From Winter Doldrums to Winter Counts: Politics and Historical Archaeology

Elizabeth Prine

I began the research for this paper two years ago, as part of the process of becoming competent in historical-period archaeological research. The work of familiarizing my "prehistoric self" with historical archaeology has been interesting and exciting, but I have also found it frustrating and challenging. Fortunately, I believe that these are the characteristics of work that is worth doing; nonetheless, I find that certain questions have yet to be answered to my satisfaction. What are the goals and purposes of historical archaeology? Why do we pursue this field of inquiry? How can we best focus our work, theoretically and methodologically, to fit our goals? Finally, what can we do about the problems that arise when non-archaeologists commodify knowledge about the past? This paper is a discussion of these problems and some possible solutions. It focuses on several examples in which the purveyors of archaeological information did and did not foreground the implications inherent in their choice of theoretical models and archaeological sources, and the ways in which these choices affected the resultant versions of the past. While I believe that the examples I have chosen to discuss are interesting and enlightening, they are by no means the only examples—by archaeologists or non-archaeologists—that could be mentioned.

Historical archaeology has evolved over the last 30-odd years from Ivor Nöel Hume's "handmaiden to history," to Jim Deetz' belief that it is worthwhile in its own right, especially when we study periods about which little is known from the historical record (Nöel Hume 1964, 1969, 1991; Deetz 1977, 1988, 1991). Today the majority of historical archaeologists would probably side with Deetz, although many would further problematize the theory and practice of the discipline. Work by Mark Leone (Leone 1982; Leone and Potter 1992), Mary Beaudry (Beaudry 1988; Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski 1991), Ann Yentsch (Yentsch 1991a, 1991b), Suzanne Spencer-Wood (Spencer-Wood 1987, 1991a, 1991b), Barbara Little (Little 1992), and Margaret Purser (Purser 1987, 1989, 1991) illustrates this trend. We seem to have reached consensus that the goal of historical archaeology—indeed, of all archaeology—is to gather, examine, and interpret evidence from the past. However, the purpose of archaeology—its *raison d'être*—is still the focus of debate.

Why do archaeology? Should archaeology be done for preservation's sake? To gain "pure scientific knowledge" ? To produce universal laws of human behavior? Because it is, as Jim Deetz has often said, "the most fun you can have with your pants on"?[1] While I agree that these are all reasonable justifications for doing archaeology, I believe that the purpose of archaeology should be to give ordinary people—the descendants of the people we purportedly study—some of the tools necessary to combat societal and cultural hegemonies. One way to do this is to publicize the information we gather about the past to as wide an audience as possible.

Elizabeth Prine, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720

There are two major critiques of this point of view. The first is that our primary role as scholars is to further knowledge without regard to the lay public. While I agree that so-called "pure research" is important, it is clear that no scholarly work is done in a societal vacuum. However much we might occasionally wish it to be, we all know that we ride political tides originating both within the university, as with the current budget crisis in higher education, and from without, as shown by recent changes in leadership at the National Endowment for the Humanities.[2] The second critique is that archaeology is unimportant or irrelevant to people today. My response to this is that we all live in a world system in which corporations and other institutions have as much or more power over our lives as we do—and that this is the case for all of us, whether archaeologists or lay folk. This situation merits the exploration and analysis of the history of the world system, regardless of whether the exploration is pursued by economists, historians, or anthropologists of history.

The close of the twentieth century is characterized in part as an era in which nearly everything has been commodified, including knowledge. Yet despite intense analysis of the "behavior" of many commodities, knowledge-as-commodity had been studied very little. Archaeologists' commodity—our product—is information about the past. The following are three examples of historical and archaeological interpretations of past behavior, and a discussion of the characteristics they share as knowledge commodified by people other than scholars.

The first example is "traditional family values." Perhaps more aptly referred to as "created family values," these are currently a topic of public debate. The values referred to in the arguments stem from images of white, upper middle class suburbs in the 1950s. This atypical ten-year span of time, in a neighborhood hardly traditional in American culture, is exemplified by television images such as those in "Leave it to Beaver" and "The Donna Reed Show." It is consistently cited as a model of American life at its heyday regardless of its validity as a realistic model of historical behavior. Clearly, "traditional family values" are not traditional nor agreed upon, yet they have made the rounds of the media more thoroughly than Madonna's latest look or Rush Limbaugh's latest book. Certainly they affect more people in overt and covert ways than either of these two media personalities.

Another instance of the reinvention of "tradition" is the nostalgic "confirmation" of the prehistoric man-the-hunter/shaman/trader hypotheses with the discovery of "Ötzi." This man, frozen in a glacier on the (then nonexistent) border between Italy and Austria some 5,000 years ago, has also been the focus of much media attention. Just why, exactly, are we so excited about a 5,000 year old coroner's case anyway? Was Ötzi any more typical of members of his culture than you or me are of ours? Is there such a thing as a *typical* individual? Or is this the prehistoric equivalent of excavations at the homes of the "great men" (i.e., George Washington and Thomas Jefferson)?[3]

The third intriguing use of the past that I'll put forth is the emergence of Goddess Worship, a popular religious movement based on the work of the late folklorist-turned-archaeologist Marija Gimbutas of UCLA (Gimbutas 1972, 1982). While I have no quarrel with Goddess Worship, it is disturbing that archaeology—and unquestioned, essentializing, archaeology, at that—is repeatedly invoked as justification for a religion that is perfectly capable of standing on its own.[4]

Each of these examples have three qualities in common. You'll recognize that these qualities are shared to some degree by most archaeology that has been put to political use:

- They privilege. Each example privileges the role played by a single group in the past and ignores or minimizes the contributions of other groups. It discusses that group, whether white suburbanites, Neolithic men, or Goddess-worshipping agriculturists, as if they were the only inhabitants of a monolithic past.
- They naturalize. The interpretation of the past given by these examples mirrors the current status quo in American culture. This is the case even when the purpose of the interpretation is to not support the present state of affairs. For instance, Gimbutas' Goddess model shows that violence and oppression in our culture are ways to accomplish one's goals, because these methods worked exceedingly well in the past and are part of world, or at least European, heritage. Gimbutas invokes invasion by blood-thirsty Kurgans as the primary cause for change in Neolithic Europe (Gimbutas 1972, 1982); this is a straightforward prime mover model, and is terribly simplistic given the range of space and time that the model purports to cover. That its current audience of otherwise well-educated believers resists challenges to such portrayals of the past (i.e., Conkey and Tringham 1995) implies a series of problems in the ways scientific and humanistic knowledge(s) are presented to and digested by the public.
- These cases are insidious. As explanations of the archaeological record they are not just unproblematized, they are an integral part of American and international popular culture. They are repeatedly referred to by media figures and lay people alike as illustrative of the way "things have always been," and are infrequently questioned—even by organized groups with a vested interest in presentations of the past, such as feminist, African American, and gay and lesbian communities.

The above illustrations show that archaeological explanations—interpretations of the past—can be appropriated to support almost any agenda. While this is especially the case when archaeologists are not part of the recounting of the historical (or prehistoric) tale, it has also been thoroughly demonstrated in cases where archaeologists have been involved (Trigger 1980, 1984, 1985, 1989; Leone 1981, 1982; Hall 1984a, 1984b, 1993; Leone and Potter 1992). How can we combat such misuse of archaeology's authoritative voice while still presenting our stories to the public?

The simplest answer to this question is to limit "unauthorized" discussions of archaeology—to shut down the dialogue between archaeology and the public. This is of course counterproductive and unrealistic if our purpose is to inform people about the past. I offer two examples as alternatives to such a shut-down. The first example draws from a completed archaeological survey, the second is excerpted from work currently in progress. In "The Northern Cheyenne Outbreak of 1879: Using Oral History and Archaeology as Tools of Resistance," one essay in the McGuire and Paynter volume *The Archaeology of Inequality*

(1991), Douglas McDonald, Larry Zimmerman, A. L. McDonald, William Tall Bull, and Ted Rising Sun discuss a survey conducted in 1987 at the request of several Cheyenne elders. The purpose of the survey was to confirm or invalidate Cheyenne oral history reports of a series of events that took place in and near Fort Robinson, Nebraska, during the winter of 1879. The project was a cooperative attempt by archaeologists and tribal members to consider alternative forms of evidence as part of a revision of the "official" history, which had been written by the US military. The military, and therefore academically and publicly accepted, accounts relate a very different version of the story than that told by archaeologists after this study. The military account has been used for these past 100-plus years by scholars and the public to deny the validity of Cheyenne claims to the past and to their part in it. In this case, the archaeology was able to work in concert with and confirm the Cheyenne oral history reports of the events.

This use of archaeology differs from the examples above because it shares little other than its location in a political context with them. The three characteristics of commodified and mass-distributed archaeology mentioned earlier are unproblematized privileging of certain groups over others, naturalization of the status quo, and insidiousness in popular culture. Where the Cheyenne Outbreak research privileges one set of voices over another, it does so consciously and overtly. The work challenges the status quo, questioning the history as written rather than essentializing it or accepting its normalizing view of the past. Finally, this work avoids the problems of becoming insidious, and therefore impossible to question, by taking a cooperative approach. This collaboration of archaeologists and Native Americans was based on the idea that extra effort both theoretically and methodologically would prove worthwhile in order to allow alternative evidence in the form of oral history to guide the project. How to determine which resources to privilege in the final report (documentary, oral, or archaeological) and which voice(s) to foreground (Cheyenne observers' and historians', Army officers', archaeologists', or academic historians') were difficult questions to solve within accepted archaeological and historiographic methodologies. Nonetheless, their resolution resulted in a qualitatively better retelling of the events of history.

The second example of an alternative approach to what I am calling "media archaeology" is my own project, which focuses on landscapes and community. I began this study as a way to examine a place and time that have long interested me, the frontier in nineteenth-century America. Fieldwork on former frontiers in the United States and South Africa made me aware of the romantic lens through which we see and constitute "The Frontier." Parallels in the popular culture of the two places center on depictions of brave, independent white men and "their women" building families and communities in the wilderness. The myths and histories of The Frontier in both places follow well-established cycles used in heroic tales: a hero departs on a journey, is tested and transformed by adversity, and eventually triumphs through and over the hardships he has experienced.[5] The heroic image of the past is obviously problematic because it ignores or negates the experiences of those who don't fit the parameters of the prescribed narrative structure. In addition, while concepts such as "The Frontier" and "The Wilderness" have been examined elsewhere, I have found very little historical or archaeological discussion of "The Community," which is inevitably formed as the result of the hero's triumph over nature. This presents both theoretical and methodological hurdles, and of course the requisite new line of questioning—why haven't we problematized "The Community"?

What is community? How is it defined? By whom? Do communities have life cycles or use lives, as do the individuals, artifacts, landscapes, and institutions that they comprise? If so, how are they constituted—is community life cycle a concatenation of the cycles of its constituent parts, or is this a conflation of parts with a larger whole? How can we study community archaeologically? What methodology is most appropriate for answering these queries? These are the questions I pursue in my current research.

My intellectual journey began in archaeology and continued on to cultural anthropology, sociology, folklore, literature, planning and design, and landscape architecture; my theoretical train of thought has recently arrived at the depot of human and physical geography. This journey has shown me that "community" is a near-universal concept; scholars and the public both use the term as if they know what they mean by it. My work has lead to the following definition of the problem: Community shares a conceptual ambiguity with similar broadly-used but ill-defined concepts such as "the economy," "the public good," "eco-systems," and "archaeological cultures."

Most commonly, "community" is defined as a group of people who share some characteristic, quality, or goal. Beyond this, the definition fragments. The place and purpose of community has long been debated in anthropology and other disciplines, and consensus has yet to be reached on the fundamental properties of group interaction, cohesion, and boundary-making. We refer to abstract entities or ideals like "community spirit" and "community values"—terms similar to "traditional family values" in that they invoke a set of behaviors specific in time and space and essentialize and universalize them. We also invoke "community" to refer to a well-defined organization with a codified set of rules and a unique, traceable historical record, like "The Catholic Church" and "The City of New York." These two kinds of community are certainly not equivalent. The ambiguity of "community" is both its strength and its weakness. It is typical of anthropological concepts in that it represents a human universal, group interaction, that is analyzed most clearly in case-specific terms but that becomes almost too fluid to be meaningful when used to consider human behavior on a broader scale.

What is the purpose of this research on community as it relates to archaeological method and theory? The goal of my research is to arrive at a better understanding of the role of individual behavior in community formation and the ways that a community, once formed, enters into a recursive relationship with its members. Individuals rarely or never identify themselves with only one community; instead, they place themselves at the center of a series of concentric "circles of belonging." The intersections of these "lines of belonging" mark the loci of community networks. Nepotism in its myriad forms is the most common manifestation of these loci at work.

Community networks define both who one is and with whom one associates. In my work on community, I have chosen to focus on several questions, including:

- Identification with community. How do individuals come to identify themselves with a given community? How are they identified by others? Many communities are formed on the basis of ethnicity, gender, class, occupation, religion, and location or place. These "categories of being" vary widely through culture, time, and space, but seem to share the property of bounding their members. Is the major purpose of community, then, to demarcate rather than to consolidate? Alternatively, do these categories represent different aspects of a single "category of being" rather than distinct realms for study? How can we bridge the gulf between scholarly analysis of these categories and their implications for peoples' lives?

- Community's role in creating and reinforcing ideology. Membership in a given community, whether voluntary, like the Daughters of the American Revolution, or involuntary, like "communities of women," implies some commonalty with other members. Communities as entities seem to personify or advocate particular ideologies or agendas even when individual members' beliefs are at variance with the group view. How and why does a community become an entity greater than its parts? How is ideology formed and maintained at the group level while being challenged at the level of the individual? If every individual is a member of multiple, competing communities, how and why do some become hegemonic and others recede in importance?
- Finally, expression of identity or belonging in the material record. Material culture both reflects and constitutes ideological and cognitive behavior. How is the dialectic between community membership and material culture expressed? To what degree can material culture elucidate the network of communities to which every individual belongs? How are conflicts in self-identification—between individual thought and community ideology—played out in the material cultural realm?

Because these questions are fairly sophisticated given the data, and especially when one considers that little research has been done on community organization of the American frontier (see Hine 1980, Doyle 1983, Purser 1987, 1989, 1991, and Osterud 1991 for examples of completed work), methodological problems persist in the work. How do I get at this information using the available data? The rift between theory and practice in community studies is the result of the ambiguity of the concept. How do we define and clarify the dialectic between actions and interactions of individuals and the composition, maintenance, and ideologies of groups? The major task for people who study community is to find ways to bridge the gaps between different scales of analysis, from the individual to humanity. My solution to this problem is the development of a relational database to integrate different scales of information, allowing me to move more easily between units of analysis. The database itself provides the "bridge" between theoretical models of human culture and the particularistic case study or "practical" part of my research.

The data I track focuses on relatedness and exchange amongst individuals, as well as their names, genealogies, real estate holdings and dates of acquisition, membership in churches, cooperatives, businesses, fraternal organizations, farmstead types, building types, building evolution, and land use patterns. Four degrees of individual relatedness are recorded, comprising kinship, location or neighborhood, work relationships, and institutions like clubs and churches. Three kinds of exchange are tracked. Personal exchange meets the psychological and emotional needs of people. Instrumental exchange focuses on the exchange of labor and time in non-monetary situations, as when parents drive neighborhood children to school on alternating days. Monetary exchange is the third category of analysis. Clearly, the amount of information necessary to track the individuals comprising a community, through time, requires the sort of multiscalar approach afforded by a relational database. It also provides for numerous checks and cross-examinations of the reliability and validity of multiple kinds and sources of data.

I hope to reconstitute community out of these patterns of individual interactions. In effect, the database mirrors the matrix or web of social entanglements that create and maintain community. The research focuses on three complementary resources: the documentary record, surveys of architectural and land use patterns, and oral histories from residents of the area. While documentary research has provided the basic framework for the study, architectural survey provides the material culture component of the research. If the basic form of a given farmstead, house, or community building informs us as to the cognitive ideals of its builder, then the evolution of the built environment through time parallels changes in household ideology, composition, and economic well-being. I compare information from the architectural survey with land-use survey data, particularly information on dates and methods of field drainage (in 1861 much of the county was wetlands, requiring extensive modification). This strengthens the quality of the material cultural data as economic and social indicators. Oral history also provides evidence. Gathered in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, held in the University of South Dakota Oral History Collections, oral histories further elucidate changes in community and ideology; many of the people interviewed lived in the area their entire lives and can corroborate information from the documentary and material records. Information from each of these sources is being compiled into the relational database, clarifying the intersections of individual behavior, interpersonal connections, and community formation and maintenance.

In order to minimize the "noise" from interactions between locales and from long-standing historical connections prior to my study period, I work in two townships in Clay County, South Dakota. The county is generally typical of nineteenth-century American "frontier" communities from a social and historical standpoint, but also provides unique circumstances of settlement. This area in the extreme southeastern corner of the state was homesteaded beginning in 1861. The region was voluntarily cleared of Native inhabitants by treaty with the Yankton Sioux, the only Dakota-speaking group in the area never to have fought a war with the US Federal Government. Because the area was artificially "cleared" of people prior to white settlement, it provides a *tabula rasa* upon which various ethnic, religious, and economic groups spread and interacted. In particular, the processes involved in choosing land, "proving up," and establishing homesteads, farmsteads, and the accouterments of community such as churches, schools, fraternal halls, and farmers' cooperatives are recorded in various places and are available for examination.

I present this model for research as a second example of methods we can use to avoid the three pitfalls that I discussed earlier in this paper, while still fulfilling what I see as the purpose of historical archaeology: to spread information about ourselves and the past. The combination of different sources used, privileged, and questioned more or less equally should provide us with a better understanding of community as it works at a variety of scales. It should also result in a program for continued study of the problem of community in its various historical manifestations—a program that is specifically and overtly aware of the ways in which it privileges some groups rather than others and naturalizes the status quo. Through these methods, the work will challenge the "just so stories" that so often pass for history and archaeology today.

Notes

1 This sentiment came up in numerous conversations the author had with Jim Deetz while he was her graduate advisor at UC Berkeley.

2 The change I refer to is the replacement of Lynne Cheney with Jane Alexander as head of the NEH—the result of personnel changes subsequent to the election of Bill Clinton to the Presidency in 1992.

3 See Tringham (1994) for commentary on similar phenomena in archaeology elsewhere in Neolithic Europe. Because of the kinds of evidence we use, all archaeologists must generalize to some degree; however, the European past seems populated with an abundance of smooth-talking, debonair heroes, shamans, and priests—all men. One must wonder how this state of affairs came to be.

4 See Conkey and Tringham (1995) for further arguments regarding the use of archaeology to substantiate the Goddess Movement.

5 See Landau (1991) for a discussion of these cycles in accounts of human evolution.

References

Beaudry, Mary, editor

1988 *Documentary Archaeology in the New World.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Beaudry, Mary, Lauren Cook, and Stephen Mrozowski

1991 Artifacts and Active Voices: Material Culture as Social Discourse. In *The Archaeology of Inequality.* pp. 150–191. Randall McGuire and Robert Paynter, editors. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Conkey, Margaret, and Ruth Tringham

1995 Archaeology and the Goddess: Exploring the Contours of Feminist Archaeology. In *Feminisms in the Academy: Rethinking the Disciplines.* A. Stewart and D. Stanton, editors. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Deetz, James

1977 *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life.* New York: Anchor Doubleday.

1988 Material Culture and World-View in Colonial Anglo-America. In *The Recovery of Meaning: Historical Archaeology in the Eastern United States.* pp. 219–235. Mark Leone and Parker Potter, editors. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

1991 Archaeological Evidence of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Encounters. In *Historical Archaeology in Global Perspective.* pp.1–10. Lisa Falk, editor. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Doyle, Don
1983 *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois 1825–75.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Gimbutas, Marija
1972 The Neolithic Cultures of the Balkan Peninsula. In *Aspects of the Balkans: Continuity and Change*. pp. 9–49. H. Birnbaum, editor. The Hague: Mouton.
1982 *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hall, Martin
1984a The Burden of Tribalism: The Social Context of Southern African Iron Age Studies. *American Antiquity* 49(3):455–467.
1984b Pots and Politics: Ceramic Interpretations in Southern Africa. *World Archaeology* 15(3):262–273.
1993 The Legend of the Lost City: Or the Man with the Golden Balls. Unpublished seminar paper; Africa Seminar, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

Hine, Robert
1980 *Community on the American Frontier: Separate But Not Alone.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Landau, Misia
1991 *Narratives of Human Evolution.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Leone, Mark
1981 Archaeology's Relationship to the Present and the Past. In *Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of US.* pp. 5–14. Richard Gould and Michael Schiffer, editors. New York: Academic Press.
1982 Some Opinions About Recovering Mind. *American Antiquity* 47(4):742–760.

Leone, Mark, and Parker Potter Jr.
1992 Legitimation and the Classification of Archaeological Sites. *American Antiquity* 57(1):137–145.

Little, Barbara, editor
1992 *Text-Aided Archaeology.* Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

McDonald, J. Douglas, Larry J. Zimmerman, A. L. McDonald, William Tall Bull, and Ted Rising Sun
1991 The Northern Cheyenne Outbreak of 1879: Using Oral History and Archaeology as Tools of Resistance. In *The Archaeology of Inequality.* pp.64–78. Randall McGuire and Robert Paynter, editors. New York: Basil Blackwell.

McGuire, Randall and Robert Paynter, editors
1991 *The Archaeology of Inequality.* New York: Basil Blackwell.

Nöel Hume, Ivor
1964 Archaeology: Handmaiden to History. *The North Carolina Historical Review.*

1969 *Historical Archaeology*. New York: Knopf.

1991 *Martin's Hundred.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Osterud, Nancy

1991 *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Purser, Margaret

1991 "Several Paradise Ladies Are Visiting in Town": Gender Strategies in the Early Industrial West. *Historical Archaeology* 25(4):6–16.

1989 All Roads Lead to Winnemucca: Local Road Systems and Community Material Culture in Nineteenth Century Nevada. In *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture III*. pp. 120–134. Thomas Carter and Bernard Herman, editors. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

1987 Community and Material Culture in Nineteenth Century Paradise Valley, Nevada. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley.

Spencer-Wood, Suzanne

1991a Toward an Historical Archaeology of Materialistic Domestic Reform. In *The Archaeology of Inequality*, Randall McGuire and Robert Paynter, editors. pp. 231–286. New York: Basil Blackwell.

1991b Towards a Feminist Historical Archaeology of the Construction of Gender. In *The Archaeology of Gender: Proceedings of the Twenty-second Annual Conference of the Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary*. pp. 234–244. Dale Walde and Noreen Willows, editors. Calgary: University of Calgary Archaeological Association.

Spencer-Wood, Suzanne, editor

1987 *Consumer Choice in Historical Archaeology*. New York: Plenum.

Trigger, Bruce

1980 Archaeology and the Image of the American Indian. In *American Antiquity* 45:662–676.

1984 Alternative Archaeologies: Nationalist, Colonialist, and Imperialist. *Man* 19:355–370.

1985 *Natives and Newcomers*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.

1989 *A History of Archaeological Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tringham, Ruth

1994 Engendered Places in Prehistory. In *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 1(2):169–203.

Yentsch, Ann

1991a Engendering Visible and Invisible Ceramic Artifacts, Especially Dairy Vessels. *Historical Archaeology* 25(4):132–155.

1991b The Symbolic Divisions of Pottery: Sex-related Attributes of English and Anglo-American Household Pots. In *The Archaeology of Inequality*. pp. 192–230. Randall McGuire and Robert Paynter, editors. New York: Basil Blackwell.