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Regional

Archaeology not much like Indiana Jones

For most people, the image of archaeologists is the one depicted in the "Indiana Jones" movies. That is, adventurers involved in exciting excavations, quick findings and even questionable practices such as grave robbing.

As usual, Hollywood has it all wrong.

Just ask Greg Vogel, one of the most active archaeologists in this region. Born in Grinnell, Iowa, Vogel obtained his bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa and his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. He is currently an assistant professor of anthropology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"I became an archaeologist by accident," Vogel said. "It all happened when I took a summer field course on archaeology at the University of Iowa and discovered how fascinating that field is and that really interested me."

He soon discovered that archaeology is actually a science that requires a lot of hard, painstaking work. "Excavations have to be very careful because context is very important," he said. "You need to take many pictures and do a lot of measurements. That is why it is tedious but very exciting. Then you will spend about a week in the lab for every day you have been in the field in order to analyze your data."

Vogel not only uses standard archeological research methods but also more modern technologies.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero College Talk

"We can use new technologies such as satellite images and aerial photographs to analyze the sites we study," Vogel said. "We look at old aerial photographs of areas before they were plowed to see how those sites might have been disturbed in recent times."

Some of the sites he has been working on include historic cemeteries. "Historic cemeteries are very important," Vogel said. "There are many genealogical communities interested in that kind of information. That is particularly true for small cemeteries for which there is little information and we collect information from there to come up with a better understanding of the people who lived in that region."

His work on historic cemeteries has been considered so important that it has been supported by The History Channel under a program called "Save our History." For that research he has involved high school students to take pictures of the gravestones and research the background of the people buried there using local records.

Recently Vogel has concentrated on environmental archaeology. "If we really want to understand who we are today we need to understand what our past was like," Vogel explained. "Archaeology is in the service



SIUE Anthropology Department

Dr. Greg Vogel bails water from an excavation site after a heavy rain.

of the present and the future; how humans adapted to new circumstances."

He cites the study of flood history as an example of how information on flooding events reaching back several hundreds or even thousands of years may help us predict what we may face in the immediate future.

Sometimes you do not need to go that far back to better understand human behavior. He said that there are archaeologists working on landfills just to understand consumption and disposal patterns in the last few

decades. Some experts jokingly refer to those studies as "garbology," a term that does not surprise Vogel. "Most stuff archaeologists study are things left behind by people, usually disposed of for whatever reason," he said.

Archaeology has benefited from the work of volunteers. He says that in this region there are many opportunities for people to participate in archaeological work. He cites Cahokia Mounds as a prime example, as well as the summer field school at SIUE.

Vogel said he sees an increasing interest in archaeology among students, propelled in part by the demand for archaeologists created by strict federal and state regulations that demand a careful handling of any archaeological remains.

He also thinks that the introduction of new fields such as "virtual archaeology," a process that allows scientists to use computers to reconstruct images of the past, as further sparking an interest in archaeology among younger people.

"Reconstruction is becoming more common," Vogel said. "Even Google Earth allows you to see the difference between modern and ancient Rome." Vogel has used 3-D laser scanners to reconstruct ancient rock art in his own studies.

He said he feels that archaeologists do work that requires a lot of responsibility.

"As we have natural resources that are renewable, such as forests, and non-renewable ones, such as fossil fuels, we see archaeological remains as non-renewable.

"Once they are destroyed they are gone forever," Vogel added. "That is why cultural resource management is becoming a big field for which there is more and more demand of experts."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.