

GRASSROOTS AND BOOTS

A CAREER IN COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHAEOLOGY IN ALABAMA'S TALL GRASS PRAIRIE

Linda Derry

Linda Derry is the Site Director, Old Cahawba Archaeological Park, Alabama Historical Commission (Alabama's State Historic Preservation Office), Selma, AL (cahawba@bellsouth.net).

I am a public servant. Archaeology is my toolbox. I reach into it for archaeological data and interpretations that can be applied to community issues. As the site director of the Old Cahawba Archaeological Park, my assigned tasks are to acquire, preserve, and interpret a very large, multifaceted archaeological site. I do this with the help of citizens. They help because I strive to make archaeology at this location relevant, meaningful, and personal for them.

Old Cahawba, the archaeological site, is a ghost town that was once a large prehistoric village, Alabama's state capital, and the site of a famous Civil War prison. This landscape of ruins is located near Selma, Alabama encircled by one of the nation's most biodiverse rivers and adjacent to one the state's largest remnants of tall grass prairie. In 1860, Dallas County had the fourth highest per capita wealth in the nation because of cotton and slavery. Today, this region hovers at the poverty line. And yet, it is rich in history, traditions, storytelling, biodiversity, and natural splendor. Tourism is seen as the most practical economic engine for the region, so much of my daily routine is invested in that cause. I've learned that visitors are usually not interested in just archaeology or just history or just nature, but are looking to experience an authentic place with unique stories that grew out of the interplay of nature, culture, and history. So, I often cross academic disciplines to work with and learn from other specialists.

A typical day for me starts with reading the local small town newspaper or eavesdropping at a local café so I know the current issues of concern. Then I take a few minutes to reflect on how I might use archaeological findings at Cahawba to address these modern issues. This way, my staff and I can make site interpretation relevant and meaningful. Some of my days end with service on community boards or commissions. I want to ensure that archaeological concerns are considered in the local decision-making process.

Often I spend time emailing or talking with diverse descendants of the historic town site, and I am always thrilled by the family stories and treasures they share. However, because my job is multifaceted, each day is different. I work with attorneys, fund raisers and foundations that are helping to acquire Cahawba—a thousand acre site—one half-acre at a time. I also consult with architects, engineers, and exhibit designers to plan a visitor center, exhibits, brochures, and trails. I travel throughout the state giving presentations on the importance of archaeology at Old Cahawba, and I write popular articles about the site. I spend some days with other archaeologists, but just as often I am with botanical explorers, storytellers, travel writers, canoeists, genealogists, politicians, radio show hosts, or ghost hunters.

Occasionally, I still get to do some digging, but you are just as likely to find me kayaking down the river that encircles the park or photographing rare plants in the nearby tall grass prairie with Nature Conservancy staff. These adventures with naturalists are fun, but the interchange of ideas is also a productive strategy. For example, The Nature Conservancy of Alabama, motivated in part by the buried human stories beneath the seemingly natural landscape at Cahawba, recently spent five million dollars to acquire 3,000 acres of land abutting the boundary of the archaeological park. This land is now part of Alabama's Forever Wild program and will preserve outlying archaeological sites, provide a much needed buffer against development for the archaeological park, and will eventually provide a meaningful context for site visitors as restoration of the historic prairie begins.

I seldom experience a dull moment at Old Cahawba. I am happiest when I can give site tours, because that was how I was first introduced to archaeology. Actually, I wanted to be an archaeologist even before I knew what archaeology was. Growing up in central Illinois in the 1950s, my world was somewhat limited and provincial, so I craved the exotic places and cultures I experienced "out west" on my family's

annual camping vacations. Also, my parents, older than most, entertained me with stories about the exotic nature of forgotten technologies of days gone by. This probably preconditioned me for an interest in anthropology and historical archaeology. As a six-year-old, after a particularly inspiring guided tour of cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, I decided that I was going to be a park ranger when I grew up—but only because I didn't understand that archaeology was a real career choice. My brother helped me write the park service to find out how I could become a park ranger. I actually received an answer, but the letter discouraged me because I was a girl!



Linda Aug 2010. Photo courtesy of Alabama Historical Commission.

Then, years later as a junior in high school, when I was presented with the first form that asked me to declare a major for college, I noticed the check box for “Anthropology/Archaeology” at the top of the alphabetical list and remembered my thwarted ambitions. Ironically, an hour later, in chemistry class, the teacher distributed a National Science Foundation pamphlet on summer opportunities in science for high school students. I scanned the list of math camps and laboratory workshops and thought “Who in the world would want to be inside all summer long?” Then I noticed the two archaeology field schools and I thought “this must be a sign,” so I applied for both. I experienced *déjà vu* when the first reply was a rejection explaining that I was qualified, but that they could only afford one porta-john on site, so regrettably they “had” to accept only male applicants.

Fortunately, the field school based at California University of Pennsylvania accepted me with a full scholarship, and one of the four archaeologists in charge was a female professor. Furthermore, the selected students were intentionally diverse, as was my first real experience with archaeology. We even spent half our time on a historical archaeology site and learned the value of documentary research. Perhaps fate was at work, since this was 1971 and few, if any, universities offered programs in historical archaeology. But one of our instructors, my first archaeological mentor, was Dr. Ronald L. Michael, the long-time editor of the journal *Historical Archaeology*. He not only introduced us to historical archaeology, but occasionally, he took us on tours of parks and museums where archaeology was presented to the public. At the end of that summer, I knew my life course, and Dr. Michael helped me select a good university in my home state so I could continue in archaeology.

I entered Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in 1972 when it was a leader in the “New Archaeology” movement. Cultural resource management and the related idea of public archaeology were new concepts. Walter W. Taylor (author of the classic 1948 *A Study of Archaeology*) was retiring, so a veritable parade of the leading “New Archaeologists” appeared on campus to honor him. Longacre, Hill, Schiffer, Plog, Binford, and others spoke. I was inspired, but looking back, I realize that my real mentor from that time was Dr. Jon Muller. He encouraged me in my desire to study my own cultural roots, and stressed the value of learning the history of archaeology. Years later, this knowledge

freed me to see “New Archaeology” as just one of the many shifting paradigms through which our field would travel. Now when I meet new graduates that are overly dogmatic about a current approach to archaeology, I wish I could gift them with this long-term perspective.

In graduate school and in my first full-time jobs in the profession, I encountered other great mentors, including Dr. Jim Deetz, several of his talented graduate students, and many of the archaeologists in the Williamsburg, Virginia area. The Deetz group taught me to cross disciplinary boundaries and to value “folk” and the art of storytelling. The Williamsburg archaeologists, exceptionally talented in the craft of excavation, taught me the absolute importance of context. For both groups, archaeology was practiced in a very public way, never trapped in academia nor obscured by overly technical lingo.

Looking back, I can see how these and other mentors set me on a path toward my current career. So, my advice to anyone thinking of pursuing a similar career in archaeology: find exceptional people who are doing the job you want, and work with them. A formal graduate-level education is a prerequisite, but when you are job seeking, nothing beats a resume with good work experience. I worked my way through school, and was fortunate, even as an undergraduate, to have four years of work-study jobs in archaeology. Then, between undergraduate school and graduate school, I took an internship with the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office, where I helped create special public events for state-owned archaeological sites and learned how to do architectural survey. Understanding how other specialists in cultural

↳ DERRY, continued on page 23

Continue reading here

the fieldwork on our Tribal land, and oversees our larger projects to ensure that they are accomplished to our Tribal standards. Our NAGPRA and Repatriation Officer brings home our honored dead and reburies them according to their original wishes. The Historic Sites Keeper monitors and maintains historic and archaeological sites on our Tribal land. We have an Assistant who helps where help is most needed. And finally there is me. I administrate and supervise, and I get to do a little bit of everything.

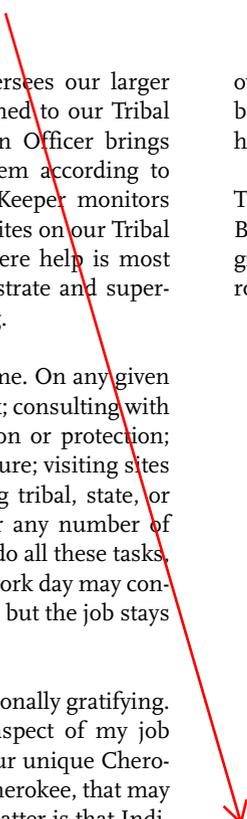
There is no such thing as a typical day for me. On any given day, I may be doing archaeological fieldwork; consulting with some federal agency about site investigation or protection; teaching a class on Cherokee history or culture; visiting sites of ongoing Cherokee archaeology; lobbying tribal, state, or federal politicians; paying the light bill; or any number of other tasks. Some days, I end up having to do all these tasks, one after the other. I rarely know what my work day may consist of, or where it may require me to travel, but the job stays interesting and rewarding.

The job may not pay a lot, but it is truly personally gratifying. As a Cherokee, I feel that almost every aspect of my job allows me to preserve some vital piece of our unique Cherokee identity. For those of you who are not Cherokee, that may not make much sense, but the fact of the matter is that Indian tribes have had to fight, struggle, and sacrifice to remain in existence. If we lose those things that make us uniquely Cherokee, then we betray all that our ancestors suffered to give to us. I would be ashamed not to contribute to their long battle to remain Cherokee. Our unique identity is the gift the Creator gave to us and it would be very rude not to carry it forward.

My most rewarding experience to date has been my association with the Ravensford Project. As I began this job, the EBCI and the NPS were beginning what would become a long and bitter negotiation over land that had been promised to the tribe in 1940, and was now needed for construction of a new dynamic three-school campus for our Tribal children. The details of this negotiation and resultant land exchange are too involved to detail here, but in the end, the EBCI succeeded in obtaining the land known as the Ravensford Tract. Archaeological sites had been identified on the property and federal law would require the Tribe to mitigate damages to those resources before school construction could start. The THPO, in consultation with the NC SHPO and National Park Service, developed an archaeological scope-of-work to the highest standards. We included research questions that specifically targeted Cherokee Tribal interests. Finally, the Tribe paid for the totality of the fieldwork at a project price of

over seven million dollars. The Ravensford project has become the largest archaeological project in North Carolina history, and it has truly been a Cherokee project.

The icing on the cake...I got to become good friends with Bennie Keel of the National Park Service, the very archaeologist whose book on Cherokee archaeology put me on the road to where I am today. Sweet, sweet, serendipity.



DERRY, from page 20 ↩

resource management operate was a valuable lesson that helped me land other positions, including jobs in three more state preservation offices. These public sector jobs taught me that archaeology is very dependent on public support, and yet we archaeologists are generally unprepared, upon graduation, to deal with the public.

So never stop learning. The most valuable training I received came to me after I began my current job. Frustrated by how little I knew about communicating effectively with the public, despite having been involved in "public archaeology" for decades, I enrolled in certification programs offered by the National Association for Interpretation (NAI). NAI is the main professional organization for park interpreters, but also they are willing to teach boring archaeologists how to emotionally and intellectually connect various audiences with cultural resources. I believe that all archaeologists in whatever area they practice would benefit from learning how to communicate interpretively. I suppose I knew this intuitively when I was six, after that park ranger at Mesa Verde, undoubtedly an interpretive ranger, captured my imagination and set me on my archaeological path. It only took me 50 years to fully understand.