

Event review: Archaeology day, Anadarko, Oklahoma, USA, Wichita Tribal History Center,
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As part of a two-month research visit supported by my Faculty at the University of Helsinki, I am staying in Norman, Oklahoma, based at the University of Oklahoma's (OU) Department of Anthropology. A key purpose of this visit, in addition to exposing me to a different university setting and providing time to focus on writing, is to see first-hand the range of public archaeology activities on offer across the state. Like several other states, Oklahoma has an Archaeological Survey, (Oklahoma Archaeological Survey – OAS) which is making significant headway in developing public outreach and participation opportunities for a wide variety of visitors. The event I review here was a joint OU Department of Anthropology, OAS, and Wichita and Affiliated Tribes-sponsored event.

Given my enduring interest in how opportunities for public engagement with archaeological heritage come about, I jumped at the opportunity on a Saturday in September to accompany members of the OAS to the small city of Anadarko, to observe an open Archaeology Day (really an afternoon, 1 pm until 5 pm) at the Wichita Tribal History Center (Figure 1). The Wichita Tribal History Center only opened in April 2018, and is a beautiful new museum that tells the story, with both joyful and deeply painful elements, of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes – one of 39 sovereign Tribal nations in Oklahoma. OU and OAS staff explained to me that the event was the first of its kind for them – there had been previous events at the Wichita Tribal Cultural Center that were open only to Tribal members, but this event was open to all, and required no pre-registration.

They also told me that the Wichita Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO), Gary McAdams, was involved at every stage of the workshop's planning and was in regular contact with the OU and OAS about what kinds of activities to offer. The organizers settled on a range of 'show and tell' activities, as well as more active options. These included a table with artefacts from ancestral Wichita archaeological sites for visitors to handle and ask about, flint-knapping demonstrations using local stone (Figure 2), 'dig boxes' where visitors could use trowels to find 3D printed replicas of Wichita artefacts, demonstrations of geophysical equipment, and the ever-popular atlatl throwing, which was a particular hit with children. Facilitators of the different activities included OAS staff, student volunteers from OU, and avocational volunteers from the Oklahoma Anthropological Society – all with impressive knowledge of their specialisms.

From the perspective of the Wichita THPO McAdams, it was important for certain artefacts from ancestral Wichita sites to be present for visitors to view and handle. Sarah Trabert of OU informed me that she had asked his permission before planning any of the activities and, McAdams approved 3D printing artefacts for the 'dig box' activity beforehand. After a rainy start, many worried that the inclement weather would detract visitors from coming, but I was happy to see a steady stream of visitors all day. Even more pleasing was that everybody who visited – Wichita Tribe members from the Anadarko community, other local Native American Tribal members, and white Europeans – seemed very engaged with the activities and exhibits on display.

The youngest visitors were probably no more than five years old, and I am not sure how many people came through in the end, but I counted at least 25. The planners were pleased about this turnout on a Saturday afternoon, especially as every visitor seemed so deeply engaged: asking questions, handling objects, trying out moving and operating the geophysical equipment and throwing atlatls (Figure 3). As I understand it, OU and OAS facilitators talk with the THPO after events such as this, in order to make an evaluation of the day based on their observations and impressions.



Figure 1. The Wichita Tribal History Center, Anadarko, Oklahoma (Photo: S. Thomas).

From my perspective (as a British person now working in the Nordic countries, with past experience of organizing and contributing to museum activity days), there were similarities in the kinds of activities on offer (although in the contexts where I have worked, the artefacts were not Native American, of course). I was happy to hear that there were prior discussions with the THPO about the day, and would have liked to have seen members from the Anadarko community also involved in facilitating some of the activities – for example, talking about the local history. However, this was a first time for this kind of event, and perhaps this kind of collaboration in the event's delivery (that is, beyond visitor participation and becoming informed about archaeology), will develop in the future. In addition, I was told, as there are only two full-time staff working with cultural heritage for the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, that Gary McAdams had specifically asked for OU faculty, staff, and volunteers to assist with the activities since he is so often short-handed.



Figure 2. Presenters from OU and Oklahoma Anthropological Society keep their audience fascinated with a live demonstration and informative description of flint-knapping, at the Wichita Tribal History Center, Anadarko, Oklahoma. (Photo: S. Thomas).

As many writers on the topic have noted, the colonial past has often led to difficult relationships between archaeologists and Native American communities. These are akin to those between archaeologists and other indigenous groups across the globe, and arise from questions over everything from the lenses through which archaeological interpretation takes place, through to control and ownership of archaeological resources (e.g. Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2004; La Salle and Hutchings 2018). Therefore for me, with less first-hand experience of such relationships in North America, it felt very positive to see a relaxed, friendly, and informal event with all parties seemingly engaged and interested. I also found out later that the Wichita THPO as well as the President of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, Terri Parton, were specifically interested in promoting and developing archaeology workshops with a goal of interesting Wichita young people in pursuing studies in Anthropology in order to benefit the tribe. Given the congenial atmosphere at this event and the enthusiasm I saw from all visitors, I fully expect that such collaborative open archaeology days will run again in the future.



Figure 3. A family enjoys trying to hunt down a 'bison' using atlatls, on grounds around the Wichita Tribal History Center, Anadarko, Oklahoma. (Photo: S. Thomas).

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References

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