DIG BUMS

THE WORLD OF PROFESSIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY IS NOT ALWAYS AS PROFESSIONAL AS YOU MIGHT THINK

BY JUSTIN HOUSMAN
PHOTOS BY CLARA J. FOX

They were finally awake. We knew they were awake because we heard heavy, metal implements clanging off hardpacked dirt, loud bangs shocking the still, languid air of a blazingly hot afternoon.

Unseen hands flung the tools of their trade from deep inside a dingy white camper perched on the bed of a Toyota pickup: a shovel, then another one, heavy iron tamp bars, pickaxes. Finally, a hard hat, covered in stickers and obscene phrases written in black marker, flew from the camper like a frisbee, skidded off the dirt, then rolled to a stop. A scrub jay alighted on the brim of the helmet and cawed. Then all was still.

"Fuckin' bird," growled a gravelly, singsong voice from inside the camper.

I was sitting with a group of fellow college students in the merciful shade of a huge oak tree surrounded by motionless grasses bleached white by late summer sun. We were somewhere along a dry riverbed within the boundaries of a massive U.S. Army base in the interior of California's central coast to take part in an archaeology field school administered by the social sciences department of our university. There were maybe twenty students, the professor who ran the program, and a handful of professional archaeologists who were there to earn a paycheck digging yet another orderly set of rectangular holes in the ground. This was an actual working excavation, one of the hundreds of such digs in Western states at any given time during the dry summers. I and my fellow wide-eyed students were to observe the pros, get a taste of dirt in our mouths, scour some callouses into our soft hands, and, if we were lucky, discover an arrowhead or two. More importantly, we'd discover whether archaeology was something we'd want to pursue as a career.

The professor in charge of the field school was wise to hire the two gentlemen hucking tools out of the pickup. He carefully explained before they arrived, as if in warning, that were we to work as field archaeologists in California, we'd almost certainly work with these guys. Or, as baffling as it seemed considering their eccentricity, others just like them—dig bums, as they're affectionately known in the business. We'd been at the site for a long morning, preparing our clean, shiny trowels, making sure our bright yellow deerskin work gloves and floppy hats had all the sales tags removed, preparing for the professionals to arrive so we could get to work. We all watched as the two pros emerged groggily, at noon, from the truck. They were not what we expected.

The gravelly voice belonged to Ron Sharman, a legendary figure in California's blue-collar archaeology scene, looking something like a cross between Rambo at his most leathery and Bilbo Baggins, who spoke with the voice of Bobcat Goldthwait after a serious bender. His partner and landlord, who rented Sharman a small house on a piece of rural property in the Sierra foothills, complete with a pet cow on the premises, was Steve Simpson, a tall, mostly quiet, foul-mouthed figure who looked like Sideshow Bob's diesel mechanic brother.

Sharman, shirtless, wearing camouflage-print cargo pants and a ponytail beneath a bandana, sat down on a nearby picnic table and pulled a sandwich from his cargo pocket—no baggie, no wrapper. A loose sandwich. Simpson lit a cigarette and leaned against the oak. It was one hundred degrees. I'd expected the pros to be clean-cut, academic figures, eager to talk about Indigenous American prehistory or review papers covering the latest theories of the peopling of the Americas. Instead, Sharman sniffed his sandwich, wondered aloud what day he made it, then took a gluttonous bite. Simpson seemed to fall asleep standing, cigarette dangling from chapped lips. The students just stared. They were the first real-deal archaeologists I'd ever met. I loved them instantly.

Throughout my mid-twenties, I spent a handful of years working as a field archaeologist, a mini-career filled with memories I'll long cherish, most of which had little to do with the science of archaeology. The majority of the jobs were in places where a new housing subdivision or pipelines or sewer systems were planned and the permitting required ensuring the project wasn't going to disturb cultural resources. You'd get hired by a cultural resources management firm by the job; typically, you'd work ten days on, four days off, with the firm footing the bill for the dingiest motel in town, sometimes stuffing two to a room.

It takes surprisingly little formal study to work on an excavation. A college education helps, but twenty years ago it wasn't a dealbreaker if you didn't have one. My university didn't even offer an archaeology degree;

You get one point for getting dirt in the buckets next to the hole and three points for the buckets farthest away. Pitch a shovelful into the sifting screen, that's five points.

Without a self-deprecating sense of humor and the ability to tolerate and mix with people from all walks of life, you're dead meat.

I had a history degree and took a weeklong field school. The folks telling you where to dig typically had graduate degrees in anthropology. They were also the only ones in clean shirts. But for most of us diggers, a shovel-handling course would have been better training than anything learned in college.

To be a reasonably happy dig bum in the West, you need four skills. You must be comfortable digging in unimaginable heat. You have to be willing to take jobs whenever and wherever they come, often in the most arid, unforgiving hellholes. You need to love being outside, feeling soil in your hands, your shoes, your nostrils, clogging every pore in your body. And you must have skin made from iron, not to fend off the sun, but to deflect barbs from your fellow dig bums, who will have figured out what makes you tick within the first hour of a job and then poke right at it. Without a self-deprecating sense of humor and the ability to tolerate and mix with people from all walks of life, most of whom seem to follow paths through the early years of Burning Man and maybe a stint in jail, you're dead meat.

You learn a lot about a person from how they approach lunch in the field. Sharman, it turned out, had a reputation for never refrigerating food. Any food. He'd stuff his pockets or a ratty old bag with leftovers from dinner the night before, which he often kept in dresser drawers in his motel room. I once saw him pull an unwrapped Polish sausage from his nightstand in the morning in preparation for lunch. One of my frequent bosses, a dead ringer for Neil Young, ate cereal for lunch, every single day, out of an ancient Cool Whip container for a bowl. His battered Coleman cooler contained a quart of milk, a bag of cereal, the Cool Whip container, and a spoon. He'd done this for years, I learned. "Neil" would often work barefoot, probably to show off his painted toenails. Many of our excavations were on the job site of a major construction project. I'd sometimes look up from my sifting screen to see him striding to a buttoned-up construction foreman, wearing cutoff jean shorts, a filthy sleeveless t-shirt, barefoot with painted nails gleaming in the sun, and wonder what the macho builder was thinking.

Per-diem jobs were the most coveted, because by eating cheaply you could squirrel away the extra cash given to you each day for expenses. You often needed that extra cash for nightly poker games. A red sun would be going down behind a black rise of vegetation-less hills and the archaeologists would be in the motel parking lot of some impossibly hot town, drinking beer and gambling away part of their daily cash allowance. If the job didn't offer a per diem, but instead paid expenses based on receipts, there might be nightly hunts in nearby grocery store parking lots, scavenging receipts from the ground to submit for reimbursement. You'd stock up on cheap peanut butter and jelly supplies, while giving the boss somebody else's receipt for expensive deli meats and fresh produce. It was an art.

We did of course find artifacts. Mostly flakes of chert, the occasional shell bead. You'd stand over a sifting screen, rocking it back and forth on rickety wooden legs, watching the dirt fall through. Sometimes the unmistakable shape of an arrowhead appeared, usually broken off at the tip or the base, and you'd pick it out to pass around to the rest of the crew, interrupting a discussion ranking Sylvester Stallone films or something. Depending on the site, that arrowhead might have been

---

Obsidian points can be found hundreds of miles from any source of obsidian. Long-distance trade? Wandering point makers? The only clues are the context they're found in—which is why you shouldn't mess with artifacts. Next page: Uneven side walls, rounded corners, sloppy shovel marks—looks like the work of a university kid in training.

there for five hundred years or a thousand. Likely, it broke off while an Indigenous person was knapping it from a larger stone, in the same spot you found it, having their own version of a Sylvester Stallone filmography discussion, also passing the time until lunch. Time completely flattened in those moments, the chronological distinction between prehistoric hunter-gatherers and, say, Ron Sharman and his pockets full of lunchmeat, essentially meaningless.

Finding artifacts, however, was secondary to the digging. Nobody took pride in uncovering a bead or a bit of human bone. Digging cleanly and quickly and accurately was almost all that mattered. It's also what elevates dig bums over the bosses directing the excavation. I never met a salaried man who could out-dig the grunts. Typically, you'd dig in ten-centimeter levels. It needed to be *exactly* ten centimeters or the data would be useless. Technique was deeply personal.

Flinging the dirt into the screens held by the rest of the crew was a sport. The good, lifelong diggers could distribute half a cubic yard of dirt into screens held by the rest of the crew ten feet away with a full arsenal of tosses—over-the-shoulder, behind-the-back, even honest-to-god spirals—without so much as a grain of sand being misplaced. I can't remember the difference between a desert side notch or a corner notch arrowhead and haven't dug a unit for fifteen years but I can instantly eyeball ten-centimeter depths with the accuracy of a laser level.

The most beautiful point I ever uncovered was a fake. We were digging outside Vandenberg Air Force Base in Southern California and I was the newb. I was waist-deep in an otherwise unremarkable unit of sandy soil and when my back was turned a wise-ass lifelong digger tossed a palm-sized obsidian blade he'd knapped himself into a pile of loose dirt just before I shoveled it into a screen. That was funny but not as funny as a job in Yosemite Valley, near Curry Village, when jokesters buried an old copy of Playboy in a unit as a prank. It was uncovered just as a group of elementary school kids was brought over to get a look at an official archaeological dig.

Was it funny when a group of us spent an entire lunch hour on yet another Army base, pitching rocks at what we thought was a burned log thirty yards away that turned out to be an unexploded artillery shell? We thought so, especially when the ordnance guys first confronted painted-nails Neil about it, then drove us out of there so they could blow the shell to smithereens. The ordnance guys, not so much.

We once had an excavation ruined by an earthquake. We were near the San Andreas fault, dozens of miles from any paved road, golden hills rolling to infinity all around us. First, there was a strange low-register noise to the west. Sharman joked about it being his stomach, but we all turned from our screens to watch the hills buckle in seismic waves rolling toward us. It was the most beautiful thing I think I've ever seen. Then it rolled and shook the screens from our hands and collapsed the side walls in our impeccably dug units. Five minutes later, Neil was eating frosted flakes out of his Cool Whip container as if nothing ever happened.

I don't know how many jobs are like this anymore. Dig bums are transient by necessity, taking work when it comes, following construction projects around the West. Some will eventually return to school, become academic anthropologists, or take full-time jobs with government agencies. Most, though, are content to work outdoors, with like-minded strangers, roughing their hands, tanning necks and shoulders. The office, collared shirts, not getting to spend hours each day throwing rocks at other rocks…most of us were avoiding that.

But so, too, were we communing with something: the people we were technically studying. We rarely talked about them, the Indigenous folks. Not because we didn't care how they lived. And not because we weren't educated about their movements and culture. Perhaps it felt disrespectful to speak with any sort of authority about those who came before. Definitely, it seemed ridiculous to draw meaningful conclusions about how or why early Californians made the tools they made, ate what they ate, believed what they believed, or lived where they lived. To me, there was little more to learn from filling baggies with artifacts other than that they'd been here, in this exact spot. Wasn't that enough?

Most of us, I think, developed our own relationship with the people who left the flaked stones and grinding bowls. Especially when digging in the backcountry, far from modernity, it seemed we were just a few days behind them in their travels, we were right on their heels, that found arrowhead only recently dropped. It was as if we could see them in the distance, moving over the same hills, taking refuge under the same shade trees, drinking from the same creek. Doing the same things people do, have done, and always will do.