, and Victor Mall; articles by Pauline Schindler, Rudolph Schindler, and Richard Neutra on architecture, Henry Cowell and John Cage on music, Ella Winter on Communism, and telephone co-inventor Thomas Watson on “An Engineer’s Idea of God”; and interviews with Upton Sinclair (running for California governor) and Robinson Jeffers and an account of a visit to Leon Trotsky by UC Berkeley Slavicist Alexander Kaun.

More important, these contributions included key statements of the twentieth-century avant-garde, including Rudolph Schindler’s first article on “Space Architecture”; the first known essay on music by twenty-one-year-old John Cage, on composition as an extension of lived experience; and the most concentrated series of Pure Photography works yet published in magazines, particularly of the Dunes as they were being discovered by Group *f.64* as a genre-altering subject.

Right—The Océano dunes, a vast expanse of undulating sand hillocks which is nurturing a new colony of intellectual ascetics. Photo by Edward McDowell. On opposite page—Half a mile from the dunes lies a seasonal headquarters for The Dune Forum.



ISOLATED among the shifting purple sands of the San Luis Obispo County coast, a new colony of hardy intellectuals is slowly developing. Will it produce another Edward McDowell, or another John Dewey?



Océano Dunes and THEIR MYSTICS

by Pauline Schindler



A dozen years ago George Blaine deserted urban civilization and came to this dune crevice to build his tiny hut and lead a life of contemplation in the quiet solitude.

A HUNDRED miles north of Santa Barbara, the coast road swings through the Santa Maria Valley and past a minor by-road marked "Océano." Six protesting miles of this little road bring us within sight of a strange and separate region—the Océano dunes.

Yes, they're strange and separate—private—with a hidden life. Little houses, and not at all obvious to the world of sightseers and passers-by. One may come to this place, drive for five or ten miles along the smooth wet sands at low tide; one may see that tawny dunes rise to the hinterland, and yet make altogether knowing their secret life.

Here there stands a quaint and deserted dance pavilion, but there are few other signs of human activity. Fine shifting sand-drifts cover the road, and there must be cautious driving. Against the breakwater there is a sign advertising clam-forks for rent (for here begin the clam-diggers' bustling grounds, the finest on the California coast) and there is a great chart indicating the time, by days, hours, and minutes, of high and low tides. Every clam-digger who drives his car down from this point along the sands, which lie southward in a swinging smooth curve of great beauty, must know this time schedule, for if he is caught there at high tide, he runs a sorry risk. When the tide is low, there is still menacingly visible the top-most inch or so of the last Model T Ford which the sands have engulfed—a sinister sight.

Now above the tide-line rise the dunes, mile upon mile southward, lovely and strange and often melancholy, curve on curve lifting and falling in flowing line and subtle color. They cannot be really known from a mere swift delightful flight over the sands. It is necessary to linger, to scale them and to move down their soft yielding sides. Shoes must be left behind; these dune explorations should be conducted barefoot.

There may be a chill morning wind caressing by the sea. Yet as soon as the first dune is topped, the ocean left behind, a different world begins. The sea roar turns to silence, the sands are warm to the foot. Back there by the sea-edge the clam-diggers, up to their thighs in water, grimly and patiently explore with their pitchforks wherever a bubble in the sands betrays their prey. But here all is motionless stillness; the dune-hollows invite one to sun-bathing.

Now subtle hovelnesses begin to disclose themselves. The tracks of rabbits leave a piquant pattern, roundabout and capricious, over the steep slopes. Color and dune texture, moves smooth and shadow soft, provide the senses with a private quiet delight.

And yet all this delicate beauty is only a prelude to the strange and inner life of the dune region. Half a mile inland from the ocean, the dune hollows become copes. Shrubs and low trees darken the tawny sand with green. Here, partly or completely hidden in the brush, we come upon a tent, or a cabin improvised from the materials the region affords. And somewhere near we shall come also upon its own particular hermit. Along this curve of seacoast, many a solitary has found himself a cope or a dune hollow secret with shrubbery, each with his own water-well dug in sand, his own coil of smoke rising when night comes, his own characteristic habitation in which he lives his frugal and contemplative life.

heard is soft and still, gentle like himself. He is like the woodcutter out of our childhood tales, unrelated to sophisticated civilizations . . . in emotion. If we want to be factious, we can call him a holy man. However, he is free from exhibitionism or self-consciousness. He is real. A life of contemplation has illumined his face. After forty years of gaudy-thrill carousing, he has chosen this as the more satisfying way of life these last dozen years.

Beyond the next dune or two, another hut houses his nearest neighbor—also a solitary, strangely quiet and winning of personality; a carver of full-rigged ships and minor sculpture. A half-mile down, a painter with his wife and children has established himself for a season's stay. A tent, and another shelter with roof woven of reeds, as the Indians of the region once used to build houses then. The family cooks its meals out of doors over a wood fire, and lives on the most simple terms with life. There is almost no money whatever, but for all this magnificence of land-and-seascape they pay no rent. They flourish without being caught in the economic pattern.

Some of these dune-lands do have actual owners, or so it is written in a legal document somewhere. But it is difficult in so mobile a unit as a dune, to set a surveyor's mark which will be there next year rather than somewhere else, or buried in sand. The dunes belong by habit to anyone who comes and who is in tune with the life of the region.

The quiet of the place is a thing consciously felt and treasured by those who live there. The United

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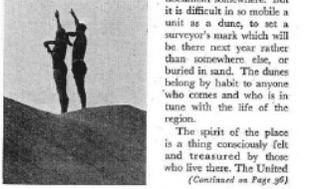
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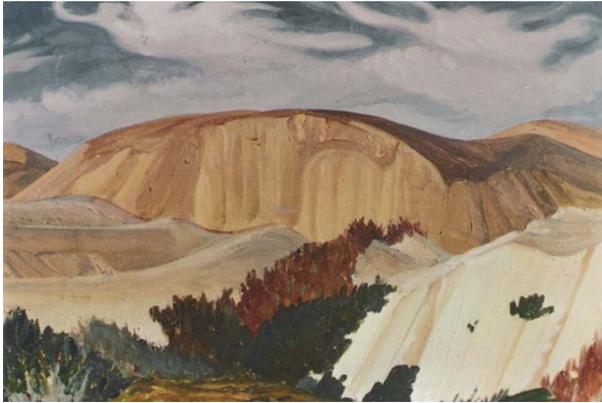
Pauline Schindler's Westways magazine article

Dunites themselves were well represented, with—besides articles and one poem by Arthur—poems by Thorp, Seelig, Beckstead, and Alex R. Schmidt and a piece by "A Goofy Nudist" (likely LA journalist and recurrent Dunite Pat O'Hara, Pauline Schindler's lover before John Cage). Halcyon representation included architectural and political criticism by Pauline Schindler and poems by Janson, Ella Young, and John Varian.

The *Dune Forum* got press in West Coast newspapers and *Time* magazine, which quoted Arthur's ambition to create "the outstanding magazine of culture and controversy in the West" (22 Jan. 1934). It was the occasion for Schindler's "Océano Dunes and Their Mystics" in the Southern California Automobile Club's *Westways*. But the *Dune Forum's* connection to the intellectual world of Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and Carmel, the East Coast and Europe where it had the greatest impact. The Subscribers' Number closed with a list of those who had promised to write for the journal, ranging from dancer Martha Graham to African American poet Countee Cullen, arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan to Nobel Prize-winning physicist Robert Millikan: showing the range of its network and cost of its early demise.

Diminuendo of the Dunites Elwood Decker came from a notable artistic career in San Francisco (the Police Commission made him paint over his nudes in Bigin's Bohemian Café) and lived and painted in the Dunes 1931–1932 and 1936–1946 before leaving in 1946 for a notable career in abstract art and mainstream and experimental film in Los Angeles

(exhibiting sculpture with Man Ray and abstract film with John and James Whitney).³⁰ His departure, following the wartime diaspora of Gavin Arthur and his followers, removed much of the avant-garde artistic activity of the Dunes, but other Dunites, including artists and spiritual seekers, persisted. Dixie Ojesen brought her children and lived and painted there in the early 1950s (Hammond 104–109). Ella Young was observed speaking to a circle of Dunites in a dune cove (or hollow) in 1954, two years before her death.³¹ After the *Los Angeles Daily News* folded, journalist Pat O'Hara came back to the Dunes to die in 1955.



Views of the Dunes at day and night by Elwood Decker

This period coincided with the introduction of beach buggies to the Central Coast. First documented in the early 1930s on the Jersey Shore, where fishermen made them from stripped down Model A Fords with large, soft tires, they spread, after World War II, to Eastern Seaboard beaches from Florida to Maine.³² Concerns for the coastal environment and other beach users also saw local bans by the early 1950s.³³

By 1955, LA newsprint and TV promoted Guadalupe dune buggy rides and Pismo clam digging, and “cars, trucks, beach buggies, and nearly every other mode of transportation lined the hard sand four deep” on a March weekend, with nearly 8,000 cars entering just by the ramps, carrying 32,000 people harvesting a third of a million clams—if they kept to their limit. Population, prosperity, mobility, and a vehicle that could now tear through the sand and vegetation of the dunes themselves spelled the end of Dunite isolation, meditation, and sustainability.³⁴

30. “Bohemia’s ‘Art’ in Coveralls as Police Blush at ‘Naughty Sights,’” *San Francisco Examiner* 7 Feb. 1927; “Watercolors of Vistorian Interiors Test Credulity,” *Los Angeles Times* 21 Dec. 1947; “Abstract Film Program Bows,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, 29 May 1950.

31. Recollection of Basil W. R. Jenkins, Dune Poetry Walk, Coastal Awakening, 13 Oct. 2019. Jenkins was nine in 1954, familiar with Young’s work, and came upon the scene by accident, mounting the crest of a dune.

32. “Police Chief Goes for Buggy Ride,” *Asbury Park Press*, 27 June 1932, p. 3; classified ad for “beach buggy wheels,” *Lompoc Record*, 11 Feb 1954, p. 14.

33. “Club Urges Protection for Turtles,” *Miami News*, 17 June 1952, p. 13; “Police Close South Broward Beach to Souped-Up Buggies,” *Fort Lauderdale News*, 20 June 1952, p. 13.

34. *Los Angeles Times*: “New Experiences Await You,” ad, 19 May 1955, p. 34, “Santa Maria Area Visited on Tour,” 22 May 1955, p. 62; “Minus Tides Bring Pismo Clam Record,” *Santa Maria Times*, 21 Mar. 1955, p. 1..

One of the earliest Dunites, Paul “Strongman” Henning, was driven from the Dunes by dune buggy noise and intrusion in the early 1960s, dying soon after (Hammond 112–113). Bert Schievink, was the last Dunite in the Dunes. He had arrived in 1940 and quoted astrologer Dane Rudhyar (who was also a theosophist, modernist composer, and associate of Henry Cowell’s) that the most holy vibrations on earth were found eighteen miles south of San Luis Obispo (Hammond 80). Schievink, the model for Bouke (his birth name) in Jane Elsdon’s *The Secret of the Dunes* (1986), died in 1974, his cabin torched by vandals months later. Now that the Dunes were easily accessible by dune buggy, this was becoming the fate of the rest of the dune dwellings that hadn’t been buried by sand or (like Gavin Arthur’s cabin) transported to town as a rental (114–115). The Dunites would now populate works of reminiscence (Sufi and yogi Shamcher Bryn Beorse’s *Fairy Tales Are True* [1978] and Ella Thorp Ellis, *Dune Child* [2011]), fiction (Elsdon’s *The Secret of the Dunes*), and history (Norm Hammond’s *The Dunites* [1992]).



Edward Weston, Dunes, Oceano (1936). Museum of Modern Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art Permanent Collections.

Pure Photography: The West Coast Photographic Movement The Oceano Dunes changed the direction of Pure Photography, dramatically redefining the genres of the landscape (toward abstraction) and the nude (toward humanism). Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Willard Van Dyke, three of the seven original members of Group *f.64*, Pure Photography’s founders in 1932, photographed and filmed the Dunes. And the symbiotic relationship of the Dunes and Pure Photography was captured at its inception by the *Dune Forum*, the first inkling for New York and Europe of what was to come.

As Weston exclaimed in his *Daybooks*, the Dunes were “the material made for me!” But they were also the material that helped make, or split, the movement between social focus (which drew *f.64* member Consuelo Kanaga and semi-member Dorothea Lange) and the portraits, still lifes, landscapes, and nudes of Weston, Adams, and Imogen Cunningham. It is emblematic of the rupture that in spring 1936 Lange took her haunting *Migrant Mother* and, in fall the same year, Weston his lush *Nude on Sand* only five miles apart.

The wind-formed sand, both natural and abstract, allowed a complete departure from landscape Pictorialism without slipping into Non-Objectivity or Dada. The Pure

Photographers were not the first to photograph sand dunes, but they were the first to take advantage of this abstraction, to eschew any hint of Pictorial context. Weston's 1936 *Dunes, Oceano* series was called "classic and majestic" and "Weston's most accomplished" by the influential New York photography writer and editor Nancy Newhall,³⁵ and Edward Weston, Brett Weston, and Ansel Adams returned again and again to the Dunes.

Used as a background both natural and abstract for Weston's nudes, the dunes brought the human form from the studio into the warm but unrelenting sunlight and reimbued the genre with humanism. As the critic John Davenport explained to an English audience in 1942, "His nudes, sprawled among sand dunes, are as startling as those archaic sculptures disinterred before the thrilled gaze of Leonardo's Florentines."³⁶



Edward Weston, Nude on Sand, Oceano (1936). Museum of Modern Art Permanent Collection.

How, When, and Why Pure Photography Found the Oceano Dunes Ansel Adams in particular had direct knowledge of the Dunes before the 1930s and is the probable author of a distant view of the poet John Varian standing among them in the late 1920s, resembling Adams work at the time and with Varian in white shirtsleeves and tie like his close-up Halcyon portraits with Adams. It is a photograph tensed between Pictorialism and Pure Photography but dramatically beyond either. Edward Weston must also have heard of the Dunes; he certainly knew Henry Cowell in Monterey by 1928, judging from his *Daybooks*. But art takes time to gestate, and Weston did not photograph his two earthshaking Dune series till 1936, while Adams' four important Dune studies date from the 1930s to the early 1960s.

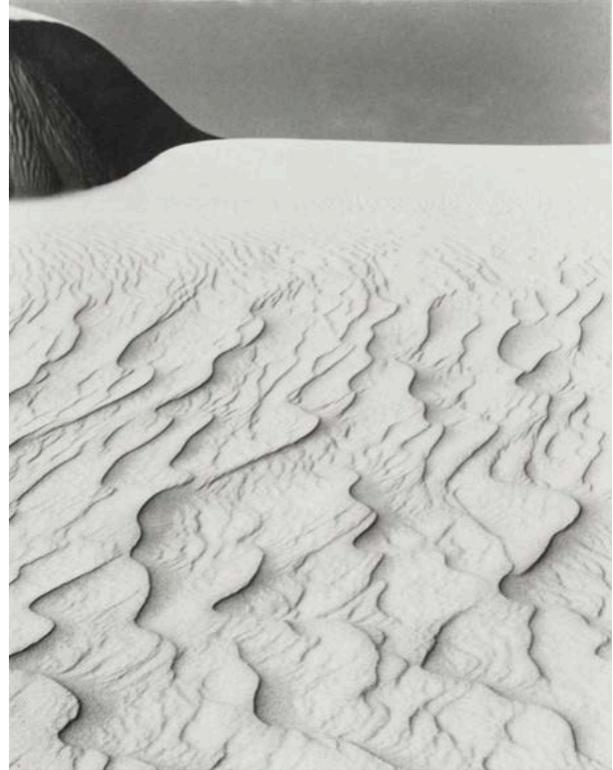
In 1914, when Cowell was 16 and Adams 12, the former was briefly the latter's music teacher; Adams had originally wished to be a concert pianist rather than a photographer. Before he taught Adams, the "boy composer" Cowell was already a friend of the Irish poet and Theosophist John Varian and his sons Russell and Sigurd, when the Varians were living in Palo Alto and Cowell and his mother in Menlo Park (Johnson 2).

35. Nancy Newhall,

36 "Genius: Edward Weston of California," *Lilliput*, Nov. 1942, pp. 405-414.



Above: Brett Weston, *Sand Dune 5* (1935).
Museum of Modern Art Permanent
Collection.



Right: Dody Weston Thompson, *White Dune
No. 1*, Oceano, California (circa 1951)

Varian wrote to Cowell in 1917 that California was where “the great movement is to be” and that New York and Paris were “has beens,” warning their influence would be like “university english upon a Poet” (7). Cowell wrote to Russell Varian from New York in 1916, “Everyone here composes along old lines, or merely stupid new ones. You have heard or are hearing more of the best present day music in Halcyon than is produced in all this big city” (16).

A similar rebellion against the East Coast (where Pictorialism reigned) drove the Californians who founded Group *f.64*, who stated in their manifesto, hung at their founding De Young Museum show in 1932, that

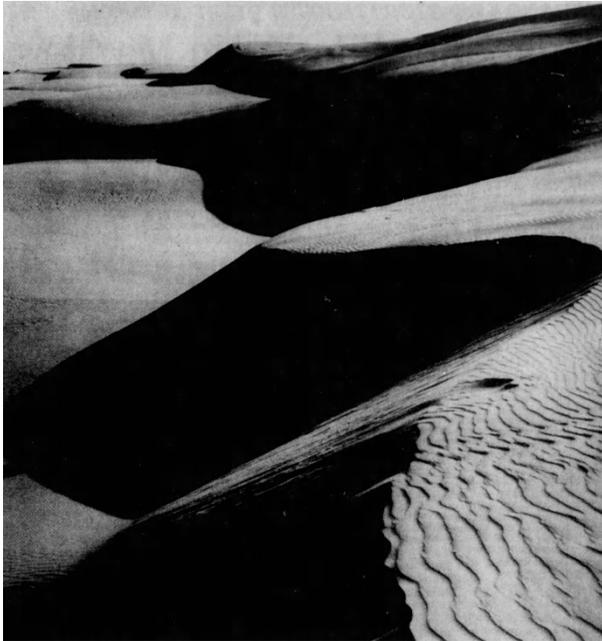
Photography, as an art form, must develop along the lines defined by the actualities and limitations of the photographic medium, must always remain independent of ideological conventions of art and aesthetics that are reminiscent of a period and culture antedating the growth of the medium itself.³⁷

Group *f.64* considered its “chief object ... to present in frequent shows what it considers the best contemporary Photography of the West” (*ibid.*) The ruggedness and grandeur of the Western compared to the Eastern landscape was considered more conducive to Pure Photography. In the Oceano Dunes, Group *f.64* discovered a landscape that was grand, soft, and highly ascetic, and it drove them to photograph other dunescapes in the West.

Like Cowell and John Varian, Group *f.64* considered geographical and ideological separateness from the East Coast to be a condition for experimentation, modernism, and purity. Like Cowell (who came up with new methods for playing the piano, including with

37. “Group *f.64* Manifesto,” in Mary Street Alinder, *Group f.64* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), fig. 28.

the hand and forearm, and playing the strings directly), John (who invented musical instruments with new methodologies), and Cowell and Russell (who in the rhythmicon conceived of a musical machine based on scientific principles), Group *f.64* wanted to be true to the mechanism.



Ansel Adams, Sand Dunes, Oceano, California (circa 1930s), left, and Stream, Oceano Dunes, California (1942) above

(That said, Edward Weston attended a performance of Cowell and Varian's *The Building of Banba* in Monterey in 1930 and concluded, "I have my doubts about the esoteric when it does not include the aesthetic! [... M]uch of it sounded like old church hymns poorly sung" [*Daybooks*, vol.2, p. 184]. What would he have thought of the instrument experiments of Cowell's student Cage—whom he may have encountered at the Dunes in January 1934?)

Adams was a friend of Ella Young, who moved next to the Varians in 1928 and cultivated connections with the Dunites through her friend from Irish days Gavin Arthur. The final cover of Arthur's *Dune Forum* featured a photograph by Adams. Arthur's associate editor—the only one with experience in bringing out a journal—was Pauline Schindler, who had known Weston in LA, had helped found a gallery in Carmel to exhibit the photography of Weston and Adams, and promoted Weston in *The Carmelite*.³⁸

Adams photographed Young in Halcyon in the late 1920s, as did Edward Weston in Monterey in 1930. When Weston and Van Dyke came to the Dunes in January 1934, their destination was Moy Mell, but they drove at high tide, almost lost Van Dyke's car, and never made it, photographing to the north ("Willard Van Dyke"). Ella Thorp Ellis recollects subsequent photographic forays by Weston to Moy Mell, before he returned to Moy Mell with Charis Wilson in fall 1936, creating *Nude on Sand*.

At any rate, Weston claimed not to have been introduced to the Dunes—as he could have been—by Adams, Cowell, Young, Pauline Schindler, Van Dyke, or Chandler or Brett Weston

38. Thomas S. Hines, "Critic and Catalyst: Pauline Gibling Schindler (1893–1977)," *Getty Research Journal*, 2019, p. 56.

but (in an inscription to her on a photograph) Galka Scheyer, art dealer for the Blue Four: Alexei Jawlensky, Lyonel Feininger, Vassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee. Weston seems to have met Scheyer through Rudolph Schindler in Carmel in April 1930 (*Daybooks*, vol. 2, p 151). These complex relationships show the centrality of the Oceano Dunes as one of California's four avant-garde nodes in the early to mid twentieth century.

Adams and Weston could have discovered the Dunes earlier, but they discovered them when they needed them: after Pure Photography had been defined by Group *f.64*, and when Group *f.64* was beginning to go in different directions. The Dunes had been there. Edward Weston and Ansel Adams had to learn that they needed them, had to learn how to see them.

Edward Weston's Revolution Group *f.64* coalesced in the Bay Area in 1932. Not only was it subsequently split by social versus aesthetic focus, but in 1934 Weston split from lover and fellow founding member Sonya Noskowiak, to whom he had taught photography, and moved south to Santa Monica with Charis Wilson, who would become a writer. In the early 1930s, Brett Weston, who had been accepted into full *f.64* membership, set up a studio in Santa Barbara and Chandler Weston in Santa Maria. But by 1936, Brett was back with his father in Santa Monica. Before Edward and Charis's 1936 trip to the Dunes, Edward told her, "You won't believe it. [...] Everything is black-and-white!" (Wilson 108).



Edward Weston's 1936 Oceano Dune photograph that Charis Wilson included in Through Another Lens: My Years with Edward Weston (1998)

The book accompanying the Museum of Modern Art's 1946 Edward Weston retrospective made clear the effect of the Oceano Dunes on the photographer's development, after he had gone through periods of Pictorialism and Precisionism:

In the early 1930s Weston was alarming his friends by breaking away from the extreme closeup: doing clouds and villages in New Mexico, perspectives of a lettuce ranch in Salinas, the massive naked hills of the Big Sur. Then came, in 1936, a classic and majestic series. From their new studio in Santa Monica, Edward and Brett worked together among the vast, wind-rippled sand dunes at Oceano, which rose from deep swirls of morning shadow to stand dazzling and sculptural at noon and sank again, bright-crested, into the darkness. Photographing across from one bank to another, with the sun along the same axis as his camera, Weston made a series of nudes in which a subtle line of shadow outlines the figure, rounding the living skin away from the harsh brilliance of the sand. (Newhall 9)

Weston's initial studies of Charis had followed the pattern of his close-up, abstract, studio nudes of the 1920s with partial anatomies. When they went to Oceano—a holiday after they had completed a Guggenheim Fellowship application—Weston was photographing the

landscape and Charis took off her clothes to sunbathe (notably, and in California fashion, *Nude on Sand* is of a tanned figure). She then began “diving down a steeper part of the sand bank ... fling[ing] myself down with abandon,” coming to a halt in gouges that provided “dark accents in the monochromatic sand” (Wilson 111).



Photographs from Dunes, Oceano and Nude on Sand mounted at Weston's 1975 Museum of Modern Art retrospective in New York

The photographs “mark the climax of Weston’s quest for a modern figurative style” and are among his most widely recognized masterpieces.³⁹ They would define Pure Photography’s nude: in natural light in a natural context. The following year, Edward Weston became the first photographer to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship, Charis Wilson writing their 1940 book *California and the West*, the product of their Guggenheim travels.

Ansel Adams’ Evolution It’s unclear when Adams’ 1930s Dunes photograph dates from. His 1942 photograph (*Stream, Oceano Dunes, California*), circa 1950 one (*Sand Dunes, Oceano, California*), and 1963 one (*Dunes, Oceano, California*) cluster with his dune images from White Sands in 1941–42 (*Dunes, Hazy Sun, White Sands National Monument, New Mexico* and *Sand Dunes, White Sands National Monument, New Mexico*) and Death Valley in 1948 (*Sand Dunes, Sunrise, Death Valley National Monument, California*).

39. Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989).



In the digital age, the *Guardian's* 2014 four-part series *The Pictures That Changed Photography* would name part 3 *Nudes on Sand and Ansel Adams*, echoing an international appreciation of Dune culture on Youtube, where the most viewed performances of "The Tides of Manaunaun" are by Steffen Schleiermacher of Germany (76,803), Elif Onal of Turkey (26,498), Tricia Dawn Williams of Malta (14,285), Ralph van Raat of the Netherlands (7,965), Fausto Bongelli of Italy (7,438), Cowell himself (2,784), Julie Moon and Hyun Kathleen Kim of Korea (2,715 and 2,077), and Wilhem Latchoumia of France (2,395). The influence of the Oceano Dunes' avant-garde in the twentieth century shows no sign of diminishing in the twenty-first.

Ansel Adams, Dune, Oceano, California (ca. 1950). Metropolitan Museum of Art Permanent Collection.

The Boundaries of the Resource

Norm Hammond's work suggests the bulk of Dunite habitation stretched from the south bank of Arroyo Grande Creek (Bert Schievink's cabin) to the south shore of Oso Flaco Lake (Paul Henning's)—for the practical reasons that clams were scarce to the south and people too numerous to the north. Hammond maps most of the camps and cabins along a vegetated area of low dunes between the shore and the high dunes, with a few cabins (such as Elwood Decker's first, previously "the Dwarf's") further inland. Aerial photographs from 1938 and 1939 are not particularly helpful, as Dunite structures were tiny and designed to be inconspicuous, but the cabins of Moy Mell and a few others settlements, some in the high dunes, can be picked up, as well as the configuration of Dune vegetation, confirming the accuracy of Hammond's mapping.

It isn't clear where all the photographs of Edward, Brett, and Chandler Weston, Dody Weston Thompson, Willard Van Dyke, and Ansel Adams were taken, as their abstract aesthetic was not to include landmarks. The note on Van Dyke in the February 1934 *Dune Forum* claimed that the January 1934 trip never made it as far south as Moy Mell, and Van Dyck (and presumably Edward Weston) took photographs in the dunes to the north. Charis Wilson writes that in the fall 1936 trip she made with Weston, they stayed at Moy Mell. She doesn't say how far south they ranged, but she only mentions walking, and she mentions that Moy Mell was "not far from the northern edge of the dunes." She does confirm that she and Weston ranged east into the high dunes:

The people in the area who crossed to the beach followed a regular path among lower-lying dunes. By heading into the high ones—some were a hundred feet tall—we were soon surrounded by trackless wastes, where it was easy to work up such a lost-in-the-Sahara feeling that it took a quick pull on the canteen to counteract it.

All the dunes I had seen before shrank to sandbox size when compared to these towering peaks and steep-side bluffs. (108)

This seems to suggest the area south of the lakes, a little more than a mile from Moy Mell. It would have been arduous with bulky and heavy camera equipment, which Weston insisted on carrying himself in 1936, but Wilson mentions that before they left their "leg muscles were complaining about two days of walking in deep sand" (113). At one point Wilson

climbed to the top of the highest crest in sight to reconnoiter. About a mile to the east there were hills and trees. About the same distance west, ocean waves rolled in on a flat beach that continued north and south. To the north the dunes dropped down to mere sand hills, but south of us stretched range after range of sand



Edward Weston, Bug Tracks on Sand, Oceano (1935, though Charis Wilson dates it to 1936). Museum of Modern Art Permanent Collection.

mountains with valleys and plains set among them—a whole sandy geography where the straight line was outlawed and the arc and parabola ruled. ... “Down that way,” I reported with a wide arm sweep to the south, “the dunes are endless. You’ll never run out of new subjects.” (110–111)

Weston replied that he would never run out where he was, “because the dunes were changing constantly right before our eyes.”

Ella Thorp Ellis recounts various trips with Edward Weston carrying his photographic plates. On these she is a five- to nine-year-old who has recovered from polio but also one used to long walks in the Dunes. She says of an early trip, “We trudged on and on. How could he carry that heavy tripod and camera through the deep sand ... My legs hurt but we kept walking ...” (16). She does not say, however, which direction they went.

Comparison of backgrounds from Van Dyke’s 1948 film and contemporary aerial photographs suggest Edward Weston and Dody Weston Thompson are photographing south of the lakes in dunes beyond a first vegetated ridge (where the Dunite dwellings were concentrated) and a second ridge farther from the ocean.



Images from Willard Van Dyke’s The Photographer (1948), showing location of Edward Weston and Dody Weston Thompson’s shoot

Chandler Weston was based in Santa Maria and Brett for a while there and in Santa Barbara, and they may have approached the Dunes from Guadalupe, as Dunites themselves had done (though not the visitors to Moy Mell, who came via Halcyon and Oceano). But written accounts of Edward Weston’s key 1934 and 1936 visits suggest these series were photographed to the nearer northeast and southeast of Moy Mell, near the Dunite-inhabited areas north of Oso Flaco, where a greater concentration of unvegetated dunes that the Pure Photographers preferred were located.

The Integrity of the Resource

The Oceano Dunes form a cultural landscape that was imbued with meaning by the Halcyonites, Dunites, and Pure Photographers for its wildness, quiet, and remoteness; for its sights and sounds of sand, water, wind, and sunlight, including the delicacy of bird, animal, and bug tracks; and for its representation in art, music, literature, and philosophy. It was valued for being untouched rather than for its alteration by humans. The Dunes had triumphed over the La Grande Beach development, they periodically swallowed up Dunite cabins (Wilson 113–114), and they swallowed up cars like Moy Mell's *Belinda*.

As Ella Young describes it, the Dunite's "little tent or cavelike shack must be securely hidden: it must not affront any eye, even his own. He must feel that he discovered it, stumbled upon it by accident so to speak, when he returned from a foray ..." (236). Hugo Seelig writes of an analogous process in climbing over the crest of his cove, "ambushed by the commonplace / ... Suddenly I felt myself free to journey / Into the archetypal penetralia of the dunes before they had taken form."

Seelig "knew at what hour the evening primrose opened and in what place one might surprise the first blue gilia"; George Blais, "who had attained health and salvation in the Dunes ... longed to spread the gospel of it to others: meat-eaters, dwellers in cities, their hide-shod feet ignorant of sand and sea-wave" (Young 236). Pre-dune buggy, vehicles could not enter the dunes themselves. In Ella Young's recollection of being driven along the beach in the late 1920s, "the auto in which I sat" was "the only car on all those flat sands that reached southward for ten miles" (235).

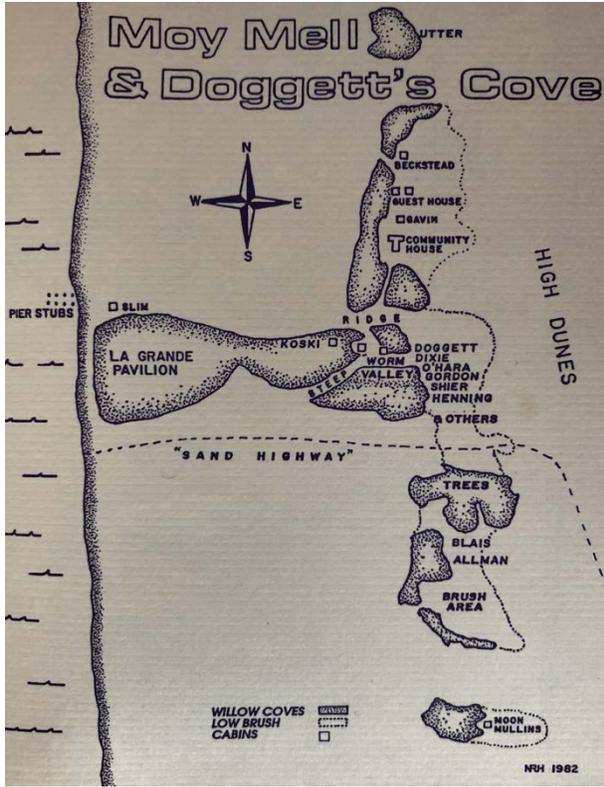
When Edward Weston photographed the Oceano Dunes, "The footprint record that worried Edward was his own. From the top of a rise he would scan the surrounding formations, trying to select a downward course that would do the least damage to the fewest foregrounds" (Wilson 109).

The Oceano Dunes' integrity of **location** remains the same.

The Dunes' agricultural and sparsely developed **setting** of hills and trees to the east and ocean **setting** to west is similar to their period of significance.

A passage from National Register Bulletin 34, "Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Historic Aids to Navigation," that defines **feeling** points up issues with the Dunes.

Feeling is the quality that a historic property has in evoking the aesthetic or historic sense of a past period of time. Although it is itself intangible, feeling is dependent upon the aid's significant physical characteristics that convey its historic qualities. Integrity of feeling is enhanced by the continued use of a historic optic or sound signal at a light station. The characteristic flashing signal of a light adds to its integrity. While sounds themselves, such as the "Bee oooohhhh" of a diaphone, cannot be nominated to the National Register, they enhance the integrity of feeling. The mournful call of fog horns on San Francisco Bay is an integral part of experiencing life there.



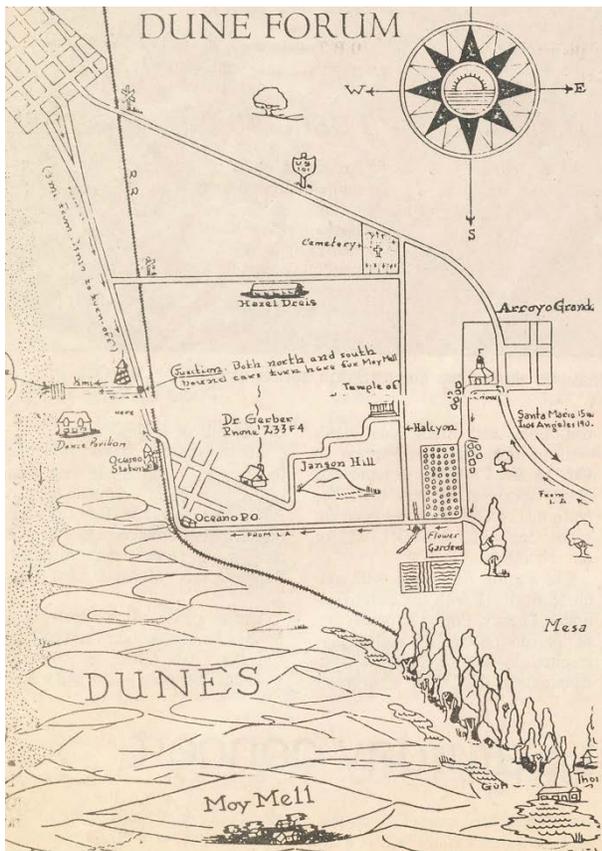
Above: Hammond's map of northern Dunites (inside back cover of *The Dunites*); 1939 US Army aerial photo of same area. Below: Moy Mell structures visible in the 1939 aerial: Carl Beckstead's cabin top, left of center; Gavin Arthur's and guest cabin slightly above and left of photo center; L-shaped Community House, bottom; Google satellite of 1939 aerial photo area.



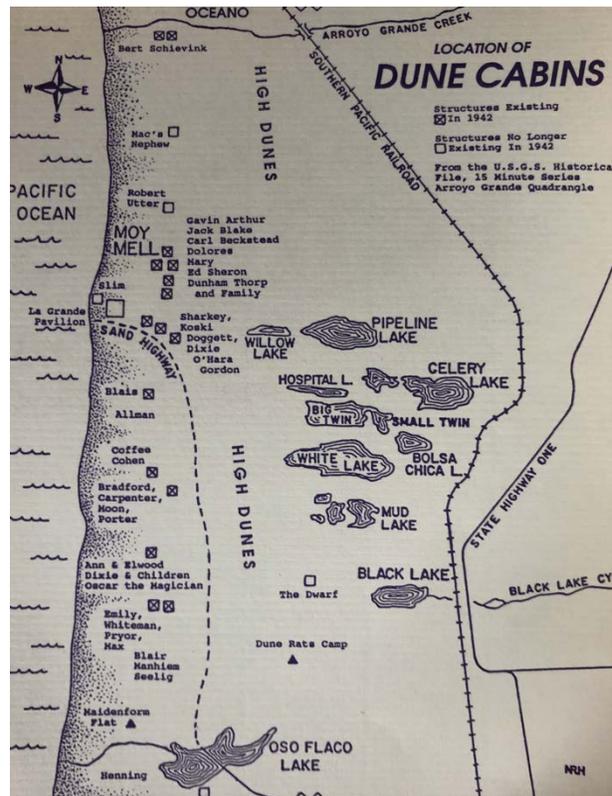
In the case of the Oceano Dunes, vehicular noise (as well as visual intrusion and air pollution) is the opposite of the “Bee oooohhhh’ of a diaphone,” degrading the integrity of feeling for the period of historic and aesthetic significance, which would be enhanced by ocean, wind, and bird sounds and silence. But this loss of integrity of feeling is reversible.

The Dunes’ **association** with the Halcyonites, Dunites, and Pure Photography remain strong in terms of the all-important visual and aural environment (when vehicles are not present). Tents have disappeared and cabins have been buried under the sands or burnt by vandals, but the literature, music, art, and philosophy of the Dunites was concentrated on the natural environment, not on its alteration, as was the photography of the West Coast Photographic Movement. The lower dune spine of vegetated coves inhabited by the Dunites has been significantly denuded, but this loss of integrity is reversible.

Materials, design, and workmanship would be relevant only for buried cabins. Whether documented (such as Carl Beckstead’s at Moy Mell) or undocumented, there seems little reason to uncover them.



Unsigned map showing how to get to Moy Mell, from the era of the Dune Forum



Hammond’s map of Dunite habitations from Arroyo Grande Creek to Oso Flaco Lake, The Dunites (inside front cover)

Following page: 1939 US Army aerial photographs of Oceano Dunes from Arroyo Grande Creek to Oso Flaco Lake, marked with locations of Dunites mentioned in the text; current Google Satellite images, showing erosion of vegetated ridge where most Dunites lived

