



DAVID LLOYD DEJARNETTE¹
1907–1991

On January 16, 1991, David L. DeJarnette died quietly at his home in Orange Beach, Alabama, at the age of 84. His life was a full one, during which he oversaw the professionalization of archaeology in his home state.

He was born in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1907. DeJarnette attended the University of Alabama from 1925 to 1929, earning a degree in electrical engineering. After graduation he was offered employment by Walter B. Jones, director of the Alabama Museum of Natural History. Recognizing that DeJarnette's native abilities and training as an engineer would be of much value to the museum, Jones hired DeJarnette as assistant curator. By 1930, he was promoted to the position of curator of the museum.

In his early years as curator, DeJarnette participated in numerous field expeditions to collect items of many kinds, including biological and mineral specimens. He fondly remembered an expedition to South Dakota and Wyoming in the summer of 1930 to acquire minerals for display. It was, however, quickly recognized that his main proclivities lay in archaeological work. Along with sites in Alabama, museum-sponsored archaeological expeditions in the company of Walter B. Jones led DeJarnette to excavate at the Walnut Mounds, Arkansas (1931); Wickliffe site, Kentucky (1931); and the Nodena site, Arkansas (1932).

At the time he was hired the museum was energetically engaged in acquiring the site of Moundville for preservation and study, and so began a long association between DeJarnette and that site. For the next two decades he assumed various responsibilities in the excavation of Moundville and its development as a public park and museum. Excavations began during the spring of 1930, largely following the methods used earlier at the site by Clarence Moore.

During 1931 DeJarnette instinctively refined his field-recording techniques at Moundville and elsewhere by adopting plane-table mapping of finds and burials. More formal training in archaeology came during the following summer, when he attended the University of Illinois Field School under the active direction of Thorne Deuel. There, after a brief orientation at Dickson Mounds, DeJarnette was placed in charge of a crew apart from the main party to excavate a Hopewellian mound, Site

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Mn^o1, and the Clear Lake Village site. Later in the summer another assignment for his subcrew was to reinvestigate the Black Sand component at the Liverpool mound group (F^o77–78). These exposures to rigorous stratigraphic recording techniques and problem orientation proved invaluable some years later during the giant Depression-era projects DeJarnette supervised in the Southeast.

Upon his return to the museum in 1931 DeJarnette assumed charge of the fledgling Archaeological Survey of Alabama, which eventually evolved into the present Alabama State Archaeological Site File. The first research problem of the survey, funded by a series of grants from the National Research Council, was to establish whether a number of regional flat-topped mound sites were culturally related to Moundville—among them the Hobbs Island and Florence Mounds on the Black Warrior, the Omussee Creek Mound on the Chattahoochee, and the Bottle Creek group in the Mobile Delta. Excavations were carried out at all of these sites. The early success of the survey led directly to the first Conference on Southern Pre-History, convened in Birmingham in December 1932.

When the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Civil Works Administration began their large-scale Depression program of excavations under the overall supervision of Major W. S. Webb in 1934, David DeJarnette was well placed to assume a commanding role as division chief. Thus “loaned” to the TVA, he orchestrated the archaeological projects in the Pickwick, Wheeler, and Guntersville basins between 1934 and 1939. Together with Webb, DeJarnette made fundamental contributions to the prehistory of the Southeast, most notably by bringing to light the Shell Mound Archaic, Copena burial-mound complex, and Kogers Island Mississippian complex in the Tennessee Valley. Following the TVA basin research he directed or coordinated Works Progress Administration projects at the Bessemer site and at various sites in Clarke, Mobile, and Baldwin counties, Alabama. Much of his later career saw him preserving and protecting the vast reserve of notes and specimens from these projects for the benefit of future researchers.

During World War II, DeJarnette served as captain in the 58th Coast Artillery Surface Warning Battery, tracing and mapping enemy movements in New Guinea and the Philippines.

Returning to museum research after his discharge, he directed excavations at the Historic Creek Indian site at Childersburg, Alabama, in which he effectively refuted John R. Swanton’s contention that this locality was the Coosa visited by Hernando de Soto in 1540. This work was the basis of DeJarnette’s Master’s thesis, completed in 1958 and published shortly thereafter. It was a signal contribution to ethnohistorical archaeology.

The Alabama Museum of Natural History gave DeJarnette a leave of absence in 1949 to become the first director of the American Museum of Atomic Energy in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. This Museum, the first of its kind, was built from “scratch” based on its director’s previous curatorial experience. DeJarnette went on to become Chairman of the Museum Division of the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies.

While at Oak Ridge archaeology was never far from his mind, and it was during this period that his “Summary of Alabama Archaeology” was published in J. B. Griffin’s compendium, *Archeology of Eastern United States*. Lured back to Alabama in 1953, DeJarnette assumed the direction of Mound State Monument and established there a highly successful contract-archaeology program, which he operated until his retirement in 1976. In this program, along with a succession of 20 field schools taught between 1957 and 1975, DeJarnette trained a generation of archaeologists, many of whom practice the craft today. He regularly taught sociology, cultural anthropology, and archaeology courses in the Department of Anthropology of the University of Alabama, after being appointed to the faculty in 1956. He achieved the rank of Associate Professor in 1961, which he held until his retirement.

He was very active among amateur archaeologists, helping to found and promote the Alabama Archaeological Society (AAS) during the 1950s. He served as editor of the Society’s journal, the *Journal of Alabama Archaeology*, through the 1960s and through most of the 1970s. Many of the archaeological projects conceived and carried out under DeJarnette’s direction during the 1960s and 1970s were sponsored by the AAS, with the financial support administered through the Archaeological Research Association of Alabama, Inc., a body composed entirely of amateur archaeologists. A large portion of this effort went toward research on early humans in Alabama, and it involved the excavation of several key sites, mostly bluff shelters, in the northern part of the state.

DeJarnette particularly counted among his achievements the excavation of the Stanfield-Worley Bluff Shelter, a project entirely supported by popular subscription between 1960 and 1963. This work defined and dated an early Holocene Dalton presence, which he termed Transitional Paleo-Indian. Lesser known was his work in the Maya area: between 1965 and 1967 he was director of the Alabama X-Kukikán Archaeological Project in the Puuc Hills of Yucatán, an investigation of a Classic Maya ceremonial center.

After retiring from academic life in 1976, DeJarnette devoted more than a decade to a private consulting business based at his home in Orange Beach, Alabama, enlisting the occasional aid of some of his former students.

Personally and professionally David L. DeJarnette was a perfectionist, a character trait that always served him well, even if it inspired a high degree of trepidation among his charges. He was never one to suffer fools gladly. But among peers he was always amiable, and among friends a consummate southern gentleman. As if to relieve his professional intensity, he delighted in the comedy of living, and many treasure, as he did, anecdotes of his clowning and prankishness.

Southeastern archaeology has lost one of its founding fathers, a great practitioner and teacher. Many have lost a cherished old friend.

VERNON JAMES KNIGHT, JR.

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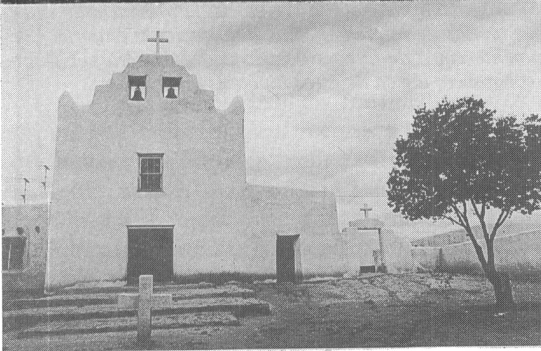
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NOTE

¹ Photo of David Lloyd DeJarnette taken ca. 1950s.

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