

# **Remembering *The Archaeology on the Farms Project* (1991-1993) or Growing Up on the Farm**

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The *Archaeology on the Farms Project* rescued me from unemployment in 1991 after I had completed my PhD at the bottom of a recession. The project had been concocted by Giovanna Peebles. The issue was what was going on behind the scenes at the Soil Conservation Service (SCS, what is now NRCS, the Natural Resources Conservation Service)? Well-meaning federal legislation had funded the construction of manure pits on dairy farms in regions where the ground froze during winter. The idea was that spreading cow manure on frozen fields allows it to run directly into streams and rivers, but manure stored in lined pits could be spread during warmer times of the year when the fields could absorb it. Sounds like a solid idea, but were archaeological sites being impacted by this federally funded construction spree on dairy farms? The SCS claimed there were no impacts on sites, but Giovanna, the feisty state archaeologist, wrote and received a grant from the Lake Champlain Basin Project to hire someone to find out. Jim Garman (1991) did a brief first phase in Franklin County, and then I came in for a serious two-year phase in Addison County.

I was placed directly in the SCS field office in Middlebury, very much as the Jewish city slicker who had become lost in the heart of the country. At first, Bob Collins (old school) and later Keith Hartline (new school) directed the office. Bob believed that all SCS activities should be conducted in the farmers' interests and he disliked growing regulations that protected wetlands and archaeological sites. Keith was more open to the new realities that farming interests had to be balanced against protection of environmental and cultural resources. My office mates referred to me as

the spy, while some of the farmers treated me like a cop. In the cramped office I had the front desk. Country music blared all day. I was treated well for an interloper who was foisted on them against their will. One breakthrough came when I was desperately asked to stand in for a sick member of their bowling team. Much to their astonishment, I could actually bowl well. The victory was celebrated over beers and skee-bowling at the local VFW.

From late 1991 to the summer of 1993, I followed around and followed-up on hundreds of projects big and small all over Addison County and occasionally beyond to more remote counties. I first had to teach SCS personnel about the potential contradiction between manure pit construction, environmental protection, and archaeological site protection. I then had to learn about SCS patterns of collaboration with farmers and earth-moving, as well as both SCS and farmers' perceptions of cultural resources. The addition of cultural resource responsibility was an affront to tradition for some SCS people, particularly the old-timers. They had viewed themselves as helpers and enablers of farmers at any cost, not as regulators or protectors. Food Security Act checks, along with wetlands and highly erodible land regulations, were coming down on the SCS at the same time as cultural resource protection and there were grumblings and retirements as the SCS mission became more complex. The good old free-wheeling days were gone. However, many of the younger agents embraced the cultural resources mandate. At regional workshops I ran, they studied the flakes and projectile points and pondered quartzite preforms and potsherds that looked like old brownies. In my office, they began

bringing in artifacts or just rocks they had found at a site when I was not present. There apparently was a slow cultural change happening in SCS.

Almost immediately, I began to find artifacts in the backdirt at manure pit construction sites. Each time I called in Giovanna. It was interesting to watch how nervous the SCS folks were in the presence of this petite but no-nonsense blonde woman! There were even quiet inquiries about why I had to call her in *every time*. Can't we just let it go this one time? The upshot of the project was that Giovanna had been right all along. I found over forty cases of damage to archaeological sites caused during manure pit construction. Site impacts mostly occurred because SCS surveyors chose the highest hilltops to place the pits, exactly where prehistoric habitation would be most likely in this region where lower-lying areas were moist and flood-prone. I wrote all the excruciating details in a monograph (Rossen 1994) that was widely distributed to government agencies (or so I was told), and the SCS hired archaeologists to sprinkle through their ranks. Along the way, I worked with the Addison County Planning Commission to recognize and institutionalize the significance of archaeological sites in their long-term planning documents. There was outreach to conservation organizations like the Lewis Creek Conservation Committee and Friends of Kingsland Bay, and the three major museums of the county: Chimney Point, Rokeby and Sheldon. I spoke to every local historical society and club in the area.

I met some of the most unforgettable characters of my life in Vermont. To begin and end, there is Giovanna Peebles. She was not so much the State Archaeologist but the Czar of State Archaeology. She knew everyone and everyone knew her. Probably the best boss I ever had, she staunchly defended me in every pickle I got into, and there were many. From tiny Vermont, she planned and engineered a national change in how the government interacts with farmers and formulates farm plans. Archaeologists were hired nationally throughout the SCS and field technicians were trained to recognize sites and artifacts. Locally, we were also able to conduct some research, such as a controlled surface collection of the multi-component

prehistoric site at Chimney Point, after it was unexpectedly plowed.

At the end of the project, we made a series of recommendations including incorporating staff archaeologists, implementing waiting periods before earth-moving, improving communication and record-keeping, implementing incentives and enforcements for protecting sites, monitoring and regulating use of fill, and preventing impacts to standing historic structures. There was also a series of public outreach suggestions, including continuing education and outreach, performing archaeological research, implementing stewardship programs, and even writing an elementary school textbook (Rossen 1994). The presence of a professional archaeologist in an area helps people realize the collective importance of archaeological sites and their protection, when in contrast the absence of an archaeologist leads to the impression that sites are not important, or they only matter as a recreational collecting source (Rossen 2008). However, more than twenty years later, what stays in my mind about the *Archaeology on the Farms Project* is not so much the greater issue of site protection, but a spate of memories. I learned about the grueling work of dairy farms, about farmers with million dollar subsidies telling me they wanted the "government off their backs" (that meant me), and that dairy cows are friendly and will slime you if you turn your back on them. Here are some of the more prominent (and sharable) memories.

### Me and Langdon Smith

I came to Vermont with a one-dimensional view of looters and collectors as one of the great evils of the world. A substantial amount of my project time was spent with collectors to learn about culture history and site locations in the county. I was amazed at the range of knowledge and motives. I learned there was a network of collectors with a stratified status system. Status was based on how many artifacts you had (being in the thousands would earn some status) and also to an extent how much you knew about the pre-Contact past beyond the artifacts themselves. I marveled at both the knowledge and misconceptions. In those days, when looter pits appeared on a site, I was able to put out a

message through the network that certain sites were off-limits or were being watched, and the looting would cease. My interactions with collectors in Vermont fundamentally changed how I specifically view artifact collecting, and in general how I judge (or should wait to judge) people. More than anyone, Langdon Smith taught me this lesson. Langdon was one of the first local dairy farmers I ran across. I met him at Addison County Field Days because his booth, describing how Native Americans were one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, was next to my booth on the *Archaeology on the Farms Project*. Who was this crazy and energetic guy with the big grin and twinkling eyes (Figure 1)?

As I got to know him, he repeatedly asked me to see the state site files for the area around his farm. We were guarded. He was an artifact collector, after all. He kept showing up at my desk in the Middlebury Field Office to show me artifacts and take me to sites. Then one day he showed me his county road atlas, which contained detailed maps of every site within fifteen miles of his farm. Different surface artifact densities were shaded differently. It turns out that he wanted to see the site files because he knew that many sites were missing and the locations and boundaries of many of those already recorded were probably inaccurate. When I finally got permission to show him the maps, from memory he told me how the shape of this or that site on the topo map was incorrect.

The first time I went to his house, he showed me his extensive artifact collection (thousands of surface collected artifacts). Since he claimed to remember exactly where every piece came from, I mentioned off-hand that he could number and catalog them so the locations could be preserved. A few weeks later he invited me back to show me that he had numbered and cataloged every one. I learned that Langdon's farm sat in the middle of what we came to call the New Haven Quarry District, an extensive area with a series of sites where glacial quartzite boulders had been quarried, including many preform caches.

During the two years I lived in Middlebury, I got used to Langdon's impromptu visits. Almost any evening or weekend, his old jalopy truck would cruise by my place. Come on, I got someplace to take you! It

could be a site I'd never seen before (officially unrecorded, of course) or it could be a local lecture on history or archaeology. He would sit in these lectures and grin, shake his head, and wink at me when the lecturer said something that was obviously inaccurate. I remember that my girlfriend thought it was quite strange that my best friend was this old codger of a farmer.

Despite the Lost Tribes thing, he knew his archaeology and claimed to have read every archaeology book in every library in the county. I gave him some of my books and after I came to Ithaca College to teach, sent him some photocopy readers of articles that I used for my courses. Years after I left Vermont, he continued to write me long rambling letters about books I had sent. He was insatiable about archaeology. He also believed in site documentation and preservation. I don't know how many sites he helped document for the site files, but I suspect it was in the hundreds. It is an ongoing battle to protect sites from looting in Vermont, but during my days in Vermont, he (at least for the time being) saved several sites from destruction in his own inimitable way.

The last time I saw Langdon was at the Northeastern Anthropological Association (NEAA) Meetings when they were held in Burlington in 2003. I made the trip to present a paper and Langdon was there, with that same smile and twinkling eyes. I sat with him during the session, and he asked me why I'd rather sit with him than with those "real archaeologists." I told him that he was as real an archaeologist as they were. As I stated above, he changed forever the way I think about artifact collectors and collecting, in terms of what a range of people, personalities, and motivations are encompassed in that activity.

I still have on my desk several items he made for me. They are very strange and very Langdon. One that I particularly cherish is a paperweight (I think). It has a block of wood and a piece of bicycle tire nailed to it. Sticking out of the bicycle tire are quartzite flakes. The block reads, "Arrowhead Bros., INDIANapolis, IND 46268. Guaranteed Traction" (Figure 2). Another is a curved point he chipped from a bottle bottom (he was a very good self-taught flintknapper). Langdon



Figure 1. *Langdon G. Smith (1928-2008)*



Figure 2. “Arrowhead Brothers Tires,” handiwork by *Langdon Smith*.

explained in the accompanying letter that this was a top secret CIA weapon designed to shoot around corners. Damn, I miss him.

### The Bissell Sheep Dip

In my forays into historical archaeology, I’ve always been impressed with the endless variety and twists and turns of the sub-discipline. For me, this great variety has ranged from a Civil War Quartermaster Depot and the Jim Beam House in Kentucky to an 18<sup>th</sup> century frontier tavern and court house on the New York-Native American frontier as well as a Jamaican coffee plantation slave village. Every site seemed unique and irreplaceable.

On the *Archaeology on the Farms* project, one farm turned up a curious historic site, an internally segmented cut limestone foundation with water bubbling up inside. The SCS project called for placing tile lines to drain the water and removal of the foundation to allow corn cultivation. The foundation had an entranceway. Backhoe testing revealed two underground stone slab lined canals (Figures 3 and 4). From archival research and archaeological investigation, we learned that this was a remnant of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Merino sheep industry: a sheep pen and wash or dip, used for washing sheep before shearing (Rossen 1994:31-53).

The Bissell family had developed Stony Spring Farm early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which had become one of the largest Merino sheep farms in the state. E.N. Bissell had been a state legislator and long-time president of the Vermont, New York, and Ohio Sheep Breeding Association. Archival sources described the economics, politics, and even international trade associated with the farm, but little about the technology of sheep farming (Anonymous, ca. 1918).

We apparently had before us an unusual, maybe even unique historical archaeological site. At its height, the farm had at least 350 sheep, requiring some form of reliable washing system (Vermont Merino Sheep Breeders’ Association 1879:174). Descendants of the Bissell family arrived at my office to discuss the friendly competitive status that was related to the technology of sheep dips. That is, there was high status

associated with farmers who built the most elaborate Rube Goldberg-style sheep dips, including underground waterways.

Sheep washing was important to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Merino industry, because the breed produced a heavy yellow yolk or lanoline oil in its wool. Washing produced desirable white wool (Bard 1811:12). Besides a good water supply, a sheep dip required an opening in the foundation and a long narrow chamber leading to a deeper washing area (Vermont Stock Journal 1858:93). The Bissell Sheep Dip was the only extant archaeological example I could pinpoint.

I became immersed (dipped?) in the history of the Merino Sheep industry. The opening of the Champlain Canal in 1823 cut transport costs and effectively began the industry (Gilbertson 1992:8-9). Favorable tariffs produced local boom periods of varying intensity in 1824, 1828, 1846 and 1867, while epidemics, unfavorable tariffs, or economic panics produced crashes in 1837, 1842, 1857, and 1873. In 1840, the estimated date of the Bissell Sheep Dip, Addison County had the highest U.S. density of sheep (373 per square mile) and a ratio of 11 sheep for each person (Belanus 1977:13). Those Gothic Revival and French Second Empire houses dotting the Vermont landscape took on a new meaning to me as remnants of Merino sheep wealth. According to historian Betty Jane Belanus (1977), Addison County sheep farmers “lit their cigars with five-dollar bills.” Various factors led to the decline and disappearance of the sheep industry after World War I, including the rise of the more profitable dairy industry, declining wool markets, and competition from the U.S. west and abroad, ironically spawned by sheep exported from Vermont. An industry that had produced tremendous wealth proved to be unsustainable, and the final collapse was complete and dramatic, with the last merino sheep leaving the state in 1949 (Belanus 1977:42-3). I was interested to learn that a few Merino sheep farms, like Crooked Fence Farm in Putney, have appeared in recent years.

The upshot of the Bissell Sheep Dip case was a protracted negotiation with the farmer, SCS, and Giovanna representing the state of Vermont. A short-term agreement to preserve the site was hammered out.

SCS higher-ups notified the local TV news, sending a film crew to the site. I was highlighting the recovery of lost history, but the farmer unexpectedly used the platform to rail against government regulation over “a pile of rocks.” He still wanted the impediment to his cornfield removed and my understanding was that he planned to do it eventually. In this way, historic preservation and our disappearing knowledge of the past were pitted against farming and local economics in a stark and disturbing way I never forgot. The case was a success in that I was able to unravel the mystery of the site, but it was a failure because we were unable to convince the farmer of the site significance. We wrestled with complex and still unanswered legal questions. Should a cultural resource violation on a farm endanger all federal benefits? Is the “unit of analysis” the entire farm, as in wetlands law, or just the project area? Do we link the immediate construction project and its later consequences, or separate them, leaving loopholes to legally destroy sites?

### **A Secret Society and Their Rune Stones**

About halfway through the project, I began receiving phone calls from people about Viking rune stones on a hilltop. These people were distraught that the site was being looted. According to them, the rune stones were being removed at night to be sold on the international antiquities market. Sometimes these phone calls came in the middle of the night, and I was told that the looters were out there as they called. They told me there was a government conspiracy to secretly steal these stones. I agreed to visit the site, but only during the daytime. When I met these people, I was taken with armed escorts in a caravan of Jeeps to the place. The SCS agents reminded me later that everyone in Vermont (except me) has camo and rifles, and that basically everyone believes in government conspiracies. When I got to the top of the hill, I saw eroded limestone boulders and nothing more. I summoned my strength, took a deep breath, and told them I saw no rune stones. In turn I was told that maybe I too was part of the government conspiracy. The late night phone calls continued anyway, until I begged them to stop. At one point, members of this group showed up at the Vermont





Figure 3. *The Bissell Sheep Dip Site, Addison County.*



Figure 4. *The Bissell Sheep Dip Site, Addison County.*

Archaeological Society meeting in Burlington, complete with camo and rifles, to find me. I was able to scoot out of the meeting, speak with them, and avert a spectacle that day. That was the last time I saw them.

What is the meaning of this story? For me, it is about the disconnection between people and their history. Why do people long for a more colorful history that they can directly connect with? Are Native Americans inherently dull, or so much “the other” that we need Vikings in Vermont? What can archaeologists do to better “sell” the real past to the public (see Peebles 1989)? Is the government such an oppressive force of greed to cause us to take up arms to protect our “heritage?” One of the most interesting aspects of the story for me is that in a short period of time I had become a local symbol of historic sites and preservation, enough so to attract people from the entire cultural spectrum of the county. Had I at least temporarily filled some sort of local void?

### Chasing the Ghost of William Ritchie

It seems that for much of my life I am doomed to chase the footsteps and later, the ghost of William Ritchie. My 1975 field school was held on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, where Ritchie had excavated several sites (Ritchie 1969). The field school supervisor was Stephen Perlman, then a graduate student who wanted to revise many of Ritchie’s ideas about the island’s pre-Contact past. As it turned out, both Ritchie and Perlman were strict cultural ecologists taking a straight adaptationist view of Native life on the island, although Perlman brought a more sophisticated optimal foraging model to the table (Perlman 1977). I romantically loved the evidence in our site that raised visions of ancient clam and lobster bakes.

The last fifteen years, I have worked in the Cayuga heartland in central New York. One dark landmark of the regional archaeology was Ritchie’s 1939-1940 excavations at Frontenac Island on Cayuga Lake near Union Springs (Ritchie 1945; Trubowitz 1977). Ritchie excavated the island cemetery with hundreds of individuals, produced a graphic report, and dispersed the human remains to various public and private institutions and individuals. This event created

an atmosphere of Haudenosaunee mistrust of archaeologists that we are still working to repair. I arranged the repatriation to the Cayuga of some of the human remains from the site that were held at a local museum.

From 2007-9 I re-excavated the Levanna site, originally worked by Harrison Follett from the late 1920s until World War II (Follett 1957). As I conducted background archival research on the site, I learned that the late 1920s and early 1930s excavations included Ritchie as a young assistant (Ritchie 1928, 1932). I became immersed in the Follett and Ritchie papers at the museums in Rochester, Albany and Auburn, New York. Ritchie and Follett fell out over the excavation of several animal effigies at Levanna. Their lifelong dispute came alive to me in their letters and unpublished manuscripts. Ritchie went on a campaign to discredit the effigies and excavations, including a 1932 court deposition and a series of letters to various prominent archaeologists, including Carl E. Guthe, Chairman of the National Research Council, F.M. Setzler, Head Curator in the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian, Arthur C. Parker, Douglas Byers, and James B. Griffin, culminating in a clandestine investigation of the site. In return, Follett began the rumor that Ritchie had broken the agreement to keep the artifacts on-site at a makeshift lab by secretly shipping boxes by rail. Furthermore, Follett promulgated stories that Ritchie was afraid of ghosts and would not leave the tent at night to relieve himself. It seems that even the oddest rumors and details of Ritchie’s life and letters have entered mine.

In between Martha’s Vineyard and Levanna was the *Archaeology on the Farms Project*. As I traversed Addison County, I came across site after site recorded by Ritchie in his handwritten scrawl. These included almost every major site along Otter Creek and the so-called “island” sites, or sites perched on granitic hills now surrounded by wetlands that were once water (Figure 5). Although Ritchie published much more on his New York work than on his Vermont explorations, some of his foundational phase names (like Vergennes Phase Archaic) and projectile point types (Otter Creek) came from his western Vermont work (Ritchie 1980). It



seems that everywhere I went, Ritchie had already been there, traipsing up the same hillsides and through the same swamps and thickets. His insatiable wanderings and quest for archaeological knowledge were vivid as I studied those site folders and sketch maps.

### Final Thoughts

Is it the outcome of a project or the embedded memories that really count? Of course on the one hand we are trying to be scientists. The *Archaeology on the Farms Project* enhanced and clarified our knowledge of Addison County's past. We did not know there were extensive quarry districts there, and that those quarries were so well-organized in terms of preform production, caching, and distribution. We did not fully understand the large size of the Archaic population of the Otter

Valley. In terms of history, we learned more about the wealth, power and technology of the 19th century Merino Sheep industry. At a bureaucratic level, we learned how to work within the uneasy relationships between federal and state government agencies, how to find creative solutions to protect some archaeological sites, and how to communicate better with artifact collectors. Significant preservation conundrums on farms were raised but only addressed with short-term solutions. After I moved on to other challenges, David Skinas became the SCS and later NRCS archaeologist and took over responsibility for a much larger region than I had covered. Through the NRCS, he investigated and completed a monograph on a pre-Contact site, Conant Farm, we had examined in neighboring Chittenden County (Skinas 2012).



Figure 5. *Barker Island, typical of the Archaic "island" sites of Addison County, western Vermont.*



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