

**LEWIS ROBERTS BINFORD**  
**(November 21, 1931-April 11, 2011)**  
**Founder of Processual Archeology**

Rarely does a university with neither ivy-covered walls nor limestone gargoyles have on its faculty for nearly a quarter-century a person who genuinely can be said radically to have changed an entire academic discipline. Lewis Binford, who as *primus inter pares* among the “Young Turks” of a 1960s movement called “the New Archeology”, was such a rare individual. His death in Kirksville, Missouri, where his wife Dr. Amber Johnson is a professor at Truman State University, leaves an enormous intellectual hole in world archeology. Binford’s is a legacy of “big ideas”—appropriate to a big man and a commanding presence both in the classroom and in the cockpit of international theoretical debate about what archeology is and what it can teach us about human behavior past--and present.

The international community of archeologists, from the USA to the UK and France, from Argentina to India, from Australia to South Africa, is in mourning for a controversial man who taught thousands of New Mexico students, while stimulating professionals everywhere to use and test his ideas, even if they may have disagreed with them or disputed his findings.

Binford retired from UNM in 1991 as the Leslie Spier Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and continued his teaching career until a second retirement from Southern Methodist University in 2001. A native Virginian, he started college at Virginia Tech, then served in the U.S. Army on Okinawa in the early 1950s, publishing popular articles on Ryukus prehistory. He completed his B.A. in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina in 1957 and was influenced by the great Southeastern archeologist, Joffre Coe. A year later, Binford received his M.A. from the University of Michigan, followed by his Ph.D. in 1964, with a dissertation on artifact collections from protohistoric and historic sites in coastal Virginia and North Carolina. He also excavated at Fort Michilimackinac in Michigan. It was also in Ann Arbor that Binford, influenced by the materialist cultural anthropologist Leslie White and the statistical archeologist Albert Spaulding, began a long career of collecting both followers and opponents.

Binford (as did W.W. Taylor, a decade earlier) accused the “old” archaeology of being obsessed with classification of potsherds, stone tools and structures; the construction of chronologies; and the creation of “cultures” based on normative trait lists rather than “doing anthropology”, which Binford believed meant using material remains to test hypotheses about human behavior. He insisted on changing the subject from artifacts to people.

For Binford and other similarly-minded young archeologists, a revolution was in order to put archeology into the forefront of anthropological theory, to drag it out of the comfortable, pure empiricism of the “Big Men” of the field, who had been trained and gained prominence in the small, elite world of pre-WWII American archeology. Archeology was to be a laboratory for pushing the scientific study of systems for human survival back into the past, both recent and remote, to enable the actual analysis of cultural evolution in particular cases that should respond to general laws of rational behavior. In fact, Binford and

colleagues wanted American archeology to do what it had long professed, namely anthropology, not arcane collection, classification and pseudo-ethnic systematization for its own sake.

The crusade, launched in Ann Arbor by Binford as a Ph.D. student and then an instructor, moved to the University of Chicago in 1961. There he gathered around his charismatic (some would say demagogic) personality a coterie that reads like the *Who's Who* of the New Archeology (fueled with what witnesses and participants have described as a great deal of carousing). The opening salvo of what would be called Processual Archeology (the study of cultural processes in the past) was a seminal article, "Archaeology as Anthropology", in the profession's flagship journal, *American Antiquity* in 1962. The heady Chicago years won Binford his first generation of disciples, including Kent Flannery, Stuart Struever, William Longacre, Henry Wright, Robert Whallon, Jim Hill, Les Freeman, et al. – including Sally Schanfield (a prominent archeologist in her own right, who would become his wife). Another of Binford's rare excavations (at Illinois' Carlyle Reservoir) was conducted during this period.

Although he never worked in the Southwest, he actively supported ideas and methods in "ceramic sociology" (originally developed by Constance Cronin and paralleled by those of James Deetz) tested on the Carter Ranch in Arizona by Longacre, Hill, Jim Brown and Freeman, under the auspices of "Pottery" Paul S. Martin of the Field Museum who would become one of the few "Big Men" to join the revolution. Meanwhile, because of Sally, who was doing research on the Levantine Mousterian, and abetted by paleoanthropologist F. Clark Howell, Binford got involved in the interpretation of variability among assemblages of stone tools made by Neandertals in France and Israel. The resultant epic, transatlantic Bordes-Binford Debate, pitting him against the late François Bordes—the expert on Neandertal technology--in a series of classic articles. Bordes assumed that percentages of different tools represented membership in different ethnic cultures; Binford argued that they could mean different activities. In so doing (and in line with some of his publications on historical artifacts such as clay pipes), he applied multivariate statistics with the use of early computers and a method (factor analysis) being developed for archeology by Chicago students Freeman and Brown. The implications of this debate range far beyond the Middle Paleolithic and continue to reverberate throughout all archeological interpretations of similarities and differences among collections of finds.

Binford was not alone in challenging the old, limited view of Archeology's potential for analysis and interpretation. Other prominent challengers to the status quo included Grahame Clark and David Clarke in England. And of course, early members of the Binford circle--notably Flannery, with his application of systems theory to archeology--made seminal theoretical contributions themselves and often went in separate directions after the initial years of the "movement". And a "movement" it was—millennial in character, as exalted followers were certain that the scorned "old archaeology" was dead and that the "new" one would miraculously reveal all the secrets of the past: functional, social and ideological, as Binford had preached. Revolution was in the air; sit-ins and protest marches spread throughout the U.S. and world. The Binford "crew"

stormed the professional meetings and journals of the Society for American Archaeology and American Anthropological Association with one assault on archeology's status quo after another, much to the dismay of many in the older generation, but to the delight of most students.

In the revolutionary year of 1968, Lew and Sally Binford published the "manifesto" of the New Archeology: *New Perspectives in Archeology* (note the spelling with "e", not the old-fashioned "ae"). It was not the only "big" publication of the late 60's, but it was the biggest—a collection of papers (some more radical than others) that augured a new spirit of positivist optimism in archeological research, a new discourse. The operative word was "new".

After Chicago, Binford moved on to California, teaching for one year at UC-Santa Barbara and two at UCLA, before coming to New Mexico in 1968 (not actually beginning to teach until 1969). He was promoted to Full Professor in 1972 and became the Spier Professor in 1984. He gave the UNM Annual Research Lecture in the same year. At UNM, Binford attracted masses of excellent students, many of whom went on to be leaders in their fields. And Binford's influence spread throughout the world. Realizing that the impasse in the interpretation of Mousterian lithic artifacts could be broken by studying the other major class of objects found in the cave and rockshelter sites of SW France—reindeer bones—he embarked on ethnoarcheological research among the Nunamiut of the North Slope of the Brooks Range in Alaska (to whom he was introduced by Jack Campbell and where one of the strongest impacts was on participant Jean-Philippe Rigaud, a French Upper Paleolithic specialist), not because he thought (in any 19<sup>th</sup> century unilineal "social evolutionary" way) that Eskimo were essentially Neandertals, but rather because he saw that the economic anatomy of caribou was a constant and the exploitation of its carcass by modern hunting people could be analyzed via the principle of uniformitarianism and then applied to an understanding of human activities involving the remains of the same species at Mousterian sites. This was the beginning of what Binford would call "Middle Range Theory"—the building of arguments linking archeological remains to the behaviors that had created and deposited them. Binford was not alone in doing ethnoarcheology or in stressing the importance of site formation processes and, in the specific case of bones, taphonomy (the contributions of John Yellen, Richard Gould, Mike Schiffer, Bob Brain, Kay Behrensmeyer, among others, were also critical). But he was the leading and most vocal exponent of the new archeo-zoological approach to faunal analysis, clearly reflected in the profession today around the world. Showing how to go about making the logical links between objects and human behavior was one of Binford's most enduring contributions to archeology.

His concern with explicit modeling and hypothesis-testing was reflected in his edited volume, *For Theory Building in Archaeology*, in which he and several of his students and junior colleagues presented case studies in a variety of subjects from around the world. His growing fame and concern for understanding hunter-gatherer systems as they related to the archeological record led him to research and lecture travels to Australia, Africa, Argentina, China and India. In all these places he left an indelible impression and spurred

on local archeologists to do truly revolutionary research. Good examples would be the extraordinary boom in the study of now-extinct Patagonian foragers and faunal remains in Argentina led by Luis Borrero, the evolutionary anthropological studies of living Australian aborigines by Jim O'Connell and colleagues, or the renewed analyses of Acheulean sites on the Deccan Peninsula by K.Paddayya.

Ideas were fundamental to Lew Binford; to experience his torrent of fascinating insights was uniquely stimulating. These were usually accompanied with the statement, "all other things equal", belying Binford's impatience with residuals that could be read as inconvenient facts. He was wont to make strong assertions in apparent support of his extraordinary ideas, and few would dare challenge him openly. En route to class, he would invariably say, "Well, I'm off to misguide the youth."

Some students could be intimidated, especially if they felt their dissertation results did not uncover the results that Binford's grand theorizing seemed to make so "easy" to find with the right ideas and methods. His dictum that "the facts do not speak for themselves", could not obviate the need for demonstrable facts in student research. On the other hand, many students took the best of his ideas and put them to work in real world fieldwork and analyses, often with spectacular results. Colleagues (even when infuriated by his Alpha male posturing) could not ignore his genius. A dedicated teacher, whose office hours resembled the pilgrimage to Mecca, Binford taught his students how to make arguments, identify assumptions, understand scientific reasoning, reject received wisdom or dogma, and identify nonsense. Whether they continued in archeology or not, these were valuable lessons forcibly conveyed by "the Master". And that self-assured, domineering brilliance was also on display at departmental faculty meetings. *Sturm und Drang* were the order of the day, much to the dismay of Binford's unfortunate targets. It must be said that Binford could be the gracious Southern gentleman and welcoming host among the cottonwoods along the Rio Grande in Corrales, particularly during the wonderful years of his marriage to the charming, highly educated, strong--and saintly--Mary Ann Wilson Howell (for whom the Mary Ann Binford School was named in Albuquerque after her untimely death).

The Alaska and Australia experiences led to the publication of absolutely critical articles modeling hunter-gather subsistence systems, mobility, site structure and functions from a strongly materialist point of view. Two of Binford's most influential books, *Nunamiut Ethnoarcheology* and *Bones* dated to the UNM period, and they explicitly referenced Binford's increasingly dim view of pre-*Homo sapiens* cultural capacities, a view that was quickly overturned (often in spectacular fashion, and importantly by a pair of his most brilliant UNM students, Mary Stiner and Steve Kuhn). Nonetheless, his gunning for what he felt were unsubstantiated inferences at such classic sites as Combe Grenal, Olduvai, Olorgesailie, Zhoukoudian and Klasies stimulated others (including those whose work he criticized, such as Bordes, Glynn Isaac, Richard Klein) to do highly productive taphonomic, archeofaunal and archeological research, often proving him partly right and partly wrong. But there is no question that archeologists have become far more careful and savvy about interpreting the record as a result

of his challenges to accepted wisdom. He set the agenda for generations of archeologists—the questions they could dare to ask and the methods they developed or modified to test them. Happily, many of Binford's plethora of influential articles were collected during the UNM years into volumes called *An Archaeological Perspective*, *Debating Archaeology* and *Working at Archaeology*, and an autobiographical book, *In Pursuit of the Past*, all made his work and ideas extremely accessible and all the more influential. Though foragers and early prehistory were his fortes, his early interest in historical archeology continued throughout his career and had enormous influence there too, notably in the work of Stanley South, a close friend in South Carolina.

The SMU years saw the culmination a grand work mining the ethnographic literature on hunter-gatherer adaptations and their relationship to world environments. A huge, complex book, *Constructing Frames of Reference*, is the culmination of Binford's globalizing view of the world of foragers, valuably assisted by his then-wife, Nancy Medaris Stone. And this is often the central criticism of Binford and the now-not-so-New Archeology: the focus is on systems, regular patterns of collective behavior, with individual decision-making and variation being considered as epiphenomenal. This generalizing perspective on archeology is seen by many as simplistic or reductionist. Yet even Binford's most severe critics would not be doing what they do today without his and his associates' revolution.

Honors came rather late to this towering figure, probably because he had offended so many of the leading figures of the archeological "establishment" and even many of his contemporaries. One of the first was the Inaugural Teaching Award by the National Association of Student Anthropologists in 1989. At UNM, the same year, his students honored him with a symposium and another was held at the SAA Meeting in 2010. He was finally elected in 2001 to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. He was also given the Huxley Memorial Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (UK), the Montelius Medal of the Swedish Archaeological Society, the Fyssen Foundation Prize in Paris, the Centennial Medal of the Portuguese Archaeological Society, the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Society for American Archaeology, awards from the Fulbright and Ford foundations, and several honorary degrees. Yet such awards and recognitions were not what interested Lew Binford; what he wanted was to learn, create and teach about how we can scientifically extend our knowledge about the diversity of human ways of being back into the remote past, to expand the breadth of anthropology's understanding of evolution and the modern condition. No one did or does it quite like Lew did; his curiosity, energy, enthusiasm, and disarming certainty were contagious and either infuriating or stimulating, or both at the same time. On balance, UNM and the world were fortunate to have him in our midst; we are not likely to see his equal.

Lawrence Guy Straus  
Distinguished Professor of Anthropology  
Editor, *Journal of Anthropological Research*

With thanks to Martha Binford, Rosalind Hunter-Anderson, William Longacre, June-el Piper and Jeremy Sabloff for editorial suggestions and corrections, most (but not all) of which I accepted.