



*MVAC at the University
of Wisconsin-La Crosse*

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Archaeology News

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Historic Indian Agency House Excavations

Constance Arzigian, MVAC Research Associate

July 2020 was an opportunity for MVAC archaeologist Connie Arzigian to participate in a different format for a public archaeology dig, which took place at the Historic Indian Agency House (HIAH) in Portage, Wisconsin, July 18-19 and 24-25, 2020. The site is located at the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers, representing a critical link between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River valley. HIAH describes its importance:

“The Indian Agency House was built at the Fox-Wisconsin portage in 1832 to house Indian Sub-Agent John H. Kinzie and his wife, Juliette. This Indian sub-agency was established as a means of fulfilling the treaty of 1829 between the United States government and the indigenous Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) tribe. A lead mining boom caused such an influx of settlers on Ho-Chunk lands that the government determined to purchase the area from the tribe in order to avoid conflict. This resulting treaty promised the tribe a yearly annuity payment in silver along with blacksmithing services and other goods in return for their land east and south of the Wisconsin River.” (<https://www.agencyhouse.org/historical-overview>)

The excavations were searching for the location of the 1830s Agency blacksmith shop. There were unlikely to be stone foundations, though there could have been stone corner posts and there might be evidence of blacksmithing debris on the floor of such a structure, if identified. Besides location, research also considered what kinds of things might have been made by the shop. If doing work just for the Ho-Chunk, then repair and manufacture of hunting equipment such as traps and snares would be most likely. If work was done for the local settlers, then nails and other construction materials might be expected. Excavators hoped to find some answers.



Connie Arzigian (left) and John Wackman excavating Unit 1 at the Historic Indian Agency House in Portage.

In the dig, Arzigian was joined by historic archaeologists John Wackman, retired, and Dan Joyce, Kenosha Public Museums Executive Director, as well as several former and current students at UW-Parkside, with Adam Novey, Curator at HIAH, coordinating and managing everything. To figure out where to put units, Dan Joyce had conducted a ground penetrating radar survey of the field south of the Agency house and identified several “hot spots.” These might reflect stones from a foundation, concentrations of artifacts, or just piles of stones. Three 1x1 meter units were placed in two of these “hot spots.” Units 1 and 3 were adjacent to each other at the north end of the field, and Unit 2 was to the south. Each was excavated to between 25 and 40 cm below the ground surface, in 5 cm levels, with all soil screened.

Participants signed up for one-hour blocks of time to dig, received a brief training talk, and then were put to work. We troweled carefully through the soil, finding nails, fragments of sheet metal, coal, pottery, glass, and fragments of bricks, though we found no foundation stones or other clear evidence of the floor of a blacksmith’s shop. Tiny sherds of flow-blue ceramics and some square nails would fit well with the 1830s date of the blacksmith shop, but

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Artifact Show 2020

Artifact displays presented by MVAC and 15 area collectors were viewed by over 1,500 people at Valley View Mall on Saturday, March 7, 2020. Prehistoric and historic artifacts were displayed, and numerous people brought in items to be identified by MVAC staff. Visitors were able to see a broad range of artifacts from the Coulee Region and elsewhere, and a flintknapping demonstration by Shane Howe and Jack Larson.

The success of the Artifact Show is due in large part to the artifact collectors who are willing to share their knowledge and experiences with the public. Many of the collectors have displayed their collections at the Artifact Show for decades, and their dedication is greatly appreciated. Thanks to everyone who helps make this day a success!



Collectors and Volunteers

Rich Althaus

Jay Bittner

Art Boehm

Loren Cade

Jaremy Cobble

Shane Howe

Gene Hynek

Jim Jordan

Robert Keiper

Jeanette Laack

Jack Larson

Frank Lightfoot

Jim Losinski

Dan Maas

Doug Miller

Mark Pingel

Betty, Susan and Walter Steele

Hoyt Strandberg

Jim Theler

MVAC staff



Left: Mark Pingel (l) examines an artifact during the Artifact Show. Above: Gene Hynek (r) shares his collection with the public.

Excavations at HIAH *(continued from p.1)*

there were also wire nails and some more modern bottles dating to the early 20th century, reflecting the long use of this place.

We also found a tinkler cone typical of those used by the Ho-Chunk in the historic era, as well as several small chert flakes. While we can't demonstrate that the flakes were also being used by the Ho-Chunk while at HIAH, there is no reason to expect that they had abandoned a reliable technology like flintknapping when adopting metal tools. The flakes may also indicate the presence of a precontact site in the area.

Because of the coronavirus, all participants wore masks, and volunteers were grouped by family at each of the units so we could minimize the number of strangers interacting at any one time. As seems typical of MVAC's public archaeology projects, the weather was hot and humid, with one day into the 90s, and with the dig ending abruptly on the last Sunday afternoon with torrential rains. A total of 74 individual participants joined us, some staying for several hours and returning multiple days. In addition, there were blacksmithing demonstrations each weekend, so people could see some of what we were expecting.

The dig was sponsored by General Engineering Company, in conjunction with the Archaeology 2020 exhibit at HIAH. We hope to continue it in 2021, so we can expand the search area and see what else we can learn. Getting the public involved in the archaeology of their community is always rewarding.

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Amy Nicodemus

James Theler

Passing of Dean Emeritus Ruthann Benson

MVAC staff and friends are mourning the loss of Dean Emeritus Ruthann Benson, who served the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in many capacities until her retirement in 2015. Among her many interests and contributions, Ruthann was a strong supporter of archaeology and MVAC, including serving on MVAC's Board of Directors for many years and receiving MVAC's James P. Gallagher Award in Archaeology Excellence in 2014. She was also a key supporter of the university's Archaeology major and the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. She was a genuinely good, kind person who will be deeply missed personally as well as professionally. All of us at MVAC send sympathy and condolences to her family and friends.

Photo right: Ruthann Benson was presented with the James P. Gallagher Award in Archaeology Excellence at the 2014 awards ceremony by MVAC Executive Director Timothy McAndrews.



September Is Minnesota Archaeology Month

The decision has been made to make Minnesota Archaeology Month a virtual event this year. Pre-recorded and live programs are being offered on topics ranging from the state's early prehistory to historic cultures. A list of scheduled events can be found at Minnesota's State Archaeologist page:

<https://mn.gov/admin/archaeologist/the-public/events/archaeology-month/>

La Crosse School District:

Funds are available from the La Crosse School District for their elementary and middle school teachers to use MVAC presentations in their classrooms. Thanks to the La Crosse School District for providing funds for this program. The funds can be used for virtual visits to classrooms as well as in-person presentations.

MVAC Educational Programs are supported by

The United Fund for the Arts and Humanities
The National Endowment for the Humanities

MVAC MEMBERSHIP FORM

Consider becoming a member of MVAC

MVAC's innovative Public Education Program brings the excitement of archaeology to children and adults throughout the area. Become a member of MVAC and receive our newsletters, which report on programs, current research, upcoming events, and volunteer opportunities. Also, as a member, you will receive reminders of special "members only" events. Please remember that your contribution is tax-deductible.

Yes! I want to support the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center Programs!
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Upcoming *Events*

As part of the effort to slow the coronavirus spread, MVAC is doing the following until further notice:

- MVAC staff are telecommuting, and the building is closed to visitors.
- We will still be working on contract archaeology projects and will conduct contract fieldwork if possible.
- MVAC 2020 events are canceled.

For the latest information on future events, check our website (<https://mvac.uwlax.edu/>) and Facebook page.

Feel free to contact us by email (mvac@uwlax.edu) or leave a voicemail on our office number (608) 785-8463, we'll receive them remotely and reply as soon as possible.

2019 MVAC Awards

James P. Gallagher Award in Archaeology Excellence
– Dave & Barb Skogen and Marvin Wanders

Regional Archaeology Award
– Hoyt & Jeanine Strandberg

Archaeology Education Award
– Summit Environmental School, La Crosse School District

Special Recognition Awards
– Marcee Peplinski, MVAC
– Chuck Thompson, Dairyland Power Cooperative

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