THE HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF WICKLIFE MOUNDS:
AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND TOURISM

The Wickliffe Mounds site is best known for its Mississippi period occupation, A.D. 1100-1350. Its archaeological record also contains evidence of twentieth-century activities seldom investigated by archaeologists. Tracing the extent of previous archaeological efforts helps to document the history of Kentucky archaeology in the 1930s. Before 1983, archaeological activities were inextricably linked with tourism, which also left a record in the ground. The Wickliffe Mounds project is a prime example of the concept that all activities on a site since first human occupation have affected, and become part of the evidence in, the archaeological record.

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The Wickliffe Mounds site has taken its place in our literature as a Mississippi period site, and I don't think it's been a surprise to anyone that the work we've done on the site since 1984 has concentrated on that late prehistoric occupation. I have largely ignored the historic period artifacts that we've recovered, except where they helped to define disturbances and to sort out where previous excavations had explored ahead of us. But the history of the Wickliffe Mounds in the twentieth century is significant also, in its contribution to the history of Kentucky archaeology and of the development of tourism. Today, I'd like to consider that we might also have an archaeology of archaeology and tourism, which has something to teach us about where we are today as a discipline and a community of scholars.

The 1930s, which saw the purchase of the Wickliffe Mounds site by Fain King as an entrepreneurial effort, were also a time of expansion of tourism. I have not found a lot of good research on tourism history, but I think a couple of key points are fairly clear. Tourism expanded with transportation technology, first as railhead destinations, especially spas, and then more
aggressively with the advent of the family automobile, so that attractions could be developed
wherever a road could be cut. With this latter expansion, the heyday of caves and archaeological
sites as tourist attractions began.

A quick survey of newspapers of the period shows something of the new popularity of
archaeology and, especially, of artifacts. As a single example, the Louisville Courier-Journal,
dated March 17, 1929, had a story about a family in eastern Kentucky who had been discovered
faking stone artifacts for sale "to meet the growing demand for momentos of the prehistoric race
that once inhabited [Kentucky] ... what effect the disclosure will have on the relic-hunting fad
remains to be seen, for Kentucky has come to be looked on as a regular treasure trove of
prehistoric relics..." As we know, any adverse effect on collecting wasn't permanent.

The fad for collecting evidently also engendered a fad for viewing, as entrepreneurs were
quick to note. One area that jumped into the archaeology attraction business was that around
Lewistown, Illinois. Dickson Mounds survives as a fine museum, but it had its rivals initially.
The competition among the sites is reminiscent of the rivalry among commercial caves in
Kentucky, including shots fired in the heat of commerce.

Western Kentucky and Tennessee saw similar competition. Besides the Wickliffe
Mounds, there were would-be competitors at Tiptonville, Tennessee, and in Logan County,
Kentucky; Tom Sanders, of the Kentucky Heritage Council, has also heard something about a
second operation in Ballard County, Kentucky, although I haven't run into anyone who remembers
it.

The Logan County site, known as Prehistoric Lost City, was advertised in the North
American Relic Collectors Association Bulletin in 1936, pointing out helpfully that "Six National
Continental Highways Lead to Lost City."

Although that publication did not mention the Wickliffe site, at Tiptonville, the Reelfoot
Burial Mound was unabashedly a copy of the Wickliffe Mounds. Advertisements in the
Tiptonville newspaper in 1935 announced "34 Ancient Indian skeletons unearthed and lying in
their natural state, with beads, pottery, and implements of war... See this educational and historical
sight." News reports in the same paper made the parallel explicit: "Lake County is going to have a famous buried city of its own," and, "They have nothing at Wyckliffe that we have not found at Lasater's Corner." Bill Lawrence, to whom I owe this information, tested the Tiptonville property and found no indication that there actually was a site there.

The engine for these developments was tourism, and Fain King clearly copied the Dickson Mounds as Tiptonville and Lost City copied Wickliffe. Duane Esarey found for me a reference in the Dickson Mound archives to Fain King's visit to the University of Chicago Lewistown expedition in August, 1932. Allan Harn also told me that King tried to hire Don Dickson, then Raymond Dickson, to direct the work at Wickliffe. Both declined, perhaps because they could tell that King's motives were far less academic than their own.

King's commercial incentives were easily recognized by contemporary archaeologists, with whom he alternately feuded and attempted truces. The Webb correspondence at the University of Kentucky shows that King was collecting, and writing to invite W. D. Funkhouser to see his sites and collection, by late 1927. King wrote to W. S. Webb on October 1, 1932, announcing his purchase of the Wickliffe site and his intention to set up a museum like Dickson's.

Webb had already written to Carl Guthe, on September 29, that King "is not an archaeologist but is merely collecting as a fad." The archaeological community, led by Guthe and Webb, soon decried King's commercialism, publicity and showmanship, and devalued his findings, although recognizing the potentially important nature of the site.", King maintained a cordial relationship with Fay-Cooper Cole for a while, Cole hoping to lead King into the archaeological light, but ultimately that effort foundered on King's and his wife's egos and self-serving suspicions of academia.

Local news reports of the King project also reflected the commercial tone. The Cairo Evening Citizen for October 17, 1932, reported the headline, "Fain King Uncovers Wonders in West Kentucky," and added, "due to the vastness and tediousness of the work, Mr. King expects it
to take several months to complete his job." The New York Times, in January 1933, referred to Wickliffe as "the American equivalent of Tut-ankh-amen's tomb."

King appeared to be capitalizing on his efforts. The Cairo Evening Citizen reported in July, 1933, that King estimated 34,000 visitors that month, and 14,000 since opening in late 1932. In December, the paper called Wickliffe "the Mecca for thousands of travellers," and in November of 1934, stated that "Before the end of the year, more than 100,000 people will have visited the Ancient Buried City... Mr. King said his advertising covered nine states and at least one million persons saw it every day."

However much these figures are inflated, King's intent and commercialism are clear. He was comparatively restrained in his statements to more academic audiences, as to the Illinois State Academy of Science, where he explained that "This work is open to the public at all times and has had much to do with acquainting the great masses with Mississippi Valley Archaeology."

Whether we judge this acquaintance to be a good thing or not, the statement is accurate. Questions our visitors ask give us some insight into the kind of things they did learn. The questions, "Where's the guy who died in disgrace?" and "Where's the 7-foot-tall woman?" are so repetitive they drive us crazy. Fortunately, the visitor who insisted that he had been shown a wooden Indian torture chamber is, so far, unique. A large number of people did get their first glimpse of archaeology in this commercialized setting. The impact of King's project on the development of tourism in western Kentucky still can't be clearly measured.

King's project also had an impact on Kentucky archaeology. During the years that he and Fay-Cooper Cole maintained their uneasy friendship, Cole managed to introduce Chicago-style grid excavations to the Wickliffe project. Despite King's showmanship and his private funding, his excavation is very much a part of the WPA-era establishment of archaeology in Kentucky, and was perhaps the most publicly visible part of that history.

The point of all of this is that new methods in archaeology, and in tourism, were part of the King project in the 1930s, and part of the history of our discipline. Archaeology and tourism are
elements of human behavior. As human behaviors, shouldn't they be reflected in the archaeological record?

The simple physical fact of the displays is a relict of King's project. They would not exist without the tourism motive, but they also freeze a moment in 1930s archaeology. More subtly, the presented moment in archaeology is a blend of what really was done and found, and of what King thought would sell to an audience, a blend that results, on close analysis, in considerable ambiguity.

We have been most forcibly reminded of this ambiguity in studying the cemetery. The cemetery as displayed purported to be an in situ exposure. As Hugh Matternes has discussed elsewhere, this display is distorted by what King thought a cemetery ought to look like: whole skulls replaced broken ones, bones were moved to where they ought to have been, or to demonstrate situations that ought to have occurred (like families being buried together), bones were modified and outright faked. Sixty years of visitors saw King's vision of an excavated cemetery, not an intact, exposed prehistoric cemetery.

Nonetheless, the concept of exposure in situ is a real archaeological ideal, and a lot of people got it. The exhibit in the Mound D building, however inadvertently, also suggested controlled provenience measures:, some of the pedestals are five-by-five foot squares, remnants of the Chicago-influenced grid. In our terms, balks and pedestals are features belonging to an archaeologists' activity set. This concept is harder for a lot of people to understand than we realize, but can be interpreted for the public as well as for our own study of intact versus disturbed deposits.

Not all such features are on display. We have identified King test units or balks and pedestals in several of our excavations, attempting to trace the limits of his work. A 1932 test in the north of Mound D, plotted on a sketch map on file at Mound State Monument, Alabama, showed up in our excavation in 1987. Another anomalous profile, in the northwestern sector of the site, also appears to be a 1932 test roughly mapped in the same notes. South of Mound D, a
profile puzzled me for some time before I realized that I had cut across a pedestal from the 1930s, where King tested deeper into subsoil on the east than on the west.

This one is a relatively straight profile, but other King profiles have considerable slope. This one shows a remnant of Mound F, with topsoil and perhaps backfill over mound fill; note the sloping profile. Similarly, on the east side of the site, the edge of King's excavation is marked by a profile of nearly 45 degrees. Both of these were gridded excavations; is this 1930s Chicago style for perimeter profiles, or King's idiosyncratic version thereof? We could test for this, say, at Kincaid.

We also found in the summit of Mound C, the cemetery, an historic disturbance that at first looked archaeological by its squared-off corner. We first thought that this was an 1932 King test that had not been recorded anywhere, since it was aligned very closely to the King tests we had already seen. However, on excavation, it turned into a far less regular unit than expected. My interpretation right now, although I can't verify the dating, is that this is a post-King test begun as a square hole to impress tourists, but abandoned in frustration when all they found was mound fill. Too bad...

Evidence of the 1932 project occurs in other contexts. In 1992, we penetrated a gravel road in two units. A 1932 photograph from the University of Alabama files shows this road newly cut, but not yet graveled. I note two other aspects of this photo: first the field camp in the background, and also the circus tent over the cemetery excavation. The circus tent is secured by fairly substantial stakes—one of which was identified in 1992.

The field camp was a secondary focus of the 1993 excavations. From the photos, I interpret one tent as a field lab, and the other as a sleeping quarter. My question was, simply, whether there is an archaeological signature of an archaeologist's field camp. We excavated six test units in the general area, most of them halting at level 2 to minimize disturbance to the intact deposits. I'm not sure quite what I was looking for; tent stakes, maybe recording artifacts, such as pen nibs, or perhaps lost labeled artifacts (we did scoop up a pile of labeled sherds in the woods in 1984).
Unfortunately, although we have twentieth-century artifacts from these tests, I can't say that any of them belongs to the field camp.

Past tourism facilities, more than activities, do show up. Our tests on the west side of the office building, to check for undisturbed deposits before expanding the building in 1985, produced detritus from the original office on the same location. Several features are associated with this structure. From one, we recovered what I still feel is the single artifact from a middle Mississippian site that indisputably shows direct contact with Mexico. It's a cinco centavo, dated 1953.

Another set of artifacts that betrays the tourism influence, of which I don't have a slide, was recovered from Mound F. Mound F had an exhibit building over it, which apparently burned. Our excavations recovered several sherds of southwestern corrugated ware, which must have been on display in this building. I presume it's a 1930s trade item, not a late prehistoric one.

Finally, we have Mound A. Mound A was excavated first in 1932, and was left as a display of sequential mound construction, which actually wasn't a bad idea at all. By the time we got to it, it was a bit worse for wear. We cleaned off an old profile and placed a small test pit at the base, before filling in the excavation to restore the mound. We found one posthole, square, with shreds of uncarbonized wood in it, that doesn't fit the pattern of the Mississippian postholes. More than one visitor has told me that at one time they were able to go down into a deep hole in the ground, and my best interpretation is that this posthole is a trace of a staircase down into the mound. I don't think it's the torture chamber.

Other tourist features remain to be investigated. Informants tell us that there was a set of cabins along the northern margin of the site, for tourists and guests. A house just north of Mound D apparently served also as a reception area for favored visitors whom Blanche King invited for tea. Then, of course, the broad gully on the south side is also a feature, bulldozed out for the double driveway. This had a rather drastic impact on the topography of the site, but is purely a tourism impact.
Some of these aspects of the archaeological record are not as well recorded or analyzed as I would like, because it only occurred to me relatively recently that the archaeology of archaeology and tourism has a contribution to make. We know that we destroy those parts of the archaeological record that we excavate, but what more subtle traces do we leave of our own activities? Will our efforts be documented by future archaeologists, studying how our methods changed through time--or how our textbook ideals reflected our practices?

In the first class in general anthropology that I ever taught, a student wanted to do a paper on the impact of anthropologists on the societies they study. Very little information was available, because very few ethnographers look for that process, perhaps in denial, and very few groups are restudied. Some important archaeological sites, however, are revisited in search of new data. We can also document old archaeology, if we think about it.

For me, thinking about this idea emphasizes something we all teach, but don't always explicitly discuss in analysis: all human activities, as well as natural processes, leave traces in the archaeological record, and we must interpret everything that has happened to a site since the occupation we are interested in, to understand fully their impact on that target record. We know this. But we tend to see a site as either prehistoric or historic: you might ask the conference organizers, for example, why I'm giving this paper in a Mississippian session, and not a session on historical archaeology. Perhaps we should recognize that, even in prehistoric sites, we may also have opportunities to further the studies of such arcane 20th-century activities as tourism--and archaeology.