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Jesse Jennings Was a Force of Nature

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he was overall the most effective research administrator that I've ever run into. And over the years, he remained tremendously loyal to past employees and colleagues he judged to have measured up to his expectations. See Don Fowler's (2011) excellent book on Glen Canyon for a more extensive assessment of Jennings, as well as Jennings' own autobiography (1994).

Jennings sometimes let it be known that he thought academia was plagued with methodological fads, unnecessary circumlocutions, and (often) hypocritical collegiality. The public image he favored for himself was that of a straight talker who had come up the hard way and expected to be recognized on the merits of his accomplishments, no more, no less. He thought that a good archaeologist had to be a good fieldworker first, and that did not mean just sending out orders from the shade of a tent. Ostentatiously rolling a cigarette in one massive hand while sitting on a log sent the message that he would be just as—or more comfortable—associating with common laborers as he would with the kind of professors who made sure you were aware of how important they were.

He liked archaeological “salvage” projects, because they allocated a certain amount of money toward achieving specific results within a specific amount of time. In his terms, they were “a job o' work” just like any other project in the real world. In a recent retrospective on the Glen Canyon Project (Lipe 2012), I tried to capture Jennings' ideas about how to do salvage archaeology (and by extension, any project):

- (1) “Use the coarsest tool which will do the work—i.e., recover the data” (Jennings 1966:7).
- (2) “My preference is to get 95% of the data from ten sites instead of 99% from one” Jennings 1963b:263).
- (3) Troweling and screening have their place, but “the slow brushing away of a site with trowels and the plotting of each scrap” guarantees a low information return for the effort expended (Jennings 1966:6).
- (4) A well-coordinated team of full-time workers is better than a single individual working the same total number of hours (Jennings 1963b:284).
- (5) Maintaining data quality is essential, but at an appropriate level. Perfection is not achievable.

- (6) The field record is preeminent. A researcher can always reclassify artifact collections, but can't go back and re-excavate a site that has already been dug.
- (7) Achieving data comparability among multiple research teams on a multi-year project requires explicit, detailed steps (Jennings 1959b:687–707).
- (8) Fieldwork unreported is equivalent to fieldwork never done. It destroys a site with no information gain.
- (9) Report deadlines are essential. It “...puts the burden of completion in sharp focus from the very beginning of the project” (Jennings 1963b:284).
- (10) The principal product of a salvage project will be descriptive reports of basic data. “...Extensive comparisons, synthesis or interpretation must be deferred ...” (Jennings 1959a:9).
- (11) Artifacts and records from a project don't belong to the archaeologist. Both must be properly curated and remain available for future use.

The weaknesses of this approach lie in the notion that “data” are pretty much self-evident or already widely agreed upon, so that the links don't have to be spelled out between particular field and lab observations and particular kinds of inference. And of course “basic descriptive reports” are actually loaded with inferences about chronology, site functions, assemblage formation, etc. On the GCP, the notion that “comparisons, synthesis or interpretation” could be deferred sometimes led to *de facto* interpretations that were based more on unexamined assumptions than on appeals to evidence (Lipe 2012). But those critiques could be made about most of the archaeological reports of the day. That's why in the 1960s, the “new archaeology” gained traction so rapidly.

* * *

JESSE JENNINGS WAS A FORCE OF NATURE

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I first met him in the mid-1970s when I was working on an MA in English literature at the University of Utah. One day a man whom I had never seen before

tracked me down on campus and said, “Dr. Jennings wants to see you.” He showed me to an office in the anthropology building. When I went in, there was this rather intimidating man sitting at a big oak conference table, chain-smoking cigarettes. He said, “Dick Ford says you used to be their editor at the anthro museum at Michigan.” I replied, “Yes, I...” After that the conversation, if that’s what you’d call it, went like this:

Jennings: “Says you do real good work.”

Me: “Well, that’s very nice of him, he...”

Jennings: “I really need an editor around here. Got manuscripts stacked up; NSF is on my back.”

Me: “Oh, well, sir, I can’t really take a job right now. I’m going to school full time and...”

Jennings: “When can you start?”

Me: “No, really, sir, I can’t...”

Jennings (herding me toward the door): “How about Monday?”

Me: “But...”

Jennings (while shutting the door behind me): “Nine o’clock.”

Me (standing outside the door): “???”

So Monday morning at nine o’clock, there I was outside his door. I was afraid to not show up. Although Jennings swore that this story was not true, that’s exactly what happened, and thus began one of the more... colorful chapters in my life. My entire reason for being, from Jennings’s perspective, was to edit the manuscripts that his current and former students were turning out on the excavation of dry caves and shelters in Utah, and subsequently to edit two of his textbooks as well. I’m happy to report that I did manage to finish my MA, but I know Jennings felt that this unreasonably interfered with my higher calling.

A year or two into my tenure as Jennings’s editor, Jeremy Sabloff was hired by the U. of U. Anthropology Department, and he asked me if I would serve as the copy editor for his term as editor of *American Antiquity*. A combination of those marvelous caves and rockshelters and the theoretical ferment of the “New Archaeology,” as represented in the *American Antiquity* manuscripts that I was reading, reawakened a desire to be an archaeologist that I had set aside a decade before.

So I trotted into Jennings’s office one day and told him of my marvelous plan to go back to school and become an archaeologist. I don’t know what I thought

his reaction was going to be. But I didn’t expect him to look at me, say that I wasn’t serious, that I was just a bored housewife looking for something new to do, and that he would flunk me out of the program if I attempted it. If he thought this would discourage me from making the attempt, he had, for once, misjudged his audience. I proceeded to take every 400-level cultural anthropology and archaeology course that I could get into, and when he found that not only could I do the work but I could turn out straight As in his classes, nobody could have been more genuinely supportive of my desire to go on and pursue a Ph.D.

Because, you see, that was the thing about Jennings. He gave new depths of meaning to the word “irascible.” He could be harsh and devastatingly cutting if you screwed something up or he thought you weren’t being appropriately serious about something important. But if you proved him wrong, showed that you *could* do whatever it was and do it right, then he would go to bat for you and get you whatever help, resources, introductions to other researchers, etc., that you needed. Even if what you wanted to do was reconstruct prehistoric social and political organization—my New Archaeology goal that he considered to be a bunch of, well, you know—the organic deposits left in the pasture by male bovines.

Jennings was a man of his time, a time that my husband calls the Era of the Great Warlords of American Archaeology. He could be arrogant, profane, sexist, and bad-tempered. He was a master culture historian, a breed whose domination of the field of archaeology was waning when I knew him. His command of Great Basin archaeology, and indeed of much of New World archaeology, was encyclopedic. He had experienced many of the seminal events and programs and people in the history of our discipline, and he could tell tales that brought that history alive for us when the mood was upon him. He was no theoretician, but he was the best dirt archaeologist I ever knew. And he made sure that his graduate students (at least the male ones) developed excellent field skills and had the experience, supervisory opportunities, and specialized training to build solid careers in archaeology.

Jennings had an enduring influence on my career as an archaeologist. His emphasis on rigorous standards of excavation, recording, and analysis, and his insistence on the obligation to publish your results in a timely fashion

(assuming that you could impress a suitable, unsuspecting young editor into servitude) formed core values in all of us. For years, every time I made what turned out to be a less than brilliant excavation strategy decision, I heard the Old Man's voice in my head, roundly cussing me out for being such a dumb SOB. His disdain for those who dared to pronounce on an archaeological subject without first commanding the relevant literature has led to a truly monumental number of books that need to be accommodated in our house (the net number of books being directly proportional to the number of ex-Jennings students living under your roof, apparently).

For all the challenges of working for The Dark Lord (as we sometimes called him when we were certain he wasn't within earshot), my life would have been less colorful without him and my career less rich. In spite of our various run-ins, I had an enduring (though possibly inexplicable) fondness for the man. One of the disappointments of my life was that Jennings didn't live long enough to see me elected President of the Society for American Archaeology, a position that he had held 44 years earlier. He would have been (secretly) tickled and pleased by the whole thing—although he would never have said so out loud to me. And right there in the SAA business meeting with him sitting in the audience, I would have told that darned story about him saying that I was just a bored housewife and he was going to flunk me out of the archaeology program. And he would have waved off the irony and implied that he knew it all along.

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