

MARVIN F. KIVETT¹
1917–1992

Marvin F. Kivett, long-time director of the Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS), died in Lincoln, Nebraska, on December 19, 1992, at the age of 75. With his death, Plains anthropology lost an eminent scholar, an early proponent of historic preservation, a leader in museology, and an administrator who worked tirelessly to bring the subject matter of archaeology, ethnology, and history to the lay public. Although he never had an official academic appointment, Kivett served as a mentor for a number of students and young colleagues at the University of Nebraska, the Nebraska State Museum, and the Smithsonian River Basin Surveys unit headquartered in Lincoln. He is survived by his wife of 51 years, Caroline R. Kivett, his son, Ronald L. Kivett, three grandchildren, and one great grandchild, all of Lincoln.

Kivett was born in Nehawka, Nebraska, on March 10, 1917. He was the third and last child of Thomas Kivett and Murl Blanche Mark Kivett. When Marvin was seven months old, his father died, and his mother moved the family to the outskirts of the nearby town of Weeping Water. Here Kivett grew up in modest surroundings; the family home had no electricity or running water. However, Kivett remembered his childhood as happy and especially recalled playing with his siblings and neighbor children in the open fields and woods along Weeping Water Creek.² When Kivett was nine years old, his mother married Bill Gussett, an employee of the Missouri Pacific Railroad. That marriage not only provided a father for the Kivett children but also resulted in Marvin's nickname, "Gus," which stuck with him the rest of his life.

As with most rural families in the Midwest, the Depression years were not easy ones. Even as a young boy, Kivett worked at odd jobs to help out with family finances. He shoveled coal and cut lawns for neighbors, picked wild berries for sale, salvaged milk bottles for resale, and delivered

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copies of the *Omaha Bee* newspaper. When he was older, he drove horse-drawn wagons and later tractors for local farmers. Kivett also trapped muskrats and, if lucky, an occasional mink. He typically rose at 4:00 a.m. to run the lines, returned home at 7:00 a.m. to prepare for school, and spent an hour or two each evening skinning and stretching the pelts. These activities defined a hard-working, diligent boy; they also presaged the adult who was, as they say in today's parlance, a "workaholic."

Kivett's tramping and trapping along Weeping Water Creek had another impact on his life. For it was there that he discovered stone tools and pottery at several sites now known to be components of the Nebraska phase. At one of these loci, the Theodore Davis site, he noticed circular depressions in the surface of a pasture. As a curious 16-year-old, Kivett gathered up his prehistoric treasures and hopped a train to Lincoln. There, at the NSHS, he sought out A. T. Hill and E. E. Blackman to have his artifacts identified. Perhaps with their encouragement, Kivett obtained landowner's permission and dug down into one of the surface depressions at the Theodore Davis site. Two feet below the extant ground surface, he found a concentration of ash. Kivett not only dug by hand but came up with the idea of removing the extensive overburden with a horse slip and truck power. Eventually he defined the entire floor of a semisubterranean rectangular earthlodge.³

In July 1934, Kivett enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), one of several public works projects that had been created recently by the Roosevelt administration. By that time he had completed tenth grade and, by his own admission, had little interest in school other than playing football on the varsity team. The CCC assigned Kivett to a camp near Nebraska City where he helped build small earthen dams to control gully erosion. In acquiring fill for these dams, Kivett discovered prehistoric artifacts and implored, without success, for permission to further investigate the archaeological sites.

The following spring, A. T. Hill wrote to Mrs. Gussett and asked consent for her son to serve as a volunteer on the NSHS's summer archaeological crew. So Kivett left the paid regime of the CCC and became an unpaid worker for Hill. According to Kivett's account, life in Hill's 1935 field camp was equally austere and regimented as that in the Corps. But far outweighing the poverty and deprivations involved in being a volunteer were the richness and significance of the archaeological sites they explored that summer: the Shrader (Central Plains tradition), Leary (Oneota), Yutan (Oto), and Leshara (Pawnee) sites in particular.

One visitor to Hill's field party that summer was John L. Champe, who was active in Plains archaeology although still working in the insurance business. Champe joined Hill and Mrs. Gussett in convincing Kivett that he should return to school that fall. In the spring of 1936, Hill again sought Kivett's services as a volunteer. Kivett pointed out that he needed to earn money for clothes and other expenses during his senior year of high school. In an autobiographical manuscript (see Note 2), Kivett reports Hill's response as follows: "Hill finally made an offer, explaining that it would not be logical to pay me for digging since it was a privilege. However, he indicated that if I would cook and also dig, I would be paid at the rate of \$30 a month." So Kivett cooked for the society's 1936 field crew and excavated at the Bellwood, Wright, and other Pawnee sites. The crew was joined by Waldo R. Wedel, who had just completed his doctorate at Berkeley and who worked briefly for the NSHS before accepting a permanent position at the Smithsonian Institution. After the field season, Kivett returned to Weeping Water, played varsity football, was selected "all southeast Nebraska guard," and graduated in 1937.

During the summers of 1937 and 1938, Kivett served as Wedel's cook and assistant field director for the Smithsonian crew excavating at the Renner (Kansas City Hopewell) and Steed-Kisker (Middle Mississippian) sites in northwestern Missouri. During that period he also helped supervise the NSHS's Works Progress Administration archaeological crews at the Valley site and other Woodland sites in central Nebraska. He and Hill would soon publish the results of those investigations in 1940 in *Nebraska History*. Kivett worked again as Wedel's field assistant during the summers of 1939 and 1940 in Kansas at the Doniphan (Nebraska phase and Kansa), Fanning (Oneota), Tobias (Wichita), and El Cuartelejo (Rio Grande Puebloan site unit intrusion into Dismal River/Apache domain) sites.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1937, Kivett enrolled at the University of Nebraska to pursue his academic interests in Plains anthropology. To defray his college expenses, he worked as a janitor



Nebraska State Historical Society Archaeological Field Camp, 1939: from left to right, A. T. Hill, George Metcalf, and Marvin F. Kivett (courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society).

at Champe's insurance office. In 1939, Kivett met Caroline Ritchey, then Hill's secretary at the NSHS. They were married in 1941 after Kivett returned from a summer at the Hill site (Pawnee) and Woodland tradition sites that were the basis for defining the Loseke Creek focus. That year he also became the society's archaeological laboratory supervisor and began a massive program to reorganize the museum's somewhat helter-skelter exhibits into more meaningful groupings. Kivett graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1942. His career was put on hold, however, when he was drafted into the U.S. Army in the fall of 1942. After training at various bases on the mainland, Kivett was shipped to Hawaii where he served as a supply staff sergeant.

Immediately following his discharge from the army at the end of 1945, Kivett returned to Lincoln to begin work on his Master's degree in anthropology. By that time Champe had completed his Ph.D. at Columbia University and was teaching anthropology at the University of Nebraska. Kivett became Champe's assistant and helped supervise the investigations at the Walker Gilmore (Sterns Creek) site. He located and excavated a Nebraska-phase earthlodge on the terrace surface above the stratified Woodland zones, which F. H. Sterns had reported some 30 years earlier.

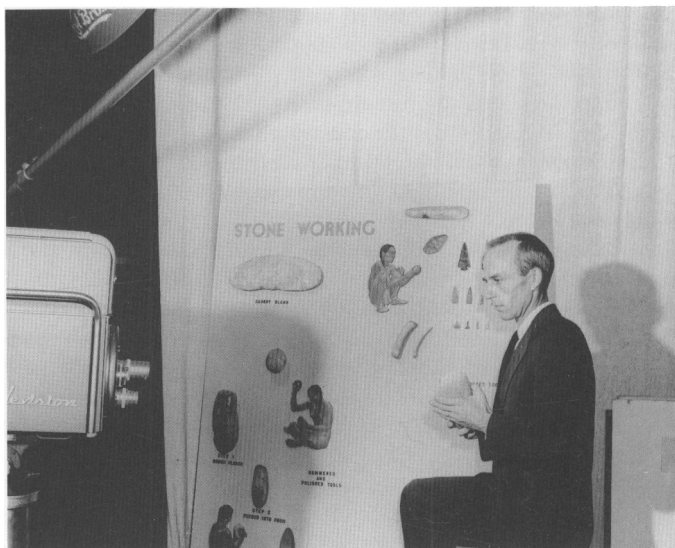
By the summer of 1946, the Smithsonian Institution River Basin Surveys (RBS) had been established under the direction of Wedel. The new unit was housed with anthropology on the University of Nebraska campus. For the next three years Kivett worked for the RBS while completing his graduate course work. During the 1946 field season, RBS crews conducted surveys and test excavations in Colorado along Cherry Creek near Denver and at the Harlan County Reservoir in south-central Nebraska and north-central Kansas. One of the more spectacular discoveries in the latter project, subsequently published by Kivett (1953) and Kivett and Wedel (1956), was the Woodruff Ossuary (Woodland tradition) in which a flexed human adolescent had been buried with a wrapping of strings of shell beads. The 1947 campaign included archaeological work in the Garrison Reservoir and Baldhill Reservoir in North Dakota and the Medicine Creek Reservoir in Nebraska. Archaeological salvage continued at Medicine Creek during 1948. During that season Kivett uncovered 47 house floors with the controlled use of power machinery. These data were extremely important in understanding the settlement patterns of the Upper Republican and other phases of the Central Plains tradition. Preliminary results of the Medicine Creek excavations were published in 1949 in *American Antiquity*. With the assistance of George Metcalf, Kivett produced a more comprehensive analysis submitted to the Bureau of Reclamation in 1991; he was revising the manuscript at the time of his death.

In June of 1949, a permanent position opened up at the NSHS. Kivett was offered the job and spent the rest of his career there. Initially he was appointed as assistant museum director. He and Caroline departed immediately for a field season in the Mullen Reservoir in Hooker County. That fall Kivett was promoted to the status of museum director and began drawing up plans to move to a new location. Plans for the future involved the construction of new exhibit cases, complete overhaul of the old displays, and the consolidation and proper storage of the museum's collections, which at that time were scattered around the capitol building in every nook and cranny. In 1953 the museum and NSHS offices finally moved to a new building at 15th and R streets adjacent to the University of Nebraska campus. The organization of the exhibits, visitor flow patterns, and display techniques were hailed as exemplars in the museum world (see Neal, *Help for the Small Museum: Handbook of Exhibit Ideas and Methods*, 1969:44–45). Meanwhile, in 1951, Kivett received his Master's degree in anthropology. His thesis, *Woodland Sites in Nebraska*, was published as the first number in the NSHS Publications in Anthropology Series.

During these years, Kivett continued directing salvage archaeological projects under cooperative agreements with the National Park Service: in 1950 at the Trenton Reservoir in Nebraska, and from 1951 to 1955 in the Fort Randall Reservoir in South Dakota. Of particular note in the latter project were two seasons of excavations at the Oacoma site, a protohistoric Arikara village near Chamberlain, and another two years at the Crow Creek site, a stratified multicomponent site near Fort Thompson. Kivett, with the assistance of Richard E. Jensen, published the Crow Creek site report in 1976. Beginning in 1956, Kivett's archaeological fieldwork was restricted almost entirely to Nebraska. Principal projects included archaeological excavations at Fort Atkinson (a military fort dating between 1820 and 1827), the Logan Creek site (a multicomponent Archaic tradition camp and type site for the Logan Creek complex), and the Red Willow Reservoir where Archaic, Woodland, and Central Plains tradition manifestations were found. During this time period Kivett established the NSHS highway salvage archaeological program using available state and federal funds. He also participated—along with C. Bertrand Schultz, E. Mott Davis, and James C. Olson—in a series of 39 half-hour television programs entitled “The Great Plains Trilogy.” Produced by the Nebraska Educational Television Network, this early effort in public-information television programming won several national awards.

In 1963 Kivett was named director of the Nebraska State Historical Society, a post that had been held traditionally by historians. Other staff members took over most of the operations of the museum and the directing of archaeological field investigations while Kivett devoted his energies to administrative duties. Although these sorts of career endeavors are usually unsung, they merit at least brief mention here. Kivett's efforts were notable in at least six areas. First, he was instrumental in promoting the historical-markers program throughout Nebraska. He was sensitive to Nebraska as a multiethnic and multiracial society, and took special pride in the fact that there were markers relating to each Indian tribe that had occupied the state as well as a marker in Omaha noting that city as the birthplace of Malcolm X. Second, he was instrumental in launching the National Register of Historic Places program in Nebraska. For a number of years, the Nebraska program clearly outpaced those in several other midwestern states. Third, Kivett was prescient in establishing the Historic Preservation Program in Nebraska. He convinced the Nebraska unicameral legislature to support the federal program, became the state's first historic preservation officer, and facilitated Nebraska's being a leader in preservation at the national level.

Fourth, over the years, he established a number of branch museums to take the society's mission to the public across the state. Outside Lincoln, these included Fort Robinson at Crawford, Courthouse and Jail Rocks at Bridgeport, Chimney Rock near Bayard, Senator George W. Norris House in McCook, John G. Neihardt Center at Bancroft, Neligh Mills in Neligh, Willa Cather Historical Center in Red Cloud, and the Captain Meriwether Lewis Dredge (Museum of Missouri River History) at Brownville. In Lincoln, the Thomas P. Kennard House and William H. Ferguson House served as branch museums; the society also cooperated with other agencies in the restoration of the William Jennings Bryan Home. In addition to these outreach facilities, Kivett took archaeology, ethnology, and history to the public in other ways: an exhibit building at the State Fairgrounds, the centennial train car exhibits that traveled the state by rail, and three house-trailer mobile museums. Fifth, Kivett encouraged and assisted the development of county and local museums in Nebraska. To



Marvin F. Kivett on the television set of "The Great Plains Trilogy" in 1954 (courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society).

achieve that goal, he and other staff members made presentations and held workshops across the state.

Sixth, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Kivett shepherded appropriations bills through the state legislature facilitating the acquisition of a new museum building. As the society grew, the building constructed in 1953 was increasingly inadequate in housing the museum exhibits and collections, much less the library, archives, laboratories, historic preservation program, and administrative offices of the institution. In 1983 the museum moved to a renovated building at the corner of 15th and P streets. The process was an arduous one and involved many political skirmishes, financial negotiations, and logistical problems. In his autobiographical notes, Kivett comments that the 1983 museum move was "probably the most difficult assignment I had during my term as director." Throughout these years, Kivett continued as the editor of *Nebraska History*, wrote administrative reviews and annual progress reports, and communicated to the members of the society via the *Historical Newsletter*. The latter efforts were necessary as the society had to battle with other agencies, various governors, and changing legislatures vis-à-vis jurisdictional "turf" and diminishing financial resources. These controversies won Kivett some enemies, but nobody can deny that he was successful in marshaling support across the state for the mission and continuing programs of the NSHS.

In 1985 Kivett retired as the NSHS director and became the executive director of the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation, a position he held at the time of his death. In that role, he was instrumental in the foundation's acquisition of a number of properties. Some of these sites are potential branch museums or interpretive centers; others produce income for the NSHS.

Kivett was honored with a number of awards. He was a member of Sigma Xi and received a lifetime achievement award from the Society for American Archaeology, a merit award from the Nebraska Society of Architects, and the "Pioneer Award" from the Nebraskaland Foundation. Hastings College awarded him an honorary doctorate degree. Upon his retirement as the NSHS director in 1985, Kivett received a resolution of appreciation from the Nebraska legislature.

Today when archaeologists are too often perceived as adversarial to Native American interests, Kivett's generally cordial relationship and productive cooperation with Native Americans stand out as "ahead of his time." His actions were a matter of personal and professional ethics; they preceded the era of "political correctness." A few examples demonstrate this point. Both in South Dakota and Nebraska, Native Americans were hired to work on archaeological crews. At Crow Creek, Kivett

instructed students not to climb the hill at the northern edge of the prehistoric site because he knew it was an area containing historic scaffold burials and eagle traps sacred to the local Yankton and Yanktonai. In 1954 he was asked to locate the remains of the Omaha Chief Big Elk whose burial had been disturbed in 1883 by the construction of Clarke College Hall in Sarpy County. The skeletal remains were found and reburied in the Bellevue Cemetery with the assistance of a medicine man and other members of the Omaha tribe; as missionaries had converted Black Elk to Christianity, the services of a chaplain were also enlisted. At the Fort Robinson and Lincoln museums, Kivett removed human burials and sacred items from display before serious confrontations with Native Americans occurred as they had in Iowa, Minnesota, Colorado, and elsewhere. On more than one occasion in Lincoln, Kivett hosted Pawnee Indian visitors from Oklahoma and escorted them to the sites of their ancestors throughout Nebraska. A quiet man with strong convictions, Kivett supported the request and ultimately successful suit of the Pawnee to have the remains of their ancestors removed from the NSHS collections and reburied.

As a person whom Kivett introduced to Plains archaeology, my portrait of the man may be considered as biased. My debt to him is obvious. He was my teacher and colleague, as well as my friend. But my evaluation is not unique. Waldo R. Wedel, who knew "Gus" longer than I and is certainly the leading authority in Plains archaeology, had this to say of his former field assistant: "To Marvin F. Kivett . . . I am particularly indebted. Of him I should like to say that in a quarter century of activity in Plains archaeology, I have known no worker who has shown better field technique, keener insight, higher personal and professional integrity, or deeper comprehension of the task at hand" (*An Introduction to Kansas Archeology*, Bulletin No. 174, Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, 1959:xiv). Kivett's mentor and his apprentice thus agree. In terms of breadth and depth, the contributions Kivett made to Plains studies, museology, public interpretation, and historic preservation extend far beyond.

DAVID MAYER GRADWOHL

SELECT PUBLICATIONS BY MARVIN F. KIVETT⁴

- 1940 Woodland-Like Manifestations in Nebraska (with A. T. Hill). *Nebraska History* 21:147–243.
- 1948 Mechanized Archeology. *Plains Archeological Conference News Letter* 1(4):16–17.
- 1949 Archaeological Investigations in Medicine Creek Reservoir, Nebraska. *American Antiquity* 14:278–284.
- 1950 *Archaeology and Climatic Implications in the Central Plains*. Proceedings of the Sixth Plains Archaeological Conference, pp. 88–89. Anthropological Papers No. 11. Department of Anthropology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
- An Archaic Horizon? *Plains Archeological Conference News Letter* 3(4):4–7.
- 1952 *Woodland Sites in Nebraska*. Publications in Anthropology No. 1. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
- 1953 *The Woodruff Ossuary, A Prehistoric Burial Site in Phillips County, Kansas*, pp. 103–141. River Basin Survey Papers No. 3, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 154. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Asa T. Hill—In the Field. *Nebraska History* 34:86–89.
- 1956 Additional Data on the Woodruff Ossuary, Kansas (with Waldo R. Wedel). *American Antiquity* 21:414–416.
- 1959 Excavations at Fort Atkinson, Nebraska: A Preliminary Report. *Nebraska History* 40:39–66.
- 1970 Early Ceramic Environmental Adaptations. In *Pleistocene and Recent Environments of the Central Great Plains*, edited by W. Dort, Jr., and J. K. Jones, Jr., pp. 93–102. Special Publication No. 3. Department of Geology, University of Kansas, Lawrence.
- 1976 *Archaeological Investigations at the Crow Creek Site (39BF11), Fort Randall Reservoir Area, South Dakota*. Publications in Anthropology No. 7. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
- 1991 *The Prehistoric People of the Medicine Creek Reservoir, Frontier County, Nebraska: An Experiment in Mechanical Archeology* (with George Metcalf). Nebraska State Historical Society. Submitted to the Bureau of Reclamation. Copies available from Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

NOTES

¹ Photographs and information relating to them were generously provided by the Nebraska State Historical Society with the assistance of Rob Bozell, John Carter, and Martha Vestecka-Miller. The lead photograph is a

portrait of Marvin F. Kivett, museum director, NSHS, taken in the early to mid-1950s (courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society).

² I am grateful to Caroline R. Kivett and Ronald L. Kivett for providing me with much information about "Gus," including a rough copy of his autobiographical work in progress. Kivett's manuscript is entitled "With a Silver Spoon." The text is instructive but the title strikes me as somewhat incongruous considering his youth during the Depression years.

³ Kivett's initial work at the Theodore Davis site (25CC17) was extended by Dr. L. N. Kunkel, a physician and avocational archaeologist in Weeping Water. In the late 1950s, Kunkel donated his artifact collections from the site to the NSHS along with photographs, house-floor plans, and a manuscript describing his investigations. I supervised the organization and cataloging of the collection. With Kivett's generous offer, I used the data as the basis for my Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard (later published by the NSHS as Gradwohl, *Prehistoric Villages in Eastern Nebraska*, Publications in Anthropology No. 4, 1969).

⁴ In addition to the 13 publications cited here, Kivett published 20 contract completion reports (on file at the NSHS and the National Park Service Midwest Archeological Center in Lincoln), 12 book reviews, and 12 other articles.