

Looking Back: A career of 'looking back'

Jo Baeza | Posted: Tuesday, March 22, 2016 5:00 am

Dr. John R. Welch has made a career of "looking back." Way, way back. He's not old, but his lifetime of studies have been in the fields of archaeology, anthropology and history. It's hard to believe such a distinguished scholar was once appointed the "Garbage Czar" for the University of Arizona archaeology field school during excavations at Grasshopper Ruin on the Fort Apache Reservation where he was a staffer from 1984 to 1989.

His innate urge to be of service and to do the work others eschewed led him to accept the job. It included separating field school refuse into recyclables, burnables and "slop," material not even he could burn and had to pack to the Cibecue dump.

John also became adept at hauling generators, drinking water, gasoline and students between stints of excavations and field surveys.

Grubbing around in the dirt under a hot sun in remote corners of the world is not everyone's idea of fun, but field work led John to a deeper purpose.

During his time at Grasshopper he found his place, one to which he would always return. He wrote: "In 1984, on the staff of the University of Arizona Archaeology field school, I fell in love." He would work four more seasons at Grasshopper surrounded by the "seductive buttes and canyons of White Mountain Apache lands." He grew to love the White Mountain Apache people (who call themselves Ndee) as much as the land they hold sacred.

As his understanding increased, he knew he wanted to advocate for White Mountain Apaches in their struggle for sovereignty — not just political sovereignty, but the ability to decide the future of their own land and culture rather than having it decided for them by people of a different way of thinking.

John was born in Denver, Colo., in 1961. In an article for the Arizona Anthropologist Centennial in 2015, he wrote that his career began in childhood.

"I sometimes quip that I learned everything I know in fifth grade ... Mr. McKenna's science course laid foundations for Mrs. Priest's social science course. During those nine months (1971-72) at Graland School I became much of what I am still: an environmentalist and an anthropologist and archeologist interested in Native peoples and lands ...

"[At Grasshopper] I began to see how land use and modification efforts at the hands of non-Apaches had, since the establishment of Fort Apache in the 1870s, impacted people as well as soils, springs, forests, and streams."

He concluded, "As my advocacy found voice and met with some success, I experienced unprecedented energy and creativity. My best guess is that this stems from my father, whose Irish Catholic family had a cross burned at their eastern Colorado home by the Ku Klux Klan."

Following graduation from Hamilton College in New York, he chose to attend graduate school at the University of Arizona "because of the Anthropology Department's close ties with tribes." His post-graduate work included projects in Hawaii, Morocco, British Columbia and Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico, but, he said, "heartstrings tether my career to the Fort Apache Reservation."

For several years during and after his time at Grasshopper John worked as a contractor for the White Mountain Apache Tribe and Bureau of Indian Affairs, then was hired as the local BIA archaeologist in 1992. He helped implement the 1993 Master Plan for Fort Apache that called for "property preservation for tourism-based economic development and cultural interpretation."

The tribe named John the tribal historic preservation officer in 1996. He served in that position until 2005 when he vacated it to enable the promotion of tribal member Mark Altaha.

John wrote: "Long evening meetings with the Tribe's Cultural Advisory Board and other encounters with Apache elders sensitized me to the injustices associated with government policies and practices and to the profound senses of loss and indignation graciously woven into most Apache elders' characters."

During John's years with the tribe, far-reaching changes were taking place in relationships between the tribe and the federal government. Fort Apache was established in the 1870s as a cavalry outpost to protect both newcomers from Apache raids and Apache people from further incursion by newcomers.

The army used it as a forward-operating base from which to hunt down and subdue other Apache groups that resisted U.S. authority and occupation.

Having no more need for a military base in 1922, the army abandoned Fort Apache and turned the property over to the Department of the Interior for use as a BIA Indian boarding school. Navajo children and others were removed from their homes and taken to Theodore Roosevelt School for the purpose of indoctrination and assimilation into the white man's world. While vocational training and learning English were useful to many students, forbidding them to practice their native languages and cultures couldn't have been more harmful.

In the 1960s, protests by Native American advocates led Congress to vote to hold in trust for the tribe 400 acres of land surrounding Fort Apache with stipulations that discouraged any meaningful development. Fort Apache fell into disrepair.

A break came in 1976 when the National Park Service listed Fort Apache on the National Register of Historic Places.

Traditional Apaches became increasingly aware of the need to perpetuate their identity as a people while their language and traditions were still alive and well. In 1969 the tribe established the first Apache Cultural Center and Museum in the fort's oldest log cabin.

Later, the museum moved to the former enlisted men's quarters, an adobe barracks facing the old military parade ground.

Edgar Perry and his staff went to work collecting historical items and taping stories and songs of elders. The original staff was composed of Marie Perry, Canyon Quintero and Ann Skidmore. They worked closely with Sid Brinckerhoff and the staff of the Arizona Historical Society in Tucson.

The museum and contents were destroyed by fire in 1985, but the staff saved about 400 audiotapes that were subsequently transcribed from the Apache language and preserved.

After the fire, the museum regrouped in the original log cabin, making plans and seeking funds to rebuild. Started in 1985 with meager insurance settlement funds, and finally completed 12 years later, the tribe opened a new museum at the western edge of Fort Apache in 1997. Nohwike' Bagowa (House of Our Footprints), the White Mountain



Dr. John Welch

The White Mountain Apache Tribe named Dr. John Welch the tribal historic preservation officer in 1996. He served in that position until 2005.

Apache Cultural Center and Museum, is dedicated to the continuation and celebration of Ndee heritage.

The World Monument Fund placed Fort Apache on its 100 Most Endangered Sites list and awarded \$80,000 to the tribe for preservation efforts. The tribe chartered the nonprofit Fort Apache Heritage Foundation in 1998 and continued restoration efforts as money became available. In 1999 the tribe filed suit against the U.S. government in the Court of Claims to recover damages that resulted from the mismanagement of Fort Apache and the failure to uphold their trust responsibility. Victory came in 2003 when the Supreme Court found in favor of the tribe.

Finally, in 2012 Secretary of Interior Salazar designated Fort Apache and Theodore Roosevelt School as a National Historic Landmark with Kinishba Ruins as a satellite NHL.

John's latest contribution to the Ndee past is a recently released book: "Dispatches from the Fort Apache Scout, White Mountain and Cibecue Apache History Through 1881," Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2016. It may be purchased online, through the University of Arizona Press or booksellers.

Welch edited the book, which consists of writings by Arizona historian, journalist and librarian Lori Davisson, with Edgar Perry and the original staff of the White Mountain Cultural Center. The book showcases dispatches published between June 1973 and October 1977 that appeared in the tribal newspaper, Fort Apache Scout, as a 28-part series on Western Apache history and culture. It begins with an Apache Creation Story told by Cline Griggs Sr., continues with early Spanish, Mexican and American entradas, and takes events forward to the Battle of Cibecue in 1881.

White Mountain Apache Tribal Chairman Ronnie Lupe writes: "Grounded in some of our old people's memories and what some of the first visitors to our land wrote down, this book is worth reading. It shows how Fort Apache became the gateway through which the non-Indians marched into our lives and changed them forever."

John Welch, PhD, continues his work at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, as a professor jointly appointed in the Department of Archaeology and the School of Resource and Environmental Management, but he returns to Arizona regularly.

His wife, Jami Macarty, is a poet, past director of the Tucson Poetry Festival and an editor at Maynard online poetry magazine.