ABSTRACT

The Wickliffe Mounds cemetery was first excavated and opened to the public in 1932. In 1991, the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center began removing the human skeletal remains from display, and preparing a new exhibit for the same space. The entire process is open to public view, allowing first-hand observation and free discussion of the procedures and problems. Public reaction among site visitors and the regional population has been guardedly favorable. The new exhibit will be based on a few plastic skeletons, and will include expanded textual, graphic and audiotape discussions of the burial and looting issues and of the value of archaeological research in cemetery sites.
The Wickliffe Mounds site is a small site of the Mississippi period on the bluffs of the Mississippi River in Ballard County, Kentucky. We date the occupation to about A.D. 1100 to 1350. Since 1932 the site has achieved a certain notoriety in a number of circles. It was excavated in the 1930s by a man I can call an amateur archaeologist (when I'm being polite), and was operated as a tourist attraction for more than 50 years. In 1983, the site and remaining archaeological collections were donated to Murray State University, which created the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center as a research station and a museum of archaeology.

The site's notoriety comes from two major things. First, to call it a tourist attraction is something of a euphemism: it was a sideshow, whose operators galled professional archaeologists with lurid advertising, sensationalist interpretation, and flagrant disdain for archaeological or museum expertise. The Wickliffe Mounds Research Center has worked steadily since 1983 to change that image and to provide responsible curation and interpretation.

The second point of notoriety is that the Wickliffe Mounds had one of the largest and best-known open burial displays in the country.

When we took over the site, I knew the burial display was a problem. What I didn't know was how to deal with it. I was lucky: I had several years to think about it and decide how to handle it, before controversy came to a head. I knew that I would have to balance archaeological ethics of preservation of data and accurate presentation against growing demands for more tasteful and more sensitive exhibits. I was handicapped by the same problems all museums are: lack of funding, and, frankly, uncertainty as to what the right thing to do actually was. I started from two basic premises: that we had to teach by what we did and how we did it, and that ducking the problem—either by locking the door and walking away, or by ripping out the bones and throwing them in a box—would be neither responsible nor, in the long run, effective.

Although some opinions had been expressed that we should not interpret human remains at all, I felt that continued public education about the cemetery was important for several reasons.

First, we want to help visitors understand something of life in a Mississippian village, to appreciate the fact that people have lived here and coped with the same human problems for a very long time. Mississippian people lived on this site for some three hundred years. In three centuries, they also died here, and to ignore that fact would be unrealistic and even dishonest. The Mississippian people clearly had ways of accepting death, and put a great deal of thought and care into their relationships with death and their ancestors. We needed to find a way to show something of the reverence inherent in Mississippian funeral ceremony, in the process to suggest that the modern American view of death is only one perspective, and perhaps even a little weird at that.

Second, and unfortunately, part of the public image of archaeology is that bones are there to be dug up. This is particularly topical in Kentucky, where looting has received much recent publicity and little penalty. The only practical way to address this issue is to present people with a more responsible view of what burials actually mean, and why legitimate study of graves must rest in the hands of trained personnel who conduct investigations with clearly specified legal, forensic, medical, or scientific goals.
Third, there is real scientific value in the study of human remains, of any time or culture. There is valuable knowledge to be gained about demography, disease history, reactions of groups and individuals to stresses and traumas, and about human society and experience. For instance, many of our visitors are surprised when we describe Mississippian as peaceful farmers and traders, with little or no sign of warfare in this population. This view is one that challenges TV stereotypes, and one that depends on analyses of burial data. We can show that the dead have much to teach the living.

We have found, in fact, that the cemetery prompts the widest range of questions from our visitors. These questions range from cultural interpretations, to basic anatomy, pathology, and demography, to excavation methods. Questions include "Why aren't the bones red?" (because Indians are "red people") to "Did these people walk upright?" These questions might strike us as funny, except that they reveal fundamental misunderstandings of anthropological and biological truths about our species.

For all these reasons, it is necessary to admit that burials exist and to interpret them.

But there are objections to the display of human remains, and as I thought about the problem, talking to Native Americans, African and European friends and colleagues, and those we loosely call the "general public" who came and gave their various opinions, sometimes all too vehemently, I began to understand the objections.

I have been in Nigerian villages where the rhythms of life have not changed much in a thousand years or more. I have talked to Europeans who see the Norman Conquest of 1066 as history; not prehistory, not ancient history, but history, the way Jamestown and Lexington Green are history to me. I began to understand that a thousand years is not really very long ago, and that Americans who begin history at 1776 or 1607 or even 1492 in fact have a peculiarly foreshortened view of the past. At some point during my introspection, I had to confront my own ancestry, and I began to understand that when you define the past as family, it becomes personal. I have to allow that Native Americans may take these burials that I study so dispassionately much more personally than I have ever given credit.

I am impressed by the double standard expressed in recent court cases in Kentucky, when looters under indictment are let go for lack of interest, or when a judge dismisses a case because disturbing Indian remains is not a public outrage.

I also found myself increasingly uncomfortable in the company of some of the persons who sought most stridently to defend the exhibit of human remains. These slides were sent to me by a man who is proud of his hobby, which is taking photographs like these. I find that the display attracts too many of those who will form the audience for Halloween 23, whom we can't reach with our educational efforts. I remember talking to the producers of Ripley's Believe It Or Not, who asked about our cemetery exhibit. I tried to explain about archaeology, and the producers asked, "Is it eerie?" I said, "Well, yeah, I guess it's eerie," and they said, "Good, we like eerie!" This is not my intended audience, or my intended message.
Eventually, I decided that I had to interpret the cemetery, and I had to remove human remains from public display. I had to interpret the cemetery by facing the issues head on, and by making explicit the conflicts and decisions involved. I chose to replicate ten burials with plastic skeletons, and to design the new exhibit around the replications.

Removing most of the burials would, of course, create a great deal of free space. I had to see this as an opportunity to install new information. We had, soon after taking over the site, put in a small display to discuss some of the ways in which burial data were studied. This display was avowedly temporary and inadequate, but was an improvement over an uninterpreted field of bones, and over former tour guides who had talked about seven-foot-tall women and criminals buried upside-down.

We decided to replicate ten burials immediately in front and just east of the entrance, which happened to be the ones of which we had an original sketch, and to throw a deck over the west half of the area, to double as an observation platform and as a floor for new exhibit space.

The exhibit panels would reflect several themes. The introductory panel, called the Burial Controversy panel, would explain briefly the current issues surrounding the treatment of archaeological human remains and would make the statement that we no longer would exhibit human remains. We also would use this panel to make a pitch for preservation of sites, and note that there were laws in place on Federal and state levels to protect burials.

The remainder of the exhibit would discuss the analysis of cemeteries, with sections on social organization, burial practices, and biological anthropology. We would draw parallels to modern cemeteries, in keeping with a general exhibit theme of tracing the common threads of ancient and modern life in western Kentucky. The amount of information we would be able to present would be far greater than we had ever presented before.

This plan required two major implementation phases. The second was designing and constructing the new exhibit. The first was removing the human remains by completing the archaeological excavation begun in 1932.

The cemetery was one of the first areas excavated in the original project. Some 150 burials were exposed within a few months of work. Field sketches exist for only the first dozen burials exposed, and no competent or thorough analysis--osteological or cultural--was ever conducted. Artifact associations were at best suspicious, and a cursory inspection showed mixing and replacement of skeletal elements. The collection, in short, was a mess.

We began with an inventory and map. This work gave us a framework for contextual control, and an initial assessment of the degree of confidence we might have in any excavation results. We confirmed many of our suspicions about mixing of skeletal elements, but also found some potential for research nonetheless.

In the summer of 1991 we conducted the major excavation to remove the human remains. I don't have time today to detail the archaeological results, except to say that the project was well worthwhile from a research perspective. The results were surprising: we got much more
contextual data than we expected; we found that the cemetery was the last of five or six major events that took place here; we have reason to think that the cemetery is in fact intrusive, created after abandonment of the village, which has significant implications for regional research designs. Analysis is ongoing, and in the case of the osteology, will continue for some time.

We also, during the course of the excavation, became more and more satisfied that dismantling the cemetery exhibit was the right thing to do as a matter of academic integrity. Too much of what was there was clearly set up for the drama of the display, and not for scientific accuracy. We already knew about some of the mixing of bones from different individuals. We found other elements that were brought from elsewhere on the site, and from outside the site, more than we knew about from preliminary inspection. A few non-human bones were salted in, and a few very clumsy plaster pieces as well. We coined the term "tourism taphonomy" to characterize bones that were modified, including a set of vertebrae that were not vertebrae at all, but discs carved from some other bone. Our assessment of the chronology of the cemetery raised serious doubts about the associations of the pottery that had been displayed with the burials, beyond the question of association with individual burials. The display simply had not been what it purported to be, and the better we understood that, the less we could have justified trying to maintain it.

All of this work was an integral part of our public education effort. I had been making public statements for several years that we would be removing the remains from display when funding permitted. When grants were awarded for the various parts of the project, I announced them. When we did the preliminary inventory, the local TV health and medical reporter came down and did a segment for broadcast on the medical implications of osteological studies. I pushed the ideas of research and responsible handling of archaeological materials at every opportunity.

The excavation fit into our public education programs also. We conduct field schools with college students, Kentucky high schoolers, and European volunteers. The cemetery excavation was open to public view during the whole project. Visitors were able to watch, ask questions, and express opinions. This can be a real pain in the neck, but we have always taken seriously the idea that a professional excavation is the best way to show what real archaeology is. We were heartened to find that the great majority of visitors were at least guardedly supportive, after we explained the project's methods and goals.

We also created a first draft of the introductory panel of the new exhibit, which drew a number of favorable comments. I think that the very openness of the process did a great deal to head off any negative reaction.

In fact, somewhat to our surprise, even the local community is taking the changes in stride. We received ten or a dozen cash contributions toward the purchase of the plastic skeletons. The monetary value was not enough to make the purchase, but as symbols of community support, these contributions were very important.

There is one other aspect of public education that has served us well in this project, by approaching an audience that has not been well informed about archaeology: the Native Americans.
We have had a ceremonial leader of Shawnee descent involved in the project from the proposal stage. She has worked as a liaison with the larger Native American community, as well as commented on the exhibit text and plans as they have developed. She placed a prayer stick in the cemetery as we conducted the excavation, a symbol of cooperation. She also contributed a paragraph for the introductory exhibit panel, which we have used without editing. I'd like to read it to you; on the panel, it's entitled "A Native American View:"

"In death we give ourselves, our bodies back to the Earth: the source of all life. This is done in the form of earth or sky burials. The burial sites are sacred to our people. A person's spirit then continues on and journeys to the Great Mystery. To disturb a person's burial place disturbs that person's journey in spirit. It is a violation of spirit to consider a burial site, the skeletal remains, and burial goods as simply objects for study. These things represent a link to the spirit of that person and the sacredness of life."

The news director of our university radio station, a National Public Radio affiliate, is working on a radio documentary of the project, to include interviews with Native American consultants. We hope to edit that program into an audiotape for the new exhibit. In sum, we are trying to include a real Native American voice in the new exhibit, which in itself goes a long way toward reconciliation of the burial issues. We hope that this effort will lead into a long-term involvement of Native Americans with our program, to revitalize the Wickliffe Mounds as a ceremonial center, affording opportunities for public education and for discussion of our mutual concerns about the North American past.

We reopened for the season on March 1, with the project about half done. We still had a dozen original burials in place, waiting to find funds to purchase the plastic replicas. We had installed the introductory exhibit panels, and also the new deck and superstructure for the rest of the panels.

We were fortunate to receive a substantial anonymous donation to complete the funding needed for the plastic skeletons, and we removed the last of the burials late in March. These are standard classroom disarticulated skeletons. They look a bit stark, a bit too clean, but we wanted to make it clear that they are indeed plastic, and not real bones. The pottery vessels are also replicas. They were made to replace vessels that were stolen from us in 1988.

Another exhibit building has since 1932 housed a set of infant burials. Infants were buried in the village, not in the cemetery, which we interpret as a practice relating to a very high infant mortality and thus lesser investment in an infant's funeral. The infants had rarely been mentioned as part of the burial display problem; in fact, some Native American commentators seem to retain the idea that infants were not ideologically as important, not fully human in a ceremonial sense. However, our culture defines infants as human, and we have removed the infant remains from display as well, referring to the cemetery exhibit for explanation.

Comments we've received so far from visitors are very much like those we heard last summer during the excavation. Some express regret that the bones are no longer displayed, but most understand the reasons and support the compromise we made. One visitor last weekend came to
see the bones, but when told they were already taken out, he turned to his companion and said, "Well, you know, there's still a lot we can learn here." We hope that's the attitude that will prevail.

Just last Wednesday, we received the final exhibit panels and installed them. I'm sorry that there wasn't time to bring slides of them, but we are very pleased with the results. The amount and quality of the information we present in this exhibit is a grand improvement over what was there before.

Before I sum up, I'd like to acknowledge funding assistance from the National Park Service, administered by the Kentucky Heritage Council; the Kentucky Humanities Council; and the Kentucky Bicentennial Commission, without whose consistent support this project would not have gotten started, let alone been so successfully conducted.

I don't know if there is anyone left who is in quite the same position as the one in which I found myself a few years ago, or faced with the same decision. If I have one piece of advice to offer, it's this: don't lose control. The site director is the one who has to live with the decision and its consequences. The site director is the one who knows the site's strengths as resources for public education and for research, and who knows the audiences that must be addressed. The site director must make sure the decision is one he or she can live with, and take responsibility for.

I do not presume to offer advice on what that decision should be. What I have presented today is my decision, my compromise. It is my way of reaching an accommodation between my archaeology, my audiences, and my ancestors.

If visitors can come to the Wickliffe Mounds and learn something about archaeology, about the value of cemetery studies, about Native American culture today and in the past; about scientific and traditional values; and about compromise and respect for more than one point of view, then I don't think that the cause of public education will be badly served.