Passages

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SCHOOL
AND FIRST FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES

Madelyn Iris, EDITOR

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE PRACTICE OF ANTHROPOLOGY
A SECTION OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
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Foreword

OSWALD WERNER
Professor Emeritus, Northwestern University

BACKGROUND

I was a beginning graduate student when I decided I needed to get archaeology into or out of my system. Thus the summer of 1959 became my first experience at fieldwork. I was the Wetherill Mesa Project photographer during its first season in excavating Long House. More importantly, many of my coworkers were Navajo and soon they became more interesting than the remains of the Anasazi (Ancestral Pueblo).

It was during this summer that I discovered Carl Voegelin, of Indiana University, and his Field School in Linguistic Anthropology out of the Research Center at the Museum of Northern Arizona. My family and I decided to try it out the following summer. The Voegelin field school plan was simple.

Every graduate student (the Indiana University Field School was strictly for graduate students) had to have a car. There were about six or seven of us spread out in Indian Country, as defined by the famous map published by the Automobile Club of Southern California. The student projects that summer covered Acoma Pueblo, Hopi, Hopi Tewa, Walapai, Navajo, and Uto-Aztecan languages in general. Every Saturday afternoon from 2–6 p.m. we had seminars in Flagstaff, Arizona. My family had a relatively short ride. Every Friday we came in from Shonto, a small community located in the north central area of the Navajo Indian Reservation (now the Navajo Nation), and did laundry and shopping Saturday morning. The seminar took place in the afternoon followed by dinner at the Voegelins. Sunday we did some sightseeing and headed back to Shonto, about one-hundred and ten miles to the north.

I discovered that I had a knack for fieldwork, that I enjoyed it. Ultimately it led me to transfer to Indiana University and pursue a Ph.D. on Trader Navajo* under Carl Voegelin. These were all highly positive experiences and

*Trader Navajo is a pidginized form of the Navajo language spoken by Anglo traders to their Navajo customers. It is not a true pidgin since the traders were relatively isolated from one another and each made up his or her own version of greatly simplified Navajo.
instrumental in preparing me for starting my own field school at Northwestern where I became Assistant Professor in 1963. This opportunity came sooner than I thought possible. I received an NIMH grant that included two or three graduate student positions. I call this period the “proto” Field School. It ran from 1965 to 1973 and was intended for graduate students. Organized on the Voegelin model, the students were dispersed as far as Window Rock and the Hopi Mesas and I conducted Saturday afternoon seminars at Tsegi Trading Post, where we had our headquarters. These seminars were followed by dinner at the Werners in the evening.

During the later part of this period I often brought out a small number of undergraduates from Northwestern who volunteered to help the Indians. In 1973 Native American voices became louder about anthropologists taking things away but never bringing anything back. These voices and my own ethical, methodological, and related concerns culminated in the organization of Northwestern University’s Ethnographic Field School in 1974. Another important consideration was to make the Ethnographic Field School (EFS) independent of the vagaries of extra-institutional grants.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY

My basic assumption was very simple: It was an untenable situation that in the science of humanity researchers (ethnographers) were not allowed into the laboratory unless they had passed their qualifying examinations for the Ph.D. A second assumption was that student ethnographers were not full-fledged anthropologists and, therefore, should not carry our profession’s burdens or responsibilities. As a result, my EFS combined service and research. This led from the beginning to an unstated emphasis on applied anthropology. Under the best circumstances the service and research components of a student’s work were closely linked. I am still amazed how well we succeeded.

In 1979 A. Chambers and R. Bolton read an important paper at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association. They reviewed the field note taking procedures of some fifty or so Ph.D. candidates. Their results showed field note taking in complete anarchy. The number of pages ranged for 12–18 months of fieldwork from some two hundred to twenty thousand pages. No one seemed to have collected native texts as there was no distinction made between ethnographer’s field notes (which we decided to call the “Journal”) and verbatim transcriptions of native depositions (which we called “Interview
Transcriptions”). There was virtually no awareness of the problems of memory and recall. I therefore set out to correct these shortfalls in our program.

**PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It was clear from the beginning that the plan of the EFS must include undergraduates and graduate students. Practically, this meant that the undergraduate tuitions supported graduate Teaching Assistants. In addition, it was clear that we needed to offer scholarships to Navajo students. My early assumption was that we could have paired teams of Navajo and Anglo students conducting fieldwork. This turned out to be much more difficult than I anticipated and we rarely succeeded with such pairings.

Another practical consideration was the support of the summer school dean. In fact, we discovered that the support of summer school deans and/or directors was crucial. One director in particular, David Schejbal, more than anyone advanced Northwestern’s summer programs. He established the Summer School Bazaar, in which all summer programs made presentations on Northwestern’s campus. With appropriate publicity we reached a much larger group of students than we had before and we eventually expanded the program to include non-Northwestern students.

**THE EXPERIMENTAL NATURE OF FIELD SCHOOLS**

Early on we discovered that feedback from our students was essential in improving the quality of the EFS. This included not only the undergraduates but especially teaching assistants. We created an atmosphere in which it was acceptable to criticize EFS as long as the critic recommended solutions. With this help we could literally improve the quality of our experience from year to year. Sometimes the changes were small but, rarely, were they not significant.

Let me list a few of the improvements. The first summer of EFS consisted entirely of Northwestern students. We had an orientation in Evanston and students were almost literally parachuted into their placements. The student opinions were unanimous. An orientation near the field sites would be highly desirable. First we instituted a three-day Orientation near Gallina, New Mexico, where my family had a summer home. Later we expanded it to four
days. Soon after year one we recognized that the required proposals prepared in Evanston or other remote locations were often not realistic and could not take into account the situation in the field. Thus, the first draft of a working research proposal was due at orientation and was usually finalized, now including the volunteer work component, after the first week of field placement, often with input from local Navajo sponsors.

About three years after the start of the EFS it became clear that the weekly visits by the teaching assistants and the biweekly visits by the director and deputy director were insufficient. Students rightly recognized that peer exchange and learning were as important as academic oversight. Thus we instituted Midterm. It addressed three questions: (1) What problems did you encounter during the first half of your field work and volunteer experience? (2) How did you solve your problems and what can the rest of us learn from your experience? (3) How do you propose finishing your project in the remaining four weeks? Perhaps the most significant contribution of the midterm exchange was students learning to negotiate their role with their sponsors, assuring that the project was completed to everyone’s satisfaction.

Sometime along the way the staff complained that they did not know the students well enough to be truly helpful to them. On the inspiration of Jim Spradley, professor at Macalester College and a pioneer in teaching students to conduct fieldwork and write ethnographies, we instituted brief student autobiographies. These were due at the start of orientation. Students were free to restrict the readership to the director, and/or to his deputy, or allow it to be read by their TA as well. These life histories were very effective in helping students with their placement, their fieldwork, and, occasionally, with personal or medical problems.

Our final debriefings were at first rather random. Students volunteered and some wanted to make their 40-minute presentations early and some late. We soon discovered that usually all the best and most interesting papers were presented first and the weaker papers last. This made it very difficult for all (including the director) to stay interested (or awake). After several years of this we started grouping papers by topic and conducting the sessions as seminars at professional meetings. Thus, we have had sessions on health, agriculture, animal husbandry, art, literature, the Navajo court system, and so forth, covering almost every aspect of Navajo life. An even later innovation was to designate teaching assistants as chairs of each session. The TAs kept time and directed the ensuing discussions following the AAA meeting model. Debriefings were open
to the larger community and were often attended by our students’ sponsors, colleagues, and even friends.

**STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS**

Most field school directors emphasize the ways in which field schools contribute to the life of the host community, and to the lives of the students. The EFS is no exception. However, its longevity provides excellent examples of how important this influence can be. Over the years we had many memorable contributions to the betterment of Navajo life, and since part of our work was in Hispanic villages of northern New Mexico, contributions to the life of these villagers were made as well. For example, one student, Wendy, spent two summers working with an interested Navajo woman on a study of the nutritional value of traditional Navajo foods. After graduating from Northwestern, Wendy obtained a master’s degree (and later a Ph.D.) in nutrition and anthropology from Cornell. Her master’s thesis was the actual research into the nutritional value of these foods. Her sourcebook is still used, especially for senior centers.

Another student, Carol, was a high school guidance counselor. She joined the EFS and investigated counseling of Navajo students at a border town high school. Her report was so damning that the Navajo community sent her report to the Justice Department. Julie, a University of Michigan sophomore, studied the underutilization of a rural health clinic in a Hispanic community. She discovered that the big problem was privacy. People would rather go to a nearby town than have knowledge of their illness spread throughout the small community. Julie later obtained a master of public health degree and at last report was working in the Third World.

Paula studied Navajo women 9–5. We heard rumors that some women lived in hogans but used word processors during working hours. Paula did not find any such women but discovered that in her sample of 12 midlevel executives, eight lived with their ex-husbands. This was the perfect setup for these women: they followed traditional Navajo cultural patterns and kept control of their possessions and sanity threatened by the Anglo justice system. She also discovered that these women followed the split-second schedule of soccer moms in Evanston, balancing the demands of children, husbands, and an extended family. Jessica found every health and welfare resource on the Navajo
Nation and compiled it into a brochure that was widely distributed. She was instrumental in helping Navajo women to cope with spousal abuse, health issues, and related matters.

PROBLEMS

We did have our problems and at times these seemed so overwhelming that I was ready to quit and close the program. However, year after year the high point was the excellent reports at debriefing that kept me going until the following summer. We also had our share of conflicts. Some students were able to cope, some were not, but in 25 years we sent only one student home. We had students who were too rigid to adapt to changing circumstances and ended up frustrated. Obviously, fieldwork was not for them, but at least they found this out early in their career. One year the EFS student body splintered into cliques and we had difficulty coping with the ensuing conflicts. Romances between students or between students and Navajos were also a serious problem. Ethnographic fieldwork requires full emotional involvement. A romance can drain away emotional energy and usually the volunteer work and project suffers.

CONCLUSION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The most important lesson I have learned over the 25 years while I was director of the EFS was that any field school program has to keep its experimental spirit alive. Without constant monitoring of the pedagogic needs of students and the graduate student staff, it becomes difficult to keep a field school going. Constant innovation keeps the effort alive. This is also the time to acknowledge the contribution of deputy directors and teaching assistants. The people who have significantly contributed to our success are Larry Fisher, Mark Schoepfle, Mark Bauer, Karen Benally, Carolyn Epple, Leighton Peterson, Bill Nichols, Rich Levine, Denny Fransted, Kim Hirshman, Tim McKeown, Jeff Ward, and many others. Among undergraduates I thank especially Richard Sun, M.D., for his thoughtful suggestion of the 3/8 midterm and many others who are too numerous to be mentioned here.

Equally important to our success were our Navajo sponsors who have become friends: Martha Austin-Garrison, Ethelou Yazzie, Jimmy Blue
Eyes, Philmer Bluehouse, Louise Grant, Katherine Arviso, Timohy Benally, Herbert Benally, Sam Wauneka, Sadie Billie, the Navajo Chapters at Torreon, Cottonwood, and Upper Fruitland, and many others.

I am confident that this volume will be helpful to anyone trying to start a program of field studies as well as to students who are thinking about a field school experience. It will give them several models to choose from and provide the opportunity to adapt the best program to suit the needs of both students and staff. Dr. Madelyn Iris deserves the credit for collecting these chapters that show future organizers of ethnographic field schools a range of possibilities.

We have operated Northwestern’s EPS for 29 years. This makes ours the longest running Field School in the history of American anthropology. I would like to close with special thanks to Madelyn Iris for creatively continuing and improving the tradition that I started in 1974 and operated for 25 years.

Oswald Werner, Albuquerque and Gallina, New Mexico
Introduction

WHAT IS A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY FIELD SCHOOL
AND WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

MADELYN IRIS
Northwestern University

A field school experience remains the exception rather than the common experience for most undergraduate and pre-dissertation graduate students in social/cultural anthropology. There are a growing number of programs that describe themselves as anthropology field schools, but fewer that emphasize a research experience and in-depth exposure to ethnographic and other qualitative methods. This bulletin offers detailed descriptions of four types of programs: "problem-focused" field schools, "instructor-driven" programs, "applied" anthropology field schools, and the "study-tour" model. Other chapters include descriptions of the field school experience from the student perspective; a long-term reflection on the influence of the field school summer on career development; the importance of mentorship; the relationship between field schools, service learning, and homestay experiences; ethical issues; and guidelines for choosing a field school.

Why have a bulletin on cultural anthropology field schools? The place of the field school experience is well established in archeology, and an archeological field school experience is a requirement for most students wishing to pursue a career as either a professionally based or academically based archeologist (Roberts 1999). However, although the cross-cultural fieldwork experience remains the hallmark of social/cultural anthropology and distinguishes it from other social sciences, a field school experience is still the unusual rather than the common experience for most students thinking about careers in this branch of the discipline and, most often, in this discipline that requires often extraordinary degrees of engagement, students are asked to remain passive learners (Spradley and McCurdy 1972; Whiteford 1978). As E. Lange and M. Whiteford
noted over two decades ago, “Field research is very high on the list of activities which characterize anthropology: in fact, many would say it is the defining practice of anthropology” (1981). In the years since this was written, not much has changed in this regard. Yet despite this, opportunities for young “anthropologists-to-be” to test the waters of the discipline through a supervised field school option remain few and far between and the art and science of conducting fieldwork is still explored largely through brief classroom projects as part of campus-based research methods courses (Trotter 1991). A review of the web-based archives of the Anthropology Newsletter published by the American Anthropological Association shows only ten cultural, ethnographic, or linguistic anthropology field school programs, as well as two programs that emphasize language instruction but do not include a research experience. In contrast, 22 archeology field school programs are listed. This paucity of programs in part reflects a gap in publicizing nonarcheology field school programs but also evidences their comparative scarcity.

This bulletin is designed to partially fill this gap, by providing case examples of five different field school programs, as well as offering information to students who are searching for a program compatible with their needs. In addition, the reader will find several chapters that describe the field school experience from the student perspective, as well as a reflection on the impact of such an experience on the development of a career. This bulletin is designed to appeal to both students and faculty. The authors hope it will provide insights into the importance of a field school experience for all students thinking about a career in cultural or social anthropology, and, in addition, that it will add to the slowly growing literature about field schools from the faculty perspective. In this regard, it complements volume 30(2) of the Anthropology and Education Quarterly that contained a series of articles addressing various topics related to cultural anthropology field schools. However, this volume, edited by Tim Wallace, was targeted to faculty members who were contemplating starting their own programs. It did not address the many important issues related to helping students select a field school program that best suited their needs, style, and personal goals.

The first field experience serves many functions, particularly when it is undertaken in the earlier stages of education and training in anthropology. Field schools give students a chance to experience what it is like to be an anthropologist “in the field.” Being “in the field” is a distinctly different type of experience from conducting a brief study in conjunction with a classroom-based course in field methods or ethnography. Perhaps most importantly, being
in the field means being away from the familiar. In this respect, a field school offers a first step towards the goal of independent fieldwork.

Anyone who has ever participated in or been affiliated with a cultural anthropology field school knows of the many benefits that come from such an experience. These benefits affect students in a number of areas, including personal growth and maturity, the acquisition and testing of research methods, and the development of interpersonal communication and other valuable life skills. Roberts (1999) enumerates a long list of positive traits and skills that result from a field experience, including time management, flexibility, creative thinking and problem-solving, advocacy, critical thinking, and analytical skills. In addition, students often learn to deal with both overt and subtle ethical issues and challenges to their sensibilities and social mores. Awareness and sensitivity to these types of issues and problems is becoming more and more important for the novice researcher, as university-based institutional review boards impose tighter controls and oversight of the research endeavor, and as local communities and groups demand accountability from all researchers, outside professionals, students, and faculty (Lange and Whiteford 1981).

Although there are a number of different types of field schools now operating either in the United States or abroad, they share a select set of characteristics. These include some formal instructional methods, often in a classroom or similar setting, and either during the initial phases of the program and/or ongoing over the course of the term; some specific fieldwork exercises or assignments, such as interviews and participant-observation; opportunities for informal discussion and feedback from faculty; and the completion of an independent research project, or component of a larger project. The programs described in this bulletin all incorporate each of these component parts.

Four types of field school models are represented in this volume. The first type is the “problem-focused” field school. In this type of program the same research topic is pursued by all the students, either in a single setting or in multiple sites. The specific aspect of a topic may differ from student to student, or small group to small group but, overall, everyone is focusing on the same problem. In this volume, the program described by Phil Stafford fits this model. A second type of program is “instructor driven.” Here the students participate in the instructor’s research study, either through individual contributions or as a group. This model was described earlier by R. W. Stoffle et al. (1991). In past years this was the model used by Tim Wallace, when his program focused exclusively on tourism in Costa Rica, although more recently he has altered
the model and now has students conducting research on a number of different topics, although all are based in the same town or general geographic area. A third model of field schools might be called the “applied” model, in that students’ research studies are geared toward problem solving or investigations that emphasize the needs of the local community or communities in which the students live. This is the model now employed by Iris in the Northwestern University Ethnographic Field School. The fourth type of field school described in this volume is a hybrid type, combining elements more characteristic of a study-abroad program with that of an applied model. Roberts (1999) calls this a “study tour.” Van Arsdale’s program in Bosnia and Robert’s program in the Gambia are of this type. In both these programs students spend part of their time abroad together as a group, with lectures, short trips, and guided experiences serving as an extended orientation. Only after a period of several weeks do the students then branch out to pursue research or volunteer experiences specific to their own interests. Van Arsdale’s program draws on the increasingly popular “service learning” model, while Robert’s program offers students a more traditional research exposure.

In addition to these four models of field schools, several other types of programs are also called “field schools” although they do not include a research-specific experience. Some of these are tour-based, in that the students and faculty travel together on a sort of “grand tour” of a country or region, seeing the sights, meeting with the locals, and learning about the history and culture of the area but without the in-depth, firsthand experience of a more grounded program (e.g., Ward 1999). Another type of program also called a field school is more like a study abroad experience, in that the students all live and study together for the duration of the program, usually with dormitory-type housing and classroom time devoted to language, history, and culture. Short outings and side trips are usually included but students do not have much extended time participating in local community life. Descriptions of these programs are not included here, as this volume emphasizes programs that give students some type of sustained research experience. This last type of program usually does not incorporate the essential elements of a field school described above.

This bulletin is organized into three parts. Part 1 provides descriptions of five different field school programs, each with a distinct character and focus. Part 2 contains three chapters. Timmer’s chapter describes her experiences as an undergraduate during her first cross-cultural journey while Nichols focuses on the student’s role in the host community. Berman’s chapter is a reflection on the impact of the field school experience on career development. Part 3 contains
a chapter on the importance of the mentor and the mentoring relationship in a field school, and a discussion of various ethical issues related to field research. The final chapter reviews the important features of a field school that students should be thinking about when they choose a program.

NOTES

1. The terms cultural anthropology field school and ethnographic field school are used interchangeably in this volume. We recognize that some anthropologists may draw a distinction between the two, but we believe that either term is sufficiently broad as to encompass the various program models described here.

2. Although the use of the World Wide Web and search engines such as Google have made it much easier to locate programs, many web sites listed in the archives of the Anthropology Newsletter published by the American Anthropological Association are no longer active or have not been updated in a number of years. This is also true of a number of sites located through Google. Therefore, students searching for programs using the Internet should pursue multiple search options. They should always follow through with a personal contact to the program director to be sure that the field school is still operating.

3. There is a sparse literature in anthropology on the field school experience. George Gmelch cited this lack in his 1992 article on the educational benefits of the field school experience. Since then there have been a few but our understanding of the contributions of a field school to students' growth as anthropologists and as individuals remains largely unexplored.

4. This volume also contains articles by George Gmelch and Sharon Gmelch, describing their program in Barbados; Martha C. Ward, who draws on her experiences directing a program in northern Italy; and Linda Grant et al., who discuss the University of Georgia's U.S.-based program.

5. In 1991 one issue of Practicing Anthropology, published by the Society for Applied Anthropology, was devoted to exploring undergraduate experiences in applied research. Edited by Cynthia A. Cone, this volume contained the articles cited here by Stoffle et al., and Trotter, as well as those by Mikel Hogan Garcia, Barbara H. O'Connell, Cynthia A. Cone, and Linda E. Cartee.

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