

An Amateur Archaeologist Looks At the Trails

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Over the past several years I have become more and more concerned about the loss of historical information to enthusiastic artifact collectors.

When I first started reading about the wagon treks over the Sierra Nevada and hiking to retrace their route, I knew nothing about proper archaeological techniques or procedures. The first time I found an ox shoe and a hand-forged bolt I grabbed them and rushed to tell everyone about what a great discovery I had made. Little did I know that in my enthusiasm I could have removed a significant part of a puzzle which could have been the key to explaining that this object might have come from an improvised blacksmith shop on the trail, or marked the location of an accident or, better yet, an overnight camping area. Or perhaps it was just another lost shoe along the route.

Fortunately, unlike many people, I have had the opportunity to work with a team of professional archaeologists. After I had written the nomination report for the Emigrant Summit Trail over Carson Pass, the U.S. Forest Service hired a team of trained archaeologists to do a survey along the entire eighteen miles of that trail from Caples Lake to Maiden's Grave.

The information I received working with these ten people was practically a college education in itself. I learned that artifacts found along the trail can be much more than just mementos of the gold rush period. Through careful study of their location and interrelationship,

these artifacts can tell a story. They can provide information about emigrant experiences not often recorded by chroniclers of the day or even in diaries of emigrants, who tended to record spectacular events instead of the more mundane experiences of daily life on the trail. During this period I learned to do a site survey with proper techniques for mapping the features of a site; I also came to understand the importance of observing each detail and its relation to other details and to the whole.

It came as a great surprise to me that archaeological excavations are not done merely to collect artifacts. They are sometimes done when a site is in danger of being destroyed by a commercial, state or federal development, and they are often done to address particular questions in historical research which cannot be answered by any other means.

I also learned how exacting the collecting, recording, and cataloguing of even one artifact can be. I further learned that the removal of an article from its original location is usually done only when there is a reasonable assumption that it will be lost or destroyed by someone who doesn't know any better.

According to the 1906 Antiquities Act and the 1979 Archaeological Resources Protection Act, "no person may excavate, damage, or otherwise alter or deface any historical or prehistoric structure, site, artifact, or property; or remove any object of antiquity: arrowheads, worked stone, bone, wood, shell, beads, pottery, bottles,

tools, structures or parts of structures situated on lands owned by the United States Government. To do so without permission of the Secretary of the department who has jurisdiction over the lands, is punishable by fines or imprisonments or both."

Most professional archaeologists are concerned about items collected on sites excavated on private land because of the historical knowledge that may be lost by improper data collection.

About four years ago, when I was locating some lost portions of the trails in the Sierra and reading diaries, I thought of how interesting it would be to discover a site where a wagon had overturned on the side of a mountain. After hiking and re hiking many portions and comparing my knowledge of the area with descriptions in the diaries, I had a good idea where such a site might be. I talked with the Forest Service archaeologist about my idea. I was going to use a metal detector to locate what I hoped would be items from an overturned wagon. I knew that I couldn't dig them up, but I could locate them, survey and map the area. By this time I had taken classes and workshops on proper field techniques and was certified by the Forest Service archaeologist to do this type of work.

If I were to find such a site, a professional archaeological team would be called into the area to map it. Then they would systematically uncover, photograph, identify, and replace each item in its original location. The site that I had chosen was on

a steep sideling hill and numerous other artifacts had already been discovered in the area and on the trail itself.

All my planning and preparations took several weeks spread out over three summers. Two weeks before my actual survey date I went again to look over the site, trying to decide how to divide it into segments for mapping. It was then that I observed several holes had been dug in the trace of the trail itself. Upon closer investigation, I discovered more than sixty holes had been dug up and down the hillside at random! Someone had come into the area with a metal detector, dug up and removed everything they could find.

Through ignorance and lack of understanding, someone removed a part of historical knowledge that is irretrievable. Even if we were to get the items back, they would only give us the information about the items themselves. If each object could have been observed in relationship to the other artifacts, we might have discovered invaluable information about the accident itself, if indeed there had been one.

At OCTA's annual convention in Carson City last year a statement was adopted endorsing our intentions to respect and honor the law and, equally important, to observe proper archaeological techniques and practices.

OCTA members must not overlook the wealth of information about the trails that can and will be obtained by observing proper scientific research methods in the library, in the field, or in discussions with others.



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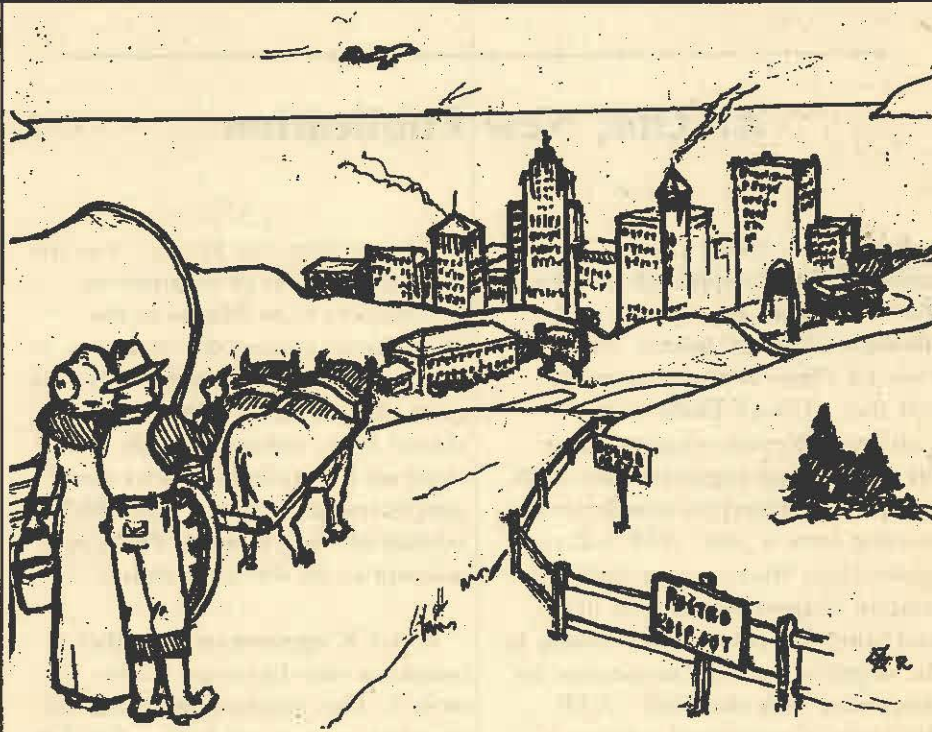
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Mebbe we spent too much time on the trail.

Cartoon by Carl Weber