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Indiana Jones (for a weekend)

Professional archaeologists may groan at the reference, but an annual gathering in the American Southwest lets amateurs play the part.

By [Teresa Méndez](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

ELKS CAMPGROUND, NAVAJO LAKE, N.M. – It's Day 3 of Pecos, the annual conference where hundreds of archaeologists who make their living sifting through the American Southwest gather with their armchair counterparts beneath a big white tent to discuss, as one puts it, "what we did this summer."

With the desert sun beating down, David Hull stands under a tarp at a smoking grill, his light-blue tent pitched nearby. As he pokes at smoldering coals in preparation for lunch, Mr. Hull, a remodeling contractor and first-time attendee, from Tempe, Ariz., breaks into a smile and says: "I feel like Indiana Jones."

Two archaeologists within earshot groan good-naturedly. The popular reference is unavoidable, an occupational hazard. Yet when the science and romance of archaeology intermingle here each year, in the mythical Four Corners, where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico,

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and Utah meet, the characterization feels fitting.

Since 1927, when it was one of the first regional meetings of archaeologists in the US, the Pecos Conference and its "deliberate" informality have been an anomaly among professional gatherings. In recent years it has become only more welcoming to nonprofessionals.

A band of rabid avocationalists returns year after year. Gary Yancy, a retired electrical engineer from Mesa, Ariz., in a trademark black cowboy hat, can't remember if it's been 10 years, or more, that he's been coming. And curious members of the public are also turning out in greater numbers.

Pecos is the place where nonarchaeologists were once overheard grumbling about the "jargon" - they felt the papers were too "technical." It's also the place where a reporter can bring along her mother to discover whether crashing a scientific gathering might make for an enjoyable weekend getaway.

Celebrating one of the country's most archaeologically rich regions, Pecos is held in a different Southwestern locale each year. This year the site was accessed by crossing a dam along a thin ribbon of road above Navajo Lake. Tents are scattered among junipers in soft desert sand.

The event follows a similar format from year to year: Two full days of presentations - each running about 10 minutes - broken up by meals and entertainment in the evenings. On this Friday night, a theatrical monologue recalled the discovery in 1888 of the stunning cliff dwellings of the Anasazi is delivered by an archaeologist in period dress - ranger hat, shrunken tie, lariat - his shadow bouncing dramatically off the tent walls. A party, which old-timers say has gotten decidedly tamer, follows dinner Saturday. Sunday there are field trips to local ruins - often to spots off limits to the public - led by the people who know them best.

In short, it's a family camping trip among deeply tanned and friendly strangers wrapped in colorful bandannas, feet shod in Chaco sandals. But unlike your father's vacation lectures, these talks are delivered by



AMATEUR

ARCHAEOLOGIST: Gary Yancy, a retired electrical engineer from Mesa, Ariz, has been attending the Pecos Conference for 10 years or more.

PHOTO: TERESA MENDEZ;
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people who are exceedingly knowledgeable.

At Pecos, name tags include no affiliation; you never know if you're interacting with a professional or a "hanger-on," as Gary Reming, a retired facility finance planner for San Diego, calls himself. This is Mr. Reming's fourth Pecos, and he convinced his good friend Dean Reed, a retired insurance underwriter from Placerville, Calif., to join him. The men drove 14 hours to get here, taking in marquee ruins along the way.

"The first time I was really shy," says Reming. "I didn't know if I was intruding." But he's found the professionals to be approachable, engaging.

One reason for that is "a sense in the discipline that we owe the public something extra for their support," says David Purcell, an archaeological consultant who lives in Flagstaff, Ariz. He met his wife, Kimberly Spurr, a specialist in human burials, during grad school. Most archaeology research, explains Mr. Purcell, is in some way publicly funded.

[Story continues below](#)



BIG DIGGERS: Attendees at the 2006 Pecos Conference included (left to right): Archaeologist Paul Reed, the conference organizer; Ellen Martin, a retired librarian; and David Hull from Tempe, Ariz.

PHOTOS: TERESA MENDEZ; PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY STAFF

The couple is camped next to Ellen Martin, a retired librarian and longtime Pecos participant; and her

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brother, David Hull, the contractor channeling Indiana Jones. As she listens to papers, Ms. Martin quilts a blanket, with designs inspired by rock art, for Hull's wife.

When I ask about archaeology's allure, the amateurs speak of it feeding a sort of primal curiosity. "It lets you walk in the footsteps, so to speak, of the people who came before you," says Mr. Reed.

Even though it's his first time here, and archaeology is more Reming's passion, Reed says that for the most part he's been able to follow along.

Some of the sessions are eye-glazingly dense and, yes, technical. But others are accessible, even entertaining. One of the best-received papers suggests, a bit blasphemously, that kivas, long thought to be purely ceremonial, may have been utilitarian corn-storage devices, not unlike the modern day grain silo. The highlight, however, is a discussion touching on indigenous archaeology, led by a panel of provokingly thoughtful Choctaw, Navajo, and Hopi Indians.

For the weekender, the beauty of the event is that when the archaeology begins to feel overwhelming, there are hikes to be taken and towns and ruins to be explored. (My mom and I sneaked away to swim in the sparkingly inviting Navajo Lake.)

If you decide to go, the best advice I heard came in the form of a sartorial tip from two geographers: Do not, they warned, show up wearing slacks, polo shirts, or leather shoes. Archaeologists, after all, are an earthy group. By Day 3, looking smartly boyish, the duo had traded in their office attire for shorts, T-shirts, and baseball caps. If you really want to look the part, though, add a silver bracelet - that is the telltale mark of a southwestern archaeologist.

How to participate

Every five years, the Pecos Conference returns to Pecos, N.M., where it was first convened in 1927. It was then that the Pecos Classification, a chronology of Anasazi culture based on developments in architecture, art, and pottery was developed. Next year will mark the gathering's 80th anniversary.

What: 2007 Pecos Conference

Where: Pecos National Historic Park, Pecos, N.M. (nps.gov/peco)

When: Aug. 9-12

How to get there: Twenty-five miles east of Santa Fe, N.M., off I-25

Cost: Approximately \$30 registration, plus nominal camping fee

More information to come at swanet.org

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