

american archaeology

WINTER 2024-25

a quarterly publication of The Archaeological Conservancy

Vol. 28 No. 4



Pioneer in Preservation

Conservancy Founder Leaves a Lasting Legacy

\$3.95 US/\$5.95 CAN
44>



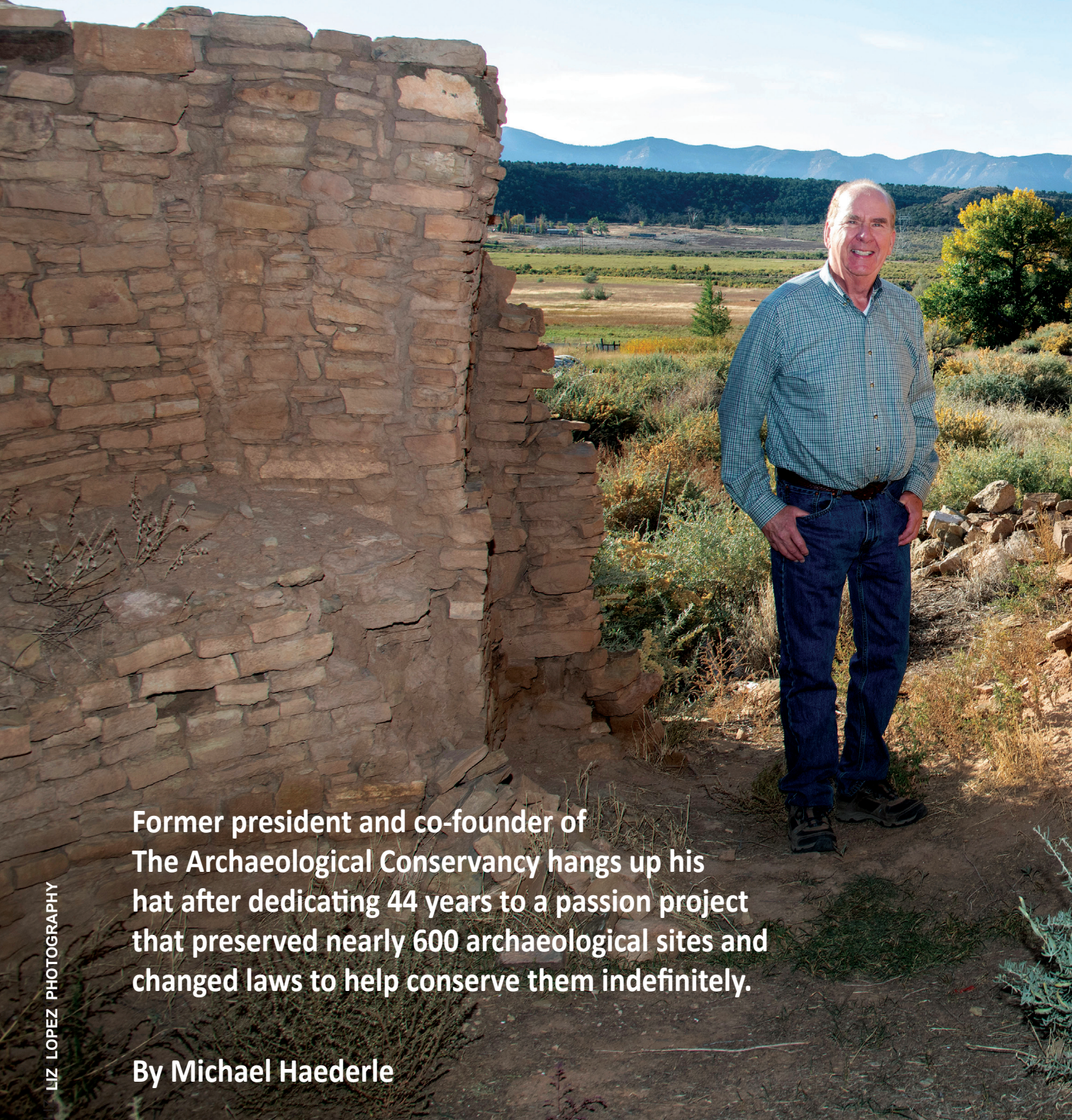
7 25274 91765 5

Earliest people
of Oregon

NAGPRA rules
take effect

Mikva'ot in
the Northeast

A Good Pitch for Conservation



Former president and co-founder of The Archaeological Conservancy hangs up his hat after dedicating 44 years to a passion project that preserved nearly 600 archaeological sites and changed laws to help conserve them indefinitely.

By Michael Haederle

Conservancy co-founder Mark Michel at a Conservancy preserve in southern Colorado, a great house village occupied between A.D. 500 and the late 1200s in the central Mesa Verde region.



At times, Mark Michel seemed more like a handyman than the president and CEO of The Archaeological Conservancy—watering flowers, pulling weeds, or washing windows outside the Albuquerque, N.M., office. “He did a lot of little things that he probably could have delegated,” said Sarah Webber, the Conservancy’s special projects director. “I think your average CEO would not do as much as he did for us.”

Michel, who retired at the end of June, admits to having worn many hats since he co-founded the Conservancy in 1980, including spending up to a third of a year on the road inspecting archaeological sites and overseeing nearly every aspect of the organization’s mission. “At first, I had to do almost everything myself,” he said. “That was OK with me because I’m a very versatile kind of guy. Worked long hours—that’s OK. Travel all over—that’s OK. I liked doing all that stuff, a little bit of everything, never a dull moment.”

A month into his retirement, we met over lunch at a busy Vietnamese restaurant in Albuquerque to discuss his long career. Casually clad in cargo shorts, a short-sleeve shirt, and sandals, Michel appeared to be enjoying his newfound free time, but said he was still regularly dropping by the Conservancy office to assist his successor, Anne Lowe, in her new role. “I’m just there to help, give advice,” he said. He was contemplating some European travel and preparing to lead a Conservancy-sponsored tour in Peru, he said, but he had also been thinking about writing a memoir. “I’ve got to get organized first,” he said. “I didn’t keep a journal, but I have a lot of records. I have a very good memory.”

Michel grew up in Cape Girardeau, Mo., in a family of mathematicians. His father was a professor at Southeast Missouri University, and his mother taught the subject in high school. He struck out in a different direction, studying history at the University of Missouri in an era when the civil rights movement and antiwar protests roiled U.S. college campuses. He was working on a Ph.D. dissertation about U.S. diplomacy after World War II, but at the time, the prospects for finding a history job in academia were poor, so he decided to get into politics.

He had already worked for Thomas Eagleton’s 1968 Senate campaign and was living in Washington, D.C. In 1972, he journeyed to New Mexico to join George McGovern’s presidential campaign. McGovern won only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia in the general election, but like so many before him, Michel was taken with the Land of Enchantment. “I fell in love with New Mexico, and after the campaign, back in Washington, I had to figure out what to do next,” he said. “At that time, I was able to fit all my worldly possessions into my car, and I drove out to Santa Fe. I’ve been here ever since.”

In 1974, Michel took part in Democrat Jerry Apodaca’s successful campaign for governor, and later joined his staff in Santa Fe. When Apodaca left office at the end of 1978, friends suggested Michel take up lobbying, but it didn’t feel like a good fit at the time. Then came an unusual opportunity. Michel was approached to see if he could do something to help protect archaeological sites, so he took a trip to Silver City, where people had been bulldozing Mimbres culture sites to loot artifacts. “I was just appalled,” he said. “This



Michel holds up a large pottery sherd at Pueblo San Marcos, which board director Robert Gelb found during a tour of the site.

kind of played into my history background, so I came back and I got a law passed in New Mexico to protect the sites, regulating excavation with mechanical equipment.” This refers to a new section of the New Mexico Cultural Properties Act (NMSA 18-6-11) that requires a permit to use earthmoving equipment.

About the same time, he said, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that criminal provisions of the federal Antiquities Act of 1906 were unconstitutionally vague. “Looting was rampant at that time, particularly in New Mexico and Arizona,” he said. “The Society for American Archaeology asked if I would try to fix it. By that time, I was pretty much hooked on it, so I said, ‘Sure, I’ll try to fix it,’ and I did. I ended up getting a law passed on the federal level, which was the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979.” It’s still the basic law protecting archaeological sites on federal and Native land, Michel said. “So then the question was, what about protecting sites on private land?” he said. “My advice was, ‘Well, you’re wasting your time. You’re not going to get a law passed to do that because private property rights in the United States are so strong.’”

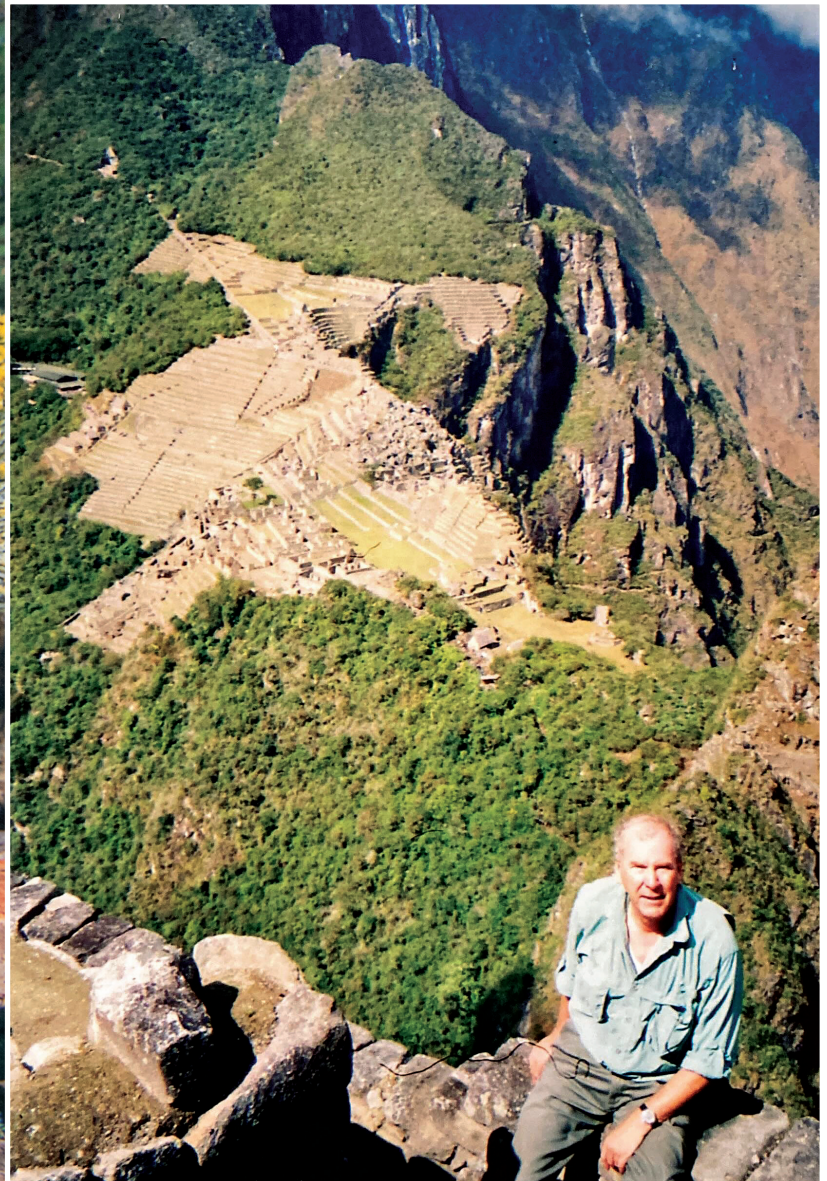


As it happened, Michel was serving on the New Mexico board of The Nature Conservancy, which buys land to preserve the integrity of natural ecosystems—and that gave him an idea. He approached the organization’s president about adding archaeological preservation to its mission. “He said, ‘Great idea, it needs to be done, but I don’t want to do it. I don’t know anything about archaeology. I’m a nature guy. I don’t want to spread myself too thin. Start your own organization; I’ll tell you how to do it,’” Michel said.

He followed the president’s advice and found a partner—and life-long friend—in Jay Last, a California-based inventor and investor who was interested in preserving Mimbres sites. “We got startup grants



From left to right, Michel, former Secretary of the Interior and U.S. Rep. Stewart Udall (D-Ariz.), and retired Southwest Regional Director Jim Walker.



Michel during a Conservancy-hosted archaeological tour in Peru.

from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Mellon Foundation—\$150,000 each—so it was a fair amount of money at that time,” he said. “We hired a few people and we had some spectacular successes at first. One of them was the Hopewell site in Ohio. It was the type site of Hopewell culture, which was the most predominant culture in the East.” Overgrown ancient mounds dominated the site, located on the outskirts of a small city. “It was just sitting out there in a corn field, surrounded by houses, so we bought it,” Michel said. “Here in the Southwest our first big project was Pueblo San Marcos,

which is probably the largest Pueblo ruin in the U.S.—again, surrounded by houses.” The early successes were validating and inspired him to keep going. “I never intended to stick with it for this long, by any stretch of the imagination,” he said, “but it was so interesting and so challenging and I wanted it so much, so I kept doing it.”

The Conservancy focused on Native American sites at first, but from the very beginning Michel knew he wanted its mission to be broader in scope, encompassing everything from First American sites to late 19th-century settlements. The timing coincided with the advent of conservation archaeology—embodying the idea that it is often better to leave artifacts in the ground for future generations. “The principle of conservation archaeology is you never let a site get totally dug up because technology and techniques are moving very rapidly, and you only get one chance to

From left to right, Conservancy co-founder Jay Last, Walker, and Michel pose for a photo during the 2015 Conservancy board meeting in Los Angeles.

PHOTOS COURTESY TAC



dig,” Michel said. “Once you dig, you’ve destroyed that part of it.” Archaeologists supported what he was doing, “but there was also a lot of skepticism,” he said. “It was something beyond their experience that you could just go out and buy these sites and protect them and raise this kind of money to do that.” With his startup funding, Michel hired staff and created operating procedures still in use today. “Every state has a historic preservation office, so that’s where we would start,” he said. “We would go to them and ask, ‘What sites in your state need to be preserved?’ And gradually, we expanded from New Mexico and Colorado to Ohio, Kentucky, and so on. We have preserves in 45 states—about 600 total.”

Jim Walker, who served as the Conservancy’s Southwest regional director for more than 40 years, had an unusual skillset—a degree in anthropology, an MBA, and a real estate license—when he applied for a job with the new organization. “We were all working out of a little house in Santa Fe that had been converted into an office,” he said. “We were pretty much focused on New Mexico. We had one project in Ohio, but we had just started moving into Colorado.” Michel was a visionary, he said. “Rather than make it a felony to disturb an archaeological site, you take the concept of private land and being able to do anything you want with it, turn it around and say, ‘We own this private land. We want to preserve it, protect it, and make sure it’s there for the future.’”

Although Michel wasn’t trained as an archaeologist, “he was in the right place at the right time and knew the right people, and he was able to put together something really successful,” Walker said. From the outset, Michel was determined that the Conservancy be supported by private money, Walker added. “Mark was really good at fundraising. He built the organization on a concept that today seems arcane—direct mail. That built our membership and continues to be an important part of what we do today.”

Michel also built an active board of directors to support the mission, whose members included former Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, who served as board chair for many years and shared space in the Conservancy’s Santa Fe office. “He helped us a lot,” Michel said. “He had a big interest in archaeology and he helped us with some legislation. He was great about it. He would come into the office almost every day.” Other board members have included archaeologists, retirees, financiers, and members of Native American tribes, he said. Eventually, the Conservancy outgrew its Santa Fe office and moved to new quarters in Albuquerque. “It was cheaper, and all of the services were here,” Michel said. “We got tired of driving home from Santa Fe in a snowstorm. It was a more practical place to do business.”

As the Conservancy grew, Michel mastered the art of cultivating relationships with landowners and developers to

“There are few individuals whose lives and careers have had such a broad and profound impact on archaeology at the national scale. Mark Michel’s efforts... in advocating for, and effecting, cultural heritage stewardship, conservation archaeology, policy and legislative implementation, and public outreach are unsurpassed and have forever changed the face of U.S. archaeology.”

— From a statement by the Society for American Archaeology, upon awarding Mark Michel the 2014 SAA Award for Excellence in Cultural Resource Management



Mark Michel stands with his long-abandoned wheelbarrow at Galisteo Pueblo in June 2024.

persuade them to sell at a bargain or donate archaeological sites on their property. “It’s easier and better publicity to save them than to wreck them,” he said. Some of the Conservancy’s undisturbed sites are in the middle of subdivisions, serving as parks or green space for the neighborhood. Local residents, known as site stewards, volunteer to keep an eye on the sites to make sure they’re not tampered with. On occasion, the Conservancy has purchased a site and turned it over to a tribe, the National Park Service, or the Bureau of Land Management to ensure long-term preservation. “One example is a site adjacent to the Zuni reservation that was being badly looted,” he said. “They could look over the line and see this looting going on, but they couldn’t do anything about it. We were able to buy it and transfer it to them.”

Meanwhile, Michel’s experience in shaping policy continued to bear fruit. He was instrumental in authoring—along with Bureau of Land Management archaeologist John Roney—the Galisteo Basin Archaeological Sites Protection Act (GBASPA), a 2004 New Mexico law that called for the documentation and preservation of 25 important sites in the Galisteo Basin south of Santa Fe (seven of which are Conservancy preserves). A working group of tribal representatives, area residents, archaeologists, and representatives of state and county agencies still meets monthly 20 years on to support efforts to preserve GBASPA-protected sites across the basin.

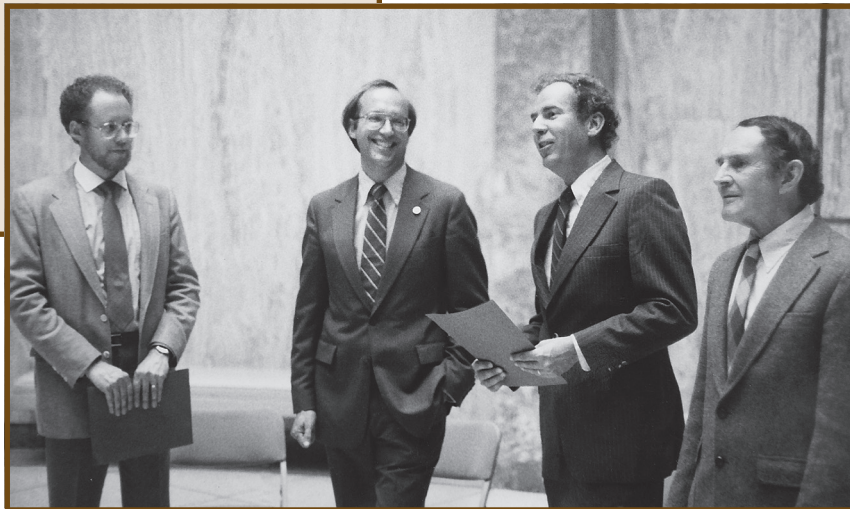
Portions of three UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been preserved through the Conservancy’s work and partnerships, along with several National Historic Landmarks and other sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places. And that just scratches the surface of a well-rounded and growing sample of archaeological sites the Conservancy works to preserve for future research and new technology. The Conservancy’s work aims to contribute to an expanding conservation ethic in archaeology and the United States.

For all his hard work, Michel has always found ways to decompress and indulge in his varied interests. He appreciates art, history, and music, and his travels have often doubled as opportunities to catch baseball games. “One day I woke up and I said, ‘I’ve been to 25 major league stadiums. I’ve only got five to go, so I’d better go do it,’” he said. “I’ve now been to all 30 major league cities. Not every ballpark, because they keep building them and replacing them, but every major league city.” When she was growing up, Michel often brought along his daughter, Alexandra, on his trips around the country to assess potential acquisitions. She is now a faculty research associate at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. He also has been known to go on fishing trips as a way to connect with a landowner to help negotiate a sale. And for years, Michel

Award-winning preservation

The Conservancy's accolades include:

- The U.S. Department of the Interior Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service Achievement Award (1980)
- The American Society for Conservation Archaeology Award (1983)
- The National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States Preservation Honor Award (1985)
- The Society of Professional Archaeologists' John F. Seiberling Award (1992)
- Archaeological Institute of America's Conservation and Heritage Management Award (2011)
- Many statewide recognitions for cultural resource preservation
- Michel garnered the SAA Award for Excellence in Cultural Resource Management (2014)
- The Cultural Resources Achievement Award from George Wright Society (2015), among others



Mark Michel's lasting impact on protection laws

Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, U.S. Code, Title 16, Chapter 18, uscode.house.gov

Galisteo Basin Archaeological Sites Protection Act, Public Law 108-208 (2004), congress.gov/108/plaws/publ208/PLAW-108publ208.pdf

Creation of Hopewell Culture National Historical Park, Public Law 102-294 (1992) to expand the boundaries of and rename Mound City Group National Monument, congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/senate-bill/749

Michel, left, boats with participants of a Conservancy-hosted archaeological tour on the San Juan River.



PHOTO COURTESY TAC

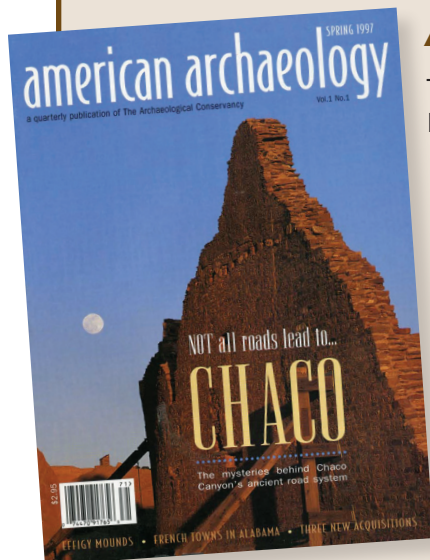
has spent time at a cabin he owns in the mountains near Jemez Springs, N.M. There, he is a member of the local volunteer fire department.

With a staff of about 20 people, the Conservancy is notable for the extraordinary length of time most people have worked there. “I have been at the Conservancy for 11 years now, which makes me one of the newer people,” said Kelley Berliner, the organization’s Maryland-based Eastern regional director. She is one of many people who describe the workplace as being like a family—and gives Michel credit for his hands-off management style. “Mark is so different from anybody else that I’ve ever worked for,” she said. “He’s really very trusting in the people that he has hired. We are given a lot of freedom to decide what projects we pursue and what people we meet with. Mark is there to provide a sounding board and so much guidance. We feel very spoiled, because he trusts us to get the job done. Mark’s like, ‘We’re all in it together. We all know what to do. You can figure out how to do it.’”

Cory Wilkins, the Conservancy’s Western regional director, based in Reno, Nev., said road trips with Michel to inspect sites usually entailed a visit to an Outback Steakhouse and stays in Comfort Inns. If they happened to find themselves near a city with a Major League Baseball team, a game was in order, he said. “Mark is such an amazing human being—just supportive and a great mentor. And after a long time, he became a really good

friend,” Wilkins said. “We would talk about our personal lives and bounce things off of one another. Mark became kind of an older brother I could talk to. I really appreciated that trust he had in me and I had in him.” Michel deserves much of the credit for the Conservancy’s success, Wilkins said. “Mark was really good about staying focused on exactly what the mission was for the entire term of his presidency,” he said. “He didn’t stray from that mission. He didn’t spend a lot of money on what he didn’t need to. We were lean and mean, and still are.”

Webber, who has worked for the Conservancy for more than 20 years, described Michel as “almost like a father figure” who encouraged work-life balance in the Conservancy office. She and other new mothers were allowed to bring their infants to work for the first six months postpartum, and parents are free to take time off to see their kids’ soccer games, as long as they get their work done. “You don’t have jobs like that, where you can call and say, ‘This has happened,’ and they’re like, ‘Please, just take care of it, take as much time as you want,’” she said. “That’s because of Mark and because he deeply cares about us, and vice versa.” Michel said he hired employees with a passion for the cause of historic preservation and an ability to handle a wide variety of tasks on their own. “It’s a team effort, which you have to have with a smaller group,” he said. Allowing new mothers to bring their infants to work “just seemed like a natural kind of thing.”

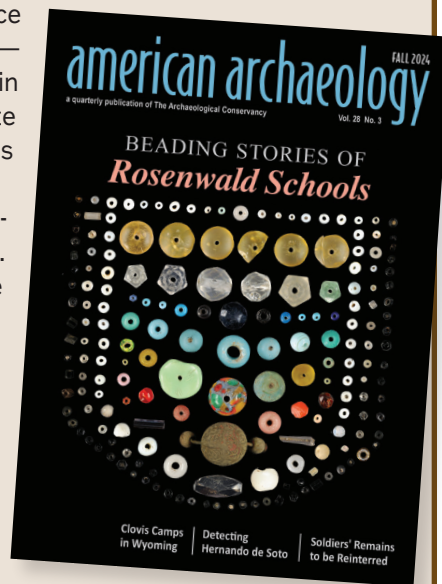


American Archaeology: Nearly 30 years later

The Conservancy's quarterly magazine, *American Archaeology*, was another Michel project launched in 1997 with its inaugural issue featuring the mysteries of Chacoan roads, the French at Old Mobile, and effigy mounds of the Upper Midwest. The magazine replaced the Conservancy's newsletter and expanded its scope. Michael Bawaya, the publication's previous editor (2000-2022), shaped the magazine into a consistent source of deep and technical—yet accessible—content about archaeological research in North America. Tamara Jager Stewart wrote the feasibility study in 1998 and continues her work with the magazine.

Its award-winning writers have garnered several Gene S. Stuart awards. The publication won a Silver award in the Magazines and Bookseller's Annual Magazine Cover Contest in 1999. In the Folio Awards, it nabbed an

Ozzie in 2008 for best use of photos and an Eddie in 2013 for its technology issue. *American Archaeology* was won two honorable mentions in categories of the 2024 Folio Awards: an Eddie for a feature about the destruction of cultural resources in Mexico as a tourist train in the Yucatán Peninsula was built, and an Ozzie for the magazine's recent redesign. It remains the only popular magazine in the United States focused solely on the rich diversity of North American archaeology.



As with any family, there have been some losses. “Jay Last and I were very close friends for years until he died two years ago,” Michel said. “He was one of the backbones of the organization, keeping it going. We made a great team. I would do the politics and management, and he would help with the finances.” More recently, the Conservancy suffered a shocking loss when longtime Board President Gordon Wilson was murdered in the parking lot of a Santa Fe Best Buy store in a carjacking. “His was this classic story,” Michel said. “He grew up in Illinois wanting to be an archaeologist. He figured out quickly he wasn’t going to make a living that way, so he went into finance. When he retired, he wanted to pursue his passion for archaeology and moved to New Mexico to do that. He was very active once he got to Santa Fe in all kinds of archaeological activities, but mainly with us, as our board chair.”

Webber said discussions about Michel’s retirement started about 10 years ago, but plans were put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, she said, “He looks so happy. He is glowing. He’s ready. He deserves to have a retirement and he deserves to have the rest of his life.” Michel confirms that he was planning to step aside in 2020. “But then COVID-19 happened, so I didn’t feel like I could leave,” he said. “I had to wait until it settled down. It slowed us down a little. We couldn’t travel much, at least at first. But our membership stepped up.”

At his retirement party in June, baseball still loomed large. Michel’s staff and board snacked on hot dogs and beer as they

watched him throw out the first pitch of the night for the Albuquerque Isotopes. As the evening wore on, they shared their memories and gratitude to Michel for all his years of leadership and service. Michel portrays his long career with the Conservancy as simply a matter of doing what he loved. “Jay Last asked me over a beer or two, ‘How long are you going to do this, Mark?’ I said, ‘Well, Jay, I like this so much I’m just going to keep doing it.’ Last said, ‘If you’re going to keep doing it, so am I.’” Michel adds, with characteristic understatement, “It’s funny how things work out sometimes.”

MICHAEL HAEDERLE is a New Mexico-based writer and editor whose work has appeared in *People*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Pacific Standard*, and *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, among other publications.

FURTHER READING

- See a timeline of The Archaeological Conservancy's history and archived articles at thearchcons.org.
- See *American Archaeology*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter 1999-2000), “**Twenty Years of Saving Sites**”
- See *American Archaeology*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter 2009-10), “**The Conservancy turns 30**”
- See *American Archaeology*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Summer 2020), “**Forty Years of Preservation**”
- GBASPA Working Group, galisteo.nmarchaeology.org