

HOW I WAS HOOKED

Vincas P. Steponaitis

 I first met Jeff Brain in the fall of my sophomore year at Harvard. This was a time in my young life when academics were not a priority. Rather, I was much more interested in extracurricular activities—including late-night games of bridge, intramural sports, and being Undergraduate Manager of the varsity soccer team. Yes, I had declared anthropology (with a concentration in archaeology) to be my major after a false start in physics, but that was a nominal choice forced by a deadline, certainly not a career decision. And it was as much the soccer as the anthropology that ultimately led me to Jeff. Let me explain.

One day that fall I got a phone call from a freshman soccer player named Dan Potts. Dan told me that he was interested in archaeology, and his coach Dana Getchell (called “Getch” by generations of soccer players at Harvard) had suggested that he talk with me. Apparently, Getch assumed that because I was an experienced sophomore and an anthropology major, I would be able to offer this wet-behind-the-ears freshman some sound advice. So Dan came over to Adams House for lunch, and after some initial pleasantries he asked a simple question, “Where do you plan to go into the field next summer?” Completely puzzled, I responded, “What do you mean?” He proceeded to explain that if I was interested in archaeology I should try to get some field experience. That was news to me. I asked him what he was planning to do next summer, and he told me that he was going to Natchez, Mississippi with a professor named Jeffrey Brain. Sounded interesting. So rather than me giving Dan advice, it turned out the other way around. Before too long, I found Dr. Brain in the Peabody Museum’s Putnam Lab, introduced myself, asked to go with him to Natchez, and was given the green light.

Having met the man and signed up for his summer dig, I also enrolled in Jeff’s undergraduate seminar in North American archaeology that spring. This is probably where I first got to know Ian Brown, a year ahead of me in college, who also took the course. It was my very first seminar, and to this day I consider it one of the best. Prior to each weekly meeting, Jeff handed out a



*Vin Steponaitis at the Trudeau site, 1972
(LMS photo).*

old, Lithuanian kid from Boston! We lived in a Victorian house on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River and would watch the sun set over the valley as we ate supper, wrote our field notes, and played poker on the front porch. And the people were fascinating. Apart from Jeff and my crewmates—Ian Brown, Dan Potts, and Gil Parsons—I shared the field house with Stu Neitzel and Dottie Gibbens, who were digging at Fatherland. Others I got to know that summer were Bill Haag, Bob Neuman, Leonard Charrier, Leicester and Betty McGehee, Tommy McGehee, George Castille, “Smoky Joe” Frank, and Robert Prospere, a remarkable cast of characters. Stu in particular made a tremendous impression on me, as he did on almost everyone who knew him. Many of these folks remain good friends to this day.

And then there was the archaeology. My very first excavation experience was at Emerald, one of the biggest pre-Columbian earthworks on the continent. Jeff didn’t like to waste time in the field (something I learned quickly when I was late getting to the trucks one morning), and he expected a lot from his crew. After a couple of weeks of training, he turned us loose and gave us responsibility for digging our own units, and ultimately for directing our own crews made up of local high-school kids (including Tommy McGehee, now a captain in the Natchez police). I made mistakes along the way, but I quickly

well-organized reading list in which some titles were read by the entire class and others were divided among the students. Jeff would always begin by talking about the topic in general, and then, as the class proceeded, he would invite students to present brief synopses of the articles they had read individually. It was a perfect combination of lecture and discussion, and a clever way to get every student involved. It was also a great introduction to North American archaeology and sparked my interest in this field. But I had absolutely no thought of pursuing an academic career.

Then summer came and I found myself working with Jeff in Natchez. That was an extraordinary experience for a skinny, nineteen-year-

learned a great deal about the craft of archaeology and how to lead a crew. The lessons Jeff taught me that summer—not wasting field time, respecting the “chain of command” in giving instructions to a crew, as well as the many techniques of mound excavation—are ones that I still pass on to my students today. By the end of that season I was hooked on archaeology as a fun thing to do, but still not as a career.



Leonard Charrier shares his magnetometer with Vin, Bloodhound Hill site, 1977 (courtesy Vin Steponaitis).

After returning to Cambridge I became a regular at the Peabody Museum and started to work on the collections. At some point, with Jeff’s guidance, I decided to write a senior thesis on the previous summer’s excavations at Emerald and Foster (another mound site near Natchez). This would involve studying the ceramics. For much of my junior and senior years, I spent a great deal of time sorting pottery and learning the many nuances of the type-variety system. I also had the chance to work on the French earthenwares from the so-called Tunica Treasure. Jeff’s *modus operandi* was once again in evidence: he was always there to provide opportunities and advice, but at the same time expected a lot of his students. And I kept doing my best to keep up.

I have many fond memories of those years at the Peabody. One was discovering the sheer joy of research, of tackling an archaeological puzzle and trying to solve it. Another was the comradery and fellowship among the museum's faculty, students, and staff, which was most clearly manifest during the daily ritual of afternoon "tea": At 4 o'clock sharp, everyone at the Putnam Lab would drop what they were doing and gather around a table to drink a cup of instant coffee or tea, review the day's events, swap stories, and tell jokes. I also remember, during the summer of 1973, walking across the future site of Pusey Library as construction was just getting underway and seeing eighteenth-century pottery lying in the disturbed earth. This was same stuff I had learned to recognize while working in Natchez: Westerwald stoneware, lead-glazed redware, creamware, and the like. I made a surface collection and showed it to Jeff. He got excited and encouraged me to look for more. So I kept going back each day and over the next few weeks the collection became quite substantial.



Jeff at the Haynes Bluff site in 1974. He could be pretty scary at times (LMS photo).

All of this material ended up in the Peabody's collections, and this small effort encouraged by Jeff may well have been the first attempt at archaeology in Harvard Yard, which in later years became a major undertaking (see Stubbs).

The more I worked at the Peabody the more I was attracted to archaeology as a profession. In the fall of my senior year, I decided to apply to graduate schools. I still wasn't sure that I would actually go to graduate school if accepted, but at least I wanted to keep that option open. In the spring I did get accepted to a couple of places and was still struggling with the decision of whether and where to go. At one point I decided it would be best to simply take the next year off. Convinced I'd made the right decision and relieved that it was



A traditional “chigger itch” on the porch of the First East Street home in Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1974. From left: Vin Steponaitis, Nora Groce, Ian Brown, and Nancy Lambert (LMS photo).

done, I went to tell Jeff. His reaction was not what I expected. Visibly angry (which was rare for him), Jeff told me, in no uncertain terms, that taking a year off would be a big mistake. This shook me up and got my attention. It also put me back on the right track. I made up my mind to go to the University of Michigan the following year. My future direction was finally set, and that kick in the pants from Jeff is what did it.

I spent the summer of 1974 working for Jeff in the field again, this



Stu Neitzel’s abode in the basement of the First East Street home, the so-called “slave quarters” (LMS photo).



Vin and his differential proton magnetometer exploring the Haynes Bluff site, 1974 (LMS photo).

time based in Vicksburg. The project had all of Jeff's hallmarks: great location, fabulous field house (in this case a haunted antebellum jewel-in-the-rough near downtown Vicksburg), and interesting archaeology. We did major excavations at two sites that season, Fort St. Pierre and Haynes Bluff. Ian was in charge at the former, and I was field boss at the latter, with Jeff as overall project director shuttling back and forth between the two. We were joined on the crew by Nancy Lambert (who later married Ian in 1977), Winifred Creamer, Nora Groce, and Alan MacMillan. Tommy Birchett was hired as local help. And, needless to say, Stu Neitzel was there to keep us all in line. That summer also was memorable in that we got to know Gordon Cotton, who wrote several stories about us for the local newspaper. Our work was Gordon's

introduction to archaeology, and ever since he's been a friend and gracious host to any archaeologist who passes through Vicksburg. (As Gordon himself once told me, "Archaeologists are like stray dogs. If you feed them they keep coming back.")

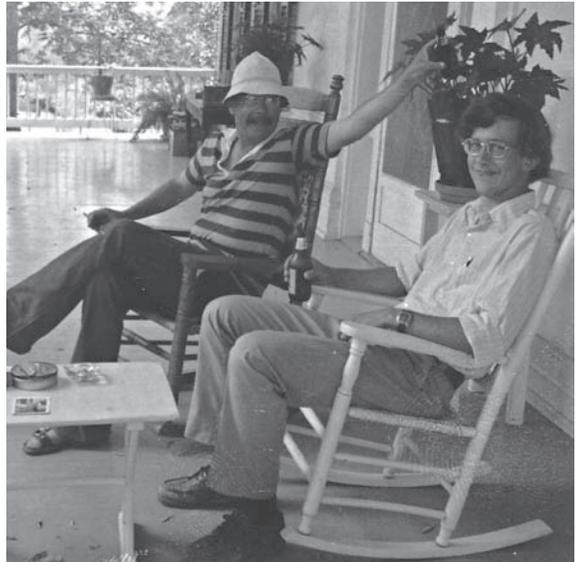
These excavations also witnessed the debut of the LMS's first and only magnetometer. Jeff had seen the effectiveness of a home-made "mag" in the hands of Leonard Charrier, who had used it not only to find the Tunica Treasure, but also to locate features in our 1972 excavations. Jeff wanted that remote-sensing capability in Vicksburg, but did not want to rely on Leonard to provide it. He knew that I had some background in physics and that Leonard had taught me to operate his device. So during my senior year, before we left for the field, he designated me his "instrument man" and charged me with the task of building one. With the help of a kindly graduate student in physics and a small budget, I managed to put together a differential proton magnetometer that looked like a Rube Goldberg machine—an aluminum rod six feet long with large copper coil at each end. This was no modern magnetometer that generated pretty



Weyanoke Plantation near St. Francisville, Louisiana, 1977 (Vin Steponaitis photo).

maps. Rather, it was more like a metal detector that created a distinctive sound whenever it passed over a magnetic anomaly. I spent considerable time that summer walking around Haynes Bluff, listening for that sound in my headphones and telling crews to “dig here” when I heard it. Sometimes these anomalies were caused by real archaeological features. Other times they were caused by buried beer cans and tractor bolts. I’ll never forget telling Alan MacMillan to dig in a spot where he had to use a pickaxe to pound his way through an old asphalt road to get to a huge feature that was sure to be underneath. When he finally got to the source of anomaly—his face beet red and his shirt dripping with sweat—it turned out to be a steel hubcap. At that moment, I saw the advantage of being the man with the instrument than the one digging, although the look on Alan’s face (not to mention his pickaxe) made me fear for my safety!

Jeff prepares to christen Vin with a bottle of brew on the porch of Weyanoke Plantation, 1977 (courtesy Vin Steponaitis).





Jeff and Vin watch the Sprague ("Big Mama"), as it slowly makes its way to dry dock after having been destroyed in a fire, Vicksburg, 1974 (LMS photo).

After that season ended and I had just started my first semester of graduate studies in Ann Arbor, Jeff sent me a postcard (the 1970s equivalent of email) saying he had submitted an abstract on my behalf to present a paper on our magnetometer at the Southeastern Archaeological Conference. This was a surprise, to say the least. But once the shock wore off I did my best to rise to his expectations and managed to deliver my first meeting paper, which in turn became my first publication in archaeology.

Over the next few years I kept working with Jeff during the summers, mostly looking for Tunica sites in and around Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana. Ian, Nancy, and Stu were generally on hand for these digs, and we were joined by Laurie Cameron, whom I married in 1976. Once again I saw fascinating places (the Penitentiary itself taking the prize), lived in memorable field houses (Yonda and Weyanoke), and dug at amazing sites (including Bloodhound Hill). There were more adventures, involving all of the above, which I will let others recount (see Lambert-Brown and Woodiel).

What I can say, and what should by now be abundantly clear, is that I never would have gotten started in archaeology, or gotten as far, without Jeff's guidance as a mentor and friend. And for these gifts I will always be grateful. ❖