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The Kansas Anthropologist Reminiscence Project for Senior Plains Anthropologists

by

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*Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations,
ask thy father and he will show thee, thy elders, and they will tell thee.
Deuteronomy 32: 7*

For the past six years, *The Kansas Anthropologist* has published an ongoing series of reminiscences or retrospective articles by senior Great Plains archaeologists. The aim of the project is to collect reminiscences from senior anthropologists regarding their experiences in pre- and post-World War II Plains archaeology, biological anthropology, and ethnology. The historian John Lukacs (1966:x) once offered an elegant and concise comment on the value of history, one that I offer here:

I believe that history, as a form of thought, is one of the most precious and perhaps unique rational possessions of Western civilizations. The character of a person may appear best from the reconstruction of the history of his life; the same is true of the character of nations. The very history of a problem may reveal its essential diagnosis. There is no human endeavor that may not be approached and studied profitably through its history.

Fortunately, there hardly needs to be a justification anymore for such a project, as is attested by the recent proliferation of research into the history of archaeology and anthropology on virtually a global scale.

The intention of these retrospective articles is not to explore or diagnose any particular problem but rather to create a mosaic of first person narratives informed by personal experience and illustrated with photos and anecdotes to illuminate the development of Plains anthropology in the 20th Century. To date, the journal has published ten articles in this series:

Carlyle S. Smith Carlyle S. Smith, *KU Years: 1947-1980*. 13(1&2): 58-72 (1992). [This retrospective was the first and was included in an issue of the journal devoted to the history of archaeology at the University of Kansas entitled "Archeology at the University of Kansas, Williston-Eiseley-Spaulding-Smith;" hence, its title. Smith has elsewhere published a similar retrospective, though focused on his pioneering role in historic archaeology; see Smith 1994.]

Ralph Solecki Reminiscences of Plains Archeology, Pre and Post World War II", 15(2): 1-16. (1994).

Richard G. Slattery Four Seasons in Pre-War Kansas Archeology," 16(1): 1-23. (1995).

W. Raymond Wood The Missouri River Basin Surveys: Archeology Without the Middle 'A,'" 16(2):1-13. (1995).

Wesley Hurt Recollections of a Missouri Valley Salvage Archeologist," 16(2): 39-47. (1995).

Roger Grange When I Was a Lad, I Served a Term... 'Minor Adventures in Plains Archeology in the 1950s and 1960s,'" 18(1): 1-20. (1996).

David M Gradwohl Accidental Plains Archeologist: Neither Courage Nor Naiveté? 18(2): 19-44. (1997).

Edward B. Jelks Reminiscences of Archeology in Texas: 1947-1968," 18(2): 1-18. (1997).

James Gunnerson From the Plains and Back Again," 19 [in press] (1998).

Waldo R. Wedel Wm. Duncan Strong and Nebraska Archeology in the 1930s," 19 [inpress] (1998).

Ultimately, these articles, singly or together, do not constitute a history (except in the loosest sense) but are the stuff of history, primary sources for any future history of Great Plains anthropology.

Initially, it was intended that the contributions would begin with the pre-World War II years and continue with those of anthropologists who entered the discipline prior to 1960. However, with the exceptions of Wedel, Smith, Solecki, and Slattery, a sampling of entrants into the field during the pre-war period has been rendered largely impossible due to the deaths of many of the most senior Plains anthropologists in the past few years. Indeed, C. S. Smith and Wesley Hurt have both, unfortunately, passed away since the publication of their respective contributions and the paper by Waldo Wedel, although originally delivered at the 50th Plains Conference in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1992, is a posthumous contribution. The sad fact of the death of most of the eldest generation of Plains anthropologists has necessitated a shift to the post-war experiences of a younger generation. A broad areal coverage of the Plains has been difficult to achieve and the contributions published so far weight the series toward the northern and central Plains, though the papers by Jelks and Gunnerson correct this to some degree. Finally, while the participation of women in the field is often touched upon by many participants, there is a decided male bias in the series. Several women anthropologists have been asked; for a variety of reasons none have so far chosen to contribute. As it is anticipated that the series will continue, hopefully, this situation will change.

The reminiscences published to date are the exclusive work of archaeologists. Securing contributions by ethnologists and biological anthropologists has, in practice, been hard to achieve. Many of the senior ethnologists, including two who intended to contribute, John Ewers and Fred Voget, have recently passed away. Those physical anthropologists who have been invited to participate have declined or failed to respond. For that matter, many archaeologists who have been asked to contribute have declined or, as is commonly the case, not responded. Altogether about 50 archaeologists, ethnologists, and biological anthropologists have been approached; of that number half have refused or not responded to my query.

Taken as a whole, the articles reveal a good deal of commonality of experience. Dunnell (1986) has observed that archaeology was a less populous discipline in the prewar years and that archaeologists were generally more united by the governing methods and theories of the era. For the years following World War II, there is, too, a common source of uniformity, one which transcended the backgrounds and interests of the varying participants in the reminiscence project: the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program, known colloquially as the River Basin Surveys (RBS). The late Jesse Jennings (1985:281) has commented that "the inception of the River Basin Surveys was an event of tran-

scendent importance to American archaeologists." RBS employment represented for many their first taste of field-work and many a shovel hand found the work rewarding enough to pursue archaeology as a career.

Wedel, Smith and Solecki entered into the Plains field during the WPA days in the Central Plains, but they, too, shared the later bond of participation in the massive River Basin Surveys. Only Slattery, who worked with Wedel during Wedel's seminal four seasons in Kansas from 1937 through 1940 (upon which the volume *An Introduction to Kansas Archeology* is largely based) and who did not pursue archaeology as a career, did not share these experiences. Despite Wedel's intimate involvement in RBS, his contribution to the series focuses on the personalities and events of an era before RBS. Twenty years ago, Wedel (1977) offered an autobiographical statement which records impressions of the RBS era, among other things. A 1982 paper presents a formal study of Strong, though as with the *Kansas Anthropologist* article, one based, in part, upon his firsthand experiences as a student of Strong at Nebraska (Wedel 1982).

The Kansas Anthropologist is published by the Kansas Anthropological Association and the Archeology Office of the Kansas State Historical Society. Formerly published biannually, starting in 1998, the journal will be published once a year. Obviously the series could not exist without the initial support of William B. Lees, editor from 1989-1993, and especially the present editor, Virginia A. Wulfkuhle. Back issues of the journal, subject to availability, can be obtained from Mary Conrad, 3900 N. 55th St, Kansas City, KS 66104-1230; (913) 287-4405.

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