Neil Wentraub
Archaeologist
Kaibab National Forest
Williams, Arizona

July 2004
Cathy Schmidlin

Cathy Schmidlin (CS): Okay. Tell me your name and your current position.

Neil Weintraub (NW): My name's Neil Weintraub, and I'm the South Kaibab Zone archaeologist for the Kaibab National Forest.

CS: Neil, how did you come to work for the Forest Service, and how long have you been working for the agency?

NW: Well, I moved to Arizona in 1986, and I was actually an archaeologist for the Museum of Northern Arizona, research assistant there. And just through some luck, I suppose, and seasonal positions that opened on the Coconino National Forest, I applied fot work and got a position there, and it eventually led to another position on the Kaibab National Forest, and here it is, almost fifteen years later on the Kaibab.

CS: So you 've been with the agency for about fifteen years?

NW: Been with the agency for just over sixteen years.

CS: What brought you to the Forest Service in the first place? What was it that attracted you?

NW: Well, it was a new opportunity, a chance to do a lot of survey work, looking for archaeological sites all over northern Arizona, in the Coconino National Forest, and areas basically in my back yard. So I was fascinated by that.

CS: Did you have any mentors, or people that you kind of relied on to kind of help you direct your career?

NW: Yeah. Well I had two professors from the college that I went to in Iowa, Grinnell College; Cathy Camp and John Whittaker, who were super mentors. They brought me here to Flagstaff in 1985, and we spent a lot of days hiking in the back country and in canyons, and they taught me a lot about anthropology and archaeology of the area. Then once I got into the Forest Service, John Hanson, our forest archaeologist, has been a major influence on my work, and teaching me the importance of being an anthropologist within the Forest Service. And Larry [Lesko?], who was our assistant forest archaeologist and tribal liaison, he taught me an ethic for wilderness. We spent a lot of time in our back country; places archaeologists don’t normally get to go, but Larry was an avid wilderness fan and he really taught me a lot about the back country.

CS: You mentioned anthropology, so tell me a little bit about the difference between anthropology, strictly speaking, and archaeology, and then how the two are related.

NW: Yeah, well archaeology’s a sub-field of what we call anthropology. You think of anthropology, you think, well, it’s the study of people. And as archaeologists, we’re studying ancient cultures and the remnants of people that really aren’t going to be able to speak for themselves any more, and so we’re trying to come up with clues for the past [as] archaeologists, and we have to have an understanding of people today and different cultures. And, you know, I think that’s one of our biggest roles in the Forest Service as archaeologists, is understanding the people that we work with. Because the Forest Service does have its own culture. You have a lot of different values out there when you’re talking about resources. And whether it’s timber range, watershed, or heritage resources. Everybody looks at these things differently. And I feel it’s one of our really important roles here in the Forest Service, is to make people understand why heritage resources are a very important part of our natural landscape.

CS: So what attracted you, growing up, to go into the field of archaeology or anthropology?

NW: it was actually a fluke. I was doing poorly in my major field of math in my junior year of college, and to actually graduate I needed to take a different path as a result of the statistics class. And while I was still always interested in math, and I had taken some anthropology classes, and two of my professors said, hey Neil, what are you doing this summer? Would you like to come on an archaeological excavation in Flagstaff, Arizona? Your way will be paid. And, you know, I came out in the summer of 1985, and just whatever it was, whether it was excavating a site at the base of the San Francisco Peaks, I feel in love with the area and feel in love with archaeology.

CS: So that’s been your destiny ever since?

NW: Yeah, since 1985.

CS: Well what keeps you in the Southwest? What keeps you in northern Arizona?

NW: Oh, I think the fantastic array of sites that we have, archaeological sites and historical sites that we have here on the Kaibab. It'’ a never ending, you know.... We find new sites all the time, and they range from ancestral pueblo sites, you know, large five to fifteen room structures, outlines of the rooms; to rock art, prehistoric paintings that may be three to four thousand years old; to historic cabins; to old trails. It’s just a... There’s just so much to research and find out here.

CS: Tell me a little bit about when you do then, here on the Kaibab.

NW: Well, I think our biggest role here on the Kaibab—I work with two other archaeologists, [Ann Serell] and [Colin Macnamie]—and our job is to protect, manage and interpret heritage resources on the Kaibab National Forest. So a big part of our work is what we call compliance work, and it's consulting with our local tribes and our state historic preservation office on any of the projects that take place within the forest boundaries. And basically we try and manage, locate and protect those sites so that we can study them in the future. Not disturb them.

CS: Okay. And what kind of skills or traditions are tied to what you do? What an archaeologist does?

NW: Well a lot of what we do is spend a lot of time during the day orienteering ourselves. [Laughs] Trying not to get lost. And so we basically have outdoor skills. We do a lot of strenuous walking, with backpacks usually, all day long, going back and forth across the landscape. We do what we call our repeated compass [transex?]—when you're [transex?]—and we just literally walk across an area, back and forth, spread about sixty feet apart, across an area all day long. And we'll walk from five to ten miles a day.

CS: Wow. So you know you hear a lot about kind of a new sport, and I guess it's called orienteering, [NW nods] where people go out into the outdoors and use compasses to figure out where they are and how to get around. So a lot of what you do is a part of that too.

NW: Oh yeah, sure. And today the technology's changing, and so people have their GPS units and relying on the technology these days. But...

CS: GPS standing for?

NW: Geographic Positioning Systems.

CS: So tell me a little bit about that. That's new technology [speakers overlap].

NW: Yeah. It's new technology. It allows us to locate sites far more accurately. It uses basically satellites that are up above us, and they're able to triangulate; we're able to—more the satellites than the units—give us a triangulation of our exact location on the landscape. So while we used to use aerial photographs, it took us a lot of time to locate sites with aerial photographs, now we can basically punch a button and find out where we are. It still doesn't replace the good old compass, because every now and then the batteries go out and the satellites you don't get, so you still have to be able to do things the old fashioned way.

CS: Are there things that... Well, I'm sure there are, so tell me a little bit about that. What kind of skills or knowledge do you pick up by practicing a practitioner of anthropology and archaeology, and how is that different from what you learned in school or in college?

NW: Well, yeah. Well actually I was... One of my mentors as I said before, John Whittacker, he's a very hands-on archaeologist. And so I think he taught a lot of us is that, to understand a lot of the things you're looking at in a lot of the artifacts, and the people that are no longer here, to understand them, you need to try to replicate what they were doing, and understand these places that they were living. So John was a [flintnapper?], although I have never really dabbled in [flintnapping] too much because every time I try and break some obsidian I end up with a pretty good gouge in my hand or my arm and, you know, the blood drips away and i get a little weary.

So I’ve stopped doing that; I leave it for the experts. But one of the things I like to do is make [split twig] figurines. These figurines were made by people that lived in the Grand Canyon area three to four thousand years ago. We’re still unsure of their function, although sometimes they were found actually in very remote caves in the Grand Canyon, pierced by other sticks. So it may have been some kind of hunting fetish that allowed people to perhaps be successful in the hunt if they speared it. Or perhaps it was done after the hunt. We’re actually finding new research at the Grand Canyon that’s showing these are actually being found in association with an extinct megafauna. So the old, the end of the Ice Age and the large animals that had died out, indicating that perhaps the prehistoric people were making offerings to these animals to insure the game herds would be large. But at any rate I like to kind of tell that story to kids. And the neat thing about [Stan’s] Cave was it was, although now managed by the Grand Canyon National Park, it used to be part of the Kaibab National Forest and the Kaibab Ranger District until 1969. Well one of the activities I like to do is actually the replication of the split twig figurine. [Throughout the following remarks he demonstrates creating a figure.] And what we do is, we actually just go collect willow, and willow of course grows in wet places in Arizona, and it would have been a very important place because water is such a scarce resource in Arizona that the people certainly would have been going to these areas. So the process is simply to split the willow—I once tried to do this by obsidian and somebody quickly pointed out I was bleeding, and somebody said, well it would be much easier if you just pulled it apart. Well it was very simple. And people say, don’t you need to soak it? I’ve done these at a lot of archaeology affairs throughout Arizona, and I have a lot of the Indian tribes that will participate in these affairs, and they come up to me and say, where’d you get that willow? ‘Cause a lot of the tribes are often in the desert and they don’t travel around much outside of the reservations. And I say, well I’m up in Flagstaff. And they look at my willow and they really want my willow because it’s great for basketry. But often they soak it, because the desert willow isn’t as supple as the willow we have in northern Arizona. At any rate, once the willow is split, basically what you’ll do is create the back leg first, by bending that down. And then you make the front leg by bending this back up. It’s about a seven step process. And then what we do is, we just twist the body, and then eventually we’ll just wrap the body underneath. The last wrap. And what’s left is to make the head. And simply bring it back, make it look like a gazelle. People say, oh, that looks like a horse. Well, there weren’t horses in this area three to four thousand years ago. We think these were either deer, or in some cases bighorn sheep. And so then the neck is just wrapped, and then tucked in. And I like to do this activity in front of big groups of kids. And what we’ll do is tell the story about what’s known as the Archaic Period, three to four thousand years ago, so that the kids get a feel for what it was like. You know, that some of these people were actually hunting on the landscape, and they were hunting with what was called the atalatl. And you had to be very close to the animal, so you’d almost have to be, you’d have to be camouflaged quite well. In some cases they probably covered themselves with urine or deer feces, to be able to get that close with the atalatl. And then if they were lucky enough they would spear their animal, and success would come in the hunt.

CS: So this is something that you’ve been able to introduce into the schools?

NW: Yeah. We’ve done these as small programs, so if there’s local schools that like to have a little lecture done it’s a good hands-on activity. And we can do these with pipe cleaners with kids who can’t twist the willow as well.

CS: And how important, Neil, is that, to go and not only talk to, to develop major school programs but other kind of outreach programs, how important is that for your [overlapping speakers; word lost].

NW: Well yeah, in this area it's real important for us to be doing that, because many of these sites, they're very special places, both to archaeologists, but as well as our tribal neighbors who once lived in this area, whose ancestors once passed through here, and who still use these areas for practicing, for collecting medicinal plants and plants that are important for ceremonies. But we do have a lot of archaeological sites, special places, where people have been vandalizing sites. Each year we have six or seven sites that have been vandalized. And what we like to do is really start with the younger kids and give them an appreciation for heritage resources and why the sites are important, and make them understand that these are places associated with people, and that these are important places.

CS: And that also maybe that it's part of their history?

NW: Yeah, sure, it's part of their history, and a lot of the families here in the Williams area and the Ash Fork area, they've been here for a long, long time. And a lot of those people don't really often think of these places as being important, but why have the families stayed all those years? It's because they love this area.

CS: So do you see yourself then as a kind of a liaison between the Forest Service and between your forest and maybe the community at large, and between the American Indians tribes and... Is that...?

NW: Yeah, well it's really, you know, the Forest Service is a multiple-use agency, and that's just a really good example of, you know, again, multiple use of values, really. And the public, the tribes, and within our own Forest Service, you know, we have a variety of values. And that's kind of where I think we come in, is to kind of understand the different, the differences in how people perceive those values.

CS: How has the job and the skills related to your job, how has that changed over time, maybe even since you first started?

NW: Well, one of the biggest things, as we were talking about before, is the technology that has really changed the way we do things. Previously I think, the GIS technology—Geographic Information Systems—now we have all our maps digitized, and we're able to bring laptops into the field and see where we are right away. It's an amazing part of how we've changed the way we've done things. But at least with the heritage program, one of the biggest changes has probably been the focus of the program. I think archaeologists first started working for the Forest Service in the 1970s. A lot of the work was geared toward basically what we call compliance work. And so for years and years a lot of the timber sales had been done in the Forest Service prior to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 says that federal agencies must consider their effects of sites that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. And eventually what that led to was government agencies hiring their own archaeologists. So that was strictly as a kind of way of dealing with the laws that were presented. But after, about the 19, late 1980s, we started having more of an emphasis. Well why were we doing this, you know. And that's when we started coming up with the notions of heritage programs, which allows us to actually do more than just what we say flag and paint the sites for avoidance. We started getting involved with the passports in time program, a Forest Service volunteer program that allows us to do really neat projects. Go look in areas that we normally wouldn't look in. So we started getting funded through what we call heritage dollars, which were geared toward doing research projects and interpretation and putting out signs in the forest to tell people what they were looking at. Trails to rock art sites. But the biggest thing I think they kind of got involved with in 1991 was the passport in time program, which allowed us to venture into wilderness areas where we knew we had spectacular, in some cases rock art sites, cliff dwellings'. And while there's only a handful of us professional archaeologists working on the Kaibab, we had the opportunity to get as many as twenty or twenty-five volunteers who were interested in doing this type of work, that had wanted to be archaeologists in their first lives, but that wasn't a real profession say back in the 1950s or 1960s. That was not something people did. And so you have this corps of wannabes that are a tremendous workforce, and when we can pull them together one week a year we can accomplish things that we couldn't accomplish by ourselves in a matter of ten years.

CS: What has been just a tremendous benefit of the task force [kind of?] program, and tell me a little bit about maybe a recent program that you've had. A recent pit project that you've had on the forest.

NW: Yeah, well we just recently did, one of the projects that we worked on, back in the Tusayan District a couple years ago, was what we called the Coconino Rim study. And this is an area where we had heard—there are finger ridges that come off of the Coconino?/ Rim overlooking the Grand Canyon, and we had found a couple sites out on these finger ridges that were large fortlike structures. And we decided, well it would be nice if we had a lot of people that could spread out and could go all down these forty or fifty finger ridges. And as we did this project we had, we spent actually two weeks and we had twenty volunteers from all over the country. And we ended up documenting just about two or three archaeological sites on just about every ridge. And these were fairly important sites as it turns out. The area had previously been considered occupied between the time A.D. 900 and A.D. 1100., but when we took a closer look at these sites, it appeared that the area was architecturally occupied about a hundred years beyond that. And so it kind of pushes the pre-history of the Grand Canyon area into an area that supposedly had been abandoned by about 1100. Perhaps it was occupied up until 1200. And that led to some research papers and presentations at professional society meetings, and so we really got a lot of work and a lot of information from these projects. One of our favorite projects that's still ongoing is documenting rock art on the North Kaibab Ranger District. That's [Connie Reid's?] district, and we're actually heading up there next October to continue with some of those studies. And again, this is just work that... Picture the work of twenty people versus the work of one person.

CS: What kind of response do you get from the people who participate?

NW: Oh, it's outstanding. Of course they say, we wanted to do this in our first lives. But I think the best example of this is the program has grown. Our first year we took twenty-five applicants on the snake [word unclear] rock art recording project, and we probably had thirty or forty applications at that time for twenty-five positions. And as we have gotten more and more into this, I think [Connie Reid?] recently put out, there a magazine called *The Pit Traveler*. It comes out twice a year, and basically this has a listing of sixty or seventy projects forest-wide. And people on the different forests take a range of applicants from six to twenty applicants, and we usually advertise ten. Well, Connie got a hundred and twenty applicants for her last recording of pueblos on the North Kaibab Ranger District. So the competition has been exceptionally fierce for these volunteer positions, where people will pay to travel and do their work. So obviously it's something that, it's very highly valued.

CS: Did that surprise you, the response?

NW: I think the response really surprised me. I mean, I would have thought we'd have people that were interested locally, and we do have a hard core number of volunteers. We have Arizona site stewards here in the Williams area that help us protect and monitor sites, and I can usually get five or six of them just to help out with a week-long project. Some of them are retired; some of them live in Flagstaff and come over here to see some of the archaeology that's a bit different here. And it's just astounding that we get this type of response. It's almost hard to put an advertisement in these papers for projects that generally take place on either the north or the south side of the Grand Canyon. You know, that makes it a very, a learning project.

CS: So in effect you get a lot of returns, [of people who'd like to return].

NW: Oh yeah. People, you know, I think one of the things about doing archaeology in the Southwest, which separates it from anywhere else in the country, is that these things... The Southwest is a dry, dry climate, with very little erosion on the surface. And so many of these sites are just sitting there on the surface. Now a lot of other places back east or in the Midwest, you have to excavate to find really interesting things, and it's a lot harder to see. Here it's a visual, just compilation of a number of different sites that you can...

CS: Why do you think people are so fascinated with archaeology?

NW: Well, you know, it's, again, we can site there and argue all day long about what happened in the distant past, and you know, nobody's right. [Laughs] And so it makes for very interesting discussions about the prehistory.

CS: Yeah. And I would think too that the added allure of maybe finding something. I'm thinking of the general public.

NW: Sure.

CS: Of finding something that's important must be a real draw.

NW: Yeah, and that's a real draw. But as we like to point out, it's also when we don't find something. I mean, we've got over eight thousand sites here on the Kaibab, and most of them very significant, and sometimes it becomes fascinating when we don't find anything. We'll sit there and knock our heads: why aren't we seeing anything, why aren't we seeing anything? This is a beautiful area. [Laughs]

CS: So what kind of... Related to your job, what kind of challenges do you think archaeologists face from maybe even public or the community, people that you work with outside the Forest Service?

NW: Well, we have, you know, it's very difficult because a lot of what we do is very sensitive information. We're responsible le for the protection of these sites, and yet we want the public to have an appreciation for them. But it's difficult sometimes to say, well, we want to tell people about these places, but at the same time you can't reveal that information. And so it's a real balance to, when you can do that.

CS: Neil, if you were participating at the Folklife Festival, what would you imagine yourself, or what would you see yourself doing there?

NW: Well, I can imagine talking about heritage resources and talking to people about those programs. Like in... Certainly do some hands-on things. We've got lots of replicas of artifacts that we can show people, that came from, how things were done. So for example doing some split-twig figurine construction. Willow occurs all across the country, so I can probably find willow back East to use, as opposed to carrying it in wet towels from Arizona. But a number of things. Just the different stone materials that we have out here can be brought out to show flint mapping.

CS: So there's a lot of different hands-on kinds of things you could do given the [rest of sentence inaudible]? What about even doing a demonstration of orienteering so that people get [overlapping voices].

NW: Sure. Absolutely.

CS: ...go out and sort of be out in the field.

NW: Right. You can give examples of the technology that's used, you can bring a GPS unit, you can bring the old-fashioned compass, and explain how those are used.

CS: You could maybe even plot a line, or several survey lines, that people could actually go out...

NW: Oh sure.

CS: You could have something then that they could then discover on their [rest of sentence inaudible].

NW: Yeah. And you know, you could have computers set up with the GPS, with the aerial photographs of an area, and show the differences in using the latest technology in global positioning systems, and show people where they are on the map, and we do these locations of boundaries of sites.

CS: Tell me a little bit about... We’ve talked about some of the changes, and now I’m looking at just changes in general within the agency. And then what do you look forward to in the future?

NW: I think what I look forward to is, again, trying to continue this getting people to have a further appreciation for heritage resources; and continuing to be able to research these different places and get a better feeling for why these places existed, and what they mean.

CS: Anything else you want to add?

NW: I think we’ve covered more than we covered last time. [Laughs]

END OF INTERVIEW