

*Field Archaeologist's Survival Guide:
Getting a Job and Working
in Cultural Resource Management*

CHRIS WEBSTER

Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek,
CA, 2014. 157 pp., 30 figs.,
2 tables, 6 apps., index.
\$24.95 paper.

Chris Webster's guide outlines many aspects of finding work as an archaeological field technician. The book is organized into five sections, each focused on a particular aspect of making a living as a field tech. Section 1, "Getting a Job," focuses on the prerequisites for employment as a field technician, making the important observation that coursework and field school training are often overlooked elements to prepare people for their first archaeology job. Webster notes a common regret based on his own experience:

Students tend to see [field school] as a chance to either do something that will help them later in their careers, see other countries, or fulfill their dreams. I chose the last one, since I didn't know what CRM [cultural resource management] archaeology was when I graduated. I wish I'd chosen a program that would help me later in my career (p. 21).

Most CRM professionals would agree with this sentiment. Unfortunately, many academic advisors do a disservice to their students by failing to adequately prepare them for the jobs available at their level of study. In fairness to academic programs, however, most undergraduate advisors would not seek to promote a career as an archaeological

field technician to their students. Perhaps more relevant to the discussion is the bridge that field tech experience plays in preparing future graduate students for more stable employment opportunities later in their careers. Applicants for the Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA) must document a minimum of 52 weeks of field and laboratory experience, both supervised and supervisory, gained in blocks of at least four weeks duration. Thus, the supervised experience gained while employed as a field tech is critical for future employment at any level within the field, regardless of whether the career path is within CRM.

Supervised archaeological work experience contributes to the refinement of skills, broadens the knowledge base of the individual, and also serves as a basis for networking with both peers and supervisors that can be invaluable at all stages of a career. Work experience can be gained in other ways that are perhaps more beneficial than field school. Webster overlooks some of these opportunities—for example, participating in field sessions sponsored by a state archaeological society, volunteering for field or lab work with a county archaeology program, or even helping a graduate student with their research. While an undergraduate, most students have the ability to take advantage of volunteer opportunities. These work experiences will enhance technical skills in the field and lab, develop networking connections, add depth and credibility to a curriculum vitae (CV), and ultimately improve the chance of securing a paid position.

Webster provides good advice on preparing an effective CV and cover letter, and also provides a plug for William A. White's useful book on resume writing for archaeology jobs (*Resume Writing for Archaeologists*, Succinct Research, Tucson, AZ, 2013). The importance of maintaining an up-to-date cover letter, CV, and list of references cannot be overstated. The chapter on job hunting covers networking and the importance of following postings on the websites <archaeologyfieldwork.com> and <shovelbums.org>. Archaeology is a small field. Chances are high that individuals making employment decisions know most of the references on a resume personally. It is still the practical experience, however, that largely determines whether a person will be contacted by an employer about an available job. The chapter on job interviews is a particularly important chapter for job seekers because, as Webster notes, traditional job interviews are generally not conducted for field tech positions. Webster provides incredibly useful advice for using the interview to ask the employer a range of questions that are relevant to the employment opportunity.

Section 2, "Shovelbumming," provides a good overview of what to expect while working as a field technician. The type of gear will vary seasonally, regionally, and by the type of project. While CRM companies generally provide necessary work equipment, it is important that field technicians maintain appropriate personal gear for safety, convenience, and comfort. This includes a pack, rain gear and/or appropriate seasonal outerwear, water bottle, and good boots. Oddly enough, important items that newbies to fieldwork often forget—personal care

products such as poison ivy wash, sunscreen, and bug repellent—are omitted in the chapter. These items are worth their weight in gold while doing fieldwork. The potential to encounter a wide variety of hazards, including poisonous snakes and spiders, ticks, poison ivy, and rusted nails, on a routine basis during fieldwork would suggest that a primer on health and safety would have been a useful addition to this book. The chapters on lodging, hotels, cooking, and camping are not universally applicable to all employment settings, but the discussion is very thorough and made more effective by the addition of commentary provided by experienced field techs.

The chapters outlining the general types of field projects and the job classifications within CRM are concise and well-articulated. These chapters provide a good overview of the organization and practice of CRM archaeology, and astute readers will recognize how to use this information to navigate the hierarchy of CRM companies for networking and for improving the relevance of their CV for the type of work that is generally conducted by CRM firms. Working as a field technician may be enjoyable and rewarding in some respects, but it is generally not a path toward a sustainable long-term career in archaeology. Field technicians that have sufficient experience and competence may gain employment as a crew chief, but a master's degree is generally required for supervisory and managerial positions. The master's degree is also a requirement for RPA certification. That does not mean that the information presented in this book is less relevant to individuals beginning a job search following graduate study. On

the contrary, the practical advice regarding the necessary skills and experience that are required for career success are more relevant following the personal investment toward a graduate education.

Sections 3 (“Location, Location, Location”) and 4 (“Good to Know”) provide a good read for those starting out, but are generally less relevant to those that have gained experience on the various types of projects described in the “Shovelbumming” section. Webster discusses various locational positioning schemes, the trinomial system for archaeological site inventories, and practical advice for developing mapping skills. A chapter on dimensional lumber seemed oddly out of place, given the goals of the book. Likewise, the chapter on the Munsell color system strayed somewhat from the practical usefulness of many of the other chapters in the book.

In section 5, “The End, for Now,” Webster discusses some of the strategies for coping with breaks in paid work. This is an important discussion for the CRM industry, which thus far has largely been relegated to blogs and podcasts by field techs—including Webster’s *Random Acts of Science Blog* and White’s *Succinct Research Blog*, R. Joe Brandon’s blog at <shovelbums.org>, and the forum at <archaeologyfieldwork.com>, among several others. With some exceptions, including a 2013 online seminar (*Get Hired!*) by Carol Ellick for the Society for American Archaeology, major archaeological organizations, including the American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA) and the Society for Historical Archaeology, have not devoted much effort to the issue of labor in the archaeological workforce. The lack of

dialog is evident in some of the strategies that Webster proposes to navigate including the consequences or benefits of unemployment. Webster notes:

I feel that CRM archaeology is one of the few professions where people earn their unemployment every year. We work hard during the year, and if there simply isn’t any work over the winter then you should be able to draw unemployment. Consider it a gift from the people of the state you live in for helping to record and preserve their history (p. 123).

That is, except for the reality that in many states unemployment insurance fund payments are paid by employers with the rates based on the unemployment benefits paid out to former employees. Thus, when a worker leaves employment and is approved for benefits, the unemployment payments increase for the former employers. The more employees who use unemployment benefits, which can be the vast majority of the labor force, the more CRM firms will ultimately have to pay. It is a cost of doing business, though it certainly highlights one of the many issues that divide archaeological labor and employers in this sometimes dysfunctional industry. The final chapters give a glimpse at what job insecurity can feel like, yet Webster manages to close the book on an optimistic note.

The *Field Archaeologist’s Survival Guide* is an invaluable resource for those contemplating employment as a field technician, but may perhaps be overlooked by those who are contemplating graduate study. Archaeology is fun and rewarding. Starting out in the field, literally and figuratively, however, is not an easy feat. Many colleagues have spent years dealing with job insecurity before a permanent job

opportunity becomes available. Careers in archaeology are most likely to be within the private sector. Webster provides practical advice on getting a foot in the door. For anyone contemplating work as a field tech, even for a short stint between undergraduate

and graduate school, the book is well worth the investment.

LYLE C. TORP
THE OTTERY GROUP, INC.
3910 KNOWLES AVENUE
KENSINGTON, MD 20895