



Picking Up *the Pieces*

A campus office brings Iowans of all kinds together to save their heritage

Gary Dalecky, an engineering technician with the University's Facilities Services Group, washes and sorts through pieces of broken pots, artifacts from an excavation of the 19th-century Bonaparte Pottery Factory in southeast Iowa.

Gary Dalecky pulls on yellow rubber gloves, grabs a coarse brush, turns on the faucet, and starts to wash the dishes. It's hardly a menial chore. He savors each moment that he scrubs and rinses, sorts and dries. When the dishes are filthy and broken in dozens of jagged pieces, that's when he feels most needed. His dishwashing is a history lesson; the dishes reveal a story, and he gets to help tell it and share it with fellow Iowans.

Dalecky, an engineering technician, works in Design and Construction Services for UI Facilities Services Group. But his weekends sometimes are spent in a lab at the Office of the State Archaeologist on The University of Iowa's campus, cleaning artifacts from an archaeological dig in Van Buren County. He is one of many volunteers from around the state spending time learning more about Iowa's past and helping preserve it for future generations.

"Some people might say all this broken pottery is just garbage. Why would we want to keep that? But these pieces are history, a connection to our past," Dalecky says. "It's a fascinating record of who people were, what they did, how they did it, and why."

The artifacts Dalecky and others handle during these lab weekends were excavated

from the former Bonaparte Pottery Factory site along the Des Moines River in southeast Iowa. Examining the remains offers a glimpse into the lifestyle and technology of the 19th-century Midwest. For example, volunteers learn from Maria Schroeder, the staff member in charge of the Bonaparte dig, how to differentiate between hand-thrown pottery and the mold-made variety, which in turn may indicate in which decade the pieces were made.

Because the site has been well preserved and is of significant historical note, it has been put on the National Register of Historic Places. The Bonaparte excavation was one of the hundreds of outreach activities coordinated this year by the Office of the State Archaeologist, which reports to the UI vice president for research. It is located in the University's 700 S. Clinton St. Building. However, its very nature as a state office allows for far-reaching connections. The office organizes visits to schools, hosts field trips and tours, opens field projects to the public, and sends out experts to speak about archaeology. It loans pieces from its vast collection to museums and historical societies for exhibits. As the preferred repository for all of Iowa's archaeological materials, the

office has more than four million artifacts on display and in storage on campus.

There are about 30 full-time staff members during the school year and as many as 120 during the summer, which is prime time for fieldwork. They routinely serve as consultants to various agencies and organizations. For example, they may offer guidance when artifacts are unearthed during a building project or when questions arise regarding cultural preservation law.

"This last year, our staff interacted with more than 20,000 people around the state, not including any of the activities we sponsor during Iowa Archaeology Month, which reached another 20,000," says Lynn Alex, public archaeology coordinator.

Since its inception in 1993, the annual September celebration of Iowa archaeology has introduced more than 100,000 Iowans to the office, its work, and the state's archaeological past. Another astounding statistic is the number of hits the office gets on its web site, which has become a popular high-tech link to the past. In 2002 the site, www.uiowa.edu/~osa, recorded about 1,100 visits per day.

DEVOTED TO THE GREATER GOOD

Iowa's archaeologists—dedicated professionals and avid amateur volunteers alike—are doing whatever they can to teach as many people as they can about the importance of preservation, notes Beth Pauls, director of the Office of the State Archaeologist and adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The mission of the Office of the State Archaeologist remains

much the same as it was when the state created the office in the 1950s: to discover, preserve, and protect Iowa's archaeological heritage and to educate the public about it.

"We can't preserve Iowa's archaeology unless people understand its value and know that it's worth saving," Pauls says. "We're sending our message to people of all ages across the state: we must save archaeological sites and materials because they have great stories to tell."

Once Iowans have respect for their own heritage, Pauls hopes they can help push preservation efforts globally.

"Otherwise, what keeps people from saying, 'Why not bulldoze the pyramids in Egypt? You could put a Tastee-Freez® there,'" Pauls warns, only half-joking.

So volunteers like Gary Dalecky will continue to devote their days off to the Office of the State Archaeologist's mission and to the idea that their bit of scrubbing and sorting is part of a greater good.

Pauls applauds their efforts, adding, "When you're doing dishes that are a hundred or a thousand years old, it makes doing the dishes a lot more fun, doesn't it?"

by Amy Schoon

Pots from the Bonaparte excavation



Soil patch charts help workers from the Office of the State Archaeologist determine the age of an ancient Indian camp and burial grounds.



David Stephenson, a research assistant with the office, is leading an excavation near Rome, Iowa, where state archaeologists Mike Curran (standing) and Adam Newman (background) sift through soil for evidence of a camp area Stephenson believes dates back some 6,000 years to Iowa's late Archaic period.