

# Digging Summer School

by Larry Pope

At the suggestion of a friend I decided to do something different this summer and signed up for an archaeological field school. I had visions of great Indian burial mounds filled with skeletons and pottery, and I imagined archaeology as a glamorous profession.

The program I enrolled in is conducted every summer at Catawba College in Salisbury, NC, under the direction of Peter P. Cooper II, professor of anthropology. The session lasts five weeks and is designed to give practical field experience for anthropology majors and other students interested in archaeology.

Before getting to Salisbury, I had anticipated having to read stacks of background materials and having to sit through long, boring lectures, but that was not the case.

During the first week, much of the time was spent reading and listening to lectures, but the talks were short and common-sense oriented, ranging from basic first-aid techniques, to artifact identification. After that first week, the majority of time was spent in the field, and the work required was no different than the work done by professional archaeologists.

Although the number of students enrolled in this summer's program was small, academic interests were quite varied. Three were regular students at Catawba, including two anthropology majors and an English major. The remaining three included a music major, a biology major, and a visiting student from Sweden. All were enrolled in this field school for the first time, so inexperience was a common attribute.

The field activities were supervised by Professor Cooper's two sons, Mark and Peter, both of whom have done archaeological work with their father since childhood. The practical knowledge and experience they shared was tremendously helpful and more valuable than a dozen textbooks. Peter, who is currently pursuing a master's degree in archaeology at the



Photo by Peter P. Cooper, III

Back row l. to r.: Scott Mitchell, David Dodd, Terry McCaw, Peter Cooper, III.  
Front row, l. to r.: Larry Pope, Mark Cooper, Ulrika Bøethius

University of Arkansas, has been a professional archaeologist for the past six years, and he shared many insights into the profession.

The highlight of the field school was the time spent in the Uwharrie National Forest in the central Piedmont. The Uwharries are a chain of mountains older than the Appalachians, but they have been worn down to gently rolling hills. For a week we camped in the woods overlooking Badin Lake and spent the days doing formal excavation work.

The excavation procedure included laying out a one-meter square with stakes and string, and making a map of the area. The excavation itself consisted of taking the soil off in five centimeter levels with the hand trowels and sifting the dirt through screens to find artifacts. Any artifacts found were bagged according to layer and mapped in relation to the walls of the square. Extensive notes had to be taken regarding changes in soil color and texture. Some levels were so concentrated with artifacts that the excavating resembled digging in a gravel pit. A great assortment of stone tools were found, including knives, scrapers, and arrowheads, some of which were as old as 6,000 years.

During the week's activities at the Uwharrie cooperation was essential. Because of the circumstances, members of the crew did everything together, and the responsibilities had to be shared equally. These responsibilities went beyond the digging and sifting; preparing meals, washing dishes, bathing, maintaining latrines, and keeping the campsite clean all became group activities. Without the cooperation of both students and instructors, the stay in the forest wouldn't have been the pleasant success that it was. At the week's end, everyone knew each other in a very personal way, and I began to view Mark and Peter less as teachers and more as friends.

By the time we arrived in Salisbury, Professor Cooper had arranged a contract job with the Soil Conservation Service, so that we might defray

some of our expenses. After a few days off, the crew met in Mt. Airy, North Carolina to start the job. Although the work was no different than what we had done in field school, the challenge was much greater. Both time and money had to be budgeted, so speed and accuracy were critical.

The crew consisted of seven people: Mark and Peter Cooper; David Dodd, a friend of the Coopers and a veteran of several field schools; Terry McCaw; Ulrika Boethius; Scott Mitchell; and myself, all of us students. The site that had to be tested was a stretch of bottomland near Cana, Virginia. It is an area which has been proposed for flooding. The procedure was to survey and map the area, collect the surface artifacts, and dig test squares where the artifacts appeared in concentration. From surface collections six areas were determined to be significant enough to merit test squares. We had six days to complete the work, and the high heat and oppressive humidity made the work exhausting. When the job was completed everyone was relieved, and the tanned bodies and calloused hands told the story of the summer.

As the members of the crew prepared to go their separate ways, everyone exchanged addresses and phone numbers and said their good-byes, resembling children at the end of summer camp. The comradeship that had developed during the summer would be sorely missed. For over a month we had all worked, ate, and spent our leisure time together.

The field school had been a learning experience from beginning to end. Not only did I learn about the procedures involved in archaeology, but I learned about the profession itself. There is not much glamour involved; there is a lot of hard physical work. We found no burial grounds, but we gained a lot of information about the people who inhabited this land. And as important as any of that I learned about people, and how the best can be made of less than perfect situations.



Terry McCaw

Photo by L. Pope