

Lewis R. Binford, 1931-2011

Lewis Roberts Binford was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1931. He passed away in Kirksville, Missouri on April 11, 2011. One of the best-known archeologists of his time, Binford began his undergraduate studies in wildlife biology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. During the Korean War he was assigned to work with displaced Japanese on the island of Okinawa, an experience that kindled his interest in anthropology. After completing his military service, he returned to school, this time to the University of North Carolina, where he studied anthropology and archeology. Binford later attended graduate school at the University of Michigan, in 1964 completing his Ph.D. dissertation on the archeology and ethnohistory of the Powhatan (Wahunsonacock) Confederacy in coastal Virginia. He held teaching positions successively at the University of Chicago, the University of California at Santa Barbara, UCLA, the University of New Mexico, and Southern Methodist University. His longest tenure was at the University of New Mexico, where he taught for 23 years. Over his long career, Binford also held visiting professorships in India, South Africa, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. He retired from active teaching in 2003.

Binford wrote, co-authored, or edited 19 books, many of which have become classics in the field, as well as countless articles, book chapters, and other works. The list of his academic honors includes the Montelius medal from the Swedish Archeological Society (1990), the Huxley Memorial medal from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (1986), and honorary doctorates from several European universities. He was elected a corresponding member of The British Academy in 1997 and was inducted into the United States National Academy of Sciences in 2001.

Lewis Binford's influences on the field of archeology are tectonic and topically diverse. From an early career in archeology and ethnohistory

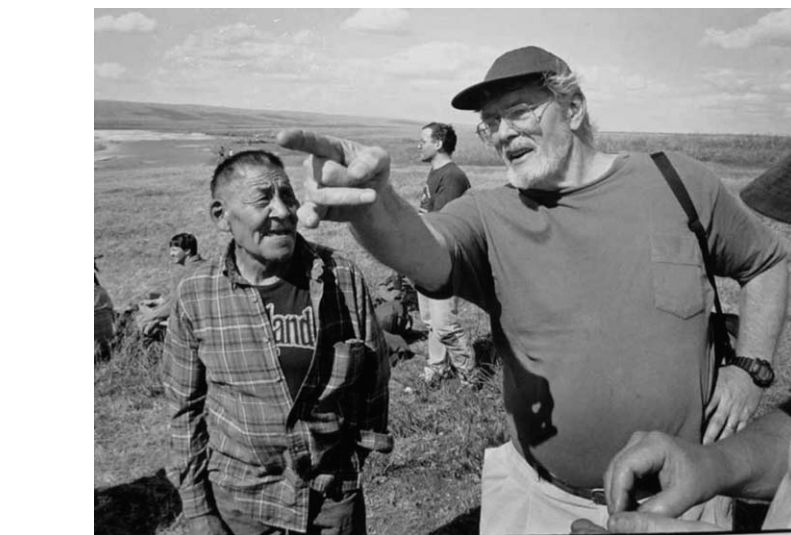


Figure 1. Lewis Binford with Johnny Rulland during a visit to Alaska in 1999. (Photo courtesy of James H. Barker.)

in the American southeast and midwest, he became, in the 1960s and 1970s, the chief motivating force behind the “new archeology,” also known as processual archeology. He was an outspoken champion for using explicitly scientific methods to investigate the past. Some have argued that he was the catalyst, along with Walter Taylor, for a distinctly new paradigm for the discipline. Scholars may disagree with the claim that a true paradigm shift occurred, but all will agree that the processual program propelled the field to a new level of intellectual questioning, making it more vibrant, creative, and conceptually ambitious. Binford was fascinated with ways of learning from the archeological record. He trained his imagination on problems of the mechanics and fluidity of behavioral systems, their structural tendencies and limits, and how they may shift under pressure. It was not difficult, with this mindset, to integrate theoretical concepts of demography, technology, site-formation dynamics, and archeological landscapes into a larger whole.

Binford's contributions to Paleolithic archeology and human evolution

research began with the exchanges between Sally (then his wife) and Lew on one side and the great French prehistorian, François Bordes, on the other, about the significance of variation among Mousterian artifact assemblages in France. Bordes had long maintained that the different assemblage types were essentially stylistic, the arbitrary conventions of independent cultural lineages. In a series of papers challenging Bordes' position, the Binfords argued that the assemblage types could be understood as dynamic mixes of activities and functions that varied with the context of site use. Although many scholars view the Bordes-Binford debate as a watershed event in American archeology, in the end the dispute was never truly resolved, each party believing that it had the upper hand. Importantly though, this exchange led Lewis Binford to two central realizations and several decades of remarkable work. First, the discussion of variability among Mousterian assemblages pushed him to think not just about what stone tools were used for but about how they came to be deposited in particular places. This insight is at

the root of many of his seminal papers about hunter-gatherer mobility and technological organization. His second realization was just how limited was our knowledge of chipped stone technology and function. This compelled him to turn to other sources of information about human behavior, such as hunting and land use, that could be studied in real time.

Binford's long-term field work with the Nunamiut hunters of Alaska is one of the most important of the first generation of ethnoarcheological projects. Focusing on a hunting people's relationship with caribou, this was an actualistic study of strategic landscape use, the behavioral structuring of archeological sites, and forager economics. The Nunamiut study's immense influence on archeology is reflected not simply in high citation rates but, more importantly, in how it has refocused research for three decades and more. The seminal book, *Nunamiut Ethnoarcheology* (1978, Academic Press), is a treasured possession for many researchers.

Binford's pioneering ethnoarcheological research, as well as his experimental studies on carnivores, eventually led him to critical reevaluations of zooarcheological assemblages from Torralba and Ambrona, Olduvai, Klasies River Mouth, and other key Paleolithic sites. Binford's radical reinterpretations of the significance of faunal assemblages from these localities generated considerable controversy, with many researchers disputing Binford's reading of the faunal evidence. Nonetheless, the force of his personality and the strength of his arguments motivated supporters as well as opponents to work harder to strengthen the logical and empirical bases for their interpretations.

Like many others who studied with Binford, we came under the spell of comparative hunter-gatherer studies. This topic proved to be a lifelong project for him and the most difficult to fulfill. Binford believed that understanding how and why recent forager societies varied was an essential referential basis for learning how human ancestors were or were not like us. His ideas about forager mobility are fundamental to many of the ways that archeologists conceive of assemblage formation and the roles of sites within settlement systems. So influential are his proposi-

tions about the organization of hunter-gatherer technologies that terms such as "curated" and "expedient" artifacts or "personal gear" and "situational gear" have become household terms in hunter-gatherer archeology worldwide. The data that Binford and several generations of his graduate students amassed were finally synthesized in the 2001 publication, *Constructing Frames of Reference: An Analytical Method for Archaeological Theory Building Using Ethnographic and Environmental Data Sets* (University of California Press). A decade on, this unique source of information continues to be mined heavily by researchers working from a wide range of theoretical positions.

Binford's debates with F. Bordes, G. Isaac, and others focused critical attention on matters of method as well as interpretations of evidence. Binford's style was colorful and often confrontational, in public debate even more than in his publications. His "take no prisoners" approach to academic discourse at times gave the impression that the arguments were based in personal enmity. But despite the sometimes heated tone of his rhetoric, he held many of his opponents in high regard. Students were often surprised when Lew recommended that they look for inspiration in the work of a scholar he otherwise seemed intent on intellectually dismembering. In fact, he enjoyed warm personal relationships with several of his "debating partners."

Binford was a dynamic and charismatic speaker, easily captivating a room full of saucer-eyed graduate students, fidgety undergrads, or members of the public. As a university teacher, he inspired generations of students to pursue archeology, or at least to take it seriously. He directed or contributed to the training and research of nearly a hundred successful Ph.D. candidates. Students will recall a teacher switching quickly between states of generous charm, serious contemplation, and inexplicable fierceness. In the latter state, he could charge hard from a standstill, glaring at the source of some abstracted provocation with ice-blue eyes. Many colleagues will also remember watching helplessly as he unpacked their viewpoint like a bear tearing through the contents of a

park rubbish bin. Learning to stand rather than run, however, students found Binford willing to entertain a wide range of opinions and perspectives as long as he felt they moved the field forward. As a mentor, his advice and spontaneous insights could set even the most deeply mired projects back on track.

Of course, Lewis Binford also loved to talk and to tell his tales in the rich hyperbolic style of the Southern storyteller. In addition to being a fire-breathing debater, Lew was a funny, generous, and even patient public speaker, as well as a true cheerleader for things archeological. His trips to China, India, the UK, and other countries left deep and lasting impressions on audiences there and laid the foundation for many ongoing scientific exchanges and collaborations with American scholars.

Now that the thunder has gone quiet, many of us feel compelled to consider the full sweep of Binford's effect on archeology. Only a truly special mind can bend the course of a field. Binford was motivated by a fundamental belief in the importance of his discipline and an abiding confidence in his own capacities to chart a better future for it. Ruffling feathers all along the way was just part of the fun. Archeology and paleoanthropology would be fundamentally different fields had Binford decided to become a carpenter or a folk singer or to follow another of his interests. In vision, Lewis Binford's contributions to archeology are unparalleled. He has left archeologists with an extraordinary legacy of ideas, methods and insights. One need not be an oracle to claim that these messages will carry through for generations of archeologists to come. Most of all, he continues to challenge us to ask ourselves what we truly understand about the human past and how we can come to understand it better.

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Published online in Wiley Online Library
(wileyonlinelibrary.com).
DOI 10.1002/evan.20314