Archaeology Laboratory Project: Nobles Pond ~Lisa Stratton

Lisa Stratton wrote her paper “Archaeology Laboratory Project: Nobles Pond” for Prof. Harkness’ Intro to Archaeology (ANTH 18420) course. She was asked to write a descriptive essay about her experiences in the lab.

One of the things that I believe sets apart the Kent State University Stark Campus from other small regional campuses is the archaeology lab on the third floor of main hall. For me, until this semester, it has been a rather vague, mysterious room that I passed by regularly, without really knowing what was taking place inside. My imagination conjured up images of dinosaur bone fragments being painstakingly glued together, or breathtaking pieces of pottery with engraved gods and goddesses cavorting around the rim being studied in minute detail. I even daydreamed of some dashing archaeologist (okay, okay... specifically Indiana Jones!) popping in now and again with some fantastic piece of jewelry or a magical container of some kind, with an obligatory curse on it that would throw the entire campus into turmoil! So, when the opportunity arose for me to do a research project of sorts in the lab, I was thrilled at the prospect.

My assignment was to spend time working with our resident amateur (loosely speaking, as she is really quite amazing) Elaine Dowd, the Field Director and Lab Coordinator for the Nobles Pond Project. I was to spend ten to fifteen hours in the lab, and then give a brief summary and description of my journal notes to my professor. I was quite convinced that by the end of the semester, I would be Lara Croft, or even better, Daniel Jackson: an inexhaustible source of knowledge, with my days full of discovery and adventure.

The first day I stopped in to see Elaine, we spent about a half an hour discussing when would be good times for me to help her out. Curiously, I peered around the room as we spoke, looking for some blue enameled death scarab artifact, or a bullwhip hanging on a wall peg. To my surprise, there was not a skull or priceless vase to be seen. Instead, there were rows and rows of checkbook cartons, filled with tiny chips of flint, and shelves full of boxes... flat, plain cardboard-looking boxes. The walls were covered with schematics and the filing cabinets were overflowing with paperwork. We finally settled on a good time for us both, and I left with anticipation for the weeks ahead.

I stopped in the following week, on Tuesday night, the time that the local archaeological society meets at the lab to work on the artifacts gleaned from the Nobles Pond site. I was unable to stay, but I was able to make the acquaintance of six or seven people that have spent years combing over material in the lab. It was a spirited discussion, and they seemed excited at the prospect of another person joining their ranks and pitching in to help. All was going according to plan.

My first day in the lab, Elaine gave me the “grand tour.” This was primarily standing in the closet door as she described to me what all the shelves of boxes were, from natural remains (non-man-made) to itemized artifacts from the various sections of the site. From there, she gave me a quick run-down of the various schematics on the walls, and the contents of the other shelves and boxes scattered in the main work area. Then, it was time to work. Finally! I waited with my breath held to find out what my duties would be. She handed me a tiny little stack of one inch by two-inch slips of papers, and asked if I could please file these away for her. Slightly disappointed at my less than auspicious start, I put on a cheery face and set to do my task. Surely the adventure would begin soon, but the mundane paperwork must be finished first. Hope was not lost.

As I began filing, Elaine started telling me the story of the Project. In the early nineties, Garry Summer and Dr. Mark Seeman came together in a shared interest in some of the artifacts that had been uncovered, on and off since the early seventies, in the Nobles Pond area of Jackson Township. At that time, the property was owned by the Timken family, who graciously allowed them to begin excavating some sections of the site. Eventually, the Timkens sold the land to developers. After quite a bit of discussion, the developers allowed the excavators to continue with their work while the construction crews worked
around the volunteers. According to Elaine, it was quite a job, attempting to get as much material out of there as possible, before the buildings started being built on top of the site. They had thousands of volunteers helping, from adults with an amateur interest in archaeology, to schoolchildren that Elaine taught and directed on site.

Kent State agreed to let the Nobles Pond Project set up a laboratory at the Stark Campus, mostly, I think, due to Dr. Seeman’s influence as a Kent State professor. I believe they removed the last of the material from the site to the new office in 1996. Some of the artifacts are at local museums, but most of the over-60,000 pieces still remain at the University in the lab.

As I filed and helped catalogue some of those artifacts, I found myself immersed in Elaine’s tale of excitement, sacrifice, and dedication that brought her to this tiny little closet-like room. Almost three hours had gone by without me even realizing it. I was nowhere near finished with the little slips of paper, so I tidied up my mess and set it aside for my next visit. I bid Elaine farewell, with promises of my return in a few days.

Since that first visit, I’ve been back several times… sometimes for an hour, sometimes for two or three, and as of just last week, I have finally finished filing all of those little slips of pink paper. I have discovered that the excitement of being in the lab doesn’t require that I dodge phantoms from cursed relics, or avoid evil priests using ancient remains to become gods. The true adventure is discovering the simple things about people that lived over ten thousand years ago… things such as how they made their tools to survive, for hunting and eating, and making clothes. I find myself wanting to know more and more every day about what things we have in common with those long-ago folks and wishing we could have even just a glimpse of their daily lives.

One of the most important realizations I’ve had over the last months regarding archaeology is just how crucial the tiniest discoveries really are in the larger scope of things. For example, while sitting at the little worktable in Canton, Ohio, trying to fit two tiny pieces of flint together, it’s difficult to think that the work will have impact. Yet, archaeologists have traveled from multiple other Paleo-Indian sites here in North America in order to learn the accurate form of cataloging and mapping that Elaine has put into motion for Nobles Pond. All of archaeology’s little tasks lay the foundation for the flashy discoveries, like King Tutankhamen’s tomb, or Lucy.

I may not have discovered a Stargate or cracked a bullwhip, but I wouldn’t change my experience in the lab for anything. It has taught me about the warmth and camaraderie of the people that spend decades trying to understand our ancestors through sites like Nobles Pond. It’s also reminded me that average, ordinary, caring people that don’t stop to worry about things like glory or reward do the lion’s share of any given job. They do what they do because they love it, and because it needs to get done.

Oh, yeah. I’ll be back to work there this summer. And fall. And winter.