The New York Times
nytimes.com

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July 29, 2005

Archaeology Jamboree

By GRACE LICHTENSTEIN

WHEN archaeologists of the American Southwest gather for their annual meeting, there are no stuffy hotel meeting rooms or bland college auditoriums. The events are all under a great big tent at a different, often spectacularly scenic locale; this year's Pecos Conference, as it's known, is in the high desert country of pinyon and juniper trees near Bandelier National Monument in north-central New Mexico. And unlike, say, the Congress of the International Union of Physiological Sciences, this conference welcomes - even encourages - amateurs to attend.

You might call Pecos "the archaeologists' hoedown." Southwest specialists from all over the world camp out and present research on what they've been finding in ruins, rock piles, canyons and mesas from California to Texas. But attendees also conduct a beer-brewing contest, dance to country music at a cookout and swap stories over campfires.

The several hundred amateurs and pros who gather for this year's version near Los Alamos Aug. 11 to 14 will be observing a tradition that began when the Pajarito Plateau was still just a place for hunting pottery shards, long before the founding of the town that gave birth to the atomic bomb. The conference was first held in 1927 when Alfred V. Kidder, the leading Southwest archaeologist of his time, invited a handful of colleagues to join him at Pecos, the Ancestral Puebloan ruins he was then investigating not far from Santa Fe. "Am sitting on a dirt-pile - hence the pencil," his note read.

It was a time of great ferment in Southwest archaeology. A spear point had recently been discovered among bones of an extinct bison in Folsom, N.M., suggesting that human history in North America went much further back than had been believed.

That 1927 meeting, with 45 participants, was the first regional archaeological conference in the United States, and to this day Pecos is novel. It has no dues, no formal membership, no headquarters. Steve Lekson, curator of anthropology for the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History, noted that from the earliest years of Southwest excavations, "camping was a necessity because there weren't any other facilities."

Moreover, novices, lay people and students are welcome to attend. They can even present papers. Jane Kolber of Bisbee, Ariz., is a nonacademic who has taught art on the Navajo Reservation and at every level from elementary school through college. But before presenting her first Pecos paper in 1991, she recalled, "I wasn't quite sure if they'd accept a paper on rock art." Her concerns turned out to be unwarranted, and Ms. Kolber has given several Pecos talks over the years about her observations of petroglyphs and pictographs.

Longtime Pecos devotees fondly remember evenings of tipsy revelry, although the official history of the conference by Richard B Woodbury, himself a distinguished Southwest archaeologist, insists the term "drunken brawl" applies only to a few "unofficial evening sessions."

Sometimes, Pecos papers can be controversial, even incendiary. The biggest brouhaha erupted over the issue of cannibalism among Ancestral Puebloans, who were once thought to be peaceful people,

according to David Breternitz, a retired University of Colorado archaeologist. A seminar on cannibalism was scheduled at the 1988 conference but canceled after objections from contemporary Pueblo tribal leaders.

Most of the talk at Pecos Conferences, however, has nothing to do with violence. This year there will be papers and seminars on subjects ranging from syphilis among archaic Arizona tribes to the Victorian-era roads carved out of the wilderness near Los Alamos for pioneer wagons. The latter talk will be given by Dorothy Hoard, 72, a retired Los Alamos National Laboratory chemist.

Despite the rustic atmosphere, the discussions can be previews of sophisticated discoveries that may not appear in printed form for years. "So much is interdisciplinary - pollen analysis, DNA, remote sensing - it isn't just going out and digging up a bunch of pottery," Mr. Breternitz said. "It gives us a chance to see more of a complete picture."

The 2006 gathering will be held near the Salmon Ruins in northwest New Mexico. It will be Mr. Breternitz's 50th Pecos encampment. "I have told my wife when we are too old to camp at Pecos Conference, we are too old to attend," he said.

Talking Rocks

What 2005 Pecos Conference; Overlook Park, White Rock, N.M.; $30 registration fee; www.swanet.org/2005_pecos_conference.

When Aug. 11 to 14.

How to Get There From Santa Fe, take Route 84 north to Pojoaque, then Route 502 west. Then take Route 4 toward White Rock-Bandelier for four miles and follow signs to the Spirio Soccer Field.

Where to stay Ponderosa Campground at Bandelier National Monument (no hook-ups). Another campsite will be added. For hotels, see www.visit.losalamos.com/lodging.

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