Berkeley Abiquiu Collaborative Archaeology Field School 2016

Thanks to the generous Jane Waldbuam scholarship I was able to spend this summer in the breathtakingly beautiful town of Abiquiu, New Mexico learning the vocational archaeological skills I need to begin a career in resource management. I was among six excavators led by UC Berkeley PhD candidate Alexandra McCleary in this project which was a continuation of previous years of data collection. We spent the month of June working together Monday through Saturday and took many trips to other archaeological sites throughout the region on our day off.

One of three churches in Abiquiu. This was taken in the central plaza outside a community Q&A meeting.
The Pueblo of Abiquiu is situated within a land grant designated by the Spanish Crown for the Genizero people. The land and water rights continued to be honored after Mexican independence but have been restrained since the United States annexation of the western territories. The term “indigeneity” is at the center of Genizero claims for political autonomy and different understandings of it have shaped the history of the region. Genizeros are the mestizo descendants of Spanish, Pueblo and Plains nations internally displaced by slave trade of children, missionization and relocation of indigenous homelands. Spanish is the language spoken by Genizeros while many customs maintain a pre-colonial origin. While this region of New Mexico holds many remnants of the pre-colonial past observable to the untrained eye, the Berkeley Abiquiu Collaborative Archaeology (BACA) project focused on post-colonial material culture. In our month of work, we excavated three sites scattered around the central plaza of Abiquiu.

This pictograph found on a hike through a river canyon closeby is an example of evidence of early peoples in the area. The image depicts a kachina, a pre-Christian symbol of religious art. It was beside Christian crosses.
The first location was in an apple orchard owned by the Trujillo family. The site was selected by historical information from an interview with an Abiquiu elder who remembered stories of a Spanish era watchtower which stood at the edge of a fortress wall between Abiquiu and the Hopi-Tewa settlement of Moqui. The fortress was built according to Spanish ordinance which set out defense designs against Ute and Comanche attack. Abiquiu and other neighboring pueblos were buffer towns to Spanish settlements and as a result often faced much more frequent raids. At this site we uncovered Spanish and pre-Spanish pottery sherds, many lithics, one complete arrowhead and a feature of a possible wall. It is important to note that because adobe bricks have historically and currently still are used to build, soil is frequently disturbed making it difficult to definitively know whether or not artifacts excavated were recovered in their original location.

This cut was taken out of the abode melt of the original Spanish era fortress wall which separated Moqui and Abiquiu. Interestingly, it had become the property border between the Trujillos and their neighbor while the acequia beside it was shared.
Our second site was the location of a jacal building still currently standing, though abandoned. Unlike adobe buildings, a jacal is much faster to build. The foundation is made of wooden posts, mostly poles instead of large timber. Clay is plastered in layers over the posts and then left to dry. Our coordinator Alexandra had found a very old photograph of the plaza of Abiquiu taken with the jacal we were going to excavate in the frame. In the picture however, the jacal extended further outwards so our goal was the find the posts covered by layers of soil. This was also a salvage archaeological project. Because of the natural and cultural appeal of Abiquiu many films use it as their setting. Movies like Bless Me, Ultima (2013) show how Abiquiu is often portrayed as a pueblo locked in early Southwest history. A new film was in the works while we were staying in Abiquiu and the film crew was busy demolishing structures to rebuild more “authentic” ones. This was the fate of the jacal on our site. By the time we closed the site we had uncovered the jacal posts seen in the photograph. We had also uncovered a great deal of pre-industrial era glass and metal.

Alexandra holds the photograph she had found in the Abiquiu Library which shows the same jacal without a tin roof in an image of the plaza of Abiquiu.
Our last site was in another property beneath the jacal which was the location of a demolished house which had become a community garden plot. Eventually it had become overgrown and a dumping ground for apple orchard branch trimmings. We had spent a day clearing it out before making the first cut into the ground. This was a good level to end on because we didn’t uncover much. It became clear, unfortunately at the end of our final levels 70 cmbd, that the soil had been disturbed in recent times when we found a 2003 budweiser bottle. Still though, this was a field school and though our findings were not significant from this location I noticed that the work had become much more fluid and faster without losing precision. The majority of our findings were small pottery sherds and sheep bones.

Here is our team with two Abiquiu high school students closing out our final levels. We were very grateful for the shade tents lent to us by community members.

On the surface level this report is about the archaeological data we collected in the month of June but it goes so much deeper than that given the context that we were excavating. Because the BACA project was focused on historical research it was inherently ethnographic and had political significance for the Genizero people. It is no secret that anthropology and archaeology
are still climbing out of a legacy of racial bigotry and ostracization with indigenous communities. Rightfully so, there is damaged trust between archaeologists and the communities we work with. For this reason our team abided by collaborative principles and pre-set agreements with the community. This of course did not mean everyone in the community was happy about our presence but we all worked hard to build a relationships with those we met. The first agreement was that we would not excavate any sites that had not been checked with ground penetrating radar first. This was to avoid any unknown burial sites as well as to ensure that our site would produce interesting findings. Second, all findings were to be documented and reported back to the community on a open source web page immediately. Third, if asked to stop excavating we stopped with no argument. This was not our history or our town to make decisions over the will of the Genizero people. Fourth, we were to attend a community Q&A to present our findings and answer all questions raised honestly and without hesitation. Last and most importantly we were to involve the community in our work. Our project employed four local high school students who lived in Abiquiu. I have to say that working with them was my favorite part of participating in this field school. I learned along with the high school students and for three of the four, it was their second time participating. We were also joined by an Albuquerque college student who was the nephew of a local Genizero archaeologist. By the end of the month we had become good friends.

The highlight of this trip for me was when we were invited into the home of an Ohkay Owingeh family and ate a delicious meal, still with the members of the house chasing us outside to give us more dessert. We then headed to the San Juan Pueblo to watch dances for the community feast day. I did not take any pictures of this day because it was against custom to do so. I was deeply touched by the hospitality by everyone we had met in Abiquiu and the San Juan Pueblo. Though the project is over I am grateful for the experience and I sincerely hope that our work will be able to help in anyway aid Genizero autonomy and resource rights. I have learned that archaeology is a powerful tool used for indigenous claims for political means. The context in which it is done validates its ethics.