

Alabama Archaeology Month 2020

Interviewing Women in Archaeology



What I have learned over the years is that, for me, being an archaeologist isn't about finding cool things or uncovering mysteries like everyone thinks. Making connections to the past is one reason why I fell in love with archaeology in the first place but reconnecting the people whose ancestors created that past is something that I love even more. Protecting these places so that they will be here for the future is what my focus is now. Being able to share the importance of these places with local communities is also one of my passions.



Erin Dunsmore

Senior Specialist, Archaeology at Tennessee Valley Authority



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Saluting Women in Archaeology



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1) What is your educational background?

B.A. Anthropology, M.A. Anthropology, University of Tennessee

2) What is your current job? Please describe.

Senior Specialist, Archaeology at Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)-primary job is the management and protection of archaeological sites located on TVA land.

3) What are your primary research interests?

Cultural Resource Management, Cave Archaeology, Rock Art Studies

4) What motivated you to become an archaeologist or how did you become an archaeologist?

I randomly took a Physical Anthro class my sophomore year in college and loved it. I didn't get into archaeology until the summer before my senior year when I went to a field school in the middle of a swamp (for 10 weeks) and did not want to come home. I was hooked.

5) What is the most interesting archaeological site on which you've worked?

I got to participate in an excavation of a Neanderthal site in France (Grotte 16) before grad school and that was amazing.

6) Who was your most influential mentor? How did they influence your work?

I have had so many it's difficult to mention only one. My major professor was Jan Simek who taught me so much about cave archaeology. I've also been influenced by many others, including all the archaeologists I learned from at TVA (Danny Olinger, Richard Yarnell, Eric Howard and Bennett Graham) and so many more along the way (Charlie Faulkner, Gerald Schroedl, Boyce Driskell, Lynne Sullivan, Judy Patterson Sichler, Renee Beauchamp Whitman, Sarah Sherwood, Scott Meeks, Caven Clark). I've also been influenced by a number of tribal reps, too (Richard Allen, Russ Townsend, Raelynn Butler, Emann Spain, LaDonna Brown, Kirk Perry, Bryant Celestine, Beau Carroll and Johi Griffin). There are more, but I've already said more than I was supposed to J

7) Do you work with volunteers? If so, how do interested people become volunteers?

I do and it's one thing I'm very proud of being able to do in my career! After 12 years of planning and pushing I finally got our volunteer program set up to train members of the public to monitor and protect archaeological sites on TVA land. Anyone who may be interested can visit contact me by email to get on our mailing list (eepritchard@tva.gov). We try to do at least one training each year in a different part of the valley.

8) What public archaeological site do you think best handles preservation and interpretation? why?

My go-to site for the public is Painted Bluff. It is one of the most amazing open-air rock art sites in the southeast and we have worked very hard to protect it and document it over the last decade. It is difficult to access (must be by boat) but worth the effort when I have the time to take people to this place. The artwork is so well preserved and beautiful, and it always is appreciated by those who are able to visit. It's one of my favorite places. Another one is the civil war site on TVA's Muscle Shoals Reservation. It is a great place with a lot of potential for public interpretation. One day I hope to work with the other TVA archaeologists and the local community to promote this resource and use it to tell the story on why it's important to protect our historic places.

9) What is your favorite thing about being an archaeologist?

It has certainly changed over the years! What I have learned over the years is that, for me, being an archaeologist isn't about finding cool things or uncovering mysteries like everyone thinks. Making connections to the past is one reason why I fell in love with archaeology in the first place, but reconnecting the people whose ancestors created that past is something that I love even more. Protecting these places so that they will be here for the future is what my focus is now. Being able to share the importance of these places with local communities is also one of my passions.

10) What is your least favorite thing about being an archaeologist?

Having to deal with looting. When people destroy archaeological sites for personal gain, they do not realize the damage that they do isn't just about losing the research value of a site (which of course is also important). I have seen some places where individuals have completely destroyed multiple human graves for the selfish purpose of finding goodies or treasure. It breaks my heart when I have to work these cases and have to tell the tribes what happened. As humans I want to believe we are better than this. It is one reason why outreach and education are so important to me.

11) Who do you most admire in our field and why?

Patty Jo Watson was always my hero as a young archaeologist. She was a young woman who made a career for herself in a male dominated field. She was a cool cave archaeologist too.

12) Do you have advice for people who want to pursue a career in archaeology?

Be persistent. Go out and meet people. Don't pass up an opportunity to do something cool. I've heard young people say that you should never do anything for free. I disagree. I volunteered A LOT in my early days and by doing that I met lots of people and networked quite a bit. I worked on a lot of weekends. I helped out graduate students and learned outside the classroom as much as in. Get lots of field experience. Work with different archaeologists to get different perspectives. Networking is crucial. Be passionate and don't let others tell you it isn't okay to be that way. You have to be passionate to be in this field. It isn't easy and it requires patience and a whole lot of motivation.

13) How do you feel about the Hollywood and/or reality tv portrayal of archaeology?

Indiana Jones was always one of my favorites, but it was also set during a different time period. Modern reality TV shows need to reflect more about what modern archaeology has become. I absolutely detest any show that would encourage people to go out and find artifacts on their own. Encouraging looting of any kind is unethical and should be stopped. People probably don't know the effects this type of encouragement has on significant places from our past and how much it hurts the indigenous people whose ancestors are still buried in these places.

14) What is your least favorite question that you are frequently asked by non-archaeologists and why?

"What is the coolest artifact you have ever found?" Hate it. I hate it even worse than people asking me about dinosaurs or fossils (which is a close second). Why? Because what archaeologists do isn't about the cool artifacts. When we promote the idea of this being about cool artifacts or treasures, I worry we are only perpetuating the idea that finding these things is all we do, and everyone should go out and find treasures of their own. When asked I immediately tell people that the coolest thing that I have done is finding a way to use non-invasive techniques, such as ground penetrating radar, to do archaeology without ever digging in the ground.

15) What can the general public do to protect and preserve archaeological sites?

When you see something that you think may be an archaeological site – don't pick things up or do anything that might damage it. Contact an archaeologist to let them know you have found it. If it's on public land, like TVA land, work with the land managing agency to see if they want help monitoring the site. Volunteer! Take a class. There lots of ways you can learn about archaeology without doing any damage to sites. If you see someone digging in a site or removing artifacts, contact the land managing agency. If its state or federal land, its most likely illegal.

16) What was the professional culture in archaeology like from a female perspective when you began your career?

At my school (UT) there were as many female grad students as there were males (maybe even more females?). Our professors were mostly male, though. I think this dynamic has changed quite a bit since the 1990s.

17) Do you think that your gender made it more difficult to become an archaeologist? If so, how?

I think there were definite barriers. I did not let this stop me nor did I stay quiet if I felt that I was being treated unfairly or differently because I was a female. I stood my ground when it was necessary and was respected by my colleagues for it.

18) What barriers or challenges unique to women did you encounter?

Some older generations tend to be more protective of women and I had to prove that I wasn't a delicate glass flower in need of that protection. It took some crucial conversations, but I was fortunate to work with many great male archaeologists along the way.

19) Does being a woman influence your interpretation of the archaeological sites that you excavate? If so, how?

Absolutely. I remember having a completely different perspective on rock art images from my male colleagues when I was in school.

20) Have you ever found something in the archaeological record that was specifically female? If so what? How did it make you feel?

No, but that would be cool.



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