

Two Years of Public Archaeology at Apex, Arizona: Life and Work in a Depression-Era Company Town

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ABSTRACT: From 1928 to 1936, the logging camp and company town of Apex, Arizona housed loggers and administrators whose labor was integral to the economic development of Northern Arizona and the construction of the Grand Canyon Railway and Grand Canyon Village. Since 2020, Northern Arizona University and the Kaibab National Forest have partnered to survey, excavate, and document the remains of the camp in order to answer questions about life during Prohibition and the Great Depression in the region. In addition to fieldwork, an exciting aspect of this partnership is the emphasis on public site tours and visitor education during the 2022 and 2023 NAU field schools. This poster will present the objectives, discoveries, visitor experiences, and future trajectories of the ongoing archaeological investigations at Apex, Arizona.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Apex, Arizona Archaeological Project aims to understand life and labor as expressed through the material remains of the 20th-century logging camp and company town. Since 2020, NAU has conducted pedestrian surveys and archaeological excavations (Figure 1) to better understand the relationships between management and their employees, access to goods (including what the community's company store would have stocked), how rural Northern Arizona communities were impacted by the Great Depression, the role of women and children at the logging camp, the differences between single male laborers' lives and those who lived with their families, and many more lines of inquiry. This research is accomplished alongside tours for the general public, which inform and expand public knowledge about historical archaeology in the Southwest.

Apex was established in 1928 as the camp headquarters for the Saginaw and Manistee Lumber Company, a major employer in the Williams area that secured a timber lease with the Kaibab National Forest. Apex served as a central camp, although at least 30 others dotted the landscape of the Kaibab as the loggers cut their timber lease to its exhaustion by 1936. Despite its occupation during the Great Depression and the waning years of Prohibition, archaeological and archival evidence indicate that employees were well-fed, received adequate housing, had access to a wide variety of goods, and consumed alcohol in great quantities on both the management and employee sides of the camp.

The 2023 Field School focused primarily on the various loci, or activity areas, associated with laborer housing. Students, staff, and Passport in Time volunteers investigated Locus E (single-laborer housing), Locus D (likely family housing), Locus C (trash dump, likely associated with Locus D), and a privy and several trash scatters (Locus U). This provided comparative data for the 2022 field school which focused on the schoolhouse, kitchen, and management housing.



Figure 1: Alex Mason and Travis Cumming map the excavation unit sidewalls.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

A large part of the Apex, Arizona Archaeology Project is public engagement and community outreach. Thanks to grants from the Arizona Humanities, in 2022 and 2023 we hosted a series of public tours of our archaeological fieldwork. In 2022, nearly 100 people toured the site, while the 2023 field season saw over 60 guests visit Apex.

In 2023, we also incorporated a Passport in Time project through the Kaibab National Forest. Three volunteers worked with us for a week, assisting in excavation, mapping, and artifact recordation (Figure 2).

Our outreach campaigns educate members of the public on the importance of Arizona's more recent heritage and proper etiquette at archaeological sites. Visitors are encouraged to take photographs, attend future events, and given educational brochures. Moreover, as our students participate in tours, the next generation of archaeologists learns the importance of public engagement.



Figure 2: 2023 Field School students, Passport in Time Volunteers, and staff.

Front row: Rachel Matheson, Tim Maddock, Fran Maiuri, Emily Dale, Adrienne Dale, and Charlie Webber

Back row: Alex Mason, Garrett Hoskinson, Carl Evertsbusch, and Travis Cumming

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The 2023 Field School at Apex revealed new information regarding the lives of the men, women, and children who once called the logging camp home. Everyday objects and modified cans (Figure 3) demonstrate the mundane aspects of life and strategies to preserve money during the Great Depression. Previous investigations on the management side of Apex indicated an abundance of high-quality goods, makeup and hygiene products associated with women, and children's toys, artifacts also found at the laborer housing (Figure 4). To our surprise, artifacts on the laborer's side of the site also suggested that workers owned fancy, personal items such as decorated porcelains, figurines (Figure 5), carnival glass, and ornamental candlesticks. This suggests that goods purchased by or provided for the laborers were not strictly utilitarian and may have been more equal to the management assemblage than previously believed.



Figure 3: The Apex "Jack-o'-cantern", Locus C

Figure 4: Porcelain cherub face, Locus E

Figure 5: Metal horse team, Locus D. The holes in the feet suggest they once pulled a cart or were part of a rocking horse. A similar metal goat was also found at Locus D.

Figure 6: "BUDWEISER / BARLEY / MALT SYRUP" can, Locus E



FAMILY LIFE

The exact layout of the laborer's side of Apex was unknown. Historian Al Richmond indicated the presence of a laborer's bunkhouse to house the single men, but the extent of family housing is unclear. The 2023 Field School discovered that Locus D, just uphill from Locus E, likely represents either family housing for laborers or the residences of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railway engineers that also called Apex home. Locus D exhibited evidence of toys (Figure 5), canning, and make-up and hygiene products, which supports these theories. However, these same artifacts are also present at Locus E, which was thought to house only the single men. Does E therefore represent a post-occupation, catch-all trash area, or a different building altogether? Future research will continue to address this and other questions.

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FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We are running one final tour this year, on October 1 for the Flagstaff Festival of Science. Our findings from the 2022 and 2023 season will be presented at the 2023 Grand Canyon History Symposium, and both the Society for Historical Archaeology conference and the Arizona History Convention in 2024.

The Apex, Arizona Archaeology Project has three more years of permitted field work. Future years' priorities include recording management housing and surveying the railroad grade beyond the camp headquarters. Other projects will be undertaken with graduate student interest.

The project demonstrates the ability of Southwest archaeology to shed a light on the region's more recent history, connect communities to their past, and provide new opportunities for public engagement and collaborative projects.

CONSUMPTION AND THE COMPANY STORE

Common brands, such as Copenhagen and Prince Albert tobacco, Calumet baking soda, and enamelwares, found across the site in both 2022 and 2023 reveal the company store stocked consistent products. Canned foods included fruits, meats, and fish, from as far away as Northern California, Norway, and Uruguay. Orange Crush, bottled in Flagstaff, Delaware Punch, and Coca-Cola bottle fragments point to the variety of sodas enjoyed by the laborers. The presence of canning jars, especially at Locus C, also indicates the availability of fresh foods. The commonality at both management and laborer spaces of Budweiser malt extract cans, used to produce beer during Prohibition (Figure 6), indicates widespread, company-permitted consumption of alcohol even when illegal. Whiskey and other liquor bottles reveal the continuation of alcohol consumption after Prohibition ended. The presence of numerous types and brands of laxatives suggest a common health problem among the workers living at the Locus E bunkhouse. Finally, there is a high concentration of carnival glass throughout the site, suggesting it was either available through the company store or acquired through events in Williams.