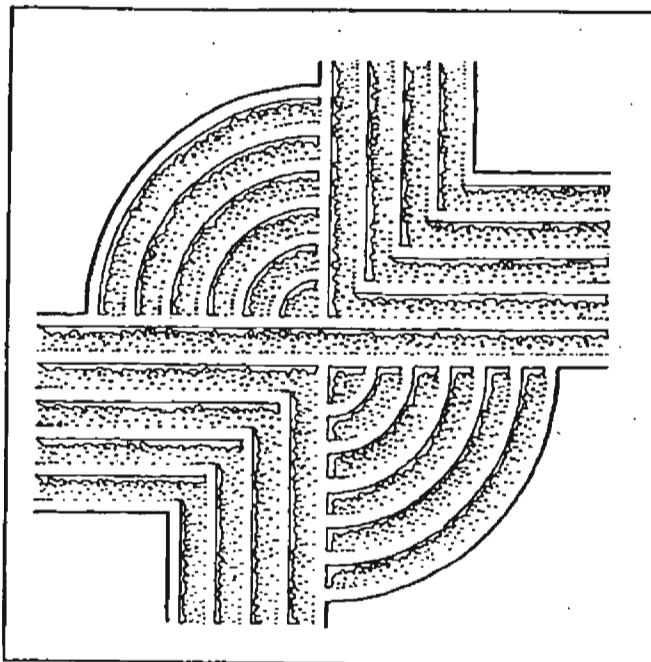


YOU ACTUALLY GET PAID TO DO THIS?



RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 139

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Chicora Foundation Research Contribution 139

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Two weeks ago today, our display was set up for a conference on Kiawah Island. As I stood with the display, I was approached by an intelligent professional woman. She examined the display, and expressed her interest and amazement at what had been discovered. When she then discovered that I work as an archaeologist with Chicora, her mouth fell open and she said with surprise, "You mean you actually get paid to do this?"

I laughed, because I am asked this question about once a month. Who asks it? Attorneys, truck drivers, physicians, repairmen, geologists, biologists, foresters, realtors, sales people, business men, and college professors, among others.

What does this question mean? It depends on the way it's asked:

the envious: you can actually get a job working outside, and digging up artifacts? How much do you sell these things for?

the suspicious: oh, you're a college graduate, you think you know everything, and you'll try to stop me from using my metal detector, and take away my goodies.

the incredulous: why are you doing this? We already know what our history is -- my family has lived in this town since it was founded, and I can tell you exactly what happened here!

the angry: I can't believe you have to dig this up -- it's just a pile of shell (or brick, or pottery) . . . don't you know how much money I'm losing here?

When I'm asked this question, I force myself to laugh. But inside, I'm gripped with an icy chill -- for here is yet another person who has just told me that the science of archaeology does not have any merit in the real world.

At a recent artifact identification program, a pothunter, or excuse me, a "fossil hunter" told us outright that he and his colleagues knew more about Indians and their artifacts than archaeologists. He felt we were "too scientific", and "don't give the Indians enough credit". He then proceeded to tell us, and the audience, about the hieroglyphic writing the South Carolina Indians used. And that the messages they wrote on rocks can be found in local streams. And he was believed.

In November, an international meeting was held in Washington, D.C., and several American and British archaeologists spoke about their efforts to get archaeology into the schools. In the middle of the American presentations, a noted British archaeologist stood up and said, "Do you mind if I make just one comment? No wonder you Yanks can't get the public interested in archaeology -- you're all so bloody boring!"

The only people who never ask me, "you actually get paid for this" are children, and teachers. These two groups of people are in the mainstream of the learning process, and they accept, without question, that their world needs archaeologists and anthropologists to help us understand the world we all live in. Their's is not a world of greed, suspicion, and profit making, but a world of learning and sharing and cooperation. In their world, learning about the past, and sharing that information, is a natural and good thing.

So how do we, as a profession, improve our image? Right now, as a group, we are seen as secretive, greedy, egotistical, and boring. We are, along with nuclear physicists, the embodiment of effete intellectual snobbery. We have created this concept by our actions about our work. How did this happen? Most of us keep our sites closed to the public, ostensibly because of isolated location or danger to the site. In reality, I think most of us just don't want the bother of dealing with the public. And that is a fatal error. The Charleston Museum and Chicora routinely open their sites to both visitors and volunteers. And they seldom experience the dreaded, and in some ways, mythological injured vistors and looted sites. What they do experience is plenty of recognition of their work in the newspaper, television and radio.

And how about those archaeological reports? Let's face it, most archaeological reports, by their very nature as research documents, are boring. Only the most dedicated lay person is willing, or able, to plod through sentences like this: "Coastal plain geological formations are unconsolidated sedimentary deposits of very recent age . . ." ". . . questions concerning the exploitation of different habitats within the coastal zone were significant to an understanding of site settlement choices." "Biomass is determined using the least squares analysis of logarithmic data in which the bone weight is used to predict the amount of soft tissue that might have been supported by the bone." And as the Boston matron said about her restaurant meal, "the food is so bad, and there's so little of it!" The

reports are not only boring, but you can't find them if you wanted to! The University of South Carolina, the only institution in the state that offers a graduate degree in Anthropology, lists 163 archaeological reports, most of which are held at the Caroliniana Library, a facility that is not often used by the general public. In contrast, the Richland County library system is one of the most highly used publicly supported agencies in the community, and the use of the main branch of this library exceeds that of the main libraries of Atlanta, Phoenix, and Detroit. But the card catalogue at the Richland County Library located only 15 listings under South Carolina archaeology.

These dry, boring, unavailable reports are a necessary part of our work as researchers. But they don't need to be the last word in our research -- brochures and newsletters are the easiest, and they can be done on a regular basis. Inexpensive booklets explaining a site and the results of the research are also popular. Traveling displays of photos and artifacts are welcomed by libraries, schools, and small local museums, and can be used and enjoyed by the public for years.

Finally, we need to speak up more. I realize that professional presentations look real swell on vitae. But honestly, how many of us, if we are good researchers, really need to pad our vitae? If you think about it, you'll probably realize that the most boring speakers, no matter what their profession, are those with permanent, full time positions that they will retire from at age 65. Because their position is permanent, they may feel they don't have to impress the public audience, or explain their work, but ego will drive them to pontificate to their colleagues on an annual basis.

Don't preach only to the believers -- get out to the public. All over the state we can find people who are willing to listen to us: service clubs and organizations, such as Lions and Rotary clubs, local historical societies, college history classes, church groups, business and professional groups, scout groups, summer camp and summer schools, public and private schools, libraries . . . the list is endless.

Between site visitation, volunteer opportunities, well presented displays, brochures, and booklets, and public presentations, we should all begin to dissolve that public reaction of disbelief, anger, and suspicion. When the business community and other professionals accept archaeology as a respectable, viable career choice, then we all benefit. When adults accept our work as readily as children and teachers do, then we'll hear that dreaded question less often.

Perhaps the best person to emulate is naturalist Rudy Mancke. He has spent the most fruitful portion of his career communicating his knowledge and curiosity about nature to the public. People of all ages will stand in line to listen to him. Although he has a busy filming schedule, he is happy to make personal appearances all over the state. He is not only a brilliant naturalist, but also loved and respected, and is the best recognized of all South Carolina personalities. He brings international recognition and big bucks to SC ETV.

And he is rarely boring.

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