Alabama Archaeological Society

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STONES & BONES NEWSLETTER

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MEMBER OF THE EASTERN STATES ARCHEOLOGICAL FEDERATION

Volume 26 Number 2

LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED

Somewhere off the coast of Georgia on St. Catherine's Island, among the magnolias and oaks hung with Spanish moss, missionaries founded a settlement half a century before the pilgrims arrived. When archaeologists assembled there in 1980 to look for the site, no trace of the Spanish settlement remained. Historical records helped narrow the search, but the conventional methods for finding an ancient site - searching for potsherds or a telltale bulge of ground that might indicate a remnant of a wall - turned up no further clues. Because the island was so vast - about the size of Manhattan - sample trenches and test digs were considered hopeless. "It was just a swampy, godforsaken scrub forest", says one archaeologist. "It didn't look as though a human had ever been there."

Determined if not desperate, expedition leader David Hurst Thomas of New York's Museum of Natural History called in Ervan Garrison, a researcher and lecturer in civil engineering at Texas A&M and one of about a dozen United States experts in remote-sensing technology. These specialists probe the earth with rare and delicate equipment, searching for indications of ancient human activity. To prepare the site, Garrison mapped the terrain using a plastic tape measure stretched out between a grid coordinate system of stakes. He then crisscrossed the forest with a magnetometer, a cylindrical device about the size of a coffee can that scans for magnetic anomalies in the subsurface terrain and graphs them with the aid of a microprocessor. In less than two weeks Garrison had located the settlement's barrel-like well, an outbuilding, and the ancient daub-walled church itself.

Just as X-rays help doctors read beneath the body's surface, remote sensing assists archaeologists in determining what lies underneath a given terrain. Most archaeological sites are hidden six inches to five feet under the surface. The traditional method for turning them up - digging exploratory trenches - is a hit-or-miss process that can waste much time, labor and money. With remote sensing, archaeologists can speed up the process and even find objects they never would have discovered otherwise.

For all their potential, the devices are used in only about 10 percent of the digs in the United States and slightly more in Europe. It is typical that Thomas, for example, had never used remote sensing before the dig at St. Catherine's and is uncertain when he will use it again.

Thomas, among others, nevertheless recognizes that the technological advances in remote sensing are tempting. "Archaeology is about the only science that destroys its own data", he explains. "So the less archaeology we do, the better". During excavation, material that might prove useful in dating the artifacts is displaced when the historical remains are removed. Remote sensing, on the other hand, allows archaeologists to dig more selectively. "If you'd dug a site a few decades ago", Thomas continues, "you wouldn't have thought to save the charcoal, but that's what we need now for carbon dating. Recently plant remains have assumed a new importance, next year it may be something else. It's to the point where we're almost afraid to throw out the dirt".

Archaeologists are convinced they will still need to dig - if only to get their hands on the artifacts themselves and see the handiwork of ancient peoples close up. "That's just something about human nature", concludes Garrison. "We feel the need to touch, to make physical contact with the past."

(From an article by John Sedgwick in Technology Illustrated; August 23, 1983)

The Editors

LAST DITCH ARCHAEOLOGY

In 1867, when the first wave of settlers rode into Arizona's desolate Salt River Valley, they stared incredulously at what they found. For miles around stretched the crumbling ruins of an ancient civilization.

Millions of pieces of broken pottery littered the ground. Bone tools, carved effigies, flint knives, grinding stones for grain, and much more lay all about. As the settlers explored farther, they discovered a vast network of irrigation canals, some of them more than 30 feet wide and seven feet deep. In all, more than a thousand miles of canals crisscrossed an area of some 10,000 square miles. Between the canals, now cut off from the river and partly filled with sand and dust, stood the eroding earthen walls of at least 22 abandoned cities. One city stretched for a mile and included at least 25 compounds of buildings.

Since those frontier days, Arizona has sustained one of the nation's fastest population growth rates, and where that ancient civilization crumbled now sprawls the city and suburbs of Phoenix, named, in view of its site, for the mythical bird that rose from its own ashes. More than a million people live there now - 350,000 more than a decade ago - and most of them take great civic pride in the technological wonders that have allowed them to thrive in one of the world's more forbidding deserts.

Not exactly forgotten, but largely covered by the shopping centers and houses, are the remains of the mysterious people who conquered that same desert some 2,000 years earlier. They are called the Hohokam, which is a modern Pima Indian word for "all used up". Before their culture vanished about 600 years ago, the Hohokam had become one of the greatest civilizations in North America, on a par with other great Southwestern peoples such as the Anasazi and the Pueblo. Largely because the growth of Phoenix obscured so much of the Hohokam remains, these ancient people are one of the least known of America's vanished cultures. The evidence that is still intact constitutes one of the largest archaeological treasures remaining in the United States.

Phoenix is not the only urban battleground for developers and archaeologists. Several major cities from Honolulu to San Diego to Kansas City to New York lie atop the remains of ancient settlements. Now that federal and, in some cases, local laws require many developers to pay the costs of archaeological salvage, bitter resentment has grown up between rival camps. When delays and the added costs of archaeological salvage affect highway construction or housing development, consumers grow exasperated as well. Though many cities face the problem to some degree, nowhere are the ancient remains believed to be richer than in Phoenix.

The Hohokam also turned their ingenuity to the arts, inventing the process of acid etching to create designs in jewelry 500 years before it appeared in Europe. Many of the Hohokam objects display a range of styles from the strictly geometric to the playfully lifelike, with images of creeping lizards, masked dancers, and other forms. Some of the better Hohokam pots, much to the dismay of professional archaeologists, command prices as high as $40,000 among underground art dealers.

Perhaps the most unusual Hohokam art objects are the acid-etched shells. They are of a species from the Gulf of Mexico, suggesting that the Hohokam traded with tribes a thousand miles to the east. Artists marked their designs on the shells and then covered certain portions with tar or pitch. The shell was then soaked in acetic acid made from fermented cactus juice. The acid etched away areas not protected by the tar, leaving the design in relief. Evidence for the method came from discovery of a shell prepared with tar but never etched.

Long after most archaeologists had written off any chance of finding substantial Hohokam remains in and around the city, Fred Plog, then an anthropology professor at Arizona State University, disagreed. "For one thing", he says, "the local pot hunters didn't buy it. They were too busy taking out tons of really valuable material to listen to the experts". Plog's years of salvage excavations with his students convinced him that Phoenix was still a treasure chest for archaeology.

Confirmation of Plog's opinion came in 1979. Large-scale archaeological testing - legally required for a mid-city freeway - revealed that vast amounts of Hohokam artifacts survived just beneath the surface. Donald Weaver, chief archaeologist at the Museum of Northern Arizona and one of the test leaders, was amazed. "If this had been any other city in the country, where houses have big basements and foundations", Weaver says, "the sites would have been completely destroyed". The implications of these recent findings have become one of the most controversial issues to face the citizens of Phoenix. So far the impact has hit mainly the developers of new highways and housing tracts. Gene Spencer, a typical Phoenix home builder, has had to lay off dozens of men for weeks at a time and has paid many thousands of dollars to keep other workers idle while archaeologists investigate his lots where a workman has turned up a pot. Bitter about the intrusions, Spencer hints it won't happen again. "Now", he says, "I simply wouldn't tolerate anyone discovering anything on my job. I make it a point that my men understand that if they hit anything that looks like an archaeological find, the first thing they should do is plow it under, and the second thing they should do is call me and I'd do everything in my power to destroy it".

Some government officials think developers like Spencer have legitimate gripes. The cost of archaeological salvage programs has skyrocketed in the past few years. In 1979 contract archaeologists charged up to $1,500 per cubic yard for excavations. But now, according to Thomas King, senior archaeologist for the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, some archaeologists are charging as much as $3,500 per cubic yard. At those prices, the estimated Hohokam resource in the path of a planned Phoenix freeway would cost more than $2 billion to salvage. Clearly, not every site can be salvaged.

Archaeologists sometimes claim that study of past cultures can shed light on modern problems. It usually holds only in the most general sense of perspective. Yet if it is true that one of the keys to Hohokam success in the Sonoran Desert - the irrigation canals - also led to their downfall, the ancient lesson becomes far more practical. Irrigation is a way of life in the Southwest today. The development that threatens Hohokam sites may destroy the very evidence that warns against further development, against too shortsighted an exploitation of the desert ecosystem.

(From an article by Daniel B. Adams in SCIENCE, December 1983)

The Editors

THE PROFESSIONALISM OF AMATEURS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

According to Robert Stebbins, a University of Calgary sociologist who has pioneered the study of "serious leisure", avocational practitioners - amateurs - currently play a role in four major areas of modern professional endeavor: art, science, sports, and entertainment. Among the

natural and social sciences, Stebbins identified some 15 specific fields with an active amateur contingent, including ornithology, astronomy, mineralogy, entomology, and archaeology. Although the "amateurs vary much more than their professional counterparts in their level of knowledge and their degree of willingness and ability to contribute original data to the discipline(s)" in which they are involved, Stebbins found that amateurs in every field share with the professionals a general sense of purpose and commitment to their work.

What is the role of the modern amateur archaeologist within the discipline, a discipline that has been defined largely by its professional practitioners? To begin to answer this question, we conducted a survey of amateur members of the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology, one of the oldest, largest and most respected organizations of its kind in the nation.

This formal survey of the entire range of amateur archaeologists' viewpoints and activities was the first ever undertaken by a member of the professional archaeology community. Computerization of the questionnaire responses and analyses of the data were completed in late 1982 at the University of Rhode Island. A great deal of fresh information on many facets of amateur archaeology is now available as a result of this project - including the factors that attract amateurs to archaeology, the "professionalism" of the amateur's attitudes, and the amateur's opinion of professionals - all issues of importance to both full-time and leisure-time practitioners.

What motivates people to get involved in archaeology? Amateurs responding to the questionnaire were asked to rank their reasons for engaging in archaeology as a hobby. Most, not surprisingly, were clearly drawn by their curiosity about the human past. Nearly 97 percent ranked "knowledge", and some two-thirds of them gave it as the primary reason for their interest. The simple desire to engage in some pleasant outdoor activity appealed to the 86 percent who ranked "recreation" as an attraction. Others apparently were hoping to satisfy a passion for collecting: one-fifth of the sample considered an "artifact collection" a very important motive. Few came into archaeology because of "economic" considerations.

The topic of amateurs is one on which professional archaeologists express wide-ranging opinions, from enthusiastic acceptance and high regard for individual efforts, to a general dismissal of amateurs as "pothunters". Most of the discussion really concerns the extent to which amateurs can or already have contributed to the discipline as it has been defined by its full-time practitioners. In our case, the question was "How 'professional' is the amateur archaeologist"? In the 1980s amateurs are more numerous and active than ever before, and to that extent they are either a latent threat or a potential boon to the interests of the profession. The debate about whether or not the amateur can be integrated into a program of legitimate research often centers around the question of whether the amateur is adequately "professional" in attitude and action.

While most amateurs considered their artifact collections only a secondary incentive for their participation in archaeology, the fact is that 94 percent of the amateurs surveyed are, or have been, active collectors and nearly all of them still retain a personal collection. These assemblages commonly include a large number of projectile points and other stone tools, frequently some ceramics, and occasionally a few artifacts of bone or other organic materials from prehistoric sites. Several factors suggest that extant collections, including those gathered by amateurs, may become increasingly important resources for future archaeologists. The rapid disappearance of sites and the escalating cost of excavation are only two incentives for more collection-oriented research, with an emphasis on squeezing every bit of data from existing assemblages. In this light, it is useful to consider the nature and research potential of the amateur's collection.

Now that we have taken a critical look at the amateur, what are the perceptions that amateurs hold about the archaeological profession? To find out, we asked them to suggest one or two ways in which professional archaeologists differ from amateurs. There were 191 responses to this open-ended question, two-thirds of which could be interpreted in a positive light. Amateurs usually saw professionals as skilled scientists who get paid for their work and who have access to fine support facilities, equipment and personnel to carry out their research. We would like to believe that this gratifying portrait of ourselves is fairly close to reality. But this admiring view was not universal; nearly a third of the answers cited negative differences and these and other comments gleaned from the questionnaire illustrate some of the most common grievances of amateurs.

Our survey indicates problems of inadequate communication, lack of involvement and suspicion, despite some measure of continuing mutual cooperation. These difficulties are not unique to archaeology or even wholly unavoidable. Trained specialists in many fields tend to regard amateur enthusiasts as less than equals. It is not altogether surprising that some amateurs who have attempted to open lines of communication with professionals have met with a lack of interest or even some discourtesy at the other end. Professionals often were described as "haughty" or "overbearing". As one person put it, "Amateurs feel talked-down to and therefore hesitate even to go to the professional.... The professional should open all doors of communication and assistance to anyone in his area - individual or group". Failure to do so has sent some amateurs a message clearly expressed in these words: "Professionals do not trust amateurs".

For many amateurs, the most common forum for communication with the profession is through publications. On this score we heard loud complaints. One person characterized most archaeologist-authors as "pedantic, verbose, and in need of a good course in technical writing". Another singled out our "preoccupation with quantification and the use of technical jargon and verbosity to present archaeology as a true science".

On another level, serious amateurs expressed frustration at being excluded from current archaeological research. One factor seems to be that professionals not only are engaged in more sophisticated research often involving highly technical approaches, but they also often prefer to draw their assistants from a reservoir of students - mostly potential professionals - whose compatible schedules, eagerness to receive academic credit, and tuition payments may enhance the smooth operation of the project. Still, these are weak excuses for some amateurs, such as the individual who regretted reporting a site to an archaeologist because he was neither notified nor even permitted to observe as it was excavated.

Amateurs may find themselves isolated not only from the research but also from the results when reports are made available primarily to other professionals or exclusively to funding agencies - or, worse, never completed at all. One amateur reminded us that "the professional who does not publish his data in some form is no better than the pothunter because he has destroyed evidence for his own personal gains, whatever they may be". Interested amateurs often are kept relatively ignorant of modern developments even in their local areas, and they clearly resent it.

But amateur archaeologists are not a dying breed. They will not vanish, nor will they successfully be legislated out of existence. They are numerous and they are active. And the formal discipline of archaeology needs to involve itself with that significant percentage of amateurs who are anxious to maintain the tradition of mutual cooperation begun so long ago. If professionals are going to cultivate the serious amateurs as allies, and not lose them as adversaries, the reasonable approach is to encourage their interest while guiding their enthusiasm.

Some good advice is contained in the words of one amateur who returned the questionnaire: "Pay more attention to amateurs and their sites and findings. Teach them more about the entire science. Organize amateurs into a wide-ranging search force for recording new sites, for recruiting collectors who have little interest in science, and for reporting on potential destruction of sites. And recognize them in public for their efforts. "Teach them, lead them".

(From an article by William A. Turnbaugh, Christian L. Vandebroek and Janet S. Jones in ARCHAEOLOGY, November/December 1983)

NOTE: This is a lengthy article, and we recommend reading it in full.

The Editors

CHAPTER NEWS

Birmingham Chapter

David Chase, Auburn University/Montgomery, will speak on "Developing Methods for Studying Alabama Prehistory" at the February 9 meeting.

The Birmingham Chapter meets the second Thursday of each month at the Red Mountain Museum Auditorium at 7:30 p.m.

Huntsville Chapter

Chapter member Houston Wright presented the January program, a discussion on the climatological influences on early man. The Huntsville Chapter meets the third Tuesday of each month at 7:00 in the Arts Council Conference Room, Von Braun Civic Center.

Muscle Shoals Chapter

The Muscle Shoals Chapter held its January meeting on the 9th at the Indian Mound Museum in Florence. Fourteen members and guests attended. Mary-Eliza and Charles Moore gave a slide narration on their trip to the Four Corners Area in the fall of 1983. The slides showed the Aztec ruins, Petroglyph State Park in New Mexico and the Lubbock Site in Texas. The next program will be on point identification on February 13 at 7:15 at the Indian Mound Museum.

Tuscaloosa Chapter

The Tuscaloosa Chapter held its January meeting on Sunday, January 8: a group field outing. The next meeting will be held at the town library on February 6 at 7 p.m. and will be a review of what was found at the January meeting.

REACTIVATION OF MORGAN COUNTY CHAPTER

John and Elizabeth Eisenbarth of Decatur are working with two other couples hoping to reactivate the Morgan County Chapter of the Alabama Archaeological Society. Any state Society members in that area who would like to support them in this effort and/or could attend monthly meetings, please call them at 355-8198 or write to P. O. Box 183; Decatur, Alabama 35602.

BOOK REVIEW

THE MIDDLE CUMBERLAND CULTURE, THE GANIER SITE - by John B. Broster. Reprint of Publications in Anthropology, Vanderbilt University. This reprint by Mini-Histories, 5311 Indiana Avenue; Nashville, Tennessee 37109, 1983, is available for $1.75, including postage. The publisher is Buddy Brehm.

The Ganier site is located in west Nashville on the banks of the Cumberland River. The site, being threatened by urban development, was excavated in 1966 and 1967. Several stone box burials were encountered, and dwellings and shell pits were excavated. A small scattering of evidence of Late Archaic, Late and Middle Woodland was found, with the preponderance of the occupation being middle-late Mississippian. Buddy Brehm is reprinting a series of reports of sites in the Nashville area that have now been destroyed - mostly due to urban development.

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