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This picture of Story was taken sometime in the 1950s.

The Dean Of Texas Archaeology

Dee Ann Story became an archaeologist when men dominated the profession. Nonetheless, she made an indelible mark as an excavator, preservationist, and teacher. *By Kristin Ohlson*



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Story (center) and other researchers view an item recovered in the 1970s during the Texas Historical Commission's investigations of the 1554 Spanish shipwrecks off Padre Island in southeast Texas.

Whenever visitors came to one of Dee Ann Story's field schools, they weren't likely to find her sitting in the shade taking a break. "She'd either be at the mapping table or, once excavation started, down in the pits," said Harry Shafer, professor emeritus at Texas A & M University, who was Story's first Ph.D student at the University of Texas. "She'd be down there shoveling dirt or studying features or whatever. She never asked her students to do anything that she didn't do as well."

There was always a plume of smoke coming from Story's pit, as she was a heavy smoker for much of her life, a habit that contributed to her death on December 26, 2010, from lung cancer. Her passing sent a jolt through the archaeological community, especially in Texas, where she was well known and sometimes called "the dean of Texas archaeology." "It's hard to think of a more gracious and dedicated person than Dee Ann," said Mark Michel, the president of The Archaeological Conservancy, on whose board Story served for years. "She was just topnotch in every way."

Story was born in 1932 to Emma and Eugene Suhm of Houston. Her childhood was spent living near a bayou, where she investigated things poking out of the dirt and explored the waterways on a raft. She grew to love nature, animals, and hiking through the outdoors. From her earliest days, her family described her as strong-willed and intensely

curious about the world.

"As a child, I found her intimidating," said her nephew Clayton Morgan of Austin. "She talked to me like I was an adult, and it was intimidating to be around someone who expected you to rise to their level. But she exposed me to a whole world of intellectual thoughts and concepts." Morgan said those early days of exploration and a copy of Richard Halliburton's *Seven Wonders of the World* inspired Story's



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Story records data during a Texas Archaeological Society field school at the Vinson site in central Texas in 1964.

career choice. "I still have her copy," Morgan said. "It's very dog-eared."

Her parents bought an 85-acre property in Wimberley, Texas, in the 1950s, where they intended to retire. By this time, Story was already a budding archaeologist, making her way in a male-dominated field. She received a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1953 and then a master's in 1956. Her parents' new property intrigued her, and she was certain she would find an archaeological site there. Sure enough, she discovered a midden with burned rocks. The midden's age is unknown, but a number of similar middens around the state date from about A.D. 750-1400, while there are others that are thousands of years old. When she inherited the property after her parents died, she donated a section of it containing the midden to the Conservancy.

"That's so typical of Dee Ann," Pat Mercado-Allinger, Texas' state archaeologist, said. "She was not only great at researching archaeology and talking about it, but also was interested in preserving archaeology. She was a great example for us all."

Story began to make her mark in the field when she was still an undergraduate. She worked with Texas archaeologists Alex Krieger and Edward Jelks to sort and organize thousands of artifacts excavated by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s, which had been largely stored in a dirty basement at the University of Texas. "They would meet at the lab and work until midnight on these massive collections," said Tom Hester, one of Story's undergraduate students and now emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of Texas

at Austin. "Some of (the artifacts) had good records and some didn't, but they tried to sort, identify, and document them."

Based on this work, Story wrote a paper about the kinds of artifacts that could be found throughout Texas. That paper became the core of a book that she, Krieger, and Jelks coauthored, *The Introductory Handbook of Texas Archeology*, published by the Texas Archeological Society in 1954. The book has since been augmented by other resources, but for years it was the definitive text on Texas archaeology, and Story (then Dee Ann Suhm) was listed as the lead author.

Then in 1963, Story went on to become one of the first women to get a Ph.D in anthropology from the University of California at Los Angeles. While working on her dissertation, she became involved with a grand archaeological undertaking called the Glen Canyon Project. The Colorado River was about to be dammed and parts of southern Utah and northern Colorado were going to be inundated, so the National Park Service launched a six-year project in 1957 to survey the cultural and natural history of the area.

Story was hired to run the archaeology laboratory at the University of Utah, where the artifacts recovered from the field were processed for analysis. She was to work with an all-female staff, as was the custom in those days. But before the lab opened, she was assigned to an all-male field crew for two weeks because she had more field experience than any of them, and thus she became one of the few women to do field work with men at that time.

When the crew left for a three-week stint downriver, she



Story enjoyed hosting her colleagues and students at her Wimberley home. In this 1999 photo she's seen with a group of prominent archaeologists and other scientists.



During a class in 1974, Story showed students some examples of the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory's collection of animal bones.

returned to the lab. "The idea that a single woman would be on the Colorado River, out of touch with the outside world for three weeks, with a bunch of male students, was not something the University of Utah would have countenanced at the time," said Don Fowler, one of Story's colleagues on the Glen Canyon project who has just finished a memoir about the experience. "She knew that going into the job."

Story's mentors convinced her to return to Texas, and in 1962 she was hired as the assistant director of the Texas Archeological Salvage Project, becoming the state's first professional female archaeologist. She was also a lecturer at the University of Texas and was later promoted to full professor. In 1965 she became the first director of the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, a post she held for 22 years.

"She had a great sense of humor, but when it came to the lab or archaeology, she was very serious," said Hester, who succeeded her at the lab after she retired. "She insisted upon very high standards in the lab for how things were going to be curated, how records were going to be handled, and so on."

In 1968, she began working at the George C. Davis site in eastern Texas—also known as the Caddoan Mounds State Historic Site—which had been excavated 30 years earlier by a WPA team. The site was the southwestern-most ceremonial center of the Caddo, an ancient people whose descendants now live in western Oklahoma.

Story had become interested in the Caddo years earlier when she catalogued the WPA collections with Krieger and Jelks. Backed by funding from the National Science

Foundation, Story conducted major excavations at two of the site's mounds. There, she found evidence indicating that the site had been occupied by the Caddo from A.D. 780-1260. She found an abundance of fine goods inside tombs in one of the mounds, suggesting it was reserved for the elite.

But Story's work with the Caddo was remarkable for other reasons. She was interested in and respectful of contemporary Caddo and even helped some of them resume their tribe's craft traditions. "Some of the people in the tribe began doing woodworking, and some were doing ceramics," said Nancy Kenmotsu, who is organizing a symposium on Story for the Society for American Archaeology's meeting



Story takes a break from examining artifacts in her office at the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory in 1964.

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next spring. “The people who wanted to learn these skills spoke to Dee Ann at length, and she was always willing to help them understand aspects of the technology.” Story’s relationship with the Caddo was so warm that she was made an honorary member of the tribe.

Through her field schools, Story also trained a virtual “who’s who” of Texas and Southwest archaeologists. Over a dozen dissertations and theses on the Caddo were written by her students, many of whom went on to specialize in this culture. But even outside the Caddo region, archaeologists trained by Story were in great demand, due to her reputation for being an exacting teacher. “She’d get us up at 5 a.m. and have us to the site by 6,” said Elton Prewitt, chair of the board of directors of SHUMLA, a nonprofit archeological research and education center. “We’d sit there in the truck waiting for first light. But I always told my students, that’s what you need to do to be a professional.”

And once the work started, Story was a model of precision in mapping, excavation, and documentation—and she expected the same of her students. She also made sure they learned all the basics of fieldwork. “Everyone rotated for two days at a time,” Darrell Creel, the current director of the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, said. “For instance, you would be the photographer for two days and have to learn everything about that.”

Story demanded the utmost professionalism from her students, but she was also fair. At the end of the day, she was as stained with red clay as the rest of them and she often worked harder and longer than anyone. Her expectations were great, but so were the rewards. “I remember one time I was helping her with artifact analysis,” recalled Shafer. “I’d write something and she’d cut it to pieces. That went on and on. Finally, a monograph was published, and guess what she’d done? She put me down as the senior author, and this was before I even had a B.A.”

When Story retired to the Wimberley property with her husband Hal, those former students—many of them now colleagues—became frequent guests. She began to travel extensively, visiting nearly every national park in the country accompanied by her pet blue jay Creature, who lived for nearly 30 years. She also signed up for virtually every tour the Conservancy offered.

She brought as much vigor and wit to her travel as she had to her work, friends say. Often, she spotted unidentified archaeological sites on her trips and interpreted them for her fellow travelers. “She was always looking at the ground!” said Lila Knight, a friend from Story’s retirement years. “She just loved dirt.”

At a national park in Tanzania, Story saw artifacts that were uncovered by erosion near their campsite, and she waved the other travelers over for a look. “She was respectful and didn’t pick stuff up,” Knight said. “But she pointed



For several years Story served as a member of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Environmental Advisory Board. She’s shown here at a Corps of Engineers meeting in 1980.

to a stone tool that was exposed near an outcropping of rocks and explained that this had probably been an ancient campsite. Just as we had chosen to camp there, it had also been a good place to camp for people long ago.”

Knight said that Story also demonstrated her respect for people and her keen interest in their culture. Once, while traveling in North Carolina, they stopped at a tiny diner. Story looked at the waiter and said, “Well, you’re a long way from home!” She discerned that he was a Native American from Alaska and, when he further tested her knowledge by asking which tribe he was from, she correctly stated his ancestry, noting certain facial features. “He actually teared up,” Knight said. “He said he didn’t think anyone outside his tribe would know that. But that’s how she was—always respectful and always able to connect to other people.”

Story was honored with a Curtiss D. Tunnell Lifetime Achievement Award from the Texas Historical Commission, and, in a short film made in her honor, said, “Archaeology is the only way in which we can project very far into the human past. Think how impoverished or intellectually ignorant we would be if we didn’t know about the early people of the New World. That’s a very rich story.”

To her dying day, she was passionate about that story. Shafer said he brought her a paper he’d written shortly before her death. “She was still arguing fiercely about the things she didn’t agree with,” he said. “It was like being a graduate student all over again.”

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