

fyi

Vol. 46 • No. 7 • Oct. 5, 2009

Photo Feature

Faculty & Staff News
THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA 

Features

Photo Feature

Profiles

In Brief

Achievements

Back Issues

Calendar

Jobs@U Iowa

UI News Services

Contact Us

Subscribe

Profiles

John Doershuk, Office of the State Archaeologist

John Doershuk knew he'd found his calling the minute he dug into archaeology.

Inspired by the experiences of a high school history teacher who'd done archaeological field work in England, Doershuk spent the summer after his senior year researching an American Indian burial mound site near his home in Ohio.



John Doershuk has served as director of the Office of the State Archaeologist since 2007 and has worked in the office for 14 years. Photo by Tom Jorgensen.

After that, he says, he knew that the blend of hands-on fieldwork and careful historical analysis was a perfect fit.

"I got into archaeology as soon as I could," Doershuk says, "and it's pretty much what I've done ever since."

Today he serves as Iowa's state archaeologist and director of the Office of the State Archaeologist (OSA), a research unit at The University of Iowa. In addition to overseeing a staff of 30 and doing his own research, Doershuk serves as an educator and advisor to UI students and the general public.

*He recently took some time out to sit down with **fyi** to discuss an upcoming*

milestone for OSA, the evolution of archaeology in Iowa, and the importance of protecting our state's historical resources.

The Office of the State Archaeologist is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Why is this a significant milestone?

The continuity is something that's important to us. One fun thing that has to do with archaeology is that under the National Historic Preservation Act (the major piece of federal legislation that protects archaeological sites in the country), the definition of something historic is 50 years or older, so we've reached that point now.

What are you doing to mark the occasion?

Small things, really. We put on our web site (www.uiowa.edu/~osa) the state legislature's proclamation creating the office. From Oct. 15 to 18, we are the host for the Midwest Archaeological Conference, an annual gathering of midwestern archaeologists. We'll have 250 archaeologists coming to Iowa City. As conference organizers we get to dictate the agenda a little bit, and we'll certainly push our birthday theme in that. We're also going to have a showing of a film called *Lost Nation: The Ioway* at 6 p.m. on Oct. 15 in the main auditorium at Macbride Hall. The showing is open to the public, and there will be a Q&A session after the film.

What does OSA do, and why is its home at The University of Iowa?

The legislation that created OSA was very specific; the governor's office and the UI president's office worked together to establish the department. That was at the urging of the Iowa Archeological Society, which is a private group that had been attempting to preserve Iowa's archaeological resources, and felt having the state archaeologist at The University of Iowa would serve as an anchor that would represent the state government, but also the scientific discipline of archaeology. OSA has grown to an office with 30 full-time employees. The mission is still the same, and that's the trifold mission of the entire university system: research, service, and education. It's a very comfortable fit for us here.

You joined OSA in 1995, and became director in 2007. What initially attracted you to OSA, and why have you stayed with the office for so long?

I had been working for a private firm that was all about

using archaeology to make money. I was really looking for a setting where I could do more outreach and research, and where it wasn't just about the bottom line. The job here opened up, and I jumped on it. I must admit that in the back of my mind, in looking over the structure of the OSA, I thought, "Wow, it'd be neat to be the state archaeologist some day," and, hey, it worked out!

As part of my appointment I have adjunct status in the anthropology department. Over the last dozen years, I've probably taught an average of two courses a year. It's really nice to get that connection with students, and to be in the classroom explaining why you do something. It makes you think about it, and you become better at it.

Walk us through the typical day or week of the state archaeologist.

I wouldn't say that any day or week has any particular pattern to it, but there are certain kinds of things I'm involved in.

I have six major programs and some other auxiliary activities that I oversee in conjunction with the program directors and OSA associate director Steve Lensink: ancient burials, the artifact repository, site records, consulting, education and outreach, and archives. I try to stay out of the political arena—creating policy is not one of my mandates—but I do engage with various federal and state agencies that are grappling with how to implement legislation that has to do with protection of archaeological resources.

Then there are the phone calls where someone says, "I think I have an archaeological site" or "I think there's a burial mound on my property. What do I do?" There's an ongoing educational process that involves working with members of the public. I also get e-mails from people who find interesting artifacts—digital photography is wonderful. Once in a while I see astounding things that

Related video: OSA celebrates 50 years

This year marks the Office of State Archeologist's 50th anniversary at the University of Iowa. The office has recorded more than 23,000 archaeological sites statewide, identifying artifacts like bones, pottery, stones and shells. Employees work to protect Native American burial sites and educate Iowans about the state's human past.

I've never seen before.

And I have my own personal research that I squeeze in wherever I can. I've been working through the Lakeside Laboratory in northwest Iowa, and have a bunch of data from a very interesting archaeological site that dates right around A.D. 1650–1700. That was when it was still very much Indian land, and the very first European trade goods were starting to trickle in from the east.

**Is most of OSA's work related to Native Americans?
What does an archaeologist study in Iowa?**

When I was just out of graduate school, the emphasis was very much on the prehistoric period, the ancestral Indian stuff. Over the past 20 years, there's been a growing recognition in our society of its own history, so more and more importance is attached to things that happened in 1830, 1850, even the 1890s. I think that's partly because as each year goes by, that stuff gets that much older, and less of it is preserved, and as we're getting further removed from what life was like then, it becomes something that people want to learn about. I've moved from being a strict prehistorian to being more and more involved with the historic time period. In August I spent a week in Fort Madison working on the 1812 battlefield there. I never would have predicted 20 years ago that I was going to do that kind of archaeology, but it's really fascinating.

What's most rewarding about the work that you do?

The thing I get the biggest kick out of is when someone calls with a complaint that—in their view—the laws that protect historic resources are an impediment to whatever sort of development they are involved with. When I can talk them through the importance of historic preservation, and convince them that they can still pursue their development while preserving historic and archaeological resources, when I get them to come around to that type

Watch the video...

A few of my favorite things ...

Food: chicken, pasta, or breakfast (scrambled eggs and bacon) anytime

Drink: Guinness Stout

Weekday lunch spot: Jimmy John's

Authors: Terry Pratchett or Carl Hiaasen

Music: classic rock

Movies: *Lord of the Rings* trilogy

TV: *True Blood*

Sports:

of thinking, and the light goes on and we can craft a win-win scenario—that's what I like to do.

What do you like to do outside of work?

We have a six-acre property outside of Iowa City, and it's mostly wooded, so I do a lot of tree work—cutting and splitting lumber—and we have animals—goats and chickens and ducks and dogs and cats—there's always something to do for them. I'm not much a woodworker yet, but I'm starting to get into that.

Is there anything else you think people should know about OSA?

Even though we've been around or 50 years, I'm still finding people that don't know we're a part of the University. Part of that is the distance—we're a little south of campus. We would be delighted to have people come tour the facility and learn more about archaeology. We're always looking for partnerships on campus to extend our research and education missions.

by Anne Kapler

Recent Profiles

[Minnetta Gardinier, Graduate College/Carver College of Medicine](#)

[Jacob Yarrow, Hancher Auditorium](#)

[Larry Lockwood, Office of the Registrar](#)

[Mary Blackwood, Division of Sponsored Programs](#)

[Michael Harker, University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics](#)