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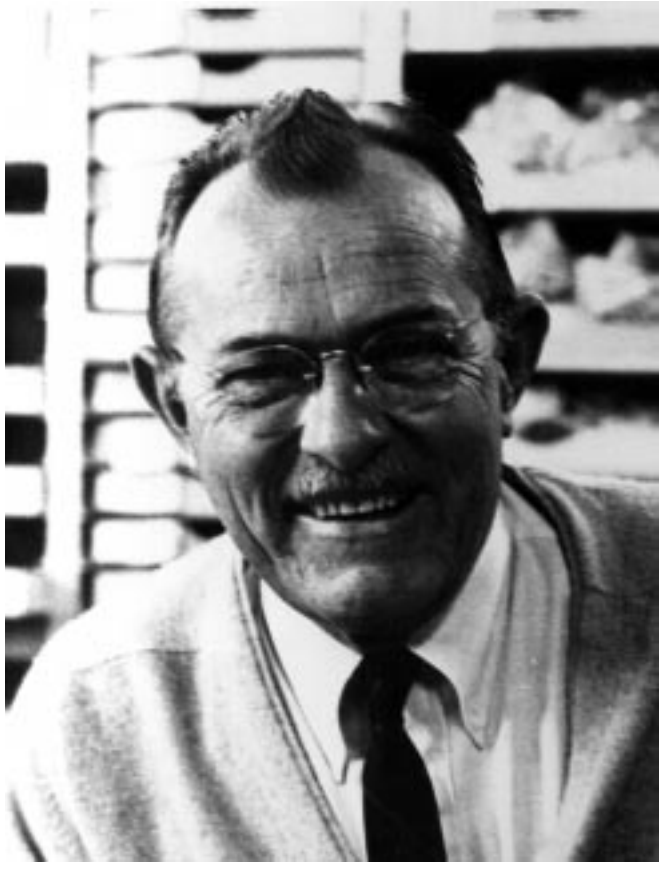

JESSE D. JENNINGS

July 7, 1909-August 13, 1997

BY C. MELVIN AIKENS

Jesse D. Jennings, prominent member of a highly productive generation of scholars that laid the empirical foundations of modern North American archaeology, died at his home in Siletz, Oregon, on August 13, 1997. Born in Oklahoma City on July 7, 1909, he was eighty-eight years old. Jane Chase Jennings, his partner since their 1935 marriage in Washington, D.C., was at his side. Jennings is survived by Jane, their two sons David and Herbert, three grandchildren, and many students who carry on his work and teachings in various ways.

In his personal memoir *Accidental Archaeologist* (1994) Jennings recounted his archaeological career, which began shortly after he arrived at the University of Chicago in 1929. After graduating from Montezuma College in Hot Springs, New Mexico, he caught a ride east with a faculty member who was returning to Chicago to further his own studies. Jennings found a job on a campus grounds crew and, after brief curricular explorations, found his way into the Department of Anthropology. There the faculty and prominent visitors who Jennings found memorable included Robert Redfield, H. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Fay-Cooper Cole, Edward Sapir, Paul Radin, Leslie Spier, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Alfred Kroeber, among others. Student comrades of what became a famous generation included Donald Collier, Robert Braidwood, Fred Eggan, Sol Tax, Madeline Kneberg, James

Griffin, Kalervo Oberg, Florence Hawley, Philleo Nash, and Alexander Spoehr, to mention a few prominent names.

Jennings initially was drawn to cultural anthropology, especially gaining from the mentorship of Robert Redfield and hoping to work with him in Mexico. But, in 1931 he was drafted to serve his obligatory term in the department's central Illinois field school in archaeology by department head Fay-Cooper Cole. Jennings found that, as a New Mexico farm boy who knew digging and dirt, he was better adapted to the work than his citified fellow students, and he progressed rapidly into a supervisory role. Pursuing opportunities that the Chicago field school and Redfield's advocacy opened to him put Jennings on the archaeological path he followed the rest of his life.

Jennings's first scholarly publication was "The Importance of Scientific Method in Excavation" (*Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of North Carolina*, 1934, 1[1]:13-16). The piece already reflected themes that later Jennings students would recognize: a stress on order, cleanliness, and thoughtfulness in excavation, with serious attention to tracking and recording structural and contextual details. Its preamble also succinctly outlined the culture-historical paradigm in which he worked:

> The importance of scientific excavation can best be presented after a discussion of the scientific method itself. The chief desire motivating the archaeologist is for fuller historical knowledge. The archaeologist, both field and laboratory worker, attempts to reconstruct history through inferential reconstruction . . . Distribution of material culture traits is essential knowledge in determining distribution of cultural groups. Contact between cultural groups can and must be observed through artifactual evidence. To plot distributional groups or to ferret out cultural contact leaves the investigator in need of every fact. The record of excavation must be complete. Every possible effort must be made to see, record, and later interpret, every fact. The archaeologist is not altogether a grave robber, inasmuch as the

actual digging is but the primary step in archaeology. The digging comes first, however, and unless it is done well nothing else can be done (p. 13).

Jennings's first major publication was a monograph on the late prehistoric and protohistoric Peachtree mound and village site in Cherokee County, North Carolina (1941). This was published with Jennings as junior author to Frank M. Setzler. Jennings had excavated the site in 1933-34, and subsequently analyzed the specimens at the U.S. National Museum. Setzler, a Smithsonian employee who was liaison officer for Peachtree and other joint Smithsonian-Civil Works Administration projects, in his foreword gives Jennings credit for writing the bulk of the report, but does not explain further. Jennings (1994) records that Setzler went down as senior author of the published report—which Jennings had written in its entirety—because Setzler had told him that Bureau of American Ethnology publications had to be signed by a Smithsonian author.

Leading into the Peachtree report, Jennings offers a classic statement of the interpretive paradigm he and others of the time followed, based on ethnographic analogy and a direct historical approach:

No archaeological area, except perhaps the Pueblo region of our Southwest, is more blessed with direct ethnological and historical accounts pertaining to the organization and movements of Indian tribes than the general Southeast. For this reason every effort should be and is being made to interpret archaeological data from these early historical reports. This procedure is the only sound method for determining the ancestors of our historic Indian tribes and properly interpreting the few remaining indestructible fragments of their material culture (pp. 3-4).

Jennings interpreted his findings under the headings Secondary Mound, Primary Mound, Village Site, Architecture and House Life, Costume and Dress, Customs and Ceremo-

nies, and Description of Manufactured Objects. Guided by the ethnohistorical clues, he stayed close to the descriptive characteristics and apparent functions of the observed archaeological traits. A final section on Archaeological Implications placed Peachtree in the emerging chronological sequence for the region. Jennings discussed briefly the site's relations to the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian patterns and identified its occupants as Cherokee on the grounds of Peachtree's late date and location in the heart of the ethnohistorical Cherokee range. The possibility that Peachtree was the Cherokee village of Guasili, visited by DeSoto in 1540, was entertained but not clearly resolved.

Another guiding concept was the taxonomically structured McKern system, which compared cultural traits from archaeological sites to define the foci, phases, aspects, and patterns of basic cultures. This became an important and widely used tool in the middle and late 1930s and lives on as an important underpinning of American archaeology. In Appendix B, Jennings compared 212 traits of excavated artifacts and cultural features from Peachtree across 7 other southeastern sites. Peachtree could not yet be placed in a McKern system framework, because regional data were still too few, but Jennings marshaled the relevant data in anticipation of future use for this purpose.

This early work is paid so much attention here because it clearly defines most—though not quite all—of the dominant emphases exemplified and advocated by Jennings in his long career: the indispensability of careful, attentive excavation and detailed reporting of same; an interpretive approach founded in ethnographic knowledge; a commonsense, dominantly functional rather than stylistic approach to artifact analysis; and placement of research findings in larger temporal and regional contexts.

Much additional fieldwork followed. Jennings's (1941)

"Chickasaw and Earlier Indian Cultures of Northeast Mississippi" reported several years of work along the route of the National Park Service's Natchez Trace Parkway project, carried out by Jennings and others. The analysis and exposition continued in the vein already seen in the Peachtree study, the main interpretive effort being to link the archaeological manifestations to the historic Chickasaw encountered by DeSoto and trace them back into prehistoric time. In the beginning of his concluding section, Jennings expresses what much subsequent work shows to be a continuing and characteristic mistrust of theorizing and a conviction that conclusions must properly emerge from and be limited by the data in hand:

> Having waded through the minutiae necessary to a factual reporting of a series of excavation units, the student is usually ready to accept the challenge offered in a concluding section by indulging in the wildest of speculations and by parading his pet theories. In spite of the strong temptation to theorize and tie up loose ends in order to confuse future generations of students, it is probably more desirable to restrain this impulse, attempting instead to evaluate and weigh the meager artifactual data . . . On the basis of ethnological and archaeological data which modify each other, the information bearing on historic material culture of the Chickasaw tribe has been slightly expanded through the four historic sites dug (p. 213).

In 1938 Jennings seized an opportunity to dig with A. V. Kidder at Kaminal Juyu, Guatemala. This was a one-season job that came up on short notice when Kidder found himself short-handed, and Redfield recommended Jennings as being skilled in the kind of mound excavation it required. Jennings spent about five months excavating a complex series of superimposed earthen pyramids, and this work became the basis for his doctoral dissertation at Chicago, written during World War II, while he served as a Naval officer in Iceland (1946). After Guatemala, Jennings worked for a

time as a National Park Service ranger at Montezuma Castle in Arizona, then was transferred to Ocmulgee National Monument in Georgia as its first superintendent. After time out for World War II he returned to work with the National Park Service, again in the southeast, but he shortly transferred to the plains region.

In the plains, Jennings functioned as a roving archaeologist, involved with early river basin surveys work. During this time he had an opportunity to visit sites up and down the plains, broadening his archaeological experience into a new and quite different area. Stemming from this interlude, Jennings was instrumental in establishing the *Plains Archaeological Conference Newsletter*, which later grew into the respected *Plains Anthropologist*.

In 1948 Jennings came to the University of Utah, beginning the professorial career that he continued to his official retirement from Utah in 1986, and extended until 1994 as an adjunct professor at the University of Oregon. Arriving at Utah, Jennings drew on his past experience to quickly initiate a statewide archaeological survey and set about filling in the map of a poorly known region through extensive surveys and test excavations.

In 1949 Jennings began excavations in a series of dry desert caves on the northern Utah-Nevada border. Danger Cave was the richest of these, and ultimately gave its name to the monographic report on the work, published in 1957. This was pathbreaking research, now recognized as Jennings's classical work and greatest contribution to our understanding of North American prehistory. At Danger Cave, Jennings's established habits played out in a painstaking approach to excavation and a commonsense, ethnographic interpretation of the archaeological evidence. An important new element was presented, however, by the nature of the site itself. In the cool, dry grotto of Danger Cave lay some 11

feet of stratified deposits rich in well-preserved artifacts and biotic specimens, which radiocarbon dating showed to have accumulated slowly over more than 11,000 years. This uniquely detailed record offered an exceptional opportunity to study the environment and subsistence practices of the cave's inhabitants over a very long period of time, and in developing that opportunity Jennings documented a convincing millennial perspective on human ecology in the desert west.

Looking as always to ethnohistory and ethnography for bases on which to interpret the archaeology, Jennings found guidance in Stewart's (1941) "Culture Element Distributions: IV Northern Paiute" (*Anthropological Records* 4(3):361-466), and Steward's (1938) seminal treatise on subsistence and settlement patterns among a broader range of Great Basin aboriginal peoples, "Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups" (*BAE Bulletin* 120). Matches between these ethnographies and what Jennings saw in the artifacts and biotic remains from Danger Cave were close and numerous. Detailing the evident similarities shared between archaeological inventories and ethnographic accounts, and essaying comparisons with other dry cave sites across the west, Jennings described a Great Basin desert culture that was widespread, ancient, and stable, lasting from about 10,000 years ago down to the nineteenth century. The evidence and argument were compelling, and he established a conception that will forever influence research into desert west and hunter-gatherer prehistory.

The desert culture idea attracted widespread attention and, along with approbation, it generated a storm of critical interest and competing interpretations from other far-western archaeologists, including attacks on the stratigraphy and dating of the Danger Cave record itself. This discussion lasted the better part of two decades, critics mainly

arguing that Jennings's broad generalizing description of a western desert culture was misleading because it glosses over obvious subregional and temporal variation. The debate has subsided, with the growth of a general recognition that both generalizing and particularizing views engage reality at differing levels of regional and temporal scale.

Following Danger Cave, Jennings continued to prosecute the work of the statewide archaeological survey, directing and supporting the work of his students all over Utah. His 1966 "Glen Canyon: A Summary" pulled together years of rescue archaeology under his direction in the canyon lands of southeastern Utah to give a first synthetic account of Anasazi agricultural life along its northern frontier. His 1978 "Prehistory of Utah and the Eastern Great Basin" is a still broader synthesis that pulls together results from several major desert culture sites that followed Danger Cave, from the Glen Canyon project, and from numerous investigations into Utah's distinctive horticulture-based Fremont culture. The bibliographies of these two summaries document the substantial breadth of this research, and Jennings's continuing role in educating and launching students into the professional arena.

Another major work for Jennings during this period was creation of the University of Utah Museum of Natural History. This was a long and large undertaking, spanning in all more than 20 years. It culminated in 1973 when, with the museum finally built and legislative funding assured, he heaved a sigh of relief and resigned as director, passing the job on to his long-time curator of exhibits. The story, detailed in Jennings's 1994 memoir, is a remarkable tale of vision and persistence, and the museum continues today as a major living contribution to public education, including but going much beyond the archaeological interests that were otherwise the focus of Jennings's career.

In addition to his field technical studies and his museum work, Jennings early entered into the writing and editing of broadly synthetic volumes directed to peers and students. In *Prehistoric Man in the New World* (1964), a compendium of regional summaries written by leading scholars and co-edited with Edward Norbeck, and in his *Prehistory of North America* (1968), Jennings gave students and teachers the first textbook syntheses of the continent's archaeology. These books lived on, each growing and changing shape through three editions, informing and influencing both younger and older students of American archaeology across three decades. *The Prehistory of Polynesia* (1979), stimulated by Jennings's 1970s foray into Pacific fieldwork (four seasons of excavation in Western Samoa), brought together under his editorship synthetic essays by more than a dozen prominent students of this vast area for a first-time summation of its prehistory. Although Jennings's interest in archaeological synthesis no doubt has additional intellectual roots, the taproot surely is the sheer breadth of the archaeological experiences he accumulated in his long career. As he worked his way around the continent from the southwest to the Midwest, the southeast, Guatemala, the plains, the Great Basin, and out into the Pacific islands, Jennings repeatedly found himself learning new regional contexts in order to understand the implications of his field data, and thus equipped himself better than perhaps anyone else for such broad undertakings.

In his 1994 memoir Jennings reflected on a question put to him late in his career by a University of Oregon graduate student about his thoughts on fieldwork. That question elicited his final chapter, "Archaeology Without Theory: An Innocent at Work." In it, Jennings expressed his strong skepticism about much of the theorizing that had come to characterize modern archaeology, picking up again the thread

previously quoted from his Chickasaw report of nearly 60 years ago that what typically passes for theory is more likely to be confusing than helpful:

> Certainly I profess no scientific goals, having wearied during the 1950s of attempting to follow the sterility or the speculative dead-end paths or the convoluted mazes that lie within the tangled forest of theory upon which "scientific" archaeology is based (p. 264).

Although Jennings never joined seriously in the published polemics over the "new archaeology" of the 1960s and 1970s, his skepticism was well known to colleagues and students. Jennings's friend and Pacific colleague Roger Green (*Archaeology in New Zealand* 40(4): 251) reminisced about the time both were visiting professors at the University of Hawaii:

> The late Chet Gorman and Donn Bayard were among our graduate students. The "new archaeologists" of the time certainly gleaned what Jesse thought of their theoretical stance through his direct assistance in facilitating Donn's publication of "Science, Theory, and Reality in the New Archaeology" in *American Antiquity* (34:376-84).

As this brief sketch of his intellectual history has shown, despite Jennings's disavowal in "Archaeology without Theory," he certainly was not innocent of guiding principles that most would place in the realm of theory, even though clearly he regarded them as simply common-sense investigative approaches. And he generated results—most notably his account of the desert culture—that are surely to be reckoned as having great theoretical importance, even though he did not consider the desert culture a theory, but merely the conclusions arrived at through his effort to consider as objectively as possible the archaeological and other data he was dealing with. To the end, as confirmed in his memoir, Jennings believed that archaeological data, and especially

new kinds of data generated by careful fieldwork and ancillary physical-chemical analytical techniques, were far more important than theory in advancing archaeological understanding of the human condition.

The remainder of this biography offers a few impressions of Jesse D. Jennings the man. It has to be written in the first person, because what I have to say in this vein was learned at first hand as Jennings's student, employee, colleague, and friend over a period of 40 years. My association with Jennings began in 1958, when he hired me as an undergraduate field hand on the Glen Canyon project, and we remained friends until his death. Necessarily, considering the source, these impressions stem from a later phase of Jennings's career after he became a professor of anthropology at the University of Utah and after he was well established as a major figure in American archaeology. What follows is taken with permission from a foreword I wrote for Jennings's 1994 autobiography.

> Jennings is most prominently defined, especially among his students, by his characteristically direct and demanding approach to both teaching and research situations. Never unclear about his expectations, he is dependably insistent and—if need be—forceful in seeing to it that they are met, or their achievement at least vigorously attempted. Possessed of boundless energy himself, he expects to see it in others, too. In the classroom or in the field—the latter one of Jennings' most important teaching venues—things are not left to chance, and things are not let go. Responsibility is demanded of a seminar student scheduled to perform at a given time or of a field crew chief coping with the many necessities of that position. Though good work is never left unremarked, neither is a failure to perform up to standard. Nor are too facile statements left unprobed, and a student who doesn't keep up the pace in a seminar presentation will be told to "kick it along." Helping to relieve the tension this regime can generate is Jennings's habit of lacing his interactions with wisecracks and asides ranging from groaners to the hilarious. Thus is engendered that certain blend of striving, nervous anticipation (for some verging on fear) and, ultimately, respectful affection for their mentor that is known to all Jennings students.

The early chapters of Jennings's memoir seem to illuminate the origin of this persona. Clearly, his boyhood was dominated by the certainties of his strong-willed mother's deeply held Baptist religion. Although Jennings records that his own Baptist fervor evaporated during his college years, something manifestly remained of the fundamentalist sense of good and bad, right and wrong, and willingness to make and act on such judgments. Jennings was also schooled early in responsibility by the obligations of helping to sustain house and home, which fell on him too heavily and too soon because of his father's frequent and prolonged absences and the extremely limited family income.

Jennings's students at Utah in the Glen Canyon project days of the late 1950s and early 1960s expressed that certain feeling of respect, affection, and dread in the brief fad of rendering his given name Jesse (with its obvious etymological connection to Jesus) as Yahweh, evoking the great and terrible desert god of the Old Testament. Similarly, he was referred to by a later generation of students as "the dark lord," after the powerful and implacable figure of J. R. R. Tolkien's *War of the Rings*. Jennings's often uttered expectation that we would cope appropriately with whatever exigencies the wild canyon lands field situation might present was memorialized in a little ditty sung to the tune of The Frozen Logger, accompanied by banjo and ukulele. The verses characterized our boss, not always flatteringly, in terms of various archaeological feats and incidents—some more or less real, some fabulous—and the song ended with the phrase, "... emblazoned on his forehead was the magic slogan, COPE!"

Those student exaggerations of Jennings's character and exploits seem to have reflected a sense of him as a kind of legendary figure, somehow larger than life. Manifestly, we at least occasionally thought of him as godlike, though not

in any namby-pamby way. We knew about his previous work, of course, and certainly he was always a looming presence on the local scene. I know that in my own case I actually did think he was larger than life. I was greatly surprised to learn one day, in a conversation with his younger son Herb (Jennings regularly sent his sons Dave and Herb, then schoolboys, to the field on summer dig crews for what they could learn about work and life in general), that Jennings was about 5 feet 10 inches tall, and weighed about 175 pounds. I was surprised because, fitting those dimensions almost exactly myself, I had always perceived Jennings as a good bit larger, maybe something over 6 feet and closer to 200 pounds!

After "cope," another favorite Jennings expression was "making mistakes." This applied to an archaeologist's role in directing an excavation. Jennings insisted on clear stratigraphic and associational control, but, of course, he knew from much experience how hard it is to figure out the structure of an archaeological deposit while in the act of digging it away. A greeting to a neophyte crew chief, "so, Aikens, you're making the mistakes on this site," meant, "I see that you are in charge here," and was also a tip-off that this stern inspector could be understanding about an occasional error, if, of course, it devolved from a reasoned attempt to get the thing right and so long as the error was clearly described and properly labeled in the field notes. Although he was not one to overtly nurture a student, I do recall being comforted by a Jennings statement that a man who never made mistakes was a man who never did anything.

On campus, a feature of Jennings's behavior that I came to recognize as remarkable only long after leaving Utah, completing graduate work, and becoming a professor myself was his total availability to students. Unlike the latter-day professor who typically schedules but a few office hours

each week for student conversation and consultation, Jennings was always there, and his door was always open. A student could depend on finding him interested and ready to act directly on the concern of the moment. A few snippets from a routine tenured faculty review done shortly before Jennings's "retirement" at Utah, describes similar relations with students some 20 years later:

> Unlike many university faculty, [Jennings] has faced the difficult task of providing direct and honest evaluation of his students so they all know where they and their work stand in relation to his judgment of quality . . . Students, past and present, stress the great amount of learning that goes on in his classes as compared to other classes . . . His involvement with students has been his outstanding characteristic. He is vitally concerned with their education, exceptionally active in finding them support during their studies and jobs when they get their degrees. His use of his many contacts for these ends has provided him with much vocal appreciation.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Jennings's long and valuable service to the profession is reflected in an exceptional list of major honors that came throughout his career. He was chosen editor of *American Antiquity* (1950-54), elected to the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (1953-56), selected as Viking medalist in archaeology (1958), elected president of the Society for American Archaeology (1959-60), and elected vice-president and Section H chairman of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1961 and again in 1971. His university named him a distinguished professor in 1974 and honored him with a doctor of science degree in 1980. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1977. In 1982 he received one Distinguished Service Award from the Society for American Archaeology and another from the Society for Conservation Archaeology. He was a featured plenary session speaker at the 50th Anniversary Cel-

ebration of the Society for American Archaeology in 1985. In 1990 the Great Basin Anthropological Conference (which he founded in 1958) established the Jesse D. Jennings Prize for Excellence in his honor, and in 1995 he was awarded the A. V. Kidder Medal for Achievement in American Archaeology.

THIS BIOGRAPHY COMBINES text previously published by the author as an obituary in *American Anthropologist* (100[4]); as part of a foreword in *Accidental Archaeologist* (1994); and as part of an obituary in *SAA Bulletin* (15[5]). I thank the editors of the *American Anthropologist* and *SAA Bulletin* and the director of the University of Utah Press for their consideration.

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