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Making the Past Come Alive: Public Archaeology at Fort St. Joseph

Reviewed by Dean L. Anderson

Steve Kettner, DVD producer, lead videographer and editor,
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People are fascinated with archaeology. But for many, reading about it or looking at exhibits in museums is as close as they can get to it. Some people even express the opinion that archaeologists are not very forthcoming about their work, and they only share their discoveries in stuffy journal articles read by other archaeologists.

Fortunately, this situation is changing. There is a growing effort in the field to bring archaeology to the public. The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project at Western Michigan University is a striking example of this trend, and the DVD entitled *Making the Past Come Alive* shows us why.

Along with archaeological investigation and research, the goals of the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project since its inception more than 10 years ago have included public outreach and education. This DVD illustrates the various venues through which the project brings archaeology and history to the public. Importantly, this story is told by students, teachers, dignitaries, re-enactors, and members of the visiting public as they each speak about their own experience with the project, having had the opportunity to engage in archaeology firsthand. This is a definite strength of the DVD. The viewer is treated to a university administrator extolling the accomplishments of the project, a teacher explaining how archaeology can be used to teach geometry, and a very poised middle school student commenting on the excitement of archaeological discovery.

The Fort St. Joseph project's dedication to outreach is conspicuous in its effort to create opportunities for different constituencies to participate in archaeology. One of the core functions of the project is to offer a class in archaeological field methods taught through Western Michigan University. But what sets the project apart is the variety of camps offered that provide access to archaeology for the interested public beyond the traditional university student clientele. There is a week-long program for teachers through which they can earn graduate credits or continuing education units toward re-certification of their teaching licenses. The program for teachers helps bring archaeology into classrooms, and generates innovative ideas for using archaeology to teach subjects like math, history, science, and language. In addition, the project offers

a camp for high school students and adults, and another separate camp for middle school students.

Each year, the project holds a weekend open house and welcomes the public to the site. Visitors get to see excavation in progress and talk to students and professors about what they are finding and how it contributes to our understanding of life on the Michigan frontier in the eighteenth century. Temporary outdoor exhibits are set up with information panels about the fort site and displays of artifacts recovered. In a grassy field adjacent to the site, a host of re-enactors add a touch of living history to the event, demonstrating period clothing, implements, weapons, and food. Attendance at the annual open house is testimony to public interest in archaeology: the number of visitors often exceeds 1,500 people and includes travelers from out-of-state.

The DVD runs 25 minutes in length, which makes it amenable for use in a classroom setting. It would be a useful tool to illustrate outreach and education in a college-level public archaeology class. At the same time, the video would have been strengthened by a brief discussion of the history of Fort St. Joseph. As the DVD begins, the narrator states that "Hidden beneath layers of soil and tree roots for more than two centuries laid the remains of an important 18th century mission, garrison, and trading post—Fort St. Joseph." Unfortunately, that sentence is the only information provided to the viewer about the history of the site. A brief historical overview of the site, and a map depicting its location, would have given viewers more context and put them on firmer footing for understanding the ensuing discussion of the project.

The commitment the Fort St. Joseph project has made to public participation and public education is impressive, and sets a high standard worthy of attention in the field of archaeology. Through the obvious enthusiasm and investment conveyed by those who have had a part in the Fort St. Joseph project, *Making the Past Come Alive* does a commendable job of showing how such a project entices, educates, and excites the public.

About the Reviewer

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