

Darren Parry, Keynote Speaker  
National Archaeology Educators Conference  
Southern Utah University, Cedar City, Utah  
October 24-27, 2024

***Reclaiming the Past: Indigenous Perspectives on Archaeology and Hard History***

A grandfather sat down with his granddaughter by the fire one evening. She had been reading her school textbook about Native Americans and came to him with a question. "Grandfather, why do they always talk about us like we only existed in the past? It seems like they love the old stories but do not care about what's happening to us now."

The old man smiled sadly, and poked at the fire with a stick. He had lived long enough to see many things change; but this question always stirred something deep within him.

"You see, he began slowly, America loves the Dead Indian. They love the stories, the legends, the dances, and the songs from long ago. They love to look at us in museums, frozen in time. To them, we are something from the past, a relic of a history that makes them feel special, almost like they were the ones who discovered us."

He sighed and looked in his granddaughter's eyes. "But America does not love the Living Indian. The Indian who is still here, still fighting, still trying to make a future in his lands. The living Indian challenges their story, because we remind them that the past is over. We are not just a memory in their history books, or in their museums. We are here, standing in front of them, asking for justice, recognition, and for reconciliation.

The granddaughter frowned, trying to understand. "But why can't they love us now, like they did before?" "Because to love us now," the grandfather said, "would mean they have to acknowledge the harm they have done, the land they have taken, the promises they have broken. It is easier for them to love us when we were a ghost from the past. It is not as easy to love us as a people with needs, voices, and futures that are in the present."

The fire crackled and popped, sending sparks into the night sky. "But We Are Still Here. The grandfather continued. We carry our ancestors in our hearts and our future in our hands. They may want to keep us in the past, but we are walking forward. And it is our job, my granddaughter, to keep walking, to keep speaking, to keep reminding them that the Living Indian is not going anywhere."

The granddaughter nodded; her face illuminated by the firelight. She understood now, and she was going to fight for the rest of her life to make sure her people are remembered in the present.

As we think for a minute about the story of the dead Indian, and the way America romanticizes the past while neglecting the present struggles of indigenous peoples, we might ask ourselves what it means to truly remember. Maybe it is not enough to admire stories of resiliency and survival from a distance; you must also confront the realities of the violence, erasure, and

ongoing challenges that native communities face today. The granddaughter in the story understood that true remembrance means more than honoring the past, it means fighting for justice in the present. That fight begins with truth telling, by bringing to light the stories that have been buried or distorted; stories of real people's lives that were forever changed by the events of history. This is one such story!!!

Chief Sagwitch, being an early riser, got up as usual on the morning of January 29, 1863. He left his tepee and stood outside surveying the area around the camp. As he stepped outside, the hills to the east of the camp were covered with a steaming mist, which seemed to creep lower down the hill. The chief was not surprised.

He started calling to the sleeping village, who woke, and quickly gathered their bows and arrows, tomahawks and a few rifles. Some of the Indians were so excited that they gathered up whatever was in sight to fight with. Some of the women picked up their woven willow winnow pans and baskets to use them as shields.

He told his people to be brave and calm. Some of the Indians ran toward the river and dropped into the snow. Some dropped into the children's play fox holes that had been dug along the river bank.

The army approached the river and Connor and his men began to fire on the Indians. But what are arrows compared to Army rifles. The soldiers began to massacre Indian men, women, and children, holding the infants by their heels while they "beat their brains out on any hard surface they could find." My people were being slaughtered like wild rabbits.

The massacre started early in the morning and lasted until the early afternoon. The Bear River, which was frozen solid in the morning, was now starting to flow. The Shoshone people were now jumping into the river and trying to escape by swimming across.

The blazing white snow was brilliant red with blood. The willow trees that were used for protection were now bent down as if in defeat. The old dry leaves which had been clinging to the willows were flying through the air like whizzing bullets.

Local Mormon resident Alexander Stalker noted that once the Indians had been routed, the soldiers pulled their pistols, and shot many of them directly in the face at arm's length. Soldiers then began burning the lodges, killing any they found still living.

Many Indian women also jumped into the river and swam with their babies on their backs. Most of them died. One Indian woman named Anzee-Chee was being chased by the soldiers. She jumped into the river and hid under an overhanging bank along with several other women. It was then that Anzee-Chee's baby started crying. Afraid that the baby would reveal their location, she chose to drown her own baby. By doing this they were all saved.

She watched the battle from her hiding place, while trying to nurse the 7 bullet wounds that she had received to her shoulder and breast. Anzee-Chee carried the scars for the rest of her

life. She would often show them to the young Indian children as she told of the massacre of their people.

Almost all of the fatalities among the soldiers happened in the first frontal attack. What weapons Sagwitch and his people had at their disposal were used during this first onslaught. As the army regrouped and began to flank the encampment, the work of death intensified. The Shoshone were now out of ammunition and at the mercy of the soldiers. What may have started as a battle quickly turned into an indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of my people

Following the massacre, Connor allowed Mormon settlers to survey the remains of the village. James Martineau was sickened by what he saw, noting that "many of the squaws were killed because they would not submit to lie down and be ravished."

By nightfall the Indians who had escaped were cold, wet and hungry. There was no food, the soldiers had done a good job of scattering the Shoshone provisions on the ground and setting fire to them. All of the tepees were burnt to the ground except one, which had been shredded to pieces and now resembled netting. This was the tepee of Chief Sagwitch and his family.

Sagwitch was stunned. He mournfully gazed at the scene. He remembered the many seasons the Northwestern Shoshones had spent in and around Battle Creek on the Bear River. He sighed and turned away. The bodies of dead Indians were everywhere. Chief Sagwitch probably began to realize that there were two different groups in his world. One group was greedy and wanted everything. The other group only wanted to live and travel around their land as they had done for centuries before. The first group made their wishes and dreams come true by making themselves the conqueror, at the expense of a defenseless people who only wanted to be left alone.

Ralph Smith, a Franklin area settler, summed up the sentiments of the local Mormons who looked upon the massacre as "gruesome, but necessary," and added, "The work of Patrick Connor and the soldiers was nothing less than an intervention from our Heavenly Father."

The morning after the massacre, local Mormons William Head, William Nelson and William Hull traveled to the massacre site from Franklin looking for survivors. Hull later wrote: "We drove our sleighs as far as the river. The first site to greet us was an old Indian walking, slowly with arms folded, his head bowed in grief, lamenting the dead; he didn't speak to us and soon left, going towards the north.

Never will I forget the scene, dead bodies were everywhere. I counted eight deep in one place and in several places were three to five deep; all in all we counted more than four hundred dead; two-thirds of this number being women and children. We found two Indian women alive who's thighs had been broken by the bullets. Two little boys and one little girl about three years of age were still living. The little girl was badly wounded, having eight wounds to her body. We took them on our horses to the sleigh, and made them as comfortable as possible."

Fear of the dead was among the Shoshone people at this time; they feared that the dead would return to call the living. Mourners would practice ritual purification. A medicine man told the Band that they should be thankful for the snow that fell on the scene of the massacre, as the

new snow covered the tracks left by the Indians who had escaped with their lives. The spirits are no longer walking the grounds of Mo-so-de-kane (home of the lungs), the medicine man said.

There is a plaque on the site today, erected in 1932 by the residents of Franklin County, that purports to recount the events of that fateful day. What the monument really accomplishes is to give people a reason to forget. Its self-justifying language strips us of our obligation to find out for ourselves what actually took place, and it always tells us how it wants the past to be remembered.

The plaque reads: "Attacks by the Indians on the peaceful inhabitants in this vicinity led to the final battle here on January 29, 1863. The conflict occurred in deep snow and bitter cold. Scores of wounded and frozen soldiers were taken from the battlefield to the Latter-Day Saint community of Franklin, Idaho. Here pioneer women, trained through trials and necessity of frontier living, accepted the responsibility of caring for the wounded until they could be removed to Camp Douglas, Utah. Two Indian women and their children, found alive after the encounter, were given homes in Franklin."

The problem with this narrative, besides its obvious lies, is that it only gives one perspective. The plaque teaches that to the pioneer people, violence on the frontier was a necessity for the survival of Mormon communities, and it shows the consequences when whites and Indians had to share the same space. It legitimizes the use of violence if it meant that their communities would be safe.

What if the plaque had been written from the Northwestern Band's perspective? It might have said this: "The massacre of the Northwestern Shoshone Nation occurred in this vicinity on January 20, 1863. Colonel Patrick E. Connor led California Volunteers from Camp Douglas, Utah, and attacked a sleeping Indian village in the early morning hours of the day. The soldiers shot, raped, bludgeoned and bayoneted several hundred men, women and children to death. The Indians fought back with the limited weapons available to them, but the Band was all but annihilated." So which version of the massacre is correct? I suppose it depends upon your perspective.

That monument was never meant to tell the story of the events of that fateful day. It was meant to tell us how it wants the past to be remembered. What the monument really accomplished for me is that it gave people a reason to forget. That monument strips us of our obligation to find out for ourselves what took place, and it tells us how it wants the past we remembered.

You see, humans have great memories for what they want to remember. In commemorating "the battle," you forget the uglier parts of history and you focus on the heroism of both soldier and Saint. That is a kind of Daughters of Utah Pioneers Monument that exists there today and that narrative now becomes a story. It is not a story about my people. It becomes a story about the brave soldiers and the pioneer women who took care of them. In constructing this monument, you firm up memory and you create a false history.

The massacre at Bear River was crucial to the history of Southern Idaho. It marked the closing of real conflict between the White Mormon pioneer settlers and the Indians in the territory. It allowed the settlers and farmers to encroach further into traditional Indian Territory without fear. The U.S. Army slaughtered nearly the entire Northwest Band because of trouble between a few Indians and the encroaching settlers. Patrick E. Connor was promoted to Brigadier General. But this is not the end!!!

Maybe the bigger question we need to ask ourselves is; how do we reconcile the past? Our goal, as Archeologists in history, should be to work hard to uncover it and preserve it. All of it. All of the stories, both written and oral. But, sometimes, our attempts are often clouded by our own current concerns, beliefs, and values.

How, then, do we understand the past that may be different from our present views and beliefs? Historical perspective involves viewing the past through the social, intellectual, and emotional lenses of the time, to understand what life was like for those who lived in it.

### **Center Indigenous Voices**

When examining events like the Bear River Massacre, it is vital to center indigenous voices to achieve an accurate and respectable interpretation of the past. For too long, history has been written by the victors-often colonial powers-leaving indigenous experiences and perspectives erased or misrepresented.

The massacre of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation at Bear River in 1863 is one such event that, despite its historical reports, remains largely forgotten or ignored by mainstream narratives. Recent efforts, including my 2018 book, have brought to light the story, from a Shoshone perspective. The indigenous voice provides essential context to this and other violent historical episodes, not only as a corrective to the dominant narrative, but as a way to humanize the victims and survivors of these atrocities.

Indigenous people have unique cultural, spiritual, and ancestral ties to the land, which influence how they understand history. For the Shoshone people, the Bear River massacre isn't just a tragic historical event; it's an ongoing trauma that continues to shape the identity and collective memory of their people today.

By centering indigenous voices, archaeologists and historians can better understand the significance of such events in the broader context of indigenous resistance, survival, and healing. It also acknowledges that history is not static; it lives on in the descendants of those affected by it, and their interpretation offers valuable insight into the ongoing impact of historical trauma.

Collaboration with indigenous communities is essential because it ensures that the work of archaeology is not only culturally sensitive but also aligned with the values and needs of those communities. The Bear River Massacre site, for example, holds deep emotional and spiritual significance for the Northwestern Band.

Research in such places should be guided by the affected community, respecting their wishes about how the story is told and how artifacts are handled. Involving indigenous voices from the

outset of archaeological work ensures that their history is not commodified or treated as mere data, but honored as a living narrative. Indigenous led collaborations in archaeology can lead to more complete and nuanced understandings of historical events. Archaeology can uncover physical evidence of massacres, or other forms of violence, but these findings often lack context without indigenous interpretation.

For example, the physical events of the massacre site may tell us how the people died, but only the stories passed down by survivors and descendants can tell us why it happened and how it affected their people. This holistic approach to archaeology acknowledges that artifacts and physical remains are only part of the story; oral traditions, cultural knowledge, and indigenous expertise are equally crucial in telling the full history.

Looking forward, archaeology has the potential to be a bridge to a better future by fostering reconciliation and healing. As more indigenous communities are brought into the fold of archaeological research, they gain greater control over their histories and can work to correct the historical record.

For non-indigenous people, this collaborative approach provides an opportunity to teach hard histories with honesty and humility. The role of the archaeologist, then, is not merely to dig up the past, but to ensure that the stories unearthed are told in ways that honor the voices of those who lived them.

Ultimately, archaeology can be a tool for justice. By shedding light on forgotten and hidden histories, it can challenge the dominant narratives that often seek to minimize or erase the experiences of indigenous peoples. Archaeologists have a responsibility to approach their work, not only as a scientific endeavor, but as a form of ethical practice that acknowledges the humanity of those whose stories they uncover. In this way, archaeology can help build a more inclusive future, where the past is understood through the diverse voices of those who lived it.

### **Teaching Hard History**

Teaching hard history requires a commitment to telling the truth, even when the truth is painful. Events like the Bear River Massacre, where hundreds of Shoshone were slaughtered in one of the most violent episodes in US history, must be told with accuracy and honesty.

In many cases, history has been whitewashed or softened to make difficult truths easier to digest for certain audiences, but this doesn't serve justice to the real victims of these events, and it prevents us from learning the full scope of what happened. Archaeologists, historians, and educators must work together to ensure that the facts are not diluted, but instead preserved and presented with integrity.

Including Indigenous narratives are essential to understanding events like the Bear River Massacre because they provide the human dimension, often missing from official accounts. Too often, historical accounts from the perspective of settlers, soldiers, or governments dominate the narrative, while the lived experiences and ongoing trauma of indigenous people are sidelined. By teaching hard history with commitment to these stories, we give voice to

those who are directly affected and whose descendants continued to carry the weight of these tragedies.

Teaching hard history, especially traumatic events, involves deep emotional and ethical considerations. Students and educators alike must understand that discussing events like massacres, forced relocations, and cultural erasure, brings with it emotional weight.

For Native American communities, these are not just abstract historical events. They are deeply personal, and they cause pain across generations. As teachers and archaeologists, we need to create space for students to process these emotions while maintaining a respectful environment. It is crucial to teach with privity, allowing students to grapple with the painful truths of history without becoming overwhelmed or desensitized.

The ethical considerations also extend to the way we approach the physical remnants of these hard histories. Archaeology often deals with sensitive sites, mass graves, ceremonial grounds, or locations tied to violence and death. When excavating or studying these places, archaeologists must act with the most respect for the people who lived, and died, and have ongoing cultural ties to these areas.

Teaching students to approach their work with this kind of reverence is key to ethical practices in archaeology. We must instill in them the idea that they are not merely studying objects or data but engaging with legacies of real people whose stories deserve to be treated with dignity.

Archaeology can play a powerful role in truth telling. By uncovering evidence that either supports or challenges historical narratives. In many cases, physical evidence uncovered by archaeologists serves as a corrective to written history. By unearthing artifacts, remains, and environmental data, archaeologists provide concrete evidence needed to develop a fuller and more accurate version of the events.

For example, the Bear River massacre was long downplayed in American history, and treated as a minor skirmish rather than a massacre. It wasn't until archaeological evidence and indigenous oral histories came together that the true scope of the violence was recognized.

Teaching students how archaeology can uncover these truths helps them understand the critical role of evidence in challenging dominant historical narratives. Archaeology doesn't just fill in the gaps; it shines a light on the part of history that some would prefer to remain hidden.

Teaching students to engage in hard history through archaeology also involves fostering an ethical approach to storytelling. This means being mindful of how we frame the narratives that emerge from archaeological research. While evidence may speak to certain facts, the interpretation of the evidence requires careful consideration of the people whose stories are being told. For indigenous communities, there is often a fine line between honoring the past and reopening the wounds.

Archaeologists must work in partnership with indigenous people, to ensure that the narratives they construct from archaeological findings align with the cultural and emotional needs of those in the communities.

Ethical storytelling requires transparency about the limitations of archaeological evidence. Sometimes, there is the potential to over interpret findings, in ways that align with contemporary narratives or political agendas.

Teaching students the importance of restraint, humility, and collaboration in their interpretations is essential. We must show them that archaeology is not about creating definitive answers, but should be about creating an ongoing dialogue about the past. One that must always include the voices of those whose ancestors experienced these hard histories.

One of the most important lessons we can teach through the study of hard history is **empathy**. When students engage with the stories of suffering, resistance, and survival that are found in indigenous history, they begin to understand the human cost of historical events.

Teaching hard history is not just about transmitting facts; it's about fostering a deeper understanding of how history affects real people, both in the past and today. Encouraging students to empathize with those who suffered in events like the Bear River Massacre helps create a more compassionate and socially responsible approach to the study of history and archaeology.

**Empathy** also helps students develop a stronger ethical compass, as they approach their future work in archaeology or related fields. By understanding the emotional weight of history, students are more likely to approach their work with the respect and care that it requires.

They become more attuned to the needs of the community. They work with, and are more committed to ensuring that their work honors the lives and cultures they are studying.

Finally, teaching hard history through archaeology offers a unique opportunity to confront the past in a tangible way. While historical documents and accounts provide important context, there is something powerful about physically uncovering the remnants of the past.

When students participate in archaeological work on the sites like the Bear River Massacre or other places of trauma, they directly engage with the legacies of those events. This can be a deeply moving and transformative experience, one that connects them to history in ways that books and lectures cannot.

Archaeology, when done ethically and collaboratively, can be a force for truth-telling and reconciliation. It allows us to confront the hard histories that many would prefer to forget; but in doing so, it offers a path forward. By teaching students to approach these stories with accuracy and respect, we help ensure that the lessons of the past are not lost, but used to create a more just and inclusive future.

### **Call to Action:**

As we confront the hard histories of the past, we must recognize that the role of archaeologists is not just to uncover the past, but to ensure that it is told truthfully and respectfully.

Archaeology, when practiced with integrity, and in collaboration with indigenous communities, has the power to expose the truths that have long been buried, both literally and metaphorically.



By carefully and ethically interpreting these histories, archaeologists can help societies confront their past, acknowledging the pain and trauma caused by violence and colonialism. This process of truth telling is essential in honoring the lives that were lost and ensuring that their stories are not forgotten or misrepresented.

Archaeology's role goes beyond simply uncovering facts. It plays a crucial part in the larger journey towards healing. For indigenous communities, the telling of these hard histories can be a step towards reclaiming lost narratives, identity, and sovereignty.

When the truth is finally acknowledged, when the stories of the massacres, removals, and cultural erasures are finally told, there is a space for collective healing to begin. By listening to and working with indigenous peoples, archaeologists become partners in this healing process, helping to rewrite the narrative in a way that honors the resiliency and survival of those who endured these dramatic events.

Ultimately, teaching and understanding hard history is not just about reckoning with the past; it's about building a more hopeful future. As we confront these painful truths, we create communities for healing, reconciliation, and growth. Archaeology can be a powerful bridge, connecting us to the past while guiding us towards a better future.

In honoring the lives lost, and the voices that were silenced, we foster a society that learns from its mistakes; one that is committed to justice, understanding, and unity. Through this work, we can find hope in the possibility that hard history, when told truthfully, can lead to healing and a more compassionate world for future generations.