

Lynn M. Snyder, Deborah Hull-Walski, Thomas D. Thiessen, and Myra J. Giesen

# Postwar Partners in Archeology

## The Bureau of Reclamation, the National Park Service, and the River Basin Surveys in the Missouri River Basin (1945-1969)

*The year 1945 saw American archeology facing a major crisis. The Japanese surrender in August marked the end of World War II, and it was the signal for the United States to begin its transition back to a peacetime status. As part of the transition, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Corps of Engineers moved to activate plans for the construction of a vast reservoir system throughout the country. Well before the war ended, it was obvious that the building of the dams and the filling of the reservoirs would result in an unparalleled destruction of archeological materials.*

Donald J. Lehmer<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Flood Control Act of December 22, 1944, authorized dam construction on a large scale throughout the nation. The

objectives of this massive water control effort were flood control, improved navigation, power generation, conservation and enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat, creation of recreational opportunities, and potential irrigation water for over three million acres of previously unirrigated land. The downside of this incredibly ambitious public works program was that much of the nation's archeological heritage was threatened with destruction or inundation as a result of dam construction and reservoir operation. It has been estimated that at least 80% of archeological remains are located along the banks of rivers and

*Oahe Reservoir, Stanley County, South Dakota, 1950. Oahe Dam construction. Don Lehmer in foreground.*

creeks.<sup>2</sup> As a result, such massive water control efforts could substantially destroy the lion's share of the archeological record in the U.S.

### **Bureaucracy and Planning**

In May 1944, during the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, a planning committee of concerned archeologists was formed to review the past results and problems of Works Progress Administration archeological work. Problems perceived by the committee included inadequate funding, lack of central direction, insufficient numbers of trained supervisory archeological personnel, publication lag, and the scattering and even loss of the resultant collections and data. Their report offered several important recommendations for future federally-sponsored archeological programs, including that:

- a "guiding force" should be established to provide central direction to the effort;



- the professional personnel engaged in such programs should not be burdened with administrative responsibilities, but rather should remain free to concentrate their attention on archeological matters;
- properly qualified organizations and personnel should be selected; and
- analysis and reporting of research should be completed for each project undertaken.

Based on this report, the Committee for the Recovery of Archaeological Remains was established in May 1945 and became the aforementioned “guiding force” recommended by the planning committee.<sup>3</sup>

The federal government’s response to this call for action was the establishment of the Interagency Archeological and Paleontological Salvage Program, later shortened to the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program. Created in the late summer and early fall of 1945, the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program was a multi-agency, cooperative program designed to inventory and assess the importance of archeological resources in planned reservoir areas, and to preserve a portion of the archeological record in those reservoir areas by conducting excavations at selected sites.

Participating organizations were the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and the Corps of Engineers (Corps) as the nation’s foremost dam-building agencies; the Smithsonian Institution as the scientific research arm of the federal government; the National Park Service (NPS) as the federal bureau with legislatively-mandated responsibility for surveying the nation’s archeological and historical resources; and the

Committee for the Recovery of Archaeological Remains as the principal advisory spokesgroup for the archeological profession. State and local universities, historical societies, and museums also participated as cooperating institutions, doing survey and excavation.

In 1945, a memorandum of understanding between the NPS and the Smithsonian Institution formally initiated the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program and defined the relationship between the two groups. The Smithsonian Institution established the River Basin Surveys to carry out archeological survey and salvage projects throughout the nation. The Smithsonian Institution, through the River Basin Surveys Program, assumed responsibility for field investigations; provided technical supervision and personnel; and served as liaison with the NPS in planning and programming. The NPS served as liaison between the various participating agencies; was responsible for overall program planning, funding, and administration; and enlisted the cooperation of state and local institutions. State and local institutions often provided space for field offices and laboratories; furnished advice and assistance through institutional staff; and carried out their own survey and salvage efforts, often by means of cost-sharing contracts administered by the NPS.

The role of Reclamation and the Corps was, of course, to plan and implement their water control programs of dam-building and reservoir construction, and in addition, to share their water resource development plans with the NPS and the River Basin Surveys. In the earliest stages of the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program, Reclamation and the Corps also provided funds for the archeological salvage work. After 1947, Congressionally-appropriated funds were administered through the NPS.

#### **The Work**

From 1946 through 1967, the substantial sum of \$9,000,000 was expended on Interagency Archeological Salvage Program field investigations in prospective reservoir locations throughout the United States. During these years, River Basin Surveys research offices were established in Eugene, Oregon; Austin, Texas; Berkeley, California; and Lincoln, Nebraska. Surveys in more than 500 reservoir areas in 43 states led to the recording of an estimated 20,000 sites.<sup>4</sup> Following survey, over 500 major excavations were conducted to further document significant

*Garrison Reservoir, McLean County, North Dakota, 1952. Aerial view of the Night Walker’s Butte in the Bull Pasture Site.*





*Specimen processing desks, Missouri Basin Project Laboratory, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964. From left: Lee Madison, museum aide; Donald Blakeslee, museum aide; Gaillard Jackson, labor; Clarence Johnson, museum aide; and John Ritch, museum aide.*

prehistoric and historic archeological sites prior to inundation. Despite chronic problems with analysis and reporting subsequent to field work, a 1968 bibliography of works resulting directly from this program<sup>5</sup> lists more than 2,600 published and unpublished reports which were the immediate result of Interagency Archeological Salvage Program projects.

#### ***The Missouri Basin Project***

The Missouri River basin was the focus of the first Interagency Archeological Salvage Program work. The project office in Lincoln, Nebraska, formally called the Missouri Basin Project, was also the largest and longest-lived of the River Basin Surveys field offices. The Missouri Basin Project existed for nearly 23 years, during which time it was central to River Basin Surveys program activities. Waldo R. Wedel was its first director; employment on the Missouri Basin Project field projects trained hundreds of students in archeological field and laboratory techniques. Many of these trainees went on to successful professional archeological careers.

During its lifespan, the Missouri Basin Project gathered massive amounts of data on prehistoric and historic archeological sites along the Missouri River and its tributaries, even as dam closure and reservoir flooding began to cover the very resources being studied. Petsche's 1968 bibliography contains 898 entries for states which border the Missouri River, or 34.5% of all reports listed. Lehmer noted that as a result of the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program over 800 sites were recorded in the Missouri River valley and more than 1.5 million artifacts and specimens were cataloged at the Missouri Basin Project alone. Archeological work in the Missouri

Basin Project continues to the present through reservoir shoreline monitoring, stabilization, and salvage under the direct auspices of Reclamation and the Corps on lands they respectively administer.

In 1969, after the major Missouri River dams were completed, the River Basin Surveys program was officially dissolved and responsibility for administering the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program transferred to the newly-established Midwest Archeological Center of the NPS. The Midwest Archeological Center continued to carry out Interagency Archeological Salvage Program work in the Missouri basin until the passage of the Archeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974. This work included several projects in Reclamation project areas and was funded with money transferred to Midwest Archeological Center by Reclamation. The new law authorized all federal agencies to expend funds for archeological investigations in connection with agency programs and activities. Consequently, many federal land-managing bureaus hired archeologists and other cultural resource specialists to help administer these responsibilities. Reclamation was one of the first to respond to this expanded authority, and soon administered many archeological investigations under the guidance of Senior Reclamation Archeologist Ward F. Weakly, who was hired for that purpose in 1974.

#### ***Lessons Learned***

Cultural resource management archeology had its beginnings in the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program with its innovative and enduring multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approach. Perhaps more importantly, the recruiting and coordination of multi-disciplinary teams of archeologists, paleontologists, historians, and hydraulic engineers for the salvage of archeological resources in the face of impending inundation and destruction served as a model for what later became the field of conservation archeology.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the many positive results of the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program, it was unable to avoid many of the problems anticipated by the planning committee of 1944/45. Without doubt, one of the most immediate and continuing problems facing archeologists and agencies is the progressive destruction of archeological sites and environs along the reservoirs. Shoreline fluctuations and bank destabilization



Garrison Reservoir, McLean County, North Dakota, 1952. Campfire scene at G.H. Smith's Camp. From left N. Joyner, R. Brown, R. Bonier, G. Baldwin, G.H. Smith, L. Bear, G. Metcalfe, J. Cotter, L. Madison, R. Prince, T. White, D. Farrell.

Photos courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

continue to take a heavy toll on these resources, and once resources are exposed by these processes, the work of professional and amateur looters assures even more rapid destruction and degradation of these sites.

The scattering of collections and loss of data is a second “most important problem” faced by contemporary and future archeologists and researchers. While a central laboratory was established in Lincoln for the initial processing of archeological collections from Missouri basin reservoirs, these collections were never gathered into a single permanent repository. Over the years, the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program collections have suffered from inadequate facilities. Overcrowded storage, lack of inventory control, and poor curatorial oversight potentially have damaged the research value of many Interagency Archeological Salvage Program artifacts and associated documents. Many federal agencies and professional societies currently are working to generate standards, guidelines, and policies for the curation of such archeological collections and are seeking ways to correct the problems.

### Conclusion

Today, the archeological collections generated by the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program are housed and curated in various repositories including the Smithsonian Institution. However, much to the frustration of researchers interested in previous work, done in a particular locale or region, is that there is no convenient or ready way to ascertain the existence, extent, or location of many individual collections. Modern web technology, however, holds the potential for

institutional web site listings of Interagency Archeological Salvage Program archeological collections and records, which would be an invaluable tool for present-day and future researchers.

The Interagency Archeological Salvage Program began modestly, but with much promise, in 1945. In less than 30 years it produced, through the enormous efforts of many people and agencies, an unmatched and irreplaceable heritage of archeological practice and material data. Perhaps it is once again time for concerned archeologists to attempt another multi-agency effort in order to develop a unified program to ensure that Interagency Archeological Salvage Program data—so painstakingly collected—continue to be available for future use.

### Notes

- 1 Lehmer, Donald J., *Introduction to Middle Missouri Archeology*, Anthropological Papers 1 (1971): 1.
- 2 Wedel, Waldo R., *Prehistory and the Missouri Valley Development Program: Summary Report on the Missouri River Basin Archeological Survey in 1946*, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections 107: (1947): 7.
- 3 Thiessen, Thomas D., *Emergency Archeology in the Missouri River Basin: The Role of the Missouri Basin Project and the Midwest Archeological Center in the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program, 1946-1975*, Special Report No. 2. National Park Service, Midwest Archeological Center, Lincoln, Nebraska, (1999): 3.
- 4 Brew, J.O., “Foreword,” In *Bibliography of Salvage Archeology in the United States*, compiled by Jerome E. Petsche. Publications in Salvage Archeology No. 10. Smithsonian Institution, River Basin Surveys, Lincoln, Nebraska, (1968): 3.
- 5 Petsche, Jerome E., (compiler), *Bibliography of Salvage Archeology in the United States*, Publications in Salvage Archeology No. 10. Smithsonian Institution, River Basin Surveys, Lincoln, Nebraska, (1968).
- 6 Jennings, Jesse D., “River Basin Surveys: Origins, Operations, and Results, 1945-1969,” *American Antiquity* 50: 2 (1985): 281-296.

Lynn M. Snyder is a researcher in the Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

Deborah Hull-Walski is Collections Manager, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

Thomas D. Thiessen is an archeologist, Midwest Archeological Center, National Park Service.

Myra J. Giesen is a physical anthropologist in the Program Analysis Office, Bureau of Reclamation.