MY CAREER AS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

OR, “I NEVER KNEW I WANTED TO BE AN ARCHAEOLOGIST WHEN I GREW UP”

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I don’t recall ever thinking “I want to be an archaeologist when I grow up,” although, throughout my 30 some odd years as an archaeologist, I have been amazed by the number of people (neighbors, friends, relatives, strangers) who have apparently had that dream at some point in their lifetime. Well, maybe I am the sucker for becoming one, but truth be told, I can’t imagine any other career.

I guess I decided to become an archaeologist in 1975 while a student at Indiana University Southeast taking all the anthropology classes offered by the Indiana University regional campus at New Albany (my home town). But I would have to credit my grandfather’s interest in history and the buckets of stone artifacts family members collected from their Ohio Valley farm fields that inspired in me an early interest in American Indian history. Making A’s in my anthropology classes also may have influenced my decision to major in anthropology, as did the opportunities for me to work outdoors, camp, and do photography.

To complete my degree, I moved to the main IU campus at Bloomington. There I had the opportunity to work at the Glenn A. Black Laboratory of Archaeology (GBL) on a variety of surveys and excavations. My first assignment was making boxes, but eventually I moved on to cataloguing collections, mostly Archaic period sites, and I guess that is how I became enamored with rocks instead of pots. What I learned as an anthropology major at IU was that archaeology was about people and the things they left behind. I also had the invaluable opportunity to get hands-on experience working in a research laboratory. Opportunities like these help you find out early if you like doing research and identify your research interests.

My previous experience at the GBL helped me land my first post-graduation position in archaeology as a field assistant at the Center for American Archaeology (CAA), a research field center then affiliated with Northwestern University, based in a small river town in west-central Illinois. While working at the CAA for the next two years or so on the Napoleon Hollow site crew, I had the good fortune again to be immersed in a strong research environment. This experience would play an important role in developing my career and my decision to apply to graduate school at SUNY Binghamton. My early research experiences and mentoring provided opportunities for me to explore many facets of archaeology and to gain a sense of intellectual independence. I entered graduate school after being out in the archaeology working world for three years. Under George Odell’s mentorship at the CAA, I was able to continue to hone my skills as a lithic analyst, thus one of my graduate school goals was to become trained as a microwear analyst. Also, my previous undergraduate schooling and time at the CAA imprinted on me the importance of getting a good grounding in anthropological theory.

SUNY Binghamton proved to be a good choice on both accounts. Several years (more than I want to count) and two degrees later, I had accomplished my goals. I attended Binghamton when the processual/post-processual debate was heating up and the Radical Archaeological Theory Symposium (RATS) was just getting organized. Needless to say, I was privy to a lot of theoretical discussion and rabble-rousing. Visiting Scholar Helle Juel Jensen, a Danish archaeologist who specialized in microwear, and her microscope, also were in residence. Under Helle’s mentorship, I was able to pursue training in microwear, which I applied to both my masters and doctoral research.

It was an easy transition from the CAA environment to graduate school at Binghamton, since most faculty had research laboratories with state-of-the-art equipment, not unlike the many different laboratories at the CAA. Under the mentorship of Vin Stepontaitis and Susan Pollock, in whose laboratories I spent a great deal of time, I was given many opportunities to explore new cutting-edge methods and techniques in archaeological research. Working with Susan, I had the
opportunity to do fieldwork in Iraq between 1987 and 1990. During this time, I gained experience working on multina-
tional teams at two important Mesopotamian sites. This opportunity led to my dissertation research that explored questions of economic and political control in early state societies through a detailed study of chipped stone indus-
tries and their relationships to agricultural technology. It also allowed me to broaden my experiences as a field archaeolo-
gist and expedition photographer, and to live and work in a culture other than my own. Never upon entering graduate school did I think I would work in the Near East, but this experience was one of the most rewarding in my profession-
al career.

Another graduate school bonus was the Public Archaeology Facility (PAF), a long-established office in the SUNY-Bing-
hamton Anthropology Department that provides first-rate public and community archaeology services. At PAF, I learned how to dig a shovel test pit, how to be a successful crew chief, how to write a Phase I Survey report, and what a successful research-oriented public archaeology program looks like. Having a facility like the PAF is a real asset for stu-
dents. It is a place where you can get lots of applied experi-
ence that will serve you well. It also gives you opportunities to build valuable and lasting relationships with your gradu-
ate school comrades, and keep food on the table during those unfunded semesters.

I have had the good fortune to have been given lots of room to grow intellectually and independently, both in my formal and informal schooling. My formal training taught me the nuts and bolts of archaeological research from a problem-ori-
tented and theoretically informed approach. These are neces-
sary tools for writing successful research proposals, or implementing them, whether one practices in a predomi-
nantly research or applied context. In my current position as the General Contracts Program Director at the University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist, I am in an environ-
ment that is supportive of service and research. Since I have been in my current position, I have taken advantage of opportunities to attend workshops and training sessions on successful proposal writing offered through the University of Iowa. My first year at Iowa, with support from an internal research funding initiative, I purchased a state-of-the-art optical microscope. I am now in a position to continue with microwear studies, and to train other interested students and staff.

My previous work and schooling experiences have instilled in me the value of team work, collegiality, and the impor-
tance of being flexible and adaptable. Working in the busi-
ness of historic preservation, no two days are ever alike, and you never know from one day to the next what situations will arise. While it can sometimes be hard to work as a team when our professional jobs tend to compartmentalize us in institutional culture (whether practical or not), flow charts, and the dreaded cubicle, I believe team work is an important and fundamental component of successful research and job satisfaction; and, it is an important way to oppose the com-
partmentalization and estrangement that comes with soli-
tary work. So, whether I am attending meetings with con-
tractors, consultants, staff, or construction workers (often all of the above in the same room or on the same phone line), I try to stay focused on the common goal, be it a successfully concluded research project, journal article, grant proposal, or new sewer line. For me, archaeology is archaeology, wherev-
er or in whatever context you practice it; your training pro-
vides you with tools and perspective; how and where you apply what you learn is up to you.

My day-to-day work also involves a large measure of man-
agement and administrative duties, skills I have had to

acquire “on-the-job.” Never in my schooling or training did I take a formal course in management, administration, or business. In my current position, I take advantage of career development courses in effective management offered at the University of Iowa. I remember being asked in the interview for my current position, “What is your management style?” I was stumped, which was odd, given that most of my professional life has been in the domain of cultural resource management as a planner, manager, or principal investigator. Team work, flexibility, and hiring good people and letting them do what they are good at, while staying out of their way as much as possible, are strategies I try to apply, having learned them along the way from my mentors, teachers, and colleagues. Everyday I manage multiple projects, moving them through administrative channels within university, government, and private-sector entities. Seeing a project from start to finish can be very rewarding, particularly ones that have positive outcomes for the public, profession, and preservation. Needless to say, this requires enormous amounts of time and energy.

Finding a balance in managing all the demands on your time, dealing with issues small and large, while having time and energy to sustain creative work, is one of the biggest challenges in my current position. One of the conundrums of doing archaeology today is the need for funding, which is largely from external sponsors. This is that you are always juggling too many projects, or so it feels. Striking a balance between program sustainability and research viability is a constant challenge. But the motivation comes from the day-to-day rewards: sparking an interest in a student; seeing large and complex projects successfully completed; and, providing support for my staff to pursue their interests, take on new responsibilities, and grow.

Writing this essay has provided me a rare opportunity to indulge in a bit of introspection, a luxury in a fast-paced digital age. I am grateful to the Public Education Committee, Careers in Archaeology Subcommittee for this experience. One bit of insight I have gleaned is that I seem to feel most at home, professionally, in research laboratory settings. These are places I have gravitated to over and over again. I suppose this is due to the opportunities I had early in my career at the GBL, CAA, and PAF.

I have always had my feet planted in both the academic and applied worlds. In my current position as Director of the General Contracts Program at the University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist, I am part of a well-established research center. I have opportunities to teach, do research and public outreach, and direct a viable applied program.

My prior work experiences in applied archaeology in the historic preservation sector, as well as my ongoing research interests, made me a good fit with the OSA. I brought to the position several years of doing archaeology and managing applied programs in a variety of settings. I also had spent one year as a regulatory archaeology reviewer for the Indiana SHPO, where I learned a great deal about the process of historic preservation and started a public archaeology research program at an historic mill in southern Indiana. The well-equipped laboratory and professional atmosphere at the OSA were a good fit for me.

So while it has been a long road, it feels like I may have found my niche. No easy thing to do these days. My advice to anyone interested in a similar career in archaeology would be to keep doing what you like, to the best of your ability, with the resources you are given. Get a good education, and then get out there and get as much on the job experience as you can. Experience will help you figure out what you like to do and what you are good at doing. Keep learning, persevere, and stay positive, no matter what is thrown at you out there in the working world. You, too, will find your niche. And as I was once reminded by one of my doctoral committee members, remember to have fun along the way!

Excavating at Spring Mill State Park, Summer 2010. Photo courtesy of April Sievert.