

Archaeologist works to uncover significance of ancient cultures

By Anne Neidinger
Reporter

Discovering arrowheads and other ancient artifacts while wandering around a farm pasture or creek bank was not an uncommon childhood occurrence for Dr. Harry Shafer, professor of anthropology at Texas A&M.

While growing up in rural Texas near Temple, Shafer had the freedom to spend time at creeks and river banks looking for and accumulating prehistoric materials. His discovery and excavation of a human skeleton on a creek bank as a teenager resulted in a deeper understanding of archaeology for him.

Shafer, who specializes in archaeology, developed that fascination into a commitment to discovering and interpreting the ways of ancient peoples. He excavates sites once inhabited by ancient cultures and explains their significance through his writings. He uses his experience to help educate students at A&M about anthropology.

When he donated the skeleton he found to the Strecker Museum at Baylor University, Shafer was invited by museum officials to join the Central Texas Archaeological Society, an amateur advocational group that often had professional archaeologists speak at the meetings.

"I joined it and that's where I met my first professional archaeologists," he said. "I began to find out what archaeology was all about and my interest went far beyond collecting artifacts. I began to accumulate and cultivate a more specific interest."

Although this interest intensified, Shafer did not immediately pursue a degree in anthropology. Instead he majored in business at Temple Junior College and later managed a young men's department in a store.

While working in Austin for the Texas Highway Department, Shafer was able to maintain correspondence and form friendships with professional archaeologists there; and by this time, he had joined the state archaeological society.

In 1962, he was offered and accepted a job working with the archaeological research program at the University of Texas as a field person.

"That let me know I wanted to pursue archaeology as a career," he said. "That's when I went back to school."

Shafer said working part time from 1962 to 1972 at the research program while attending UT helped him get experience in the field and in writing technical reports.

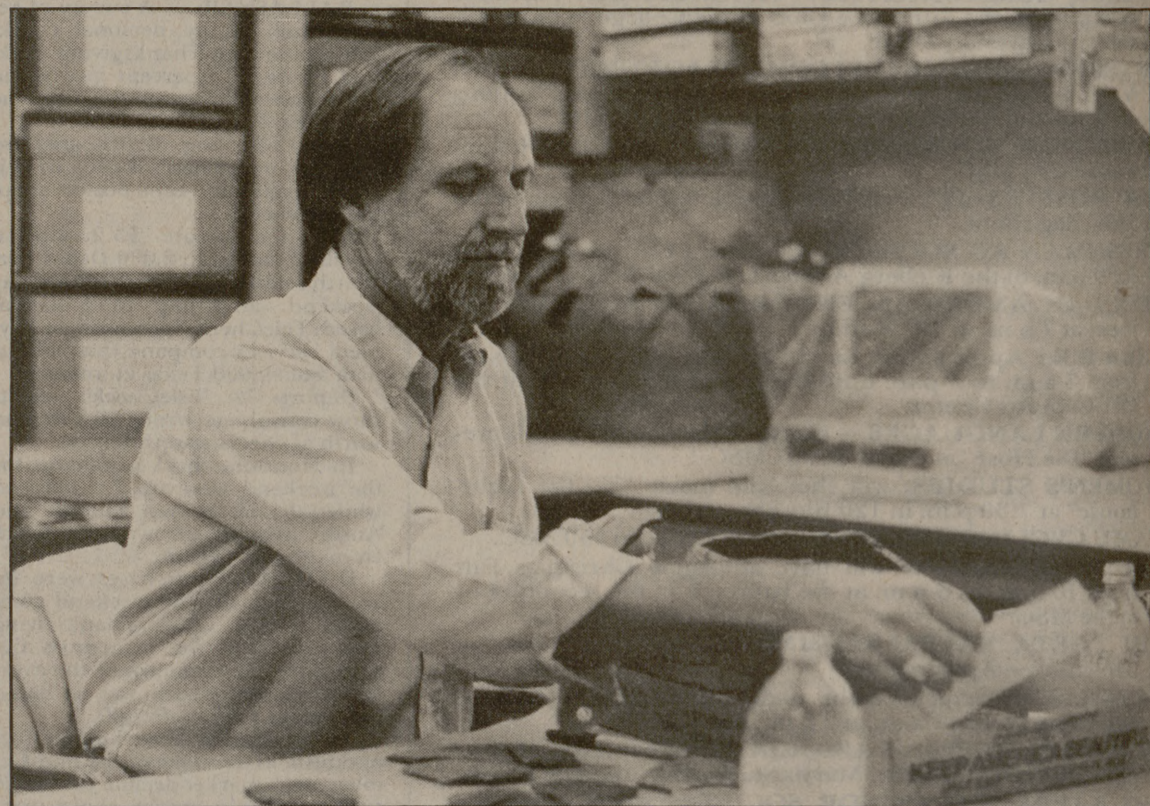
Dr. Vaughn M. Bryant, professor and department head of anthropology at A&M, offered Shafer a one-year visiting position at A&M in 1972, which he accepted. After finishing his dissertation in 1973, he took a job as a professor at A&M and has been here ever since.

"I didn't really hesitate that much when offered the position, because I wanted to get involved with an academic program and I knew that I could continue my research here," he said.

Shafer said the anthropology department at A&M was still in its infancy, and he wanted to get involved with building the program.

"I liked it over here," he said. "I was given a lot of freedom to develop my own interests and to be a part of building a program that grew from a department that offers a bachelor's degree . . . to one that offers a doctorate."

"So we've gone from nothing really to a full-fledged department in liberal arts. It's been fun to be a part of that building process."



Dr. Harry Shafer, A&M professor of anthropology, studies some artifacts.

Photo by Sam B. Myers

One way Shafer has contributed to the growth of the department is through his involvement in various anthropological field projects that have brought recognition to A&M.

Shafer has participated in archaeological digs such as the Hinds Cave project in Southwest Texas, the Mimbres Indian dig in southwestern New Mexico and the Maya Indian excavation at Colha, Belize, in Central America.

Shafer said the Hinds Cave project in 1974-1977, which Bryant also participated in, was supported by the National Science Foundation and helped in the development of the anthropology department at A&M.

"It was one of the most important projects in terms of building national awareness of a program that we've ever done," he said.

The Hinds Cave project was quite physical, Shafer said. Participants had to camp on a remote limestone plateau, and the hike down and back to the cave every day was a difficult climb.

"We either shaped up or shipped out," he said. "But we had to do it. It was the only way we could carry it through and get the information we needed."

The project site, which two student field schools helped at in 1975 and 1976, was "beautifully preserved," he said. The organic materials in it were preserved for about 9,000 years, he said, and included sandals, bits of matting, netting and dry feces, which were to be studied for dietary profiles.

"The Hinds Cave project was one of the most important learning experiences I've ever had in archaeology, because I was working with colleagues who had expertise in other fields, such as zoology or ecology," he said. "You learn a lot about people adapting to particular environments in particular circumstances."

The Mimbres Indian project at the NAN Ranch in southwestern New Mexico was "the most character building project I've ever been on," Shafer said.

The project, going on for the past

10 summers and involving a field school, is supported by A&M, the Federation of Aggie Mothers Clubs, Earthwatch and the National Geographic Society. The Mimbres pueblo, almost 2,000 years old, contains an abundance of ceramic art made by the people.

Shafer said a person running a field school must take into account department goals, student needs and one's personal research gains.

"The Hinds Cave project and the NAN have served these goals well," he said.

Another project, the ancient Maya Indian site in Belize, increased A&M visibility in terms of international involvement, Shafer said. From 1979 until last spring, Shafer has been involved in stone tool specialization at the site in Colha, Belize. He said the Maya exploited raw materials there and specialized in the production of chip stone tools.

"That particular project has been challenging because it requires an adaptation to third-world bureaucracy," he said.

The Colha project, which included graduate students participating in thesis research, was difficult because it was situated in a jungle and supplies had to be maintained for a two- to three-month period, which was expensive, Shafer said.

The dig involved other institutions such as UT at Austin, UT at San Antonio, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of New Mexico, which added to departmental recognition at A&M, he said.

"It was an interesting experience, because it now helps me to better design projects in foreign countries for students because I know a lot of the bureaucracy you have to go through," he said. "Emotionally, it's a lot easier to work in the United States."

Shafer managed to participate in projects and teach at A&M by traveling back and forth at different times during the year. In 1980, he taught a two-course field program for a semester at the Colha site.

He also has worked on about 100 small projects in Texas and southern New Mexico when he worked as a

research archaeologist in Austin. It was by working there that he was able to travel throughout Texas and see a lot of archaeology, he said.

With that experience and knowledge, along with the information from Hinds Cave, Shafer wrote the book "Ancient Texans," which was published this year and is about the rock art and ancient people of the lower Pecos River. The rock art gives insights into the people's belief systems and curing and healing rituals, he said.

Shafer said the rock art is a "teaser" to get people to read the book and learn more about the people who produced the art. Americans do not have an identity to the past, he said, which is an important legacy.

The book, Shafer's first, supports an exhibit at the Witte Museum in San Antonio, and is about the hunting and gathering people.

"People are attracted to the rock art because it's visual and assumes a certain degree of awesomeness because it's so old," he said. "Yet they don't look beyond that to the people who produced it. If the general public can learn to respect the people who produced it, particularly in that area of West Texas, maybe they will make an effort to conserve their archaeological past."

Shafer's accomplishments are numerous, but he said his greatest success has been cultivating friendships and working with the staff he has been with over the years and seeing them become excited about the same things as he.

"It's the personal experiences that have enriched my life," he said. "Working in field with people, you really get to know who they are and you see them get to know themselves. You always see people grow up out there."

Shafer hopes to complete a book about the Mimbres Indians and the NAN Ranch project within two or three years. He has written for over 100 technical publications and chaired symposiums throughout his career. He is also the adviser for the Anthropology Society, a club in the department.

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