

THE INSTITUTE FOR MINNESOTA ARCHAEOLOGY
Looking at the Questions, the Story, and the Records

Scott Anfinson in his first annual report (2006) as Minnesota's state archaeologist briefly reviewed the decline of Minnesota's public archaeology over the previous thirty years. Among other things, he noted that: "The demise of the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology (IMA) in 2002. . . . has significantly decreased archaeological research and public education in Minnesota."

The twenty-year life of the IMA had begun in 1982 as a direct result of state budget cuts that were associated with the beginning of a long downturn in both state and institutional support for archaeology. As the year-by-year chronology appended here indicates, the new organization never achieved statewide reach or financial viability. Yet the IMA story is more than just a tale of doomed struggle by a few people to create the institution of their dreams. Seen in the context of great changes in how our society understands its past, in the technology for studying that past, and in the discipline and profession of archaeology, it highlights a number of questions. Some of the answers may be found by future historians in the boxes of IMA records stored at the Minnesota Historical Society. Others will require broader resources and the perspective of decades.

The first question follows logically on Anfinson's observation: **How could the loss of so small an organization -- one with no reliable source of income and never more than half a dozen full-time employees -- significantly affect research and education on a state level?** For an answer to that, historians will need to look not only at the activities of the IMA itself, but also at the wider setting of reduced archaeological research and shrinking venues for informing and educating the public.

Although the IMA never deviated from an announced threefold mission of research, education, and stewardship, a quick review of its projects and programs shows that over the years it devoted a high proportion of its resources to education and public dissemination. The IMA conducted field schools and teacher workshops, produced curriculum materials, and provided countless classroom lectures, mostly pro bono. For the broader public it produced videotapes and traveling exhibits, published books, circulars, and a newsletter, conducted tours, organized conferences and other public events, and opened its field and laboratory work to volunteers both from its membership and from surrounding communities. Supported by a state grant, it also created a widely acclaimed educational web site, entitled "From Site to Story."

In part the web site made Minnesota archaeology more accessible to the public, but it also facilitated research by providing a data base of unpublished and little-known CRM (Cultural Resources

Management) reports resulting from mandated survey and salvage work. Other IMA contributions to research included many professional papers produced by its principal archaeologists, field work conducted almost annually at sites near Red Wing and Little Falls, exploration of an Archaic bison kill site near Montevideo, and grants to several scholars independent of the IMA for projects related to Minnesota archaeology.

Meanwhile, as Anfinson's report emphasizes, the state's major institutions were turning their backs on local archaeology. The University of Minnesota, which since the 1930s had been the center for professional training and for much of the research done on Minnesota's precontact history, reduced its staff to one North American archaeologist and has discontinued field schools in the state for the past fifteen years. Less drastic but similar cutbacks have taken place in the state university system, while Hamline University remains the only one of Minnesota's many private colleges with an active North American archaeology program.

The Minnesota Historical Society, which conducted statewide surveys and extensive historic sites exploration in the 1970s, eliminated its archaeological research program in 1981. A department of more than fifteen archaeologists was reduced to a skeleton staff of four, who were mainly concerned with highway survey programs funded by the Department of Transportation. It also abandoned a long record of publishing articles and monographs related to archaeology and made no effort to disseminate or publicize a major study of Minnesota's pre- and post-contact historic contexts completed by its State Historic Preservation Office in the 1990s.. At about the same time, the Science Museum of Minnesota turned its primary attention from its own state to studying antiquities in the Middle East. These developments accompanied a nationwide trend toward privatization of the archaeological profession and an emphasis on cultural resource management in compliance with state and federal historic preservation laws rather than upon research and education.

In this context the continuing efforts of the IMA to serve schools and to involve the public, not only as passive audience, but as participants in the adventure of uncovering the state's past, stand in sharp profile. In part those efforts were intended to broaden support for the organization, but a more immediate motive was responding to the eager interest of Minnesotans in the whole enterprise of archaeology. For children the IMA scorned the device of simulated "digs," taking the more honest (and difficult) course of letting them do real work under supervision at nonsensitive sites. Lack of funding placed even tighter limits on research than on education, but the areas studied by the IMA received sustained attention over years. Thus they led to results not often seen in a hit-or-miss world of reacting to proposed construction and salvaging evidence from the path of bulldozers.

Another question posed by the records of the IMA is: **Can archaeological study be served best by independent nonprofits or by programs under the wing of larger institutions that have a broader mission and therefore greater resources?** The case for independence has been advanced by Stuart Struever, founder of two such organizations. To a limited extent his Kampsville Archaeological Center in Illinois and later his Crow Canyon Archaeological Center in Colorado served as models for the IMA, while Struever himself was generous with his time and attention as a pro bono consultant.

He has argued persuasively that an organization with a narrow and clearly defined mission can employ its resources more effectively than a program that competes with other branches of a larger and more generalized institution. Both administrative expenses and fund-raising can be controlled and more sharply focused. Moreover, the flexibility of a small organization allows it to make effective use of talented volunteers, to adjust quickly, and to seize opportunities. An example of this in the case of the IMA is the speed with which it was able to react when repairs to a power dam on the upper Mississippi temporarily exposed the site of Zebulon Pike's 1805 wintering post. Significant investigation and statewide publicity followed within days.

A more dicey advantage is an independent organization's ability to access the full benefit of profit-making ventures. Archaeological tourism can be one aspect of this; another, in today's world, is contract archaeology. In both cases a parent institution will seldom channel the resulting revenue back into archaeology. However, there are risks as well as promises when an independent nonprofit seeks to leverage profit-making opportunities. The pitfalls as well as the possibilities are strikingly illustrated in the records of the IMA.

Another factor in the equation of small and specialized versus larger organizations is the personal research interests of the professional staff. If these dominate the organization, they may narrow its support and rob its program of broader significance. On the other hand, the passion of an individual for finding answers to certain questions may drive research forward in spite of difficulties and give vitality to what might otherwise be bland and uninspired investigations. This factor also presented both problems and advantages in the case of the IMA.

Closely related to the second question is a third one: **Are study and stewardship of the past better served by centralizing resources in the care of a large institution or by cultivating interest and responsibility in local communities?** As a small and specialized organization the IMA was in a far better position to cooperate with local agencies than were larger statewide institutions. In the two communities where it did most of its primary research -- Red Wing and Little Falls -- it worked closely with townspeople and county historical societies. From Red Wing, which is the more affluent of the two

communities, it also drew financial support, including both private donations and several city contracts for survey work. In return it fostered a sense of stewardship in the community by giving numerous public programs and holding most of its conferences there, with attendance at the latter coming from throughout the Upper Midwest.

To a far greater extent than documentary or written history, archaeology rests on a sense of place. The contours of the land, its climate patterns, biosystems, and geology, all shed light on the human societies and lifeways that have existed there. Thus a case can be made for locating the tools and resources for research near the site itself. Years of study have established the Red Wing locality as one of the Upper Midwest's most important clusters of late precontact populations and diverse cultural communities. The argument for local responsibility is further strengthened by the fact that the cluster of sites spans the border of two states with differing laws respecting archaeology and different institutional priorities. Therefore the IMA argued that all Red Wing-related collections should be transferred to the Goodhue County Historical Society and a center for research established there. The effort was frustrated by opposition from institutions based in the Twin Cities and by the inability of the county to meet the costly environmental requirements for proper storage.

Relations with the local community were different and less successful at Little Falls. There, just outside the town, the IMA itself owned a 93-acre historic property fronting on the Mississippi. Located at the mouth of the Little Elk River in the ever-shifting transition zone between forest and prairie that stretches diagonally across central Minnesota, the tract contains evidence of repeated human occupation from Archaic times to the present. Identified sites on it are an 18th-century fur post, an Indian mission of the 1840s, and the remains of a milling village that grew and vanished between 1870 and 1900.

Continuing efforts to interest the town of Little Falls met with a tepid response. School classes used the property for environmental education and citizens attended open houses and walking tours held from time to time, but apart from the Morrison County Historical Society and its staff there appeared to be little sense of local ownership or initiative. That may have been on the point of change in the final two years of the IMA's tenure, when a substantial grant from the McKnight Foundation stimulated interest in the tourism potential of the upper Mississippi. The funding enabled the IMA to inventory the area's historic and environmental resources and bring together local officials responsible for administering them. But by then time was running out. Still unknown, therefore, are the possibilities for creating a network of river or otherwise related communities to explore their common past through archaeology and inspire in their citizens a sense of place, time, and shared responsibility for preservation.

There are yet other questions that hover around the IMA and its legacy to Minnesota. What was its real relation over the years to American Indians and reservation communities? Was the proximity of its main research sites to the Mississippi River an accident, or was it a theme that should have been recognized and more purposefully developed? Could the IMA have pursued more actively its toehold in urban and industrial archaeology? Were its tentative efforts to create an interdisciplinary team effective? Were its investments in cutting-edge technologies productive for its mission, or were they an expensive and distracting gamble? And perhaps most important, does the failure of the IMA represent a cautionary tale for those who seek to involve the public more directly in archaeology, or do its successful initiatives point a direction for the future? All of these and more remain unanswered for the present.

-- Rhoda R. Gilman



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