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DIGGING UP AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

by

Gordon C. De Angelo

The title of this paper, taken literally, poses a number of amusing questions. For example, what association of artifacts might serve to identify the earthly remains of an archaeologist?

This question was given considerable study by an informal group of amateur and professional archaeologists several months ago, while they were engaged in decimating a bottle of the writer's best scotch.

It was decided that if one were to excavate adjacent to the right femur, slightly below the greater trochanter, one would uncover two coins: a nickle and a dime. The dime would exhibit deformation of the rim, indicating its use for lifting thumbtacks from plane table boards, making field adjustments to surveying equipment, and tightening the pivot screws of brush cutters.

For this is the adaptability of the archaeologist!

Unfortunately, the nickle would represent the departed's life savings— for thus is the nature of the profession!

In view of the present state of the art we must begin with one basic fact. The experienced field archaeologist with a complete, well-rounded background in historical archaeology is indeed, as Stanley South has termed him, a "rare commodity."

The organization seeking such a professional is faced with three possible alternatives:

1. To seek out one of the few individuals in the United States with extensive experience;
2. To locate an individual with less experience, but one who has worked within the particular historic period or on the same type of site involved in the project;
3. To hire an individual with the proper educational background, but with limited field experience.

Regardless of the obvious pitfalls inherent in the latter alternative, there are certain advantages to an organization possessing reliable volunteer help, in learning *with* their archaeologist.

In all of the above alternatives the most important procedure is the personal interview. It is only through this individual contact that the sponsoring agency can gain some assurance that they have made the best choice.

While it would be unreasonable to expect any one person to exhibit *all* of the characteristics and abilities in the following discussion, we hope it may serve as a guide for the prospective employer.

1. *The ability to get along with people.* The archaeologist will not be kept in a cage. He will constantly be dealing with the public, the sponsors, the field crew, and often a large number of local "experts." A project cannot be brought to a satisfactory conclusion in the presence of tensions caused by personality conflicts.

2. *A logical mind together with good common sense.* The everyday logistics of even a small project contribute significantly to the economy of the operation. This is particularly important if the archaeologist will serve as his own crew chief.

He must be generally familiar with a range of items from the potential output of a 1½ yard frontend loader to the projected lifespan of a Marshalltown trowel.

On site, he will be held responsible for the lack of everything from thumb-tacks to toilet paper— neither of which have fully satisfactory substitutes.

3. *An educational "marriage" of anthropology and history.* The relatively recent trend toward the social interpretation of archaeological data requires a knowledge of more than one discipline. To be truly effective on a historic site, the archaeologist must add to his anthropological education the techniques of historical research. We feel that it is absolutely essential to "dig into" the history before "digging into" the dirt.

4. *The methodology of field excavation.* In order to carry out a project in the most expedient manner, the archaeologist must be familiar with a wide range of field techniques and methods.

He should have a working knowledge of a number of types of surveying instruments in order to choose the proper equipment for the job and train the crew in its use.

He should be familiar with the probable output of his crew and understand the limitations and advantages of mechanical earthmoving equipment.

Although soils vary greatly in appearance from region to region, the archaeologist should be sufficiently expert in soil interpretation to be able to avoid the loss of irretrievable data.

He must be cognizant of the various methods of data recovery, so that he can select the quickest and most accurate approach suited to his purposes. This knowledge consists not only of planimetric and cross sectional drawing, but also the proper use of photographic techniques, including film characteristics and darkroom procedures.

5. *The preservation and interpretation of the site.* The excavation of an archaeological site is only a means to an end. The archaeologist must be able to carry through to the logical conclusion— the published report. This process requires a familiarity with laboratory techniques of artifact preservation as well as field techniques of site stabilization.

He must be able to set up a simple, yet thorough, catalogue for the identifica-

tion of artifacts. As part of this work and the subsequent analysis of the material, he must have a working knowledge of typology, terminology, and statistical methods. We might add at this point "meaningful statistics." We have all been exposed to analyses that had no pertinent meaning to anyone except the individual who compiled them.

During the preparation of the graphic material, the archaeologist must be competent in drafting and artwork to the extent of being able to produce "camera ready" drawings for publication. It is desirable that he have some familiarity with the range of materials and techniques available, in addition to having some knowledge of printing processes.

The archaeologist must be able to write. Recognition of what constitutes scholarship, clarity of style, and an overall sense of "perspective" are a few of the characteristics desirable in the production of an archaeological report.

And finally, to all this we might add a dash of humility, since we tend to forget that our particular site is actually a small "cog" on a single "gear" within a very large "machine" in the process of being constructed under the name of historical archaeology.

The last stage of an archaeological project having historic significance is often interpretation. In many cases this aspect of the project is held in abeyance until the last shovel of dirt is turned, the report is written, and the archaeologist has departed for "greener pastures." Contrary to this practice, we feel that those responsible for any interpretation of the site should work with the archaeologist through a major portion of the excavation. This in turn would require that the archaeologist be familiar with interpretive techniques and develop a suggested approach to the educational potential of the site.

We realize that few historical archaeologists could meet all the requirements outlined above. However, we believe a pattern emerges which can be followed by an organization seeking their own archaeologist. Assuming the formal education background required, we are looking for a personable, adaptable, inventive man who is both manually oriented and scholarly to the point of recognizing his own limitations. Add to this a sense of humor to carry him through the trials and tribulations of "dirt archaeology," and you have the ideal historical archaeologist.

Finally, remember that the man or woman you hire is human! At times he will be subject to personal pressures and will react like any other individual. Do not expect him to function like a highly trained automaton.

The professional historical archaeologist is trained to do a specific job for you. Choose wisely and we are certain he will serve you well.