An Archaeological Generation: View From the New Millennium

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A personal perspective of Ontario archaeology is offered, particularly of archaeological education, during the past 40 years.

I made a decision in August, 1967, to be an archaeologist. At times, I doubted whether this was a smart or even a reasonable move. There were few jobs, and most of those were part-time and had little promise of stability. But somehow, thirty-five years have passed and the magnitude of change during that period is astonishing.[1] Not surprisingly, I feel that some of that change is very good indeed and some is not.

The single most important change for the Ontario archaeological world was the inauguration of the Ontario Heritage Act in 1974, which instituted control on archaeology: the ways that archaeology is done, by whom it is done, where it is done, and what is its theoretical and practical outcome. There are many problems with the Ontario Heritage Act, as it has evolved since 1974. Some of these problems are addressed in the new (2005) revision; others remain for younger and wiser minds to resolve. It's worth remembering, however, what existed in 1970—Year 4 BA (Before the Act).

To virtually everybody in 1970, "archaeology" meant grave-hunting and treasure-hunting, often as a single operation. The impact of Howard Carter's discovery of Tut-ankh-amun's Tomb was to open the eyes of every North American to the possibility of buried treasures in unlikely places. Museums existed to lead the charge and to use their resources to purchase, extort or steal the most desirable "museum-worthy" objects. Ontario's aboriginal peoples had not made lavish use of gold and jewels, which defused interest in this area, but of course they did die. In the early days, I was approached by craftsmen who wanted to buy surplus (!) skulls to be made into television lamps and other folk arts. Needless to say, they got a lecture on the importance of human life rather than a purchase but, not surprisingly, many native people today view all archaeologists as grave robbers. It doesn't help that movies, television and popular fiction are so relentless in their promotion of this misconception.

Archaeology, in 1970, was an outdoor entertainment rather than a science. Anybody could dig in a site, so long at the landowner gave permission. If anything, sites were viewed as more-or-less commercial opportunities for the landowner and archaeologist alike. Members of the Connecticut Archaeological Society, for example, refused to divulge the location of their personal sites, lest some unscrupulous colleague would sneak in and steal their goodies; they were happy, however, to sell spare artifacts. One of the most rigorously-defined sections of the Ontario Heritage Act deals with protection of site locations, to the point that municipal governments and even landowners may be surprised to discover that their ability to alter their own property is limited by an unsuspected archaeological site.

Digging methods on an average site ranged from carefully plotted and measured trowel work to big shovels and screens. People showed up to dig when they felt like it, sometimes bringing along families and pets as assistants. Records of excavation tended to be sparse and handwritten in pencil (now almost illegible). There were many well-planned excavations, such as those at Cahiague-Warminster or the Ontario Archaeological Society's Beeton and MacLeod site projects, which utilized grid systems of notation that gave some coherence to the provenience of finds and records—assuming that the site datum could still be located. Poorly-planned excavations were simply holes dug at likely locations. The Roebuck Site was likened by Col. Jim Pendergast to a World War II minefield.

Excavation on early sites was usually limited to middens. The survival of pre-European housing and other settlement remains was a new concept; even experts such as William Wintemberg of the National Museum of Canada failed to recognize patterns of post moulds. The young Norman Emerson, ably assisted by Helen Devereux, introduced the concept of settlement patterns at the Cahiague-Warminster Site, producing the first reliable archaeological record of what we would now call a typical Iroquoian village.

There was considerable disagreement about the ultimate ownership of the finds: some excavators felt entitled to keep whatever they found. Sadly, this included university professors and museum curators, who took the opportunity to remove selected items for their own personal exhibits. Although most excavation was ostensibly for the benefit of the public, this worthy intention was often frustrated by the fact that archaeological analysis is less appealing than excavation and, as we know, takes much longer to do. Volunteer workers washed and labeled many thousands of artifacts, sometimes using arcane coding systems without leaving any clues about their interpretation. Conservation consisted of packing artifacts into boxes and storing them in a convenient (and hopefully dry) attic, basement or barn.

Data recording in 1970 consisted of many thousands of 3-by-5 inch index cards with pictures of artifacts, sometimes accompanied by more detailed measurements and observations. I should note, of course, that there is one huge advantage to this system: it is immune to computer viruses and disk failures and it survives many sorts of environmental catastrophe. As well, it's relatively easy for the modern analyst to go back and re-examine a now-inaccessible collection. Nevertheless, sorting thousands of index cards was slow and often inaccurate, especially in collections from large sites. "Analysis" tended to consist of counting examples of a single class of artifacts, divided into Types, which were deemed to be culturally or chronologically sensitive.

On Iroquoian sites, this meant ceramic rim sherds. Norman Emerson insisted that one could sort rim sherds into piles by Type, allowing the

analyst to complete his evaluation of a site assemblage of 200 rims in less than one hour. (Of course, a site like Cahiague-Warminster with its 4,390 rim sherds took a bit longer.) In pre-ceramic sites, analysis was generally restricted to projectile points; other tools and chipping detritus might be counted. Before Dr Howard Savage established his faunal osteology program at the University of Toronto in 1971, bone was generally divided into human and "other." Until Gary Crawford established his archaeobotany program at the University of Toronto in 1980, botanical macro-remains were counted and micro-remains were generally unrecognized.

All archaeological analysis was hand work. Computers, in 1970, were huge machines that filled large, heavily air-conditioned rooms. Data was usually input through punched cards, one or more card per artifact, and card jams were a daily occurrence. Hard disks were new and very expensive, so programs had to be individually loaded as well. Since even large main-frame computers had a working memory (we would say RAM) of less than a megabyte, much of it occupied by the systems software which operated the computer itself, this left very little memory for analysis. Programs to organize data were generally derived from biostatistics, with their heavy focus on normal distributions. The most advanced scientific methods of analysis, such as the Robinson-Brainerd coefficient of similarity or Deetz's "battleship-shaped curves" produced seriations—lists of sites equated, on shaky evidence, with chronology. An ordered list of sites gave all the information that science required in 1970. Every archaeologist dreamed of a computer that would accept punch cards and produce a reliable seriation! Few even dreamed of what is now standard in the field: systems with graphics interfaces or the seemingly limitless possibilities of the Web.

A constant problem in 1970 was chronology. A seriated list might be chronologically ordered but it did not represent real dates. Radiocarbon dating had been invented in the 1950s but it was still a rare and very expensive operation that required (and totally destroyed) very large carbon samples. My first archaeology textbook (Martin et

al. 1947) was organized around the so-called Midwestern Taxonomic System, which created and seriated groups of sites based on similarities of artifact styles but relied heavily on intuition for estimating their ages or durations. Unless a seriation could be tied down by showing the presence of non-intrusive European trade items at one end, its orientation remained uncertain: whether a sequence led in time from A to B, or from B to A, was often a matter of speculation.

One change that had particular importance for me was the impact of the women's movement. Archaeology in 1950 wanted men with strong backs who were willing to dig all day in exchange for their meals. Women were valuable assets to a dig: they could cook, clean, shop, keep the financial records, and wash and label the artifacts. Without a woman, typically the wife of the director, these chores would have to be done by a "scholar." The director was expected to outwork, outshout and outdrink the rest of the crew. Respected archaeologists like Noel Hume (1967) complained about the impact of women on archaeological sites; their high-heeled shoes punched holes in the ground. Thankfully, this perspective was already changing by 1970, thanks to the pioneering work of women archaeologists such as Elsie Jury, Martha Ann Kidd, Maggie Tushingham and Helen Devereux.

By 1970, archaeology was beginning to expand in Ontario, notably through the efforts of Prof. J.Norman Emerson and the Ontario Archaeological Society (OAS). The University of Toronto opened a formal graduate program in archaeology in 1966, and I was part of its first class. We were a very mixed group, as I recall— four men and three women, from a variety of nationalities and educational backgrounds. The department had very little idea what to do with us, and individual professors disagreed, sometimes vigorously, about the methods and goals of our education. There was no formal field training. After one month of exploratory discussions, we were all drafted to supervise Norman Emerson's fall "Blitz" dig at the Cahiague (now Warminster) site. We learned survey and excavation methods on the fly, elated by the thrill of the exercise and hampered only a little by the faulty theodolites

(purchased from Hercules Discount) and the inevitable snowstorm.

We were deeply concerned about the issues of the day: protecting archaeological resources from looters and the need for more resources to save threatened sites. Emerson estimated that there might be as many as 500 prehistoric sites in Ontario! The Ontario Heritage Act provided some means of addressing these two concerns, though its major thrust was (and to a considerable extent remains) focused on architectural rather than archaeological remains. We were becoming aware of the impact of population growth and urban spread, though the mega-city of today far exceeds our early vision.

Two issues were recognized but generally ignored in practice: concerns about the rights of aboriginal people to the property and personae of their ancestors, and issues of environmental protection. I think we would all have agreed that these were worthy and important matters, but we had no idea how they might be promoted. The grass-roots activism that marks both issues today was virtually non-existent in 1970.

For archaeology, the principle impact of the Ontario Heritage Act has been the rise of the archaeological consulting industry (often misnamed cultural resource management [CRM]— archaeologists are too rarely given the authority to manage the cultural resources they identify) with its accumulation of vast amounts of archaeological information, visual images, maps, data files and artifact collections. What we failed to anticipate was that the previous problems of archaeological data management (too often poorly executed, curated and reported, due to lack of resources) would be increased rather than decreased by the provisions of the Ontario Heritage Act and the parsimony of budget-minded provincial governments. The act made little provision for preservation, curation, storage and communication of archaeological knowledge. Everything relied upon the resources of the individual consultant and the increasingly overstressed local museum system.

We visualised a world of information that could be used for research and for public education programs; and the process of acquiring this data would be a sharing of resources, bringing the field together.

Archaeological consultants would communicate their information freely in order to build a common database, and universities would contribute regular updates on new techniques. We never anticipated that this data would remain almost unused, except as a point reference for further surveys. We never thought that consultants, tied by the need for the lowest possible cost, might not enter into the communication and education network. Certainly, we never anticipated the isolating effect of competitive business procedures.

In 1970 (or very shortly thereafter), there were six provincial archaeological regional offices located in London, Toronto, Ottawa, Sault Ste Marie, Thunder Bay and Kenora. Each regional office had one or more full-time staff archaeologists with a budget for equipment, office support, publications, field work and curation. Provincial agents were young, enthusiastic and dedicated to the promotion of archaeology in their regions. Working from these centres, archaeology developed its first real appreciation of the scale and variety of Ontario's prehistoric peoples. The demise of the regional system in recent years, and its translation into a filing and sorting operation, has been a sad loss to Ontario archaeology.

At the same time, government cutbacks systematically undermined our universities, museums, archives and other agencies of traditional culture. While higher education has become a necessity rather than a luxury for most careers, the Internet appears to be replacing libraries and archives where information is stored and disseminated. Administrators in the public and private sectors are prone to reject real-time archaeological research and education, which are seen as cumbersome and not cost-effective, in favour of "virtual reality," with its implication of minimal maintenance costs.

The newly revised Ontario Heritage Act (2005) requires a master's degree for licensing, but does not distinguish between degrees. It is possible to get a master's degree in archaeology by the Internet, an idea which I find as deeply disturbing as the notion of virtual training in brain surgery. Is a person with a MA in Classics or Near Eastern Studies (perhaps entirely based on translation of texts) necessarily more capable of conducting archaeological research in Ontario than an experienced BA or an avocational researcher? No, it is just easier for an overworked government employee to classify and the result of that classification cannot be legally challenged.

A related public response, I think, is the decline of clubs, organizations and interest-based meeting groups. It is widely observed that young people do not join clubs, nor do they read newspapers or books. Organizations of all sorts, including the OAS, have found that their membership is aging and declining in numbers. This is sad for personal interest groups like the OAS, but it is deeply disturbing in its implication for public concerns. The majority of my students look to the Internet for their political insights and their extra-curricular entertainment and education; CDs, DVDs and video games have replaced the live concert or even movies as entertainment venues. Everybody is staying wired and staying home.

In 1970, television addiction was viewed as a dangerous trend. Increasingly, today's young people abandon television in favour of computer-animated movies and videos. I find these media great fun myself, but I have some concerns about the computer revolution. Like drugs, these media are vastly appealing on the surface and highly addictive, so that the user becomes bored with a reality that is less dramatic and requires much more work. One impact of the Internet, with its vast expansion of accessible information, has been a decrease in insight and sophistication as young people are unable to distinguish between virtual reality and real reality.

Personally speaking, the most irritating aspect of the virtual revolution is that the public perception of archaeology in 2005, as in 1970, involves looking for burials and buried treasure! Admittedly, movies and video games do comparatively little damage to the environment, or to native Canadians' sensibilities, but it is annoying to see that we have spent thirty years and made so little progress in the public mind. Despite our best efforts, we are still pictured as soldiers of fortune, heavily armed (or endowed with magical powers—I'd like some of those!) and pitted against world-destroying evil agencies for the acquisition of vast wealth. Somehow, that just isn't archaeology as I know it.

To conclude: the serious problems of 1970 have been replaced by the serious problems of 2005. We have dealt with many important issues during the past 35 years, and we can all feel proud of the results of these actions, but new challenges have arisen. The archaeologists of 2040 will face problems that we, with all of our present sophistication, have never imagined. For today, we must continue to press for government support for archaeological conservation and storage, for data dissemination and for public education. To the best of our combined abilities, we must act to leave a healthy archaeological environment for future generations.

Endnote

[1] My memories reflect primarily the Ontario archaeological scene, of course, because that's the area that I experienced. Whether these events had relevance for other parts of Canada must be addressed by others.

References Cited

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On offre une perspective personnelle de l'archéologie en Ontario, particulièrement de l'éducation en archéologie, au cours des 40 dernières années.

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