

WILLIAM SNYDER WEBB, 1882–1964

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WILLIAM SNYDER WEBB, former Head of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology and the Department of Physics at the University of Kentucky, died at Lexington February 15, 1964. He was 82 years old. In 1952, Professor Webb reached the University of Kentucky's retirement age, but it made very little difference in his work day. He was actively engaged in archaeological research until his death.

Professor Webb was born in Greendale, Kentucky, on January 19, 1882. Greendale is only a few miles from Lexington, and it was in this area that he spent all of his early years. He graduated from the University of Kentucky in 1901. He received the Master's degree the following year and immediately launched upon additional graduate work in physics at Cornell University and later at the University of Chicago.

Before completing graduate work, Professor Webb became the secretary to the commanding officer of Indian Territory in what was later to become the state of Oklahoma. This experience was one that colored much of his later life, and it led almost directly to his interest in Indians, and especially those of prehistoric Kentucky. He learned to speak the Seminole language, and even at that early time began readings in the ethnohistory of the southeastern United States.

In 1908, he returned to the University of Kentucky as Assistant Professor of Physics, beginning his more than half a century of faculty association with that institution. In 1915, he became the Head of the Department of Physics.

In 1926, Professor Webb was appointed head of a second department, a newly established Department of Anthropology and Archaeology. Although it consisted of only Professor Webb and Professor Funkhouser, then head of the Zoology Department, it was certainly a very active unit. These two men constituted a team that produced several pioneer volumes on the prehistory of Kentucky, the most notable being *Ancient Life in Kentucky*, which was published by the Kentucky Geological Survey in 1928. The first number of *Reports in Archaeology and Anthropology* appeared in July, 1929. Only Dr. Funkhouser taught courses in anthropology, for this new department was established more as a budgetary unit than an academic one.

Actually, the original impetus for its formation was to receive a truck from the National Research Council, a gift given in recognition of the archaeological work these two men had begun several years earlier.

His training in the exacting physical sciences gave Professor Webb a rigid concept of the scientific method that he carried into archaeology. Despite a deserved scholarly reputation, Dr. Funkhouser sometimes dismayed Professor Webb by his casual distortion of fact for publicity. For example, during the excavation of the Ricketts Mound, we were often visited by numbers of local residents. Once, while explaining some details to these visitors, Dr. Funkhouser laid a foot ruler alongside the tibia of a burial, then observed, "Yep, eleven and three-quarter inches — Algonkian." Considering the great differences in personality between these two men, it is remarkable that they could successfully collaborate over the years.

The fact that Professor Webb was one of the few men of stature with field experience accounts for his being recommended by the Smithsonian Institution for the difficult task of coordinating an archaeological program for the Tennessee Valley Authority. In 1933, Professor Webb began building a team of archaeologists, the members of which were subsequently to supervise the excavation of dozens of large mounds and midden sites with crews of men totaling more than 1500. From these various excavations in Tennessee, northern Alabama, and western Kentucky, came three *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletins* (Nos. 118, 122, and 129).

Professor Webb was a man of boundless energy. He often observed, unnecessarily of course, that he "could lick his weight in wildcats before breakfast." Professor Webb and I dug the Fisher Mound alone one summer when it was impossible to obtain labor because the tobacco season was at its height. I am confident that Professor Webb did far more labor than I did, despite some difference in our years.

Professor Webb was a man of varied interests. He took note of everything around him. He was notably familiar with the local flora and fauna and read widely in the humanities and in history. While we were excavating the Fisher

Mound, I remember an occasion when the observation of tree roots "piercing the mold" deep in the mound brought forth a recital of *Thanatopsis*.

Professor Webb was one of the best known and liked public speakers on the University of Kentucky faculty. It is a curious fact that he never was completely free of "stage fright." The moment he stood on his feet he became a commanding figure who dominated his audience. He had developed a Churchillian mode of expression, and his addresses were filled with numerous biblical quotations and archaic expressions.

An important episode in Professor Webb's life was his military service during World War I. He took leave from the University and volunteered for service in the U.S. Army. Because of his background in physics and mathematics, he was trained as an officer and assigned to an artillery unit with the 84th Infantry Division. He rose to the rank of Major, and it is from this source that the affectionate name "Major" came to be the only term that most of his students and colleagues used in referring to him. During the work in the Tennessee Valley, everyone with any kind of military title higher than Captain utilized it, and Webb was known throughout the entire valley as Major Webb. It is only fair to report that earlier students called him "Bullneck." He was familiar with this nickname and appeared to feel flattered by it, but no student ever had the temerity to address him directly as "Bullneck."

A tour in the field with the Major was like a shot in the arm and was looked forward to by the younger archaeologists working with him. It was of course my pleasure to be associated with him for many years at Kentucky. When we were driving through the countryside, he constantly pointed out things of historical or archaeological interest and recounted much local lore. Some of these trips were rather hazardous because he sometimes lost sight of the fact that he was the driver of the automobile.

For a person who was so widely known, it was only natural that he was frequently addressed as "Doctor." This was a point about which he was a bit sensitive because he had not completed the requirements for the Ph.D. In recognition of his contributions to the prehistory of Alabama, the University of Alabama bestowed on him an honorary Doctor of Science degree in 1937. However, David DeJarnette (at



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the University of Alabama) was fearful that Professor Webb would not come to the ceremony if he thought he was going to be honored, so David wired him that something had gone wrong in the archaeological organization, and Professor Webb came "hot footing" down to Tuscaloosa to be captured and honored.

The Major was a notable contributor to the field of physics and held various national offices in physics organizations, but we are here concerned with his role in archaeology. He served as President of the Central States Branch of the American Anthropological Association and as Vice President of the Society of American Archaeology. In 1954, he was elected Honorary President of the Kentucky Archaeological Society. These are only a few of the honors he received, and not the least of these was his elevation in 1950 to the University of Kentucky's highest faculty status — Distinguished Professor.

The Major, a vivid and vigorous man, was not without certain faults. As is always the case with a strong personality, enemies were made, and the Major certainly had his share. How-

ever, it was usually in a vigorous defense of some particular theory, idea, reconstruction, or interpretation that he was most adamant. He differed, sometimes violently, with colleagues when preparing manuscripts for publication, and co-authoring reports with him was never an easy task. Still, he could be amazingly generous and thoughtful. I once heard him offer a now-prominent archaeologist all the money necessary to complete the doctoral degree, and this was no isolated example. No one was ever exposed over many years to the Major without developing a genuine feeling of loyalty and affection.

A glance at the bibliography of Major Webb immediately reveals the nature of his contributions. He has an extensive list of site reports, and these perhaps constitute his major contribution to American archaeology. He rarely attempted to interpret a cultural whole, yet he did draw the extant knowledge of the Adena culture into comprehensive interpretive volumes. His final work, soon to be published, is a definitive study of the Eastern Archaic. Perhaps he will be remembered longest for his contributions to methodology in archaeology, some of which have served as models for numerous later studies by others. The chronological bar chart in *The Adena People* is one of the earliest uses of seriation for ordering archaeological data. In the absence of stratigraphic control, his bar chart was as meaningful read from bottom to top as from top to bottom. He brought to field archaeology rigorous scientific techniques that had not characterized many previous excavations. He influenced careers of dozens of American archaeologists, each of whom remembers the heightened sense of being alive when the Major was around. Many will miss him now.

The following archaeological bibliography was compiled by Frank J. Essene and Douglas W. Schwartz of the University of Kentucky.

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