An Unraveling Rope: The Looting of America's Past

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The place was north-central Texas, on a high, windy terrace overlooking the muddy Colorado River in 1961. The boy sat on a wind-sculpted slab of sandstone, letting the early rays of sunshine chase away the chill of a late autumn morning. The teenager had been to this spot many times before. It was a magical place—a place littered with the memories of past peoples. The ground here was scattered with flint that glinted in the early morning sunlight. There were remnants of ancient stone hearths and burned rock ovens in seeming disarray across the terrace surface. The boy sat spellbound—lost in thought about what this Indian campsite and its inhabitants must have looked like so long ago. Like so many other youngsters, he had little in the way of education to draw on in his mental reconstruction of the camp. The concept of “prehistory” was essentially unknown to him. His small-town schooling in history began with the arrival of Columbus in the New World, and his concepts of Native Americans were based more on Western movies of the 1950s than anything else. Unbeknownst to him at the time, the boy’s craving for knowledge would eventually lead him to a university, and ultimately into a career in archaeology. Many years later he would anxiously return to the ancient campsite, only to find it devastated by looting and construction.

Like the boy on the river, most people have an inherent curiosity about the past, but in varying degrees of intensity. The romanticism and mystery of the past lead some people to seek higher levels of understanding through reading and other educational outlets. For the vast majority of people, however, this same curiosity—undirected and unchanneled—evolves into an entangling web of unwitting and even purposeful destruction. Were it not for a fortuitous set of circumstances, the boy on the river might well have become a collector of antiquities. He easily could have ended up channeling his intense interest into digging archaeological sites as a hobby, or even as a commercial enterprise. The site-looting phenomenon, which is so rampant in Texas and other states, should be of particular interest and concern to archaeologists, conservationists, and Native Americans and other minorities, for it is clearly the single most destructive force to our nation’s historical legacy.

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THE LOOTING PLAGUE

The mindless looting of archeological sites is not unique to Texas. It is, in fact, a worldwide phenomenon with roots in antiquity. The temples, mounds, cemeteries, villages, and campsites of all past human populations—from the Orient to the ancient Near East, from Europe to Mesoamerica—have been subjected to looters since time immemorial. In addition to being the principal targets of treasure hunters, archeological sites also have provided convenient sources of stone, lime, fill, and other building materials for local residents. Many ancient temples have ended up as stone linings for irrigation ditches and wells, or as walls for houses. Many of the world’s greatest archeological treasures continue to be attritioned away in this manner.

In the United States today, much of the destruction to archeological resources is attributable to site looters and commercial relic hunters. In Texas, archaeologists usually apply the term “looter” or “pothunter” to people who carry out unregulated and unscientific “digs” of archeological deposits to obtain artifacts for their personal collections or for sale. While construction projects such as pipelines, reservoirs, and highways take a heavy toll on archeological resources, looters are particularly ruinous because they carry out selective destruction, targeting the best-preserved and scientifically most important sites for digging. Literally thousands of archeological sites—primarily of prehistoric Native American populations—are subjected to varying degrees of damage by hobbyists and looters each year in Texas alone. This appalling situation continues to worsen as the state’s population grows, particularly in areas within easy reach of urban centers.

Who are these people, and why do they destroy the irreplaceable historical legacy of Texas and other states with seemingly callous abandon? After years of educational and legislative efforts, why have we been unable to stem the tide of destruction to our past, and what are our prospects for the future? In order to address these and other questions, we might first make a brief examination of the emotional underpinnings of the collecting mentality. We must return momentarily to the boy on the river.

THE QUERENCIA

"Under normal conditions, the average coyote ranges habitually within certain boundaries. This is his querencia—his haunt."

—J. Frank Dobie, The Voice of the Coyote

A querencia is a favorite place or area that one frequents as often as possible—for any variety of reasons. It is a place that is remembered fondly—even longingly—during necessary separations. A querencia may be a favorite fishing spot, a special meadow in the woods, or even a particular tree or a comfortable boulder in a river. Most people have a querencia, the memory of
which conjures up almost mystical feelings, even if it now exists only in their minds’ eye. Walden Pond was Henry David Thoreau’s *querencia*. The boy’s *querencia* was an Indian campsite on the bank of the Colorado River in Texas. It is here, at one’s *querencia* that critical development of a person’s attitudes towards archaeological and other resources commonly takes place.

Artifact collectors frequently begin their hobby as a result of their feelings for a haunt they have come to love. It may be the place where they found their first arrowhead, and it can be just as captivating to an adult as to a child, regardless of gender or race. Initially collectors return over and over again to the same sites where they began their hobby, thus establishing strong emotional bonds to their find spots. With some people, the *querencia* becomes an end in itself, and they may focus their collecting on only a single site or a few sites for years, or even a lifetime. In the best of scenarios the collector may come to the realization that the site, if left undisturbed, has the potential for yielding important scientific information about the past, and he or she may become a self-appointed guardian of the site. Unfortunately, this is the exception rather than the rule.

More typically, the hobbyist continues to build his or her artifact collection within an informational vacuum of his or her own creation—until the act of collecting begins to override both curiosity and concern for the site. As the acquisition of artifacts gains in importance, the hobbyist tends to broaden his or her search to other sites, and eventually to other areas. A growing obsession with artifacts then leads to interaction with other collectors with similar interests. Friendly competitions to see who can find the most or best artifacts are frequently the result, as the act of collecting becomes more of a communal than an individual activity. As more sites are included, the feeling of *querencia* may be obscured.

As his or her artifact orientation continues to grow, and is promoted by associates, the hobbyist may begin to enter the realm of the true “pothunter,” or looter. This significant and often irreversible step occurs when the hobbyist turns to digging—as well as surface collecting—archaeological deposits. Hobbyists are frequently led into excavation by pothunting associates, or by their discovery of a feature such as a burial or cache that simply cannot be ignored. After an initial taste of digging, some will turn back to surface collecting as a hobby, but many will not. Those who elect to continue the digging of sites become ever more deeply entrenched, as what began as a hobby evolves into a truly destructive obsession. Their sphere of associates may expand once again to include “hard-core” pothunters and even commercial looters. Having reached this advanced stage, the hobbyist-turned-looter becomes hardened to most educational and preservation efforts. He or she may actively seek out professional archaeologists to “authenticate” artifacts in order to increase their monetary value, and he or she may become actively involved in the buying and selling of specimens at artifact shows. The looter has become a machine of destruction.
The level of destruction wrought on archaeological resources by looters cannot be overstated. Archaeologists often refer to archaeological sites as being "pages of our history book." Each site destroyed is a page torn out of that book. The uncontrolled digging of sites destroys most of the scientific information therein, because artifacts, features, soils, pollens, and other diagnostic materials must be found and recorded in their original context in the ground in order to be meaningful. In tearing through an archaeological deposit, the looter disrupts and mixes the contents of the deposit, thus effectively destroying the site. The result of the looters' quest is a pile of objects having little or no meaning, often stored in cigar boxes in a garage or carefully mounted in geometric patterns and hung on a living room wall. Because archaeological sites are our only sources of information for more than 12,000 years of human history in the New World, their unnecessary destruction by people intent on personal gain is both deplorable and heart-rending. The appalling rate at which our most significant archaeological sites are being destroyed puts archaeologists—who are focused on the tedious and time-consuming task of reconstructing the past—in a futile race against time.

The principal targets of looters in Texas are cemeteries and mounds of the late prehistoric Caddo Indians in northeast Texas, deep stratified midden sites and rock shelters of Central Texas, late prehistoric Antelope Creek phase villages of the Texas Panhandle, and rock shelter and sinkhole sites of southwest and Trans-Pecos Texas. Caddo Indian cemeteries, many dating as early as the ninth and tenth centuries A.D., are among the hardest hit, particularly by commercial looters who sell the burial artifacts (primarily pottery vessels, pipes, arrow points, and skulls) through outlets in Arkansas and other states. In the sandy soils of northeast Texas and adjoining areas of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana, looters locate the cemeteries through the use of "pokey rods"—long metal probes that are pushed into the sandy soil to "feel" for bone and objects.

Having located a cemetery, small groups of looters will arrange a transaction with the landowner to allow them to dig, or they may lease the site for the purpose of digging the burials. In some cases, bulldozers are used to strip off the overlying archaeological deposits in order to quickly locate burial pits, which are then dug up swiftly by hand. Skeletal material is crushed and thrown out of the burials during the frantic search for artifacts. In cases where a landowner refuses access, it is relatively common for looters to trespass on the property at night, and to dig burials by lantern light—often working under tarps to avoid detection. Landowners typically have little or no idea as to the quantity, significance, or monetary value of artifacts removed from their property. What once was an ancient Caddo Indian cemetery or...
Plains Indian village is left with the appearance of an artillery battlefield, artifacts are sold, and the looters move on to their next target. The effect of looting activities on archaeologists—who understand the full scientific significance of the loss—is debilitating. The resulting loss of information for researchers, and ultimately the public-at-large, is staggering and irretrievable. The cultural and aesthetic loss to Native Americans and other victimized ethnic groups is beyond comprehension.

**The Looters' Holy Writ**

Site looters have a variety of procedures and imagined justifications. They often attempt to achieve legitimacy by grouping together in loose organizations, or by obtaining membership under false pretenses in *bona fide* archeological societies. Looters use the term “archaeology” and “archaeologist” loosely, often misrepresenting themselves as avocational or professional archaeologists to landowners and others. Some carry false business cards that imply an affiliation with a university, the state, or a professional archeological organization. They subscribe to artifact magazines that pretend to decry the destruction of sites on the one hand, while promoting looting and the sale of artifacts on the other. Looters sometimes write pseudo-scientific articles for pseudo-scientific collectors' journals and artifact magazines in order to convince others of their concocted archaeological qualifications.

They justify their sale of artifacts—often from looted human burials—as being healthy “free enterprise,” and loudly label as socialists or communists those who would question the appropriateness of applying the concept of free enterprise to a market in human remains and burial goods. They may sell the artifacts directly to wealthy collectors or to art galleries that cater to wealthy and sometimes politically influential collectors. Most transactions are conducted in cash in order to avoid paying taxes.

Looters brand professional archaeologists as greedy antiquarians who want to monopolize archeological sites for their own personal gain, and they often do so with little or no knowledge of what the science of archaeology is all about. At times they join forces with dealers of antiquities and influential artifact collectors to fight legislation intended to protect archaeological sites and cemeteries. Rarely are looters able to see beyond their own lifetime to a world in need of the archaeological sites that they are in the process of destroying. Only rarely would they care.

If this summation seems overly harsh, one should consider the long-range consequences of humanities' losses to looters. Much of what we know about ancient Egypt today comes from the discovery by archaeologists of just a few tombs—such as that of Tutankhamen—that were fortuitously overlooked by looters through the ages. Commercial looters have wreaked havoc for generations on the ancient population centers of Mesoamerica and South America, even to the extent that armed guards are necessary to protect
sites during ongoing scientific investigations.

Closer to home, most of the more significant Puebloan sites of the Southwestern United States have at one time or another suffered massive destruction at the hands of looters. Even the waters of time cannot conceal important archaeological sites from looters, as attested by the many devastated historical shipwrecks in our coastal zones. When viewed over the long term, the cumulative effects of selective looting are almost beyond comprehension. Clearly, archaeologists today are left with only a fraction of the database needed to adequately reconstruct past human lifeways. As this sentence is being written, literally hundreds of archaeological sites are being surface collected and dug by hobbyists and looters across Texas alone.

**Milquetoast Advocacy**

Archaeologists in Texas and other states have been publishing ominous warnings about the long-term consequences of site looting since at least the early 1930s. Witness Victor J. Smith’s (1931:60-61) early observation to the effect that:

> It is important that complete ones [records] be secured before the damage or entire loss of materials make investigations impossible. For example, pictographs in certain localities are being rapidly obliterated by vandals, and treasure hunters are digging into much valuable scientific material with no thought of the havoc being wrought to anthropological research.

Or Cyrus N. Ray’s (1932:63) lament that:

> Many of the Indian burial sites in this section have been destroyed either by readers of current treasure hunting fiction books who take their stories seriously or by arrowhead collectors who imagine that every aboriginal grave must be full of arrowheads . . . it is very unfortunate that people who care nothing for the preservation of the bones of these curious human types for scientific study continue to excitedly dig into every rock pile found.

Although archaeologists have long been aware of the magnitude of site destruction, they have been ineffectual at combating the problem. This circumstance is in part the result of a double standard long practiced by archaeologists in their dealings with artifact collectors and site looters. In effect, the archaeological community has advanced a kind of contradictory “milquetoast advocacy” in dealing with hard-core looters—on the one hand using only gentle persuasion to discourage their activities, while on the other
hand soliciting whatever tidbits of information the looters are willing to part with concerning their "finds."

In Texas, archaeologists have for years attempted to validate this approach with polemic debate over whether confrontation would result in the looters going underground with their finds and their booty, thus ruling out any possibility of an information flow. As archaeologists have waffled in typical fashion over this issue, hard-core looters have happily plied their trade, confident in the knowledge that the archaeological community was divided, manageable, and loathe to interfere. A secondary outgrowth of this deplorable situation has been the ever-increasing sophistication with which looters manipulate and beguile archaeologists and preservationists.

In reality, the archaeologists’ continued fumbling and fears about the potential loss of information that might occur if hard-core looters were to go underground with their discoveries is, at best, unfounded. While it is true that many significant archaeological discoveries have been made by persons other than archaeologists, such finds have typically been reported to professional archaeologists by hobbyists, avocational archaeologists, or the general public—and not by hard-core looters and pothunters. The amount of truly substantive archaeological data contributed through the years by looters—who are identifiable by their shovels and picks, not their pencils and notebooks—would hardly fill a thimble. The decades-long reluctance of archaeologists to remove their gloves to confront looting head-on has only served to fuel the fires of site destruction. This is particularly true of states like Texas, where more than 90 percent of the land is privately owned and not subject to federal or state antiquities laws.

The small size of the archaeological community also has been a major factor limiting site preservation efforts. There are untold thousands of artifact collectors for each archaeologist in the United States, thus necessitating the use of television and the printed word to spread the preservation message. The development of educational messages and programs for television are expensive and time-consuming, and relatively few archaeologists are willing to take time away from pressing research and contractual deadlines to devote to fundraising and preservation issues. In those cases where strong, effective media messages have been successfully developed, their use has been restricted almost exclusively to educational television channels that are either unavailable to, or unlikely to be watched, by the majority of collectors and looters. Devising ways of bringing the preservation message to expensive prime-time television is a major challenge that has yet to be faced by the archaeological and preservationist communities.

**UNDER NOT-SO-FRIENDLY FIRE**

The rise of Native American repatriation issues during the past fifteen years has served to further exacerbate the site looting problem. As
archaeologists have become more preoccupied with the pressing issues of reburial and have come increasingly under attack by Native American and other proponents of repatriation, pothunters and antiquities dealers have enjoyed unprecedented periods of worry-free looting and commercial trade.

In their quest to win the emotionally and politically heated issue of repatriation, Native Americans have ignored the much larger, insidious problem of site looting. The remarkable apathy characteristically shown by Native Americans toward looters and pothunters has long perplexed archaeologists—particularly those who have dedicated the better part of their careers to preserving Native American sites including cemeteries. Attempts by archaeologists to promote anti-looting activism among Native Americans have failed. Ironically, those archaeologists who have alone carried out the brunt of the battle against looting through the decades suddenly found themselves targeted as “looters” by Native Americans during the 1980s. During long-running repatriation debates, archaeologists ultimately squared off against each other, and Native Americans broke down into a multitude of pan-Indian and tribal factions.

The eventual passage of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act at the federal level was viewed as a major victory by Native Americans but it is a hollow victory at best. While Native Americans busy themselves seeing that major universities and museums turn over our nation’s only scientifically derived collections of skeletal remains, burial artifacts, and ceremonial objects for reburial, enterprising looters are diligently churning through the last remaining Native American cemeteries for objects to collect and sell. The invaluable and irreplaceable scientific collections contained in our university repositories and museums comprise only a miniscule percentage of those in the hands of collectors and looters nationwide. For each human burial scientifically excavated by archaeologists, untold numbers have been ripped out of the ground by looters. While preoccupied with a tree, Native Americans and archaeologists are losing the forest.

Archaeologists should learn from their experiences with legislators and with the media during the repatriation debate. Archaeologists have been variously portrayed by Native American activists as callous, self-serving, greedy, ruthless, and even racist. Activists have effectively exploited the emotional appeal of their cause to the general public with the aid and abetment of the media. Archaeologists, on the other hand, have typically found themselves backed into defensive positions, often having to explain the basic tenants of archaeological inquiry, as well as the differences between professional archaeologists, avocational archaeologists, museum curators, hobbyists, collectors, looters, pothunters, and antiquities dealers to legislators and journalists—all usually in five minutes or less. Archaeologists generally have not fared well in these situations—much to the delight of the activists. In fact, the explanatory difficulties faced by archaeologists clearly point out weaknesses in the way the discipline has interacted—or more
appropriately, not interacted—with the public through the years.

Large segments of the general public still do not recognize the difference between nineteenth century antiquarianism and modern archaeology. In their efforts to provide simple and succinct fare for the public, journalists have further blurred the distinction between artifact collectors and professional archaeologists. The failure of archaeologists to effectively make their case understood should be a major point of concern, particularly when one considers that, having won the first battle, Native American activists can now be expected to pursue additional legislative efforts aimed at further restricting the freedoms of legitimate archaeological practitioners. If nothing else, archaeologists should now be more cognizant of the need for professionalization of the discipline through organizations like the Society of Professional Archaeologists.

A very positive outcome of the repatriation debacle, however, has been the passage in numerous states of new laws to protect unmarked human burials and burial objects on both public and private lands—while at the same time allowing for legitimate scientific inquiry. Passage of such legislation has proven more difficult in some states than in others, for a variety of reasons. In Texas, hard-fought attempts beginning in 1987 to pass unmarked burial legislation were thwarted first by antiquities dealers and influential artifact collectors, and most recently (1993) by pan-Indian organizations narrowly focused on repatriation of scientific collections rather than in-ground protection for burials. During the last attempt at passage in Texas in 1993, state officials were wrongly accused by pan-Indian groups of trying to circumvent the federal Native American Graves Protection Act, and professional archaeologists and museum officials were—as expected—portrayed as being collectors and looters during public testimonies by pan-Indian representatives. Through it all, looters have proceeded with their destruction of Native American sites and burials on private property, particularly in the prehistoric Caddo Indian area of northeast Texas.

States that have successfully passed new legislation to protect unmarked burials, of course, now are faced with the task of how to effectively enforce the law. Looters, like poachers, are difficult to catch, particularly when they are focusing their activities on private property, with or without landowner permission. Once apprehended, vigorous prosecution of looters must be pursued by local law enforcement officials if the law is to be truly effective. Since many looters make large profits from the sale of artifacts from burials, it is the prospect of incarceration, rather than fines, that should be emphasized. At any rate, the acid test for these new state laws will be in courts across the country, and both scientific and Native American communities should strive to provide cooperative support of law enforcement efforts.
Archaeologists and Native Americans alike could profit from a period of self-analysis and reflection as we rapidly approach the twenty-first century. The Native American community which, as a result of the repatriation issue, is again entangled in the question of who does or does not qualify as “Indian,” should attempt an objective analysis of what it expects to gain through past and projected future confrontations with scientists and preservationists. Having once targeted the archaeological community as the “enemy” and easily won, Native Americans perhaps should now ask if archaeologists are not, in fact, their most natural and consistent ally in their battle to gain respect and equality in American society.

Do Native Americans really believe—as they have so often expressed during heated debate—that scientific findings concerning their cultures are meaningless in light of their cultures’ oral traditions? Do they honestly believe that scientific findings, which have proven so important in dispelling the prejudiced European concepts of the “barbarous savage,” are somehow deleterious to their well-being? And are Native Americans truly indifferent to the fact that their unwritten cultural legacy is seriously endangered because of the activities of uncaring looters, or do they simply feel powerless to do anything about it?

These are but a few of the questions in need of careful thought by Native Americans. They are questions that should be answered not for the sake of archaeologists but, rather, for the long-term well-being of the respective cultures. The ancient cultures that are brought back to life by archaeologists through studies of their carefully excavated artifacts provide critical linkages for Native Americans to their past. Through the act of reburial, our only hard evidence of the existence of some ancient cultures will be permanently expunged from the archaeological record. Are proponents of repatriation really correct in assuming that future generations of Native Americans will approve of what is transpiring today? Again, these are important questions that are best considered outside the sphere of emotional debate, and without pressing external influences.

The large-scale attrition of archaeological sites by looters on the one hand, in conjunction with the repatriation of our only scientifically derived collections from major museums and universities on the other, should certainly provide archaeologists with food for thought in contemplating the future of archaeological research and site preservation. Clearly, archaeologists have not performed well in critical areas of public education and public involvement—and our past tendency to ignore living Native American peoples has come full circle. The pantheon of errors created by archaeologists, Native Americans, artifact collectors, journalists, and the public during the debate over repatriation has generally served as a recipe for chaos rather than enlightenment. But we can and should learn from the experience.
It should be patently obvious to archaeologists by now that the public cannot be expected to benefit educationally from archaeological research when the end products of such research are long, mind-numbing technical reports. The inability of much of the public—including many Native Americans and journalists—to differentiate at this late date between professional archaeologists and artifact collectors is alarming, and graphically points out the urgent need for archaeologists to critically evaluate their philosophy and goals.

If archaeological research culminates in products that are only comprehensible to other archaeologists, how can we hope to generate anything beyond a superficial, arrowhead stereotype in the public-at-large? If the public has no conception of what we mean by the term "scientific potential," how can we expect a positive reaction to our requests for public participation in site preservation? After a century of scientific archaeological research in the New World, our library shelves should be teeming with highly readable texts for children and adults alike—but they are not, and prospects appear dim for the immediate future. We should cater to the average person’s innate curiosity about the past through clearly written, informative, and well-conceived educational and preservation-oriented publications. Since it is the romanticism of the past that invites public interest in the first place, archaeologists should become more adept at writing popular narratives that encourage, rather than discourage, emotional linkages to the past. If carefully conceived, these writings can be achieved without loss of archaeological and historical accuracy.

Even more importantly, archaeologists must seriously enter the realm of telecommunications to carry their message to the public. While this only can be achieved through cooperative ventures with people specializing in the preparation of audio-visual materials, archaeologists can help to provide raw material both for archival and educational use by filming aspects of their survey, excavation, and laboratory projects. Communications specialists need to be added to—and must become integral parts of—our archaeological staffs. Perhaps the single greatest challenge facing archaeological preservationists is the need to become involved with primetime, as well as educational, television. The exorbitant costs of placing public service announcements on prime-time television are intimidating, but ways must be found to pursue this goal if we are to reach the majority of the public. In addition, archaeologists must stay abreast of and exploit developments in computer-related communications, which undoubtedly will set the pace for the future. Archaeologists and other preservationists cannot hope to stem the tide of site looting by themselves, but they must be willing to provide a focus for the efforts of all concerned. The active participation of landowners, teachers, Native American and other ethnic groups, avocational archaeologists, and various other segments of our population are critical to success. We should expand existing programs, such as avocational stewardship networks.
and planning groups, that directly involve the public in archaeological research and preservation. Whenever possible, open-door educational tours for the public at active scientific excavations should be pursued to bring the public into direct contact with professional and avocational archaeologists. An open-door educational approach should definitely be extended to appropriate cultural resource management projects that use tax money. Since we must have the public's help and its funding in order to save our resource base, we must learn to give as much back to the public as we can—it is, after all, a two-way street.

Hard-core looters and commercial artifact dealers, of course, pose a special problem for archaeologists and preservationists, since they typically are oblivious to preservation efforts. On those rare occasions when looters initiate contact with professional archaeologists concerning a significant discovery, we should make an effort to work with them in the interest of the resource base, and we should do so in a very forthright manner. Our educational focus, however, should be centered on those segments of the population that are receptive to our message—particularly children, teachers, landowners, artifact hobbyists, and others. Although terribly destructive, hard-core looters make up a relatively small proportion of the artifact-collecting public, and they can best be dealt with through landowner education and legal avenues. Our potentially most effective weapon in the battle with looters are Native Americans and other victimized ethnic groups, who through activism and/or emotional appeal could accomplish a great deal more than archaeologists.

I hope our remaining few years of this century can be spent wisely in search of new and innovative ways of reaching out to the public, and in expanding existing programs that have been tested and proven effective. It should also be a time for the healing of wounds between two natural allies—the archaeological and Native American communities. Change cannot necessarily be directed or controlled, and the twenty-first century will undoubtedly see significant changes in archaeology. Importantly, as noted by J. Frank Dobie in Voice of the Coyote, "it takes more power of thought to meet change than to make it."

REFERENCES

