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Reexcavating Perishable Artifacts

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Reexcavating The Collections

BY WAYNE CURTIS

In the mid-1890s, a rancher and avid amateur archaeologist from southwest Colorado named Richard Wetherill stood accused of fabricating an entire culture. Digging for artifacts in and around newly discovered cliff dwellings in the Four Corners region, Wetherill announced that he had found evidence of a heretofore unknown people who predated the Native Americans who built the elaborate cliff dwellings. These predecessors were not pottery makers, Wetherill concluded, but they were highly adept at making objects of perishable materials—wooden implements, feather blankets, baskets, woven sandals, and cords. Wetherill had turned up numerous examples that were miraculously preserved for centuries in caches in rocky alcoves protected from the weather.

Critics doubted his chronology. They pointed out his lack of professional credentials. They noted that he hoped to sell his artifacts to wealthy collectors, and the dramatic claim that they were the handiwork of a previously undiscovered culture would add value to these items. Yet it turned out that Wetherill's insights and instincts were right. "Richard Wetherill used stratigraphic reasoning to turn archaeological observation into culture history," wrote Washington State University professor emeritus William Lipe in 2014. "He showed that an earlier farming culture without pottery ('Basketmaker') lay beneath the living surfaces of Pueblo cliff dwellings."

Much of what is known today about the Basketmaker culture—a term coined by Wetherill—can be traced back to him and other ranchers, cowboys, and adventurers who set off on weeks-long expeditions, mining artifacts as if they were veins of silver, seeking items to resell to Gilded Age collectors. Once unearthed, these artifacts, some dating as far back as 500 B.C., traveled in boxes and barrels via mule, and then by rail to the cities, where the collectors gathered them up and often put them on display. (One of the more notable collections "premiered" at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which also displayed meteorites and wooly mammoth models.) In subsequent decades, the collections were

COURTESY OF THE DIVISION OF ANTHROPOLOGY, AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY H/13476 / CHUCK LARUE

Researchers with the Cedar Mesa Perishables Project are working in museum basements and storerooms to bring thousands of ancient perishable artifacts to light.

Laurie Webster examines a twined yucca bag that still contains its original cornmeal at the American Museum of Natural History. The bag dates to the first or second century A.D.

One of the many fascinating artifacts is a 2,000-year-old twined blanket made in part from the feathers of birds like the Green-tailed Towhee.

later sold or donated and ended up at a handful of museums, including Chicago's Field Museum, which arose out of the Columbia Exposition.

In all, about 5,000 artifacts were unearthed and shipped out of the Grand Gulch region of southeast Utah during the 1890s—a practice that would be vilified today, but at that time was not unusual. Remarkably, the majority of these artifacts are still well preserved, but they are not often displayed and are largely unknown to the public. These collections are housed in the storerooms of six museums, and though researchers have access to them, they are generally poorly documented and rarely cited in scholarly published works. Nonetheless, the artifacts have stories to tell about the Basketmaker (500 B.C.–A.D. 700) and Ancestral Pueblo (A.D. 700–1300) periods in this region, and Laurie Webster is determined that those tales be told.

Webster is an independent scholar and specialist in perishable material culture who became aware of these collections more than a decade ago. "I knew that thousands of perishables had been recovered from southeast Utah," she said. "But I didn't know that basically none had been published for study. Given that I spend a lot of time in museum basements, I thought I would start photographing some of the artifacts in these drawers."

By 2011 Webster's avocation turned into a more ambitious endeavor that she named the Cedar Mesa Perishables Project, the goal of which is to visit the various museums and document all the known artifacts taken from the Cedar Mesa region of southeast Utah. Funded by grants and donations, she started by devoting about a month each year to the project, forming a small team of paid and volunteer staff. "We're being very systematic," she said. "We go drawer by drawer, and shelf by shelf, to be sure we don't miss anything."

Her efforts have drawn praise from museum professionals. "It's taking a collection that was assembled at a time when collecting and excavation was done not to the level of scientific control we follow today," said Jamie Kelly, anthropology collections manager at the Field Museum in Chicago. "Her work is remarkable—to be able to go through and re-excavate this material, so to speak, and try to clean up any discrepancies that might be in the catalog, and to get a better sense of where this material has come from. It really gives this material new life again."

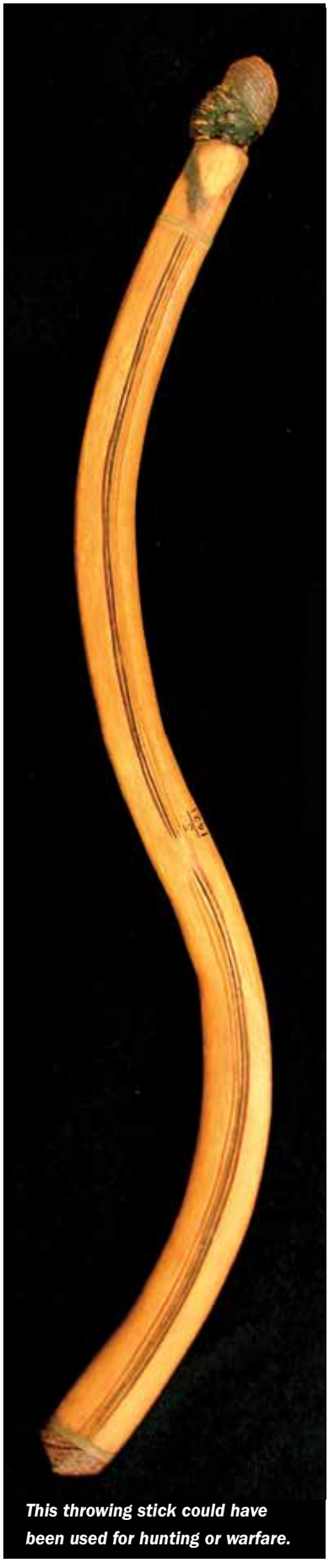
Kelly welcomed Webster and two other team members—archaeologist Erin Gearty and wildlife biologist Chuck LaRue—to the Field Museum in 2011 and 2012. They surveyed about 800 items from the Green and Ryerson-Lang collections, which were named after early patrons and collectors and had been excavated in the Cedar Mesa area in 1890-91 and 1894-95, respectively. One by one, they measured, described, and photographed each item, acquiring 3,000 digital images in all. They documented 300 textiles, about two-thirds of which were woven sandals, 250

wooden artifacts, sixty-five baskets and mats, and nearly 200 other objects. The textiles included braided and woven tumplines, cotton cloth, aprons, netted bags, and cordage—some preserved in leather pouches and similar containers, and all left undisturbed until the ranchers dug them up.

One of the more fascinating artifacts is a twined blanket made in part of delicate bird feathers, dating to the Basketmaker II period (500 B.C.–A.D. 500). To help analyze the blanket and other artifacts, she recruited LaRue, whom she'd met at a conference. "I told him, I've got this 2,000-year-old blanket that has lots of feathers in it, and I can't identify them," Webster recalled of the rare and fragile blanket. "Would you like to come to Chicago to look at it?"

LaRue did. In 2012 he spent the better part of a day poring over the blanket, identifying the feathers of more than a dozen different birds. Virtually all were ground-foraging birds—no swallows or ducks—presumably captured with snares made of wood and human hair. The most common bird represented in the blanket was the dark-eyed junco ("They're not the sharpest bird in the forest," LaRue said), which frequented the area in the winter, suggesting when snaring and weaving may have taken place.

Most feathers were familiar to LaRue, but others not. He was ushered in to the Field Museum's extensive bird collections, which enabled him to identify the remaining feathers. While there he encountered another feather artifact that completely mystified him—"I could identify 600 birds it wasn't," he said. He solved this riddle four years later when walking through the main bird exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. There he saw the bird with the vexing feather: the American white pelican, a water-loving bird commonly found in coastal areas in winter and northern inland lakes in summer. "It must have migrated through and got caught," LaRue said.



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN CAT. NO. 51421 / LAURIE WEBSTER

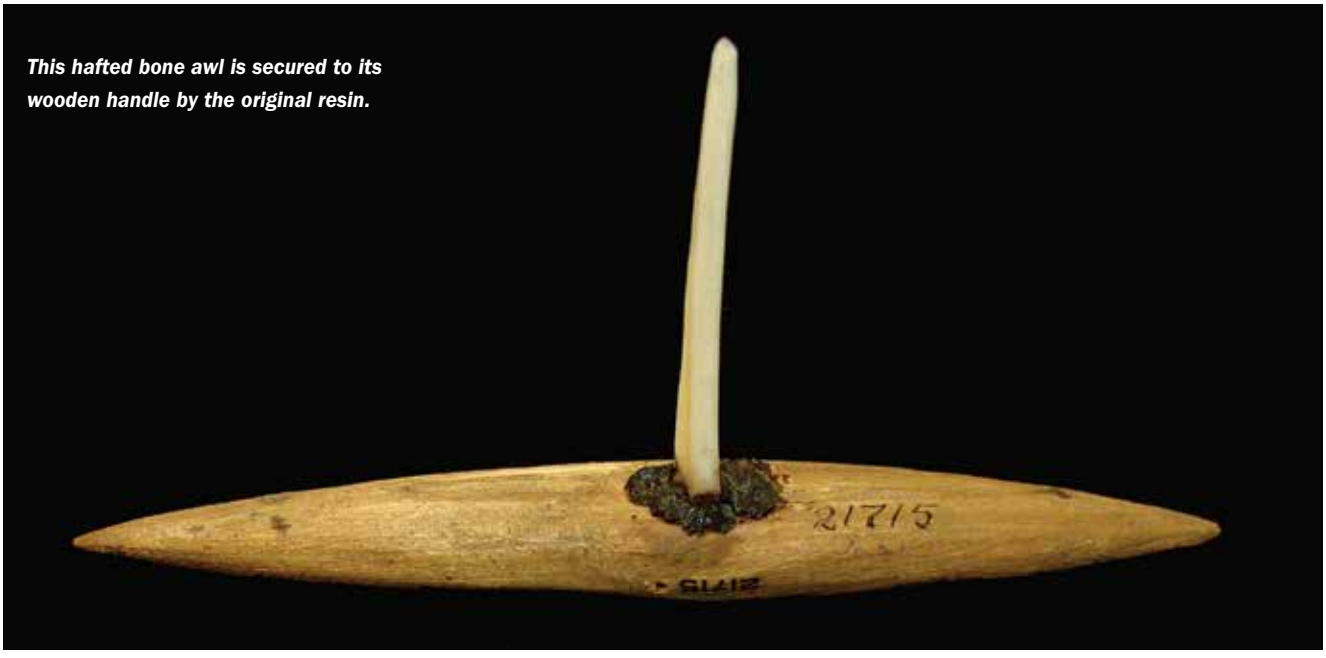
This throwing stick could have been used for hunting or warfare.

Webster emphasized that she and her team are not only building on the work of Wetherill and the other adventurers, but also of a later group of professional and amateur archaeologists who, in the 1980s, formed the Wetherill-Grand Gulch Research Project. They undertook what one member dubbed "reverse archaeology"—tracing items in the collections, some of which were vaguely documented, back to their original locations. They used the field journals and maps that survived from the initial excavations, and they also drew heavily on their own field trips, during which they located some 500 inscriptions left in rock and wood by Wetherill and his contemporaries in the 1890s.

While some of the collections were reasonably well documented, others were not. For instance, one cache of artifacts was identified as being from the "First Valley of Cottonwood," a place that appears on no maps and could describe any one of hundreds of canyons. The Wetherill-Grand Gulch Project undertook to clarify these sorts of ambiguities, tracking down each of the places mentioned in the digs of the 1890s, and identifying alcoves and routes taken by the original excavating groups. A 1990 conference led to an anthology of papers that yielded insights into how they got from the places they were recovered to the museums where they're now housed. "Their focus was on where these collections went, and their history," Webster said "They laid the foundation for me. What I'm doing is taking what they did and building on it."

Ancient textiles and other organic artifacts are scarce because they're

Bands like this pristine painted yucca tumpline were worn around the forehead or chest to support loads carried on the back. This tumpline is roughly 1,300 years old.



This hafted bone awl is secured to its wooden handle by the original resin.

fragile and they decay. Feathers left on the surface will vanish within a season, said LaRue. As a result, archaeological collections tend to be heavily weighted with non-perishables, like ceramics, stone tools, and similar objects. But Webster noted that perishable items would have been far more abundant than non-perishables in the everyday lives of canyon-dwellers a millennia or two ago. Of the 5,000 known artifacts removed from dry alcoves in the Cedar Mesa region, some 4,000 are perishables. Webster suspects that's typical—that as many as eighty percent of the artifacts at sites unprotected from the elements may have been lost. By spending the time to inventory and study perishable items, a fuller, more comprehensive picture of the material culture comes into view. "We're seeing aspects of prehistoric life that usually don't get seen," Webster said.

Webster's intent is to complete a comprehensive survey

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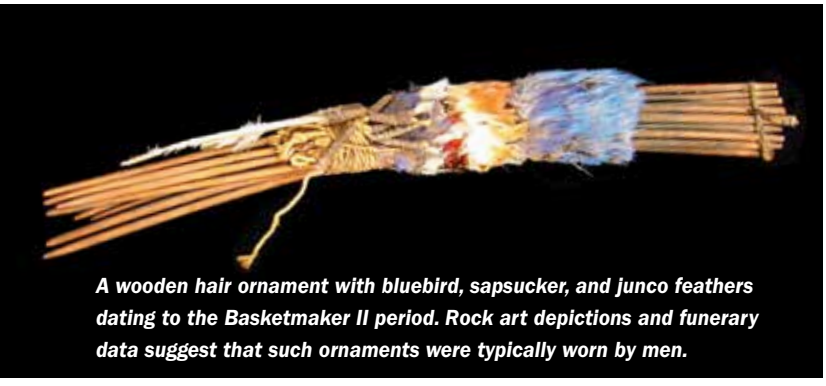

A wooden hair ornament with bluebird, sapsucker, and junco feathers dating to the Basketmaker II period. Rock art depictions and funerary data suggest that such ornaments were typically worn by men.

COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF PEOPLES AND CULTURES, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY #1995.2.378.1 / LAURIE WEBSTER

of the collections to create a data set for answering future research questions. But her work has given her new insights into ancient life. "We're getting these glimpses of humanity that you usually don't get when looking at stone tools and grinding stones and pots." They've found several examples of wooden cups and dice that date to the A.D. 1200s. "Gambling was an important pastime," Webster observed. Of the aforementioned bird-feather blanket, she said, "What we think they were doing, back in Basketmaker II, was catching large numbers of small birds, probably eating them, then using some of the feathers to make beautiful blankets. Nothing was wasted."

She's intrigued by the importance of white fur and hair, which frequently appears in a broad range of perishable artifacts. "We think it may be dog hair used for blankets and for rope—just bundles of this beautiful hair," she said. "There appears to be something really special about white animal hair."

There may have been something special about human hair, as

A pair of wooden crutches with hide underarm pads.

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Paw pads can be seen next to the toe loop of this approximately 800-year-old sandal made from the hide of a mountain lion.

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A sandal with buckskin fringe dating to the Basketmaker II period. The first row of weaving below the fringe is woven in human-hair cordage.

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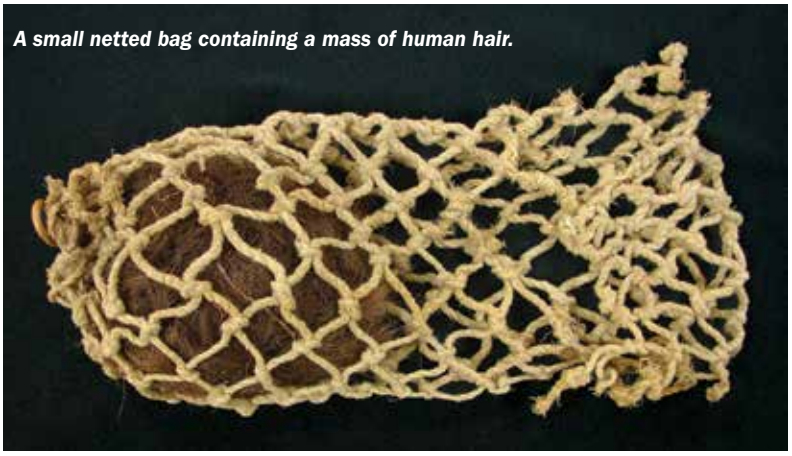

A small netted bag containing a mass of human hair.

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well. "When I started the project I thought hair was just an expedient form of fiber," something everybody had access to, she noted. But she's come to believe that it may have had a more important symbolic purpose, although she's not yet sure what. "There's a gorgeous type of early sandal where the first row of weaving is made of human hair, but you don't see it because it's covered by fringe. And we see women's aprons using human hair as the waist cord; we see human hair being used for color in weaving, in sashes, and in belts." One of the collections included a small yucca basket containing a little net with a ball of human hair along with three pairs of infant sandals.

Webster and her colleagues are also looking at the connections between ancient and modern Pueblo cultures. "To see the same materials I work with almost on a daily basis such as cotton and yucca in the ancient artifacts makes me feel connected to my Pueblo ancestors," said Louie Garcia, a Piro-Tiwa Pueblo weaver who joined the research team in 2015. "For us as Pueblo people, the artifacts in these collections have life and a spirit, as our ancestors fashioned each item for a particular purpose from every day utilitarian use to ceremonial and religious use, many of which are immediately recognizable to me, and others that are not."

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Chuck LaRue studies a bundle of bird snares with human hair nooses at the American Museum of Natural History.

"There are a lot" of old technologies that that are still used in the modern world, Webster noted. "For example, Hopi basket weavers still make sifter baskets that are virtually identical to ones found in the collections that date back to the A.D. 900s, and Hopi weavers still use the same looms and spinning equipment that their ancestors used during the A.D. 1000s."

The researchers have made it more than halfway through the 4,000 perishable items in the various Cedar Mesa collections. "The huge range of objects within these collections has allowed us to envision how people were living and thriving in the prehistoric Southwest, and we have just scratched the surface of the potential of these collections," Gearty said. "The artifacts have a great amount to teach us about raw material usage and processing, pigments and dyes, communities of practice, animal husbandry, hunting practices, and so much more."

This past winter, Webster, Gearty, and LaRue spent a month in New York City sifting through items at the American Museum of Natural History, and Garcia and Zuni weaver Christopher Lewis will join her at the museum for a week this summer. She is now spending about three months a year on the project, and anticipates that she'll complete the New York collections in 2018, then finish up with the two remaining smaller collections at the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Phoebe Hearst Museum at the University of California-Berkeley in 2019.

What then? Webster aims to compile key material in a book, then make much of the rest of the data and images accessible online through the Digital Archaeological Record, a long-term repository for digital archaeological information. "The goal is to make the information available to other archaeologists, the public, and the tribes," she said.

"I call it re-excavating collections. There's no one still alive who dug this material up who we can talk to. We're really doing archaeology in basements."

WAYNE CURTIS *is a freelance writer based in New Orleans and the author of* The Last Great Walk: The True Story of a 1909 Walk from New York to San Francisco and Why it Matters Today. *His article "The Act That Changed Archaeology" appeared in the Summer 2016 issue of* American Archaeology.