

CHARLES H. NASH, 1908–1968

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FOR THE PAST decade, one of the South-east's great field archaeologists was beset by increasingly acute emphysema. Good fortune and rigorously disciplined physical exertion became vital necessities for Charles Nash; neither, however, impaired his truly amazing imagination and enthusiasm. And his accomplishments, despite omnipresent limitations, far surpassed those of many colleagues who enjoy the blessings of good health. Winter was an annual crisis, for resistance to pulmonary complications of colds and influenza was virtually nonexistent. During the winter of 1968 such complications occurred; Charles Nash died on February 16, 1968.

Charles spent his early years in Chicago, Illinois. He did his undergraduate work at Beloit College and received his Bachelor's degree in 1932 — not our most encouraging year for college graduates. Nash enrolled in the University of Chicago and began work on his Master of Arts in Anthropology, but his future had been shaped by the Great Depression.

An archaeological expedition to North Africa provided Charles with his introduction to field work. Only partly in jest, he said that the decisive factor committing him to this expedition was the realization that he could live more cheaply in North Africa than in Chicago. Be that as it may, his interest in Old World archaeology never declined, although the future was to lead him in other directions.

On May 18, 1933, Congress created the Tennessee Valley Authority. Soon thereafter the first major "archaeological salvage" operation was underway in states along the indecisive course of the Tennessee River. Today these excavations have the aura of "The Good Old Days," yet they certainly constituted a trial-by-fire for an adolescent discipline. Although initial impetus was supplied by active professionals — Will C. McKern, Fay-Cooper Cole, and Carl Guthe in particular — the actual excavations were supervised by then nonprofessionals (William S. Webb and T. M. N. Lewis), conducted by graduate students (Cole's students from Chicago were particularly in evidence), and executed with W.P.A. labor. The tremendous achievements of these projects and the continuing contributions of the "graduate students" speak for themselves; southeastern archaeology

truly came of age. Someday, it is hoped, a narrative of the stormy adolescence may be told — not in terms of reservoirs, publications, and now-august senior archaeologists, but rather in terms of sinking houseboats, spontaneous techniques and tools of excavation, and problems presented by 100 men with 50 shovels. But this is not the place (Charles Nash would disagree), and I am not the person.

In 1935, Nash interrupted his graduate program and went to Tennessee. He began his career on the T.V.A. projects in Humphreys County, working at the Slayden site with T. M. N. Lewis. Soon thereafter, Lewis left the field to coordinate excavations throughout the state from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Also in 1935, Charles married Letha Capps of Waverly, Tennessee; their daughter, Carol, is presently living in Memphis with her husband and three children.

After excavations at the Link site the following year, Charles proceeded to other counties: Hamilton, Meigs, Rhea, Stewart, Benton, Cheatham, Decatur, and Roane. His final salvage excavation returned him, in 1942, to Humphreys County. He had excavated a disproportionate number of Tennessee's best-known sites: Link, Dallas, Hiwassee Island, the Grey Farm, Mound Bottom, Burton's Landing, and Britt's Landing.

Nash's job was to excavate and prepare field reports, and this he did with tremendous zeal. I became familiar with these notes some years before I met their author; they are masterful. It becomes immediately apparent why sites excavated by Charles Nash loom large in so many reconstructions of Tennessee prehistory. The acknowledgments in the Hiwassee Island report by Lewis and Kneberg stand as testimony to the degree to which his records enable knowledgeable archaeologists to stand, as it were, in the excavator's shoes.

World War II interrupted the archaeological programs directed from the University of Tennessee. One of the final projects was initiated in conjunction with the C.C.C. — excavations at the T. O. Fuller (State Park) Mounds in Shelby County, near Memphis. Plans for extensive excavation and development of the site as a park were made, but they had to be abandoned with the outbreak of the war. Nonetheless this exca-



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vation was to be of paramount importance to Charles Nash, but at a later date.

During the war, Nash dropped out of archaeology and apparently sampled the business world. In 1951 his first marriage was terminated, and he wed Reba Isbell of Cookeville, Tennessee. I know little of Charles during this period, although such disparate enterprises as Oak Ridge, a bottling plant, and a furniture factory were involved. For whatever reason, the man who was undaunted by the Great Depression fell upon hard times during the period of wartime prosperity. Charles had his own depression.

In the early 1950's, interest in the Fuller Park Mounds revived, locally by the Memphis Geological and Archaeological Society (which conducted excavations at Chucalissa in 1952) and Shelby County Commissioner Rudolph Jones, and in Knoxville at the University of Tennessee.

T. M. N. Lewis encouraged plans for site development and reconstruction, and suggested for director of the project the man who had been his "most capable" archaeologist — Charles Nash. Charles was found in Memphis, and there was little difficulty in convincing him to return to Tennessee archaeology. In 1955, Governor Frank Clement made the necessary funds available, Commissioner Jones arranged for a labor crew from the Penal Farm to assist in clearing the site, and work began under the auspices of the Tennessee Department of Conservation, Division of State Parks.

Activities of the next few years served to underscore a basic characteristic of Charles Nash. Nearly 15 years had passed since he had left archaeology; Charles was older, but he had not aged. This observation would be overly clever if it were not absolutely true. Charles simply did not age. The outstanding feature of the site to be developed was a large temple mound. To its south lay a plaza, bounded by a continuous residential ridge that had accumulated through centuries of occupation. A second mound was situated on the west side of the plaza. The site was cleared and was surrounded with a palisade of logs and grapevine; it was given the name "Chucalissa," and exploratory excavations were begun. Within a year the dig was opened to visitors; within two years literally thousands of interested people had taken advantage of the tours conducted by Nash and his assistant, Kirk Osoinach. Also in 1957, Charles Nash was appointed State Parks Archaeologist for Tennessee. A summer field-school, drawing most of its students from Memphis State University and Southwestern at Memphis, was established in 1958.

Chucalissa grew steadily under the sponsorship of the State Parks Division until 1962, at which time it was transferred to Memphis State University. Not the least of the assets thus acquired by M. S. U. was Charles Nash. The university soon found itself with not only a growing museum but also with a budding academic program in anthropology. Nash and Osoinach taught introductory anthropology and general ethnology courses on campus while continuing the expansion of Chucalissa.

In recent years, Charles' interests became increasingly focused on the academic side of the anthropology program. Chucalissa has now outgrown its original quarters, the reconstruction-exhibition-excavation projects are all well estab-

lished, more than 50,000 visitors sign the guest register each year — in short, it is a highly successful operation. As a result of Nash's efforts, other anthropologists joined the university staff; an anthropology major was established; and during the year of his death, the graduate council of M. S. U. recommended that a graduate program be established in anthropology — the first such program in the state.

In 1967, Charles decided to complete the degree program interrupted in 1935. Still bearing his responsibilities on campus as well as the directorship of Chucalissa, he enrolled in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Mississippi, and began work anew on a Master of Arts degree in Anthropology. During the final year of his life he completed his course-work and thesis; his degree was awarded posthumously in Oxford on May 26, 1968. The thesis was published subsequently by Memphis State University.

Charles Nash will be remembered with both awe and affection by diverse people — state and university administrators, civic leaders, colleagues, and students. Motivated persistently by a complete and genuine enthusiasm for American archaeology and anthropology, and for contributions which he knew these disciplines would make, he was able to give much to both.

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