

## Notes from the Field School

*Leslie D. Aragon*

*School of Anthropology, University of Arizona*

Archaeology field school. It's a time when students and staff come together and get to experience a microcosm of cultural coalescence first-hand. The summer of 2016 will be my fourth year as Field Director at the Upper Gila Preservation Archaeology field school, a program run jointly by Tucson non-profit, Archaeology Southwest, and the University of Arizona. Twelve to fifteen students from all over the country are led on, shall we say, "a journey of new and exciting experiences" by six staff members for six weeks. There is no experience necessary. Some of the students have never been away from home before, others have never slept in a tent or had the experience of using a solar shower before. Many have never had live in very close quarters with such a large group for an extended amount of time. Most have never had to get up before sunrise, put in a full day of hard labor (excavating, surveying, or doing experimental archaeology), and then have an evening filled with labs and lectures that keeps them busy well past dark. It's fun, and we're helping build important life skills; they'll thank us later. Probably.

As a staff member I get to observe all of these "firsts" that the students encounter, and what kinds of mechanisms they develop to cope with all of these "learning experiences." We usually like to ease them into their new lives by spending two days in civilization (Tucson) before whisking them away to the wilds of rural New Mexico. Their time is spent visiting archaeological sites and museums and being brainwashed oriented to the preservation approach to doing archaeology. They stay in dorms at the University of Arizona, and start to get used

to being with the same group of people 24/7 – living together, working together, eating together, traveling for hours in a 15-passenger van together. It's pretty cozy and relationships form pretty quickly right from the start. While the students are learning and bonding and forming alliances, the staff members are quietly observing. Those two should not be on the same crew... That's an interesting relationship... They might work well together... We'll have to watch that one... Sometimes we're wrong about our initial observations of the group dynamic and changes need to be made as we progress through the season. But usually not.

### Rules

Among other things, during orientation students are (re)introduced to the official "Field School Camp Rules." When students are accepted into the field school, they are each sent a packet of information that includes the list of rules. The rules are important because we usually live and work on private land; and it is through the generosity of the landowners that we have been allowed to set up camp on their active ranch. The rules aren't anything too crazy. They include things like: no controlled substances will be tolerated; do not harass the wildlife (or domestic animals); leave gates the way you found them (open or closed); no weapons; etc. These written rules are meant to keep people safe, since we generally like to end the field season with the same number of people that we started with. Preferably the same people, but I digress.

Then there are the unwritten rules. Each of the unwritten rules has come into being for a very specific reason. Mainly because none of the staff ever imagined that these are things that "grown-ups" needed to be told until they happen. The unwritten rules remain unwritten because we don't want to scare anyone off or discourage them from coming. In fact, we usually don't even bring them up until after we have left Tucson (but before we get to camp). It has become one of my favorite rituals.

It takes about four hours for a four-car-caravan to drive from Tucson to our field camp (longer with our breakfast, lunch, and museum stops). When we are about 15 minutes from camp, that's when we all pull off onto an empty forest service road to have our first camp meeting. The students all gather around, unsure of why we've stopped and trying to anticipate what is going on. Our fearless leader takes great pleasure in the big reveal. The rest of the staff also knows what is coming, so we're all pretty giddy by this point. The talk usually goes something like this: We're almost to camp, but we need to go over some rules first. No, not the camp rules we talked about in Tucson...the unwritten rules.

These are the rules that we didn't want to tell you about until we were sure you couldn't leave after hearing them. Yes, these rules are all in place based on actual events that have happened in the past. First, there is no amorous activity allowed in public spaces – like the 15-passenger van that we ride in every day – that's what your tents are for. Second, there is no pooping in the indoor toilets. The plumbing was not built for 20 people, and there are porta-potties for this purpose; speaking of porta-potties, one of the daily chores that you all will rotate through is to shake the porta-potties in order to settle the “cone of death” – it's important, you'll see. Third, you are not allowed to pierce your ears with mesquite thorns. In fact, don't put holes in any body parts with any materials while you are here. And the most important rule of all – unless you are sick with some kind of virus or bacteria or heat-related illness, there is no throwing up. You have to swallow it (i.e., don't drink so much that you throw up). Good talk guys, now let's go set up camp!

The looks on students faces usually fall somewhere on a spectrum of shocked, disgusted, and amused. Remember that we've all only been together for about two days, so they aren't sure how to react to this very up-front discussion about bathroom habits and other topics not usually discussed in polite society. But this isn't polite society, so get used to a lot of bathroom humor. Welcome to field school!

## Camp Life

The first thing that we need to do when we arrive is to set up camp. We have public spaces for lab, lectures, and the occasional “free time,” but everyone has their own personal space in the form of a tent. Every year we caution the students that tents only provide a veil of privacy, and that tent walls do not block out (or keep in) sounds. You don’t want to be too close to your neighbors because you will hear everything, from their snoring to the inevitable (afore mentioned) amorous activities that field schools are notorious for. But at the beginning, everyone is either such good friends or so afraid of having to sleep outside, we always end up with a tightly clustered student tent village. (Actually, we always end up with a tightly clustered staff tent village too, but over the years, we’ve gotten used to the soothing sounds of each other’s snoring.) We often reach a point in the season when one or two students (less than) discretely move their tents away from the main group. Subtle.

It doesn’t take long for everyone to settle into a routine, especially since our lives are so scheduled from pre-dawn until post-dusk. On a normal field day, we wake up, get dressed, have breakfast, pack our lunches, and leave for our excavation site before the sun comes up. June in New Mexico is a bit warm, even above 4,000 feet, so we want to start our work day as soon as the sun comes up and get out of the field by the hottest part of the afternoon. No matter what time we start or what time we schedule lunch, it is always hotter after lunch. I think there might be some kind of rule against skipping breaks though, so we take a half hour or so at 11:30 AM every day anyway. Around 2:30 PM, we pack up and head back to camp.

Once we get back, we take 20 minutes or so to grab a snack (beer) and stare blankly into space while our brains recover from post-lunch meltdown. Then, depending on the day, there is either artifact washing or lab. If it’s an artifact washing day, that means that everyone gets to sit in the shade of a cottonwood tree and scrub artifacts until either they have all been washed or there is no more space on the drying racks. On lab days, students are split between ceramics lab and lithics lab

and do a basic inventory of the washed artifacts. By the end of the field season, all of the artifacts that have been recovered should be processed and inventoried. We don't expect a complete analysis to be done, but at least the preliminary steps have been completed, which really helps later in the process. These activities are usually done well before dinner, so there is a little bit of downtime until then.

Then it's dinner time. So far, we've been really lucky to have a member of the local community cook for us. Not only does she prepare a delicious dinner (including dessert) six nights a week for 20 unruly archaeologists plus the occasional guest, she also makes sure that we have lots of snacks to get us through the day. AND she does all of our grocery shopping, which really comes in handy when the closest grocery store is over an hour's drive away!

Many nights after dinner, there is a lecture to go to. This is school after all. But the lectures are important and help provide a better context for the students to understand what they are seeing out at the site. We often have visitors (other archaeologists) come to see what we are up to and then give a talk, which in the past has ranged from Mimbres archaeology to careers in cultural resource management to working with border communities building composting toilets (I told you there would be more bathroom talk). We also have a lot of analysts come out and talk about their material specialty, which ranges from things like ceramics and ground stone to paleobotany. We try not to have the lectures go past 8 o'clock (there is only so much anyone can absorb after such a long day), but sometimes people just love their subject so much that lectures occasionally run late.

After the lecture is FREE TIME! If the students aren't completely exhausted from the day and the prospect of doing it all again tomorrow (like I usually am), there is time to relax, have a campfire, play games, and have fun without the ever-watchful staff looming. It can be hard for students to go from "independent adult" to "micro-managed field school student." Likewise, it can be hard for the staff to go from "regular life" to "responsible for 15 students." So this is a good time for everyone

to decompress, vent, and let off a little steam. But 10 P.M. is quiet time, so there isn't too much time to get rowdy and wild.

Between all of these scheduled activities (and also quite a bit during them), the students continue to form their bonds, break them, reconfigure them... Sometimes the staff can see issues that are going to present themselves a mile away, way before the students realize it. There's usually nothing we can do but let them play out. Most of the time issues get resolved without us having to step in, which I think is part of the learning process. Learning how to work civilly in a group with people that you don't always like is one of those skills that everyone learns but is never really explicitly taught at field school.

### **(Mostly) Unplugged**

One of the major factors that affects the dynamic of interaction between field school compatriots is the lack of technology available to them in the field. For the most part, there is very little cellular service in the part of New Mexico that we work in. In addition to that, we limit the amount of time that students are allowed to use the internet (in large part because having that many people using the internet at the same time really slows down broadband connection – like the plumbing, it wasn't designed to support 20 people – and some of us still have to do actual work). Being essentially cut off from almost everyone you know for six weeks really forces you to bond with the people that you're with.

About once a week, we make the long trek into Silver City to do exciting things like laundry, drink real coffee, and support the local Walmart. Usually this happens on our cook's day off, so we also get to eat at a restaurant. Students get per diem for these days, so they're (and we're) free to choose where to eat. This may not seem like a big deal, but when the rest of your days have been laid out for you, weeks ahead of time, by other people, it is nice to get to make your own choice about anything. It is also nice for the staff not have to make a choice for everyone else (and suffer the whiney consequences). But more (as?) importantly, there is cell service and plenty of wi-fi

for everyone! This gives everyone a chance to check in with family and friends back home and to see what has been going on in the real world (if you're interested in that kind of thing). I always look forward to six or seven weeks without being tethered to a cell phone or computer, but I know that life isn't for everyone, especially if they've never had to do it before.

I'm not pretending that everyone gets along with everyone else for the entire time. But I think that the experience forces students to disconnect from their technology and build relationships with the people in front of them. It can be a really fun and positive experience for those with even a little bit of social skills. And an opportunity to work on them for those whose social skills may be lacking.

### **In the End**

I know that the picture that I've painted of field school may not sound appealing to everyone (ask my mother – she's absolutely horrified). But in the end, it is a bonding experience as much as it is a learning experience. Yes, going to field school allows you to check that box that lets you to go to grad school or get a job as an archaeological field tech. But lifelong friendships, connections that will help you get into grad school, get a job, and even the occasional (eventual) marriage develops at field school. It allows you to bond with this weird group of people from all over the country, or sometimes world, who would have otherwise never come together.