

Webster, Chris
2014 *Field Archaeologist's Survival Guide*. Left Coast Press, Inc. Walnut Creek, CA.
157 pages. ISBN: 9781611329285

Abstract: *This book provides a brief overview of entry-level jobs for archaeologists in the cultural resource management field and advice on how to get a job and survive working in the field.*

This slim book by Chris Webster provides insight into the lifestyle of the itinerant archaeology field technician. In the United States, where government-mandated archaeological investigation is required prior to some construction projects, a cultural resource management (CRM) company is usually hired to perform the work. Field technicians (a.k.a. field archaeologists, field techs, or shovelbums) do the majority of the physical labor, including surveying the ground surface for artifacts, digging small test pits or larger excavation units, mapping sites, and recording data.

Aimed at the aspiring field tech, this book consists of 21 brief chapters divided into five sections and six appendices, that cover getting hired, doing the work, efficiently keeping yourself fed and sheltered while working in the field, and preparing yourself for stretches of both voluntary and involuntary unemployment. This book would be a good choice for interested undergraduates and for professors who need to advise undergraduates

who are thinking about entering the field.

The first section covers the educational requirements (a bachelor's degree and an archaeology field school) for an entry level job, how to prepare a curriculum vitae and cover letter, how to find job notices, and how to approach a job interview. This chapter is perhaps the most valuable in the book. In CRM, the interview is not so much an opportunity for the employer to determine if the field tech is a good fit for the job, as it is the only opportunity for the applicant to learn the details about working conditions. Webster lists the questions to ask before accepting a job (these are also repeated in one of the appendices). While some may seem obvious, like pay rate and length of the project, novice techs may not think to ask other questions about the work schedule (some projects work ten days in a row, followed by four days off, rather than a traditional five-day work week), or if travel time to and from the work site is considered part of the work day.

Then there's the magical mother lode of money that, if spent wisely, can mean the difference between misery and freedom. On many non-local projects, in addition to wages, workers receive an additional payment, or per diem, intended to cover the cost of food and lodging while in the field. While the book gives the impression that all projects include a per diem; this is not the case. Frugal field techs, by doing things like sleeping in their cars rather than in motel rooms or bringing inexpensive food with them instead of eating at restaurants, can bank much of this money. Therefore, the

most important interview questions to ask are about per diem: how much is it, how is it paid out, and do you need to turn in receipts to be reimbursed? In a particularly cruel-sounding business practice, some businesses apparently require an employee to pay back the per diem if they are out sick for a day. Although not mentioned in the book, field techs and company owners should be aware that per diem not actually used for food and lodging in the field likely needs to be reported to the IRS as taxable income.

The second section, Shovelbumming, includes chapters on personal equipment, like trowels and backpacks, that you may need to provide, types of projects you may work on, and job positions or titles in a typical CRM company. Other chapters discuss options for shelter and sustenance while working in the field and provide useful information on adapting to living in a hotel room or tent for weeks or months at a time. Webster advocates avoiding restaurants and convenience stores for financial and health reasons, instead recommending bringing preserved foods with you and cooking in your hotel room. He even includes one recipe; the three ingredients are meat, vegetables, and ramen noodles.

The next two sections include a somewhat random assortment of topics: mapping systems, how to draw a site map using a compass and pacing, a two-and-a-half-page chapter explaining the site numbering system used throughout much of the country, a similar description of the Munsell soil color system, and a chapter on dimensional lumber (e.g., 2x4s), which, if

found on a historical archaeological site, can provide a rough estimate of the site's age.

The final section includes chapters on dealing with unemployment, winter (when jobs can be harder to find in many parts of the country), and returning to the job market after an absence. In what is likely to be a controversial chapter, the author explains the process of filing for unemployment in his home state of Nevada, and then says:

Many people have political objections to filing for unemployment and think that too many people feel entitled to it and end up just staying on it as long as they can. I feel that CRM archaeology is one of the few professions where people earn their unemployment every year. We work hard during the year, and if there simply isn't any work over the winter then you should be able to draw unemployment. Consider it a gift from the people of the state you live in for helping to record and preserve their history. (pp. 122-123)

It is difficult to interpret this any other way than Webster stating that the majority of people drawing unemployment do not deserve it, but he and field techs do, because they "work hard". It is also misguided to consider unemployment benefits a 'gift' to anyone, and, in fact, as so much cultural resource work is

funded by government projects like roads and bridges, taxpayers are already paying CRM companies and their employees to record history.

In the next chapter on what to do during the winter, the author says “I personally think it’s best to not work” (p. 127) so you can do something fun or educational for a few months. This is supposed to be funded by money the field tech has saved over the rest of the year. Interestingly, he does not recommend looking for alternate types of jobs during these dry spells.

Overall, there is useful information in this book for someone considering working as a field archaeologist. The first two sections are the strongest and most informative. The other sections provide just enough information that complete novices will be familiar with things like the UTM system, but this book is not (and does not attempt to be) a substitute for an actual guide to conducting archaeological fieldwork. There are, however, several issues that are particularly important to field archaeologists that are not addressed in this book, including workers’ compensation, health and disability insurance, and Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations for worker safety (other than a recommendation to find out if your employer requires your safety vest to be a specific color).

While there is practical advice here, the book may be most valuable if it starts conversations in classrooms, in the field, or in offices about whether the labor market in archaeology should be run the way it is. Is it right for companies to expect their temporary employees to live this way, simply because they can rely on an abundance of newly graduated anthropology majors to fill these field tech positions? Is there a difference between sleeping in the back of your truck because you want to, and because that is all you can afford? How does the life of an archaeology field tech reflect larger labor issues in the United States? There are no answers in this book, but if people who teach anthropology undergraduates or hire field techs read this book, perhaps these questions will actually be asked more often.

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