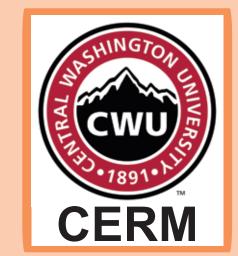
## CONTROLLED CHAOS: ORGANIZING AND WORKING WITH EXTANT ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS



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## ABSTRACT

Excavated more than 50 years ago, the Grissom site (45KT301) has yielded a collection of tens of thousands of artifacts housed in 60 archival boxes. Pieced together across several field seasons by dozens of students, the Grissom collection is riddled with uncertainties. Though many of these were addressed through a rehabilitation of the collection in the mid-2000s and a thesis exploring the history of the investigation, students wishing to complete research on this collection still face a variety of unique challenges, including unclear labels, misfiled artifacts, and compounding transcription errors. Through the work of six students across over 300 hours of lab time, many of these issues were identified, articulated, and addressed. This poster summarizes some of the specific concerns one might face when conducting research on collections such as Grissom and discusses how problems were anticipated and addressed, where errors occurred, and how to better prevent such mistakes in the future. The practices discussed here will be useful to any researcher tackling a collection of a similar scale and history and provide a better understanding of how to make the most of a collection and protect it for future use.

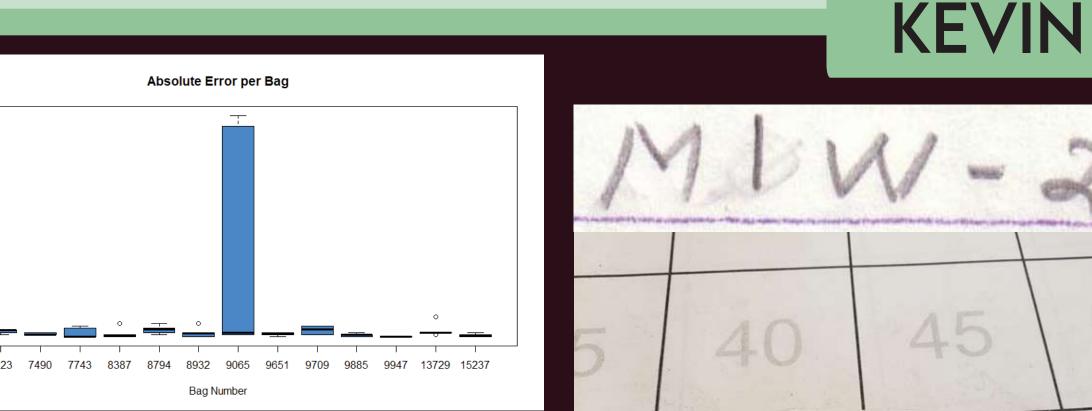
By the time this research started in Winter 2022, I had already spent months preparing the research techniques we would be using. These were scaled up from work I had started as an undergrad, and over the course of the quarter, I quickly had to face my own lack of foresight. When working with an extant collection, especially one with a long history of student work, errors and confusion that arise in the course of research can quickly become compounded and immortalized in the work we leave behind. Quality checks to prevent errors in research and recordkeeping became a massive part of the work we undertook, and much of that chaos could have been alleviated by better planning early on. Lesson learned!

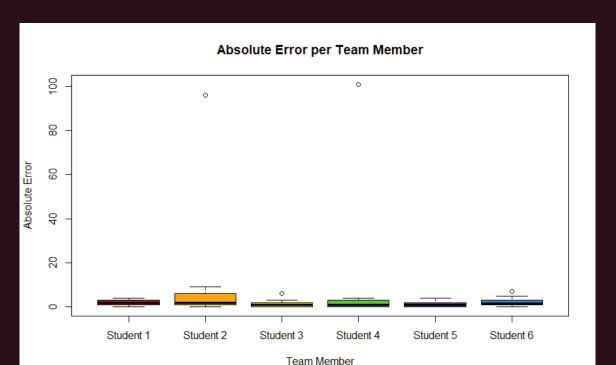
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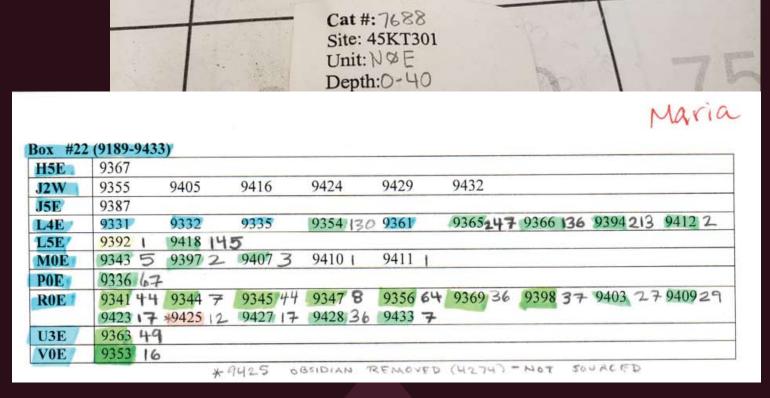
Working hands-on with an inherited archaeological collection is an important opportunity to better understand logistical issues that are not often realized until projects are underway. One lesson learned from working with and supervising others is the importance of standardized work and transparent direction. Despite the workflow structures we established to mitigate variation in our practices, pieces that were very small (1/4 cm or less) were still inconsistently counted. This issue highlights the needs for even more explicit direction when working with multiple personnel. Setting aside extra time at the beginning of a project to not only establish guidelines but to encourage staff to ask questions is an important first step when beginning any kind of project.

MARIA

Over the course of winter quarter, I along with the other three undergraduates helped to sort and organize the Grissom Site collection under the mentorship of two graduate students, Nik and Maria. Working on this project I gained a new appreciation for how large archaeological collections can be. Because of how large these collections can be, I saw how important maintenance on these collections is to the ease of future use. We had to deal with many items in this collection that were either in another location or simply missing with no documentation. Because of this lack of documentation for those items, it is impossible to ever return the collection back to a complete state. This situation makes it harder to get a fuller and more complete story from the material in the collection. When we started, the collection needed lots of work. However, by the end we got the collection into better shape, and it was better organized and labeled.







Participating in the Grissom study during the winter quarter of 2022 was a unique and eyeopening experience. There were over forty boxes, most with three tiers of trays filled within
bags containing artifacts categorized by the excavation unit. Many of the bags were filled with
debitage of various sizes. Having been previously trained in lithic analysis I was curious about
whether other participants would be counting smaller retouch flakes. As we counted it also
became apparent that over the years some materials had been misplaced and mislabeled, which
further increased the organizational difficulty. Given the immensity of the task before us I was
curious about how the study would be organized.

From the beginning we were given the tools needed to order the study and keep track of our counts by artifact type. Utilizing numerical counts, color classification, and processes to deal with missing items and errors we were able to do our work seamlessly. None of that would have been possible if not for the professionalism and organizational foresight of Nik Simurdak and Maria Kovach. Both are CWU graduate students and their leadership on this project was exceptional. Nik and Maria were there to answer questions and provide guidance regarding all of our concerns and were able to provide insight about count criteria. Moving forward in my studies and career I will be able to take the skills and leadership examples learned from Nik and Maria to ensure effective organizational strategies and work ethic in the lab and field.

JEREMY

Working on the Grissom site collection was a unique experience that provided me with an insight on what real archaeology work can consist of. The collection is vast, to say the least, and consists of a plethora of artifacts, ranging from obsidian to dentalium shell beads. While working on the Grissom site, there was definitely a moment of realization for me that this vast collection of artifacts came from somewhere. How every many years ago, someone traded these beads, hand crafted this stone tool, or hunted this animal. Then it was excavated, stored at CWU, and worked on by a number of people until finally I had the chance to work on it. The work that we are doing is so important because it will last for years, and someday down the line, a student just like me will get the chance to work with this collection. The ability to work alongside with graduate students Nik and Maria allowed for a unique learning experience, not just in archaeology but in life lessons as well. I am thankful I was allowed this opportunity to work with the Grissom site.

KILEY

The Grissom site collection is an incredibly important to the history of the Columbia Plateau and the communities that have lived here since time and memorial. It was quite shocking to see how the collection was maintained throughout the years and the disarray that it was and is partially still in. With working on this collection and helping to correct the cataloging errors has taught me a lot of restoring archaeological collections. This experience also provided insight on how the curation of student archaeological collections has changed since the 1970s. The Grissom collection holds unique artifacts of different cultures and times. It is unique experience that I have not worked with in an archaeological collection. Typically, the collections that I have learned and study with is about identifying projectile points and stone tools. Seeing other types of material culture ranging from Chinese coins and Italian glass beads actually puts in perspective of the diverse Grissom collection really is.

LAUREN

## RESULTS

Though great efforts were made to reduce error, a few predictable problems arrose over the course of research. Inter-user error was most likely to occur where levels of experience were noticeably different, such as knowing what was large enough to analyze and thus worth counting. Errors also arrose where ambiguity in the directions and tools provided resulted in mistakes that were not obvious and therefore difficult to catch, such as the +- 5 and +- 100 grid counting errors. Collection upkeep was art as much as skill, as it required interpretation of previous work, including efforts to assess the "most likely" error that could have been made without making further mistakes ("inaccurate corrections"). Only through careful work, precise record-keeping, and active communication was error avoided.

We want to thank our faculty advisor, Dr. McCutcheon, for his guidance and direction during this work. We would also like to thank Lisa Matthews for her help generating statistical reports on count error, Dr. Lubinski for his help accessing the collection and associated records, and Tiernan VanSuetendael for his help with restoring collection records.