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Archaeological Field School at the Hennings Site

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Introduction

Iowa State University's 2013 archaeological field school was held from May 13 to June 7 at the Hennings site, a 4,400 year-old prehistoric occupation in Monona County, Iowa, just west of Ute. The Western Research and Demonstration Farm (a.k.a. Wayne's World) served as a field camp and staging area for the project. This is a summary of the effort and the results of preliminary analyses.

The Hennings Site

The site was discovered in 1994 by personnel from the Office of the State Archaeologist (OSA) in Iowa City, Iowa, as part of a bridge replacement project. Artifacts and faunal remains were found eroding from cut bank exposures along the east bank of the Soldier River and in limited test excavations. A radiocarbon assay on wood charcoal recovered from the archaeological component produced an age of ca. 4,400 B.P. (years before present). The date was significant because buried sites dating to this time period (late middle Holocene) are not common in western Iowa. Archaeological debris from the site afforded an opportunity to learn about the social organization, diet, and mobility of prehistoric human foragers during this period.

Field Investigations

The 2013 field season involved removing ~3 m of overburden with an excavator to access the archaeological component, assembling a small portable hoop barn over the excavation area, and hand-excavation of 12 m sq (2 × 6 m block). The field crew was comprised of Matthew Hill, 10 undergraduate

students, and three graduate field assistants. Students learned the fundamentals of archaeological field work, including data recovery and field processing, artifact identification, site formation, geoarchaeology, and the connection between data, methods, and theory.

Preliminary Results

Over the course of the month-long field season, 2,230 artifacts, bone fragments, and bits of burned rock and wood charcoal measuring larger than 1 cm in maximum length were mapped in place (± 5 mm) using a total station (i.e., laser transit). Also, 551 5-gallon buckets of excavated sediment were water-screened through half-inch wire mesh to recover specimens that escaped recovery in place.

A concentration of burned rock, charcoal, and bone, plus a handful of chipped stone artifacts was visible in the eastern portion of the excavated block. The area was interpreted to be the periphery of a domestic area that probably revolved around a hearth. Unfortunately, most of the bone fragments were very small, which impeded taxonomic identification. Recovery of several deer ankle bones suggest that many unidentifiable bone fragments probably belong to deer.

Stewardship

In addition to an open-house aimed at showcasing science, archaeology, and experiential learning, we also had visits from two student groups from Denison Middle School—Outdoor Club and Science Bound. These students were not passive visitors. They spent the day working side-by-side with college students *doing* archaeology and *talking* about future plans, that hopefully involve earning a college education at Iowa State University.



Figure 1. Field investigations at the Hennings site, May 13–June 7, 2013. The plots at the bottom of the image show the composite horizontal and vertical distribution of 2,230 items that were mapped in place.