HIGHWAY SALVAGE ARCHAEOLOGY: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

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Abstract. Institutional histories provide one perspective on the highway archaeology programs of the 1950s and 1960s. It is also possible to examine that era from the perspective of the archaeologists who did the work. This presentation is based on interviews with two pioneers in highway archaeology, Larry and Nancy Hammack.

It's no surprise that in 2003, we've gathered to discuss the history of highway archaeology. That era began almost 50 years ago,[1] and personal and even group memory of the early years is failing. It's time to write things down. Much of the writing will necessarily focus on institutions, but today my goal is different: to talk about what it was like to be part of the early years of highway archaeology. To do that, I recently interviewed two pioneers in the field, Larry and Nancy Hammack. The interviews took place in Durango, Colorado on March 29, 2003.

Larry Hammack grew up in Chicago but his family used to visit an aunt on a ranch at Datil, New Mexico. When Larry was 12, his aunt took him "Moki digging." He had no idea what that involved but once she put him to work in a rock shelter, he found a large potsherd. From that moment he was hooked on archaeology. To pursue his dream, after high school he went off to the University of New Mexico.

As a freshman, Larry joined the anthropology club—which was intended for upperclassman and graduate students, but Larry didn't pick up on that fact and jumped right in. On his first club field trip, to a Paleoindian site, Larry rose after lunch and found that he had been sitting on a Hell Gap point. His lack of observation briefly led him to doubt that he would make it as an archaeologist. Despite this setback he attended field school at Pottery Mound and received his B.A. in February 1959. Larry then got a job as a crew member on the Navajo Reservoir project, working for Ed Dittert, followed by a summer job excavating pit houses at Fort Burgwin, for Fred Wendorf. Larry's career was off to a great start.

Almost immediately, though, his career derailed. At Fort Burgwin Larry received his draft notice. As a farewell gesture, Fred Wendorf and Herb Dick took Larry to the Sagebrush Inn and got him completely drunk, before putting him on a bus the next morning. After completing his training, Larry volunteered to be shipped to southeast Asia, which in 1960 sounded like "fun." Instead, he found himself serving as an MP at White Sands Missile Range.

Not even the Army could keep Larry from his appointment with destiny. When the commanding general learned of the trained archaeologist on base, he reassigned Larry from MP duties to excavation of an El Paso phase site at Condron Field—so the general could indulge his own interest in archaeology. As a Specialist 4, Larry found himself supervising a volunteer crew consisting of the general and other senior officers. Larry feels that the other officers were motivated primarily by the wish to stay on the general's good side.[2]

In 1961 Larry finished his stint in the Army and began alternating between his master's degree at UNM and summer work for the Museum of New Mexico. Larry's starting wage at the Museum was $1.81 an hour (due to a labor law, his laborers made two cents more an hour than he did). His first project for MNM, in 1962, was at Ute Dam Reservoir, where he recorded 57 sites and excavated nine of them.

While serving as Frank Hibben's teaching assistant,[3] Larry met the freshman who was to become his wife. I'll have more to say about Nancy, but for now I'll continue tracking Larry's career. In 1964, after obtaining his M.A., Larry began working full-time for the Museum of New Mexico, doing salvage archaeology for $4,200 a year.

The arrangement between the New Mexico State Highway Department and the Museum of New Mexico included no funding for analysis or reports. As Larry puts it, the highway department paid only for artifacts to be removed from the highway right-of-way and transported to the museum. Afterwards the Museum would scrape up enough money for the archaeologist to spend a week writing a preliminary report. For surveys, there were no reports at all (but no one knew what a "survey report" should look like; the existing literature provided models only for excavations). Immediately after finishing a survey, or a week or so after finishing an excavation, it was time to return to the field—which therefore continued year-round. While away from home, archaeologists often stayed in motels or rented rooms—but where those didn't exist, they camped out.

Highway salvage archaeology focused on Ceramic period sites; to be excavated, Preceramic and Historic period sites had to be exceptional. Crew members for excavations consisted of local laborers, who on or near reservations were frequently Native Americans. Larry recruited laborers by putting ads in papers, by asking around locally, or even by hiring work-release inmates doing time for public drunkenness, and other misdemeanors. This labor pool worked better than today's archaeologists might expect, because the archaeologists took all the notes while their laborers excavated. The locals usually quickly picked up a feel for excavating and with the one or two professionals doing all the writing, the field notes were consistent.

The early crews were exclusively male. Larry hired his first female laborers in 1965, while working at Jemez Springs. Larry began with a crew of work-release inmates, but fired them after they failed to perform. In need of replacements, Larry hired several Jemez Pueblo women who had been replastering their church. Their work convinced Larry that hiring female laborers was an option.

By 1966 Larry was making about $3.00 an hour, working around the state for the Museum of New Mexico. While on the Ormond Site that year, Larry was visited by Gwinn Vivian, whom Larry had met while a freshman at UNM.[4] After seeing Larry's work, Vivian offered him a job at the Arizona State Museum. In a 1966 letter to George Gumerman, Vivian (1966) had this to say:

> Laurens (Larry) C. Hammack will be hired in July on a full time basis as Assistant Highway Salvage Archaeologist. Larry has worked for several years as a salvage archaeologist (primarily highway) for the Museum of New Mexico and most recently completed the Cliff Project near Silver City. He has an M.A. from New Mexico and a number of publications to his credit. ... He will be based in Tucson but will work throughout the state ... [Vivian 1966].[5]

The same letter announced that for the upcoming fiscal year, the annual highway salvage budget for the entire state would be raised from $40,000 to $50,000.

Larry informs me that his starting salary at ASM was $6,000 a year. He must have felt that he had made it, because that year he bought an air-conditioned pickup truck, complete with camper shell, from the center space of a dealer's show room. This cherry of a truck set him back $2,800.

When Larry made the move to Tucson, Arizona's highway salvage program was already underway, having been created by movers and shakers including Bob Stiffler (an ADOT engineer and that agency's first environmental planner), Emil Haury, Ray Thompson, and Ned Danson. The work was divided between the Museum of Northern Arizona and the Arizona State Museum, along their traditional research boundary, the Mogollon Rim. Part of Larry's assignment was to make it more systematic, including by routinely surveying for sites before projects. (At first this hadn't happened; institutions had focused salvage work on sites they knew about already.) Several times a year, Larry received planning documents from ADOT and used those to identify which highway alignments would need studies. Because there was no regulatory structure at the time, Larry decided which highway alignments he would survey, and which of the sites he would excavate.

ADOT ordered Larry to keep paperwork to an absolute minimum, so ADOT wouldn't get documents that it would have keep. And, as had been the case in New Mexico, the funding didn't extend to analysis and report preparation. Larry suspects that many of today's archaeologists simply don't understand that back then, archaeologists were not given time to analyze artifacts and write full reports. Instead, Larry turned to University of Arizona graduate students to write up his highway salvage results, as M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations. Once again, Larry found himself doing fieldwork most of the year.[6]

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Now back to Nancy—who, as Miss Nancy Stopper, met Larry Hammack on her first day of class as a freshman at UNM. Larry was Frank Hibben's T.A. and Nancy was one of the hundreds of students in Hibben's introductory anthropology class. One of Larry's delights was to design multiple-choice tests that no one would score perfectly on, but one student kept doing just that. Larry responded by knocking off one point from the test, on the grounds that he didn't like the way she spelled her last name. Despite this beginning—or perhaps in part because of it—they became an item. They wed on June 7, 1964, after Nancy was graduated *cum laude* from UNM and after Larry obtained his M.A. The ceremony took place in the ruined church at Pecos National Monument; Larry claims that at one point Nancy's veil caught in some cactus, leading to a burst of swearing by the bride. Afterwards, Florence Hawley Ellis hosted their reception, cooking much of the food herself. For their honeymoon, Larry and Nancy camped out near Aneth, Utah while excavating a site for a highway salvage project. They lived mostly on boiled mutton, were often sick, and cooled off by bathing in the San Juan River.

Like Larry, Nancy chose her career early in life. At one point her father was stationed in Israel and the family toured Greece on their way home. After seeing the Greek ruins, Nancy decided to become a classical archaeologist. This being the 1950s, and she being a girl, the reaction to her announcement was incredulity. Nonetheless, Nancy pursued her dream, securing early admittance to Bryn Mawr. Her father decided to save a wad of money by sending her to the University of New Mexico instead. Thus she found herself in Hibben's office on her first day of class, on a collision course with her future husband.

Although archaeology was then a man's world, female students were allowed to take part in anthropology club trips and field schools. Nancy wanted to minor in geology but was unable to

do so, because the UNM geology department had a policy banning women from geology field trips. Needless to say, there were no female geology majors at UNM.

When I asked Nancy how women became archaeologists back then, she instantly replied, “Marry an archaeologist.” As we followed up on her comment, it became clear that even under that approach, there were no regular jobs in field archaeology for women. (To adopt the mind set of the day: even with the opportunities created by salvage work, there were still not enough field jobs for every man who wanted one.) Instead, being married to an archaeologist gave women a permanent foot in the door—as volunteers if nothing else. Nancy repeatedly served as Larry’s unpaid field assistant (among other things, she usually did his site maps). If the crew wasn’t eating at restaurants, Nancy did the cooking. Under the nepotism rules applying to the Museum of New Mexico in the 1960s, Larry’s job prevented Nancy from getting a paid job anywhere in the state museum system.

One example of how projects worked back then was the Cliff Highway Salvage Project of 1965. The crew stayed in a recently abandoned ranch house—albeit a rather fancy one, built by an heiress. Originally there was to be no per diem for the crew, but Larry secured some food money on the condition that Nancy would do the cooking for free. Nancy fixed breakfast for the crew; once the breakfast dishes were done, she joined the excavation work for a couple of hours, until it was time to return to the ranch house to start supper.

In those days, archaeologists’ wives serving as camp cooks was a common pattern. Larry remembers that when he worked at Navajo Reservoir, Ed Dittert’s wife prepared the meals despite being an awful cook. Every Friday, to take care of leftovers, she would make soup out of everything that hadn’t been eaten earlier in the week—including the leftover lettuce.

During the interview, Nancy called up a few memories of her days as the cook for the Cliff project. The crew brought in two refrigerators; one was for food, while the other was exclusively for Mexican beer purchased in Columbus. Fellow archaeologists often visited the project, and would stay with the crew and share their meals. Because the funding for food was so limited, Larry asked visitors to help cover the cost of their food. Nancy recalls that when Larry put the touch on Helene Warren, Helene didn’t come up with any cash. Soon afterwards, though, Helene mailed them a quarter.

Nancy recalls that it was a little scary working alone in the abandoned ranch house, while the crew was at the site. One day she returned the house to find an illegal immigrant, who in his hunger had broken in to steal some food. To escape being alone with him, far from any help, Nancy convinced the man that Larry would give him a job—then drove the man to the site, where the rest of the crew could protect her as he was sent on his way.

After college, Nancy returned to the UNM fold on occasion, to serve as a teaching assistant for archaeology field schools. She reports that one of her main jobs was to keep female students from getting pregnant, including by doing bed checks. In those days colleges acted *in loco parentis* and could be sued by parents if a coed became pregnant. Nancy’s male counterpart, Ted Frisbie, shared this responsibility, which he fulfilled by handing out condoms to the males.

From time to time, Nancy did get "real" jobs, albeit on a temporary basis. Her first such job after college was for Al Hayes, doing lab work for National Park Service excavations at Gran Quivira. At the time her office was in the old federal post office in downtown Santa Fe, now the IAIA museum. (Larry recalls visiting the dig, and being so distracted by what was going on that he drove his pickup into an open kiva.) In 1968, for the first time, Nancy was paid for her work as Larry's field assistant, albeit under the table; while at Las Colinas, Nancy was added to the ADOT books as a right-of-way encroachment inspector. Later that year, she was paid to serve as the assistant director of the first Black Mesa field school. While living in Tucson, Nancy went back to school for an M.A. in cultural resource management, which she received in 1978.

* * *

Looking back, Nancy feels that Florence Hawley Ellis consciously worked to get Larry and Nancy to the altar. Nancy reports that Florence Lister had the same feeling about Ellis's role in Florence's marriage to Bob. Ellis had concluded, they believe, that a woman trying to succeed in archaeology had one of two choices: she could give up all hope of personal life, as Ellis had, or she could marry an archaeologist and thus stay involved in the profession despite choices like having children. Ellis's match-making was not some romantic impulse but an attempt to allow her brightest students to survive in archaeology, without having to make the terrible choice Ellis had made. Thus it is that Ellis not only encouraged the marriage between Larry and Nancy, she paid for and cooked most of the food for their reception.

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In 1979 Larry and Nancy Hammack again became archaeological pioneers, by founding Complete Archaeological Services Associates. CASA started in Oracle, where the Hammacks had lived since 1969. In 1981, they moved CASA to Cortez, Colorado. I asked Larry what led them to form a private company, back when that was still a novel concept. He responded that for his existing job, "The handwriting was on the wall." As part of changes then underway, keeping his job would mean moving from Tucson from Phoenix, to join ADOT, and giving up fieldwork for a desk job. It was also clear that in the future, competitive bidding would replace the existing approach, in which he could assign himself projects he wanted to do. Finally, he was aware that private sector archaeology was an option, because Lyle Stone had come by a couple of times, trying to get a contract for highway work.[7]

When Larry quit the Arizona State Museum, his salary was more than $18,000 a year. The start-up capital for CASA consisted of Larry's retirement fund from ASM—enough, they calculated, to last them one year. Larry described this point in their lives as "scary." After a couple of small contracts, business dried up. Larry decided to visit everyone he knew in the Southwest, looking for more work. At New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, Stan Bussey had two contracts he didn't want to deal with—one for a Shell pipeline, the other for a MAPCO pipeline—so he handed those off to Larry. By the time those two jobs were done, CASA's survival was assured. At one point, Shell Oil gave CASA a retainer of $200 a day, including weekends, for two years. In exchange, Larry and Nancy found themselves working most of those days, including weekends, for two years.

For Nancy, CASA was a milestone in another way; it was the first time she had a permanent job in archaeology. Nancy is now CASA's owner.

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As I've noted, Larry's job as a salvage archaeologist meant being in the field close to 12 months a year—and since Nancy's role wasn't full-time, being separated from his family. I asked Larry whether it bothered him being away that much, but for the most part it didn't. Fieldwork called to him, he says; "It was exciting." He enjoyed the variety—working in southern New Mexico one month, near Clayton the next. And in those days, because of the lack of bureaucratic controls, it was "more fun" than it is today.

I also asked him about the money he earned as a salvage archaeologist—for example, the $4,200 a year he earned in 1964.[8] He responded that over the years, he and Nancy lived well. While living in Santa Fe they paid $85 a month for a five-room adobe in Ina Cassidy's compound on Canyon Road. During their time there, Mrs. Cassidy died and they had a chance to buy the entire compound for $25,000. Larry tried to get his father to support the deal, but the elder Mr. Hammack couldn't bring himself to invest in "mud huts." The most recent sale of the same compound fetched millions of dollars.

Back then, travel support was also adequate—usually. Archaeologists often camped out but if motel rooms or rented rooms were available, those were paid for. Per diem was at least close to food expenses. Larry does remember one survey where the client hadn't paid promptly, so there was no per diem. After each eight-hour work day, the archaeologists picked up soda pop bottles along the road, so they could cash in the bottles for money to eat.

I asked Larry about how he had viewed his long-term prospects in archaeology, back when he started out. He said that when he was an undergraduate, only two career paths seemed likely: people with Ph.D.s went on to teaching jobs, while people with M.A.s went on to become museum curators. By the time Larry finished school, though, salvage archaeology had become routine enough to offer a third option, which Larry preferred because he wanted to be in the field. Larry tells me that he didn't worry about whether he could make a career of salvage work; he enjoyed the work and left it at that.

Looking back, Larry clearly derives satisfaction from his years in highway archaeology. He believes (correctly, I'm sure) that highway archaeology has contributed more to our understanding of Southwestern prehistory than any other research program. He also views his highway salvage jobs as a seedbed for professional development, and can rattle off the names of assistants who went on to become prominent contract or academic archaeologists.

I asked Larry whether he had met most of the Southwest archaeologists he knew at the Pecos Conference. He responded that back then, "You knew everyone" already. He elaborated by saying, "I knew every archaeologist in New Mexico." Southwest archaeologists were apparently a small enough group that "networking," including through visits to each others' projects, included everyone. Today, he says, if he goes to the Pecos Conference he knows almost no one.

I asked Larry if he had any words of wisdom to pass on, based on his long career. When it comes to regulatory requirements, his attitude is, “What you need is less, not more.” Larry never had to deal directly with permits during his highway salvage years, he excavated sites as he saw fit, and no one reviewed his reports. Not surprisingly, he chafes under current regulatory approaches. Larry also views research designs “useless” and declared, “One-by-ones are a waste of time.” He added, “If the site is going to be destroyed, dig the whole [expletive deleted] thing.” Larry felt that today, archaeologists do any number of things that are mandated by the bureaucratic process but that eat up time and money that could go into studying the resources. One of those is testing. “If a site is worthy of testing,” he told me, “It’s worthy of excavation.”

In many ways, Larry and Nancy’s careers reflect the basic changes in Southwest archaeology in recent decades: the rise of salvage archaeology, its replacement by Cultural Resource Management, the emergence of private consultants, and the opening of the field to women. As someone who came along roughly a decade after the Hammacks and their contemporaries, I benefited from the trails they blazed—sometimes literally, reaching my own projects along roads for which they did the archaeology. In the Southwest we like to speak of standing on the shoulders of giants, meaning individuals such as A. V. Kidder and Emil Haury, but we have also gotten a hand up from scores of individuals who salvaged what they could, back when salvaging was all the law allowed. Through this paper I not only want to acknowledge my debt to people like Larry and Nancy Hammack, I hope to preserve some sense of what they went through to accomplish what they did.

Acknowledgements

Larry and Nancy Hammack agreed to be interviewed for this paper, proved to be the best of company during the supper that followed, and were gracious hosts the next day at their house near Cortez. I also wish to thank Sarah Herr for inviting me to make this presentation, and for finding the 1966 letter I cite. Any errors in this paper are probably Larry’s fault.

END NOTES

[1] The first funded highway salvage program was established in New Mexico in 1954.

[2] When the Condron Field excavation made the local paper, Larry was asked to dinner by a reader whose son, then in high school, had a serious interest in archaeology. The teen-ager was Mike Marshall. From this initial contact, Mike followed Larry into archaeology and the two became friends; when Larry and Nancy wed in 1964; Mike was Larry's best man.

[3] Whatever Hibben's reputation may be today, he was an outstanding lecturer. During the interview Larry spoke of introductory classes where as the bell rang at the end of the hour, the students remained in their seats, spellbound.

One of Hibben's classroom stratagems was to illustrate the concept of brachiation by "swinging" about the front of the room, from one imaginary branch to the next. In 1969, during my first anthropology class at Prescott College, I saw Bob Euler do exactly the same thing. My fellow students and I were all impressed. What I didn't know, until my 2003 interview with Larry Hammack, was who had taught Bob Euler that trick.

[4] Gwinn was then a sophomore who, because of his father and his early exposure to archaeology, already stood out among the students.

[5] Letter from R. Gwinn Vivian, Arizona State Museum, to George J. Gumerman, Museum of Northern Arizona, May 19, 1966. Carbon copy on file in Arizona State Museum Archives, RG7, Folder 9, University of Arizona, Tucson.

[6] One of his projects, the excavations of the platform mound at Las Colinas, took place in April to September 1968, in sometimes blazing heat. Road construction wasn't looming but the mound was being destroyed by looters using a backhoe. Larry obtained $35,000 to fund the excavation—again, fieldwork only. One of the crew members was Tom Caperton, who went on to become the director of New Mexico's state monument system.

[7] Lyle Stone founded the first private sector consulting program in Arizona, and probably in the Southwest, in 1974.

[8] As director of the Museum of New Mexico, Ed Dittert was making $8,000 a year. Larry recalls thinking, at the time, that he hoped to be making as much as Dittert some day.