International Journal of Historical Archaeology, Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2002 (© 2002)

Teaching the Craft of Archaeology: Theory, Practice, and the Field School

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Field schools are a rite of passage for archaeologists, the first experience of what for many is the defining activity of the discipline: fieldwork. While teaching competence in practical techniques is the minimum goal of any field school, this technical training must be situated within the broader goals that drive the fieldwork. The University of Denver Archaeological Field School provides the fieldwork for the Colorado Coal Field War Archaeological Project. This project is an experiment in archaeology as political action in the present. It explores the possibility of an emancipatory archaeology through engagement with contemporary audiences and struggles. In this paper we discuss some of the ways we try to link technical training with the admittedly unusual theoretical and political goals of the project, teaching not only skills but an awareness of the responsibilities these skills should bring.

KEY WORDS: fieldschool; pedagogy; emancipatory archaeology; Colorado Coal Field War.

INTRODUCTION

Although field schools form a central educational experience for many students, little has yet been written on the pedagogy of archaeological field schools. They are something of a rite of passage, the first experience of what for many is the defining activity of the discipline: fieldwork. It is here that many students really decide if archaeology is for them, so all field schools "shake the tree" to a certain extent. Our field schools at twentieth-century coal mining sites in southern Colorado shake it harder than most. Nothing strips the romance from archaeology like excavating pits full of burned coal and rusted tin cans in temperatures that generally hover in the high 90s.

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1092-7697/02/0900-0199/0 © 2002 Plenum Publishing Corporation

In this paper we look back on 4 years of the University of Denver field school at the Ludlow Tent Colony and the Berwind Coal Camp. Like many field schools ours serves a dual purpose:

1. It is an introduction for university students to archaeological fieldwork and record-keeping in a research setting;
2. It, quite frankly, provides labor for the research initiative.

To a greater or lesser degree any field school will experience some conflict or tension between these two goals. But the theoretical and political orientation of the Colorado Coal Field War Project highlights this contradiction and forces us to confront it in a fundamental way. What follows details our ongoing effort to address the problem.

THE COLORADO COAL FIELD WAR ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD SCHOOL

The archaeological sites at Berwind and Ludlow are related to the infamous 1913–1914 labor strike in the Southern Colorado coal fields (Duke and Saitta, 1998; Ludlow Collective, 2001; Saitta *et al.*, 1999; Walker, 2000). Berwind is a coal camp; Ludlow a striker's tent colony. The southern Colorado coal field strike became fixed in popular consciousness, at least for a while, because of its climactic event, the Ludlow Massacre of April 20th, 1914. On this day somewhere around 25 men, women, and children were killed at the Ludlow Tent Colony by Colorado Militiamen and mine guards employed by the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company. Many more people died in the 10 days of open warfare that followed the massacre as strikers attacked and destroyed coal camps along the 40-mile length of the coal field. Federal troops finally restored order and the strike ended 7 months later (Foner, 1980; Local 9856 Women's Auxiliary, n.d.; Long, 1985, 1989; McGovern and Guttridge, 1972; Papanikolas, 1982; Reed, 1955; Sunsieri, 1972; Zinn, 1991). The miners eventually lost the strike, but the massacre and the national attention it attracted led to substantial changes in work safety, living conditions, and the conduct of labor disputes. These changes marginally improved the lives of working people throughout the United States (Crawford, 1995; Foner, 1980; Gitelman, 1988; Local 9856 Women's Auxiliary, n.d.; Roth, 1992).

The site of the Ludlow Tent Colony is today owned by the United Mine Workers of America, who led the 1913 strike. Ludlow is sacred ground for the Mine Workers, and for organized labor in general. It is the site of an annual memorial service to remember those who died in 1914, as well as the object of individual pilgrimages throughout the year (Walker, 1999, 2000). Berwind, on the other hand, is undergoing residential development, and before too long there will be little left of the town. Nonetheless, many of the people who lived and worked at Berwind are still alive, and are very concerned with preserving the memory of the town. They have a keen awareness that the industrial history of southern Colorado—their history—is being erased.

The work that we have done at Ludlow and Berwind has been discussed in the *United Mine Workers Journal* (UMWJ, 1999), in the AFL-CIO magazine *America@Work* (Green, 1999), and in *Labor's Heritage* (Walker, 2000). Readers who belong to the Socialist Workers Party may have noticed our mention in *The Militant* (Dork and Parker, 2000). An interpretive exhibit of artifacts and photos that we have prepared for public education purposes has been displayed for striking steelworkers in Pueblo, Colorado and for new members of the Sheet Metal Workers in Denver, and as part of an organizing campaign by the United Auto Workers in Tennessee.

The reason we mention all this is that the dialectic of present day interests and the past is central to the theoretical orientation of the Colorado Coal Field War Project. We see archaeology as having a class position in American intellectual and social life. Archaeology produces middle class ideology, creating representations of the past that are rooted in middle class interests (Trigger, 1989). Political interest is not simply distorting, but constituting. By working at Ludlow, which has such a strong working class proprietorship, we can establish a dialogue that might permit an archaeology that extends outside middle class interests (Duke and Saitta, 1998; Shanks and McGuire, 1996). We also see archaeology itself as having a class structure, wherein potentially exploitative relations between staff and students are disguised through a guild ideology of apprenticeship and training, and an ethic of self-sacrifice for the sake of the database (McGuire and Walker, 1999).

So this is the talk we talk, but what does the walk look like? This is always a good question, and here we look back on how the labor force of our project is incorporated into the project. Do we reproduce in our own practice the very relations that our project is intended to confront?

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire argues for a liberatory education rooted in the dialogue of students and teachers as equals (Freire, 1970). Freire's work has been influential in the United States. However, as so often happens with certain ideas that become influential in the United States, his arguments have been stripped of their revolutionary and political content leaving a vaguely libertarian and unchallenging residue of "dialogue" and "empowerment." Nonetheless, his vision is one that many teachers find powerful and attractive. In the Coal Field War field school we hoped for something along these lines; that is, a democratic and nonhierarchical educational experience, one where the students and teachers would participate as full equals, with the students ultimately coming to a critical consciousness about class struggle in the United States and the political economic context in which knowledge is crafted.

Obviously this is an ideal. Freirean pedagogy or any other nonhierarchical or democratic pedagogy can be impractical in an institutional setting. But it gives us something to strive for and a benchmark against which to measure our successes and our failures.

As with any project there are multiple sets of interests at play. Sometimes these are competing, sometimes complementary. For the purposes of this paper, which addresses the incorporation of the field school student into the broader project, we abstract five main interest groups:

1. The Mine Workers and organized labor;
2. The funding agency;
3. The project principals (faculty);
4. The project staff (graduate students);
5. The project labor (field school students).

To give quick thumbnail sketches, the *Mine Workers* are interested in how the project can be useful to them, educating people about Ludlow and the history of organized labor in the United States. It is this group with whom we are committed to establishing a democratic dialogue.

With the *funding agency* we operate in a realm familiar to most archaeologists: contractual requirements, economic efficiency, products, and deadlines. As the source of our money, the funding agency often has our undivided attention and their interests are *very* important to us.

The *project principals* established the theoretical orientation of the project. Archaeology as political action is a central goal. This goal is manifested as a serious effort to engage in public interpretation (through development of a permanent interpretive kiosk at Ludlow and a traveling exhibit), middle and high school outreach (through development of a traveling history trunk for use in Colorado classrooms), and teacher education (through a summer seminar on Colorado labor history). Another main concern is providing research opportunities for their students. There is also the pressure to maintain funding sources and ensure compliance with funding agency interests.

The *staff* of the project—the director and crew chiefs—are generally graduate students, most of whom, like the faculty, came to the project out of some sort of “left” tendency. Within this tendency, actual interests and concerns differ greatly. As W. H. Auden said “We go arm in arm, but never, thank God, in step.” But beyond the political commitment to the project, graduate students have a second interest. The project is a means toward dissertation or thesis material. Once again we find ourselves in the realm of production, efficiency, and deadlines. When you have one chance a year, the pressure to get your data is considerable. The political commitments of the project are important to us all, but our future academic careers are where we “live.”

The *students* themselves, like the other groups mentioned here, are diverse. They have come from all across the United States and from European countries including England, Spain, and Bulgaria. With some exceptions, most of the students do not attend this field school out of specific political or theoretical commitments. More often than not, their reasons for attending are along the lines of “the price was right” (we offer free room and board for any credit-seeking student or volunteer who commits to 6 weeks of work), or "the work sounded interesting." Students come to the field school—as they increasingly do to the university generally—with the expectation of technical training. Like the graduate students they have an anxious eye on the future, but in their case the project provides not data but skills: mapping, excavating, and record-keeping.

We do aim to craft a representation of the past through a democratic and non-hierarchical dialogue (Duke and Saitta, 1998; Saitta, 1999; Shanks and McGuire, 1996). But this dialogue has to be with the mineworkers over the students, otherwise we would merely be reproducing our class interests. The students, faculty, and staff on the field school generally share the same class-based and disciplinary understandings of the past, but the past we wish to craft through the project is rooted in the interests of the working class people of the region. Establishing a dialogue with working class people presents its own set of problems and issues that are outside the scope of this paper.

There are some other obstacles to a democratic pedagogy that should be touched on here although they are rather obvious. The first of these is the degree of commitment to the project. Generally speaking the students' commitments are limited to the 6 weeks of the field school, although one or two sometimes return for the next season. As noted, their intellectual commitment is usually not theoretical or political, but practical: they are there to learn a set of skills. As we have discovered in our regular classroom courses, many students can quickly grow weary of too much peer interaction and dialogue, and resent the time that's wasted (in their view) *not* learning from experts. They can also resent the presupposition that accompanies their being asked not *whether* they want to get involved in collective political action, but *how*. Receiving technical training from experts is the key reason most students sign up for field school, and this interest needs to be respected. Our primary educational responsibility is to turn out competent archaeologists. Yet a competent archaeologist must be aware of the theoretical and political context within which fieldwork takes place.

The students' input is also limited in that they come into a project that already has an established research design and a set of goals. Another obvious point is that there are profound differences in skills and knowledge among the students. Crafting a good, credible, and defensible representation of the past requires skills, knowledge, and experience. All else being equal, the interpretations and input of knowledgeable and experienced excavators outweighs that of inexperienced ones.

To most readers this may seem like a painstaking restatement of the obvious. Hierarchy and authority, if not always necessary, are unavoidable. But they should not be taken for granted. This paper is a product of 4 years of debate within the project. Because of the nature of the project, we are forced to continually confront these issues. There are no firm conclusions. Our grappling with them is a process, a struggle.

Authority is often necessary, and we have laid out some of the reasons why. But does this have to imply hierarchy? According to Freire, no. Nevertheless, on the Coal Field project hierarchy there is, and it is not going to go away. The very fact that the project operates within an academic setting embeds it in a set of hierarchical social relations. This structures the relations between the various interest groups that we have identified.

There are obvious power differentials between the students and the project principals and staff. The field school is a university course, with instructors, teaching assistants, students, assessments, and grading. But field schools are in many ways the ideal educational experience. You have a manageable number of students 12 hours a day. The more obnoxious aspects of the formal teaching environment are gone: the one-way lecturing, the formality, the abstract authority, the testing. Students can be taught conversationally, one on one. The setting is not overtly hierarchical, and after a while an easy familiarity develops between the students and instructors. If a student doesn't understand something it can simply be gone over again until they do understand.

Hierarchy also comes through in the other personality of the project. It is a research project, with commitments to funding agencies and also to provide data, particularly for the graduate students. The need to "produce" is often in conflict with the educational goals of a field school. It is easy to teach the students enough to make them good diggers and then put them to work generating data for someone else's academic career. This must be a temptation on many research-oriented field schools.

So the hierarchy is always there. Pretending it is not merely mystifies very real social relations and the very real possibility of exploitation. Nor should we take it for granted, making it something natural and given. We feel the best solution is to open the project to the students at all levels. Staff meetings are open to the students, and they are encouraged to attend. Even if they cannot actively participate in much of the decision-making, they can at least see it in action. The decisions of the field school should not arrive fully formed in the morning, ready for the day's work. The students should get to see the often very messy process by which decisions are made, and as their knowledge and confidence increases they should be welcomed to participate in the process. There are different sets of interests to be negotiated, and compromises to be made. We weigh the next step to be taken in the light of what the union wants, what the funding agency wants, what we want, who the landowner is, and whether the afternoon thunderstorms will hold off for another week. In a very practical sense, by opening this process up to the students and making it visible, we highlight the interrelationship of fieldwork, research design, and the real world. Archaeology in the real world rarely involves the seamless movement from research design to fieldwork. The real world does not consist of knowledge awaiting discovery, and science is not a cookbook procedure whereby verification results from the application of a correct method (e.g., Bhaskar, 1986, 1989; Ollman, 1977; Sayer, 1987).

Opening up staff meetings to the students is a small step but an important one for integrating mental and manual labor on the project. Although our sense is that the students generally find the meetings rather tedious, our course evaluations indicate that this is one aspect of the field school that the students appreciate. Theoretical issues become much more real when they are applied, and when you take the time to show how they are applied on the ground.

We should note that while it is important to show the messiness, uncertainty, and negotiations that go into a real-world research project, we run very real risks. Depending on the students and the circumstances, we may in fact be challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world is or, alternatively, we may look like idiots. Those of us in the so-called "softer" sciences need to be especially careful so that we don't send students running off to fields where practitioners supposedly have their acts more together, like the physical sciences, engineering, or business.

Seeing how a representation of the past is crafted internally, through negotiation and dialogue between the different factions and interests that make up the project, is one part of the picture. The other part is engaging the students with the political construction of the past outside the academic orientation of the project, showing them the importance of the past to the working class people of the area, as well as to the more traditional middle-class audience for archaeology.

As students become more familiar with the history and archaeology of the strike they help handle public interpretation. They take visitors through the site talking about the history and what we are doing, and also listening to what the visitors have to say. Although most of the visitors to the Ludlow Massacre Memorial merely pulled off at the highway marker and are completely unaware of what happened at the site (they often come expecting the site of an "Indian Massacre"), many are local people or working people making a kind of pilgrimage because Ludlow is important to them.

Students also act as docents of a sort during the annual United Mine Workers memorial service at Ludlow. This is a big event that attracts union members and sympathizers from all over Colorado and adjacent states. High ranking UMWA officials speak at the service. They are joined on the dais by one of the principal archeologists, who also speaks. For the past 4 years we have displayed our interpretive exhibit on the history and archaeology of Ludlow at the service. Students rotate the job of standing at the exhibit to answer questions and to listen to the people who have something to say, of which there are quite a few. Since the artifacts are not covered the students also act as a kind of security, primarily keeping children from playing with the display.

In 2000 we took our exhibit to the United Steel Workers union hall in Pueblo. The steelworkers there have been locked out of work for the past 2 years by Rocky Mountain Steel, which was formerly Colorado Fuel & Iron, the company largely responsible for the Ludlow Massacre. The history of Ludlow is very important to the steelworkers and they feel strong parallels with their current struggle. Along with our exhibit this occasion featured talks by the steelworkers, followed by dinner in the union hall. Obviously it is unrealistic throwing groups of college students and steelworkers together for one evening and expecting anything other than some awkward conversation. But it does expose the students to the current reality of labor struggle in the United States. The evening also meant a great deal to the steelworkers. The chance to lay their case before the students was important to them. They know that most people's knowledge, at least for the middle class, comes almost entirely from antiunion sources. This event was a big step in our efforts to establish a dialogue with working class audiences.

CONCLUSION

Any project is a compromise, or negotiation, between different interests and goals, be they research goals, production schedules, budgetary constraints, or educational responsibilities. Compared to most university educational settings, archaeological field schools are pretty good. But however much they fall at the fringes of institutional teachings, they are within this framework. Ours is a project dedicated to labor struggle and praxis. We are deeply committed to the project's scholarly goals. However, the contradictions of using student labor to conduct this research are not easily swept under the rug. We cannot naturalize these contradictions by assuming that this is just the ways things are. Nor can we mystify them by pretending that these contradictions do not exist and that we are all equally positioned within the project. In making the negotiations and debates that affect the fieldwork visible to the students, the students can on a very practical level see the implementation of research designs in the real world and better understand the nature of archaeological work.

By engaging the students with the working people who have an interest in the history of the site, the knowledge we create ceases to be an abstract exercise. Rather, it becomes something consequential for, and perhaps useful to, people today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The archaeological fieldwork at Ludlow and Berwind is supported by grants from the Colorado Historical Society-State Historical Fund (CHS-SHF) and the Office of Special Programs at the University of Denver. Public interpretive work is supported by CHS-SHF and the Walter Rosenberry Fund of the Division of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at the University of Denver. Summer teacher education is supported by the Colorado Endowment for the Humanities. Trinidad State Junior College has been a valuable partner in this work. None of this research and outreach would be possible without the support of The United Mine Workers of America.

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