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Guiding Students to Discover the History of their Community

From the Valley of Heart's Delight in California to the Magic Valley of Texas, Dr. Russell Skowronek has dedicated much of his professional career to discovering the history of his community. Exploring beyond the confines of the classroom, he ventures into the landscape and listens to narratives about the region's earliest settlers. He takes students on a journey of examination that culminates in a comprehensive historical account of the region. He fosters imagination and illustrates the necessity of utilizing a variety of academic approaches to understanding the past in a way that allows all of the region's populace to benefit.

Dr. Skowronek attributes his passion for history and discovery to reading and family visits to national parks during his childhood. His father, an engineer by trade, was usually seen carrying a historical fiction book—a habit young Skowronek picked up as well. "I voraciously read everything in the library about history," he said. "I just found it fascinating."

At the age of 16, Dr. Skowronek followed a lead he found in a newspaper column and spent eight weeks exploring the site of a 1,000-year-old Native American town during an archaeological dig sponsored by the University of Wisconsin. The trip was supposed to last three weeks, but he stayed for five additional weeks and was named crew chief by the end of the summer. Every summer following that first dig, Dr. Skowronek found himself working at a different historical site. Recalling those brief expeditions, he said, "It changed my life. Historical archaeology really captured my imagination."

Dr. Skowronek supported himself during college at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign through various archaeology jobs. In what he calls his "childhood dreams coming together," he chose to attend graduate school at Florida State University because it is the host institution for the Southeast Archaeological Center, which conducts research and curates archaeological collections for the National Park Service.



Dr. Russell Skowronek presents his two publications about the archaeology of piracy.

He earned master's degrees in both history and anthropology with research focused on the exploration of 18th century Spanish colonial shipwrecks. Skowronek then moved to Michigan State University, where he received each a master's and doctoral degree in anthropology. His research there centered on a 16th century Spanish colonial site with a dissertation titled *A New Europe in the New World: Hierarchy, Continuity and Change in the Spanish Sixteenth-Century Colonization of Hispaniola and Florida*.

After teaching stints at Michigan State University, the University of Michigan, Indiana University-Purdue University-Fort Wayne, and Central Michigan University, Dr. Skowronek found himself in The Valley of Heart's Delight at Santa Clara University in California. Known now by its more popular name – Silicon Valley – the region's earliest inhabitants, the Ohlone people, followed by Spanish colonists, benefitted from fertile land and accessible water.

The orchards that dot the Californian landscape were planted by the colonists who founded Mission Santa Clara de Asís in the 1700s. It's here that Santa Clara University (then called Santa Clara College) opened in 1851. Now the oldest operating institution of higher learning west of the Mississippi, it is also the only American university to sit on a Spanish colonial site. As one could expect, the vast and rich history of the area provided abundant teaching material for Dr. Skowronek. One of the more memorable discoveries made by Skowronek and his students was a prehistoric cemetery dating to AD 700. In their research lab they were able to identify living conditions, such as diet, and curate the artifacts that they found.

During a sabbatical in 2005, Dr. Skowronek visited the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. It was the first time he had been to the area south of San Antonio and he knew very little of its history. During the trip, he visited with Dr. Van Reidhead, who proposed the idea of conducting archaeological and anthropological historical research on the region.



Students learn this history of their community at the RGV Civil War Trail display at UTRGV.

At that time, Dr. Reidhead was Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) legacy institution the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA). Dr. Skowronek was intrigued. He took the idea into consideration; he called local sources of information and visited the campus library to read previous findings. He quickly discovered that there was not a profuse amount of written history to be found on the area—there actually was not much of anything he could find. “It was a ‘tabula rasa,’ a clean slate,” he said. When Dr. Reidhead returned to him with a plan to establish a fully-fledged archaeology program in the Rio Grande Valley, Dr. Skowronek could not resist the offer. So, in a poignant move, he left the Valley of Heart’s Delight for the Magic Valley.

The Texas Rio Grande Valley constitutes the southeastern-most tip of Texas that borders Mexico and ends in the Gulf of Mexico. Conversationally referred to as the Rio Grande Valley, the RGV, or el Valle, the region was frequently disputed territory, which led to a culture rooted firmly in both countries that has formed its own distinct identity. The land was ceded to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. It was around that time that landowners began referring to the region as the Magic Valley due to its abundant irrigation, year-round tropical climate, and stunning wilderness.

In 1927, Edinburg College opened its doors. This small junior college would eventually become the first major public university of the 21st century in Texas – the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley – with locations across all four counties of the RGV. Dr. Skowronek was hired in 2009 in a joint position teaching anthropology and history courses. Over the past 10 years, the local historical information he and his students have published is nothing short of breathtaking.

DISCOVERING SOUTH TEXAS

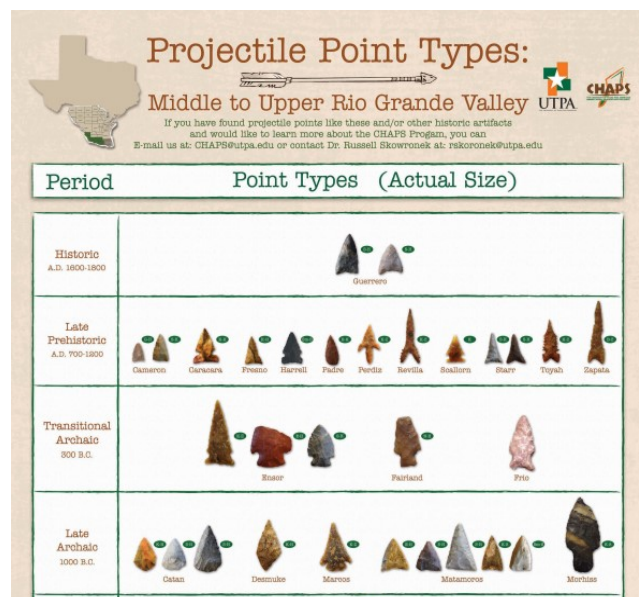
During his second year in the RGV, Dr. Skowronek was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a place-based curriculum for local K-12 teachers. Essentially, the curriculum was to cover “what is unique about where we live and how that can dovetail into broader questions about American history and international history, and beyond,” said Dr. Skowronek. He prepared the first rendition of the curriculum by meeting with various groups of teachers to determine what would be useful for them in the classroom then consulting with UTRGV professors in biology, geology, and geography to assemble relevant information. Based on those meetings, he also broadened the scope of the project to also include workshops for teachers.

The archaeology curriculum he and his colleagues developed includes lesson plans and companion books for 4th, 7th, 8th, and 11th grade teachers. The curriculum aims to help students develop stronger ties to their community and to become more productive citizens. Topics include analyzing artifacts, reading a map, visiting historic places, significant events of the Civil War, and much more.

To supplement the lessons, displays were developed, such as posters on projectile points and historic ceramics, and a traveling trunk with soldier uniforms and war artifacts. An array of activities for younger children has been produced, too, including coloring sheets, family tree

worksheets, word searches, color by number projects, and more, all of which complement the local history curriculum.

In 2011, Dr. Skowronek initiated an interdisciplinary methods class, the first of its kind at the university, with elements of biology, geology, anthropology and history; the class is called “Discovering the Rio Grande Valley” and is still taught today. Each semester, the class explores the history of a prominent farming family in South Texas—through oral history, family trees are constructed, biological, geological, and archaeological surveys of the property are conducted, and the students author a report with their findings. The purpose of the class is to discover the history of the Rio Grande Valley one parcel of land at a time.



A portion of the poster display developed by the CHAPS program at UTRGV that documents the various projectile points, and their timeline, found in the Rio Grande Valley.

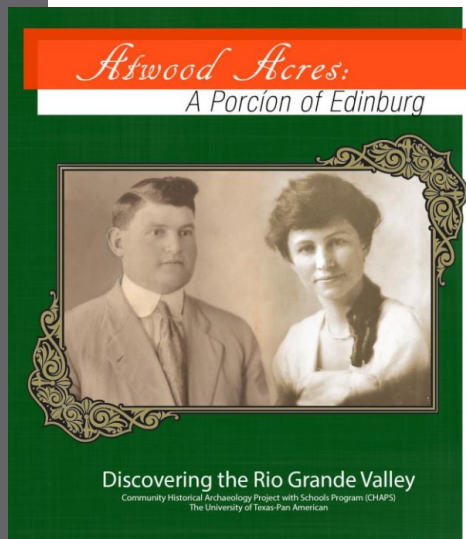
Dr. Skowronek stated, "We have a snapshot of this Valley. What's fabulous is that we have families with Latino surnames (Luna and Cantu), families with Swedish and German background (Norquest), families out of Belgium (Roegiers), and English families (Atwood). In 1938, when people would come here, you would hear Polish, German, Spanish, Swedish, Flemish and English spoken on the streets of Edinburg. It's a fascinating place where we're living."

As retail development, new roadways, and the destruction of farming land and orchards accelerate, Dr. Skowronek's class works to produce a new report on the region each year. "We're gaining knowledge of this area before it disappears beneath asphalt and tarmacs," said Dr. Skowronek.

Through these efforts of engaged teaching at UTRGV, the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS) was established. CHAPS is an award-winning student engagement and community outreach program that promotes an interdisciplinary approach to exploration. The project aims to create awareness of local cultural and natural history, which is accomplished through student research projects and exhibitions. The project calls on the expertise of many UTRGV departments, such as anthropology, history, geology, and biology.



Students assemble the RGV Civil War Trail display at UTRGV.



A report published by students in the "Discovering the Rio Grande Valley" class at UTRGV highlights Dewey and Jewel Atwood, a prominent farming family in Edinburg, TX in the early 1920s.



Dr. Russell Skowronek speaks at a professional development workshop for K-12 educators. The workshop included a field trip to Fort Ringgold in Rio Grande City TX, which is a site along the RGV Civil War Trail.

The CHAPS program has received significant recognition over the past few years. The project received the Texas Archaeological Society's Distinguished Service Award for Outstanding Contributions to Texas Archaeology in 2015 and in 2016, the Texas Historical Commission recognized the project with both its Chairman's Award for Community Education and the Award of Merit for the project's efforts to preserve Texas' cultural and historical resources. In 2017, the Society of Historical Archaeology selected CHAPS to receive the Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology. The CHAPS team was recognized on the floor of the 85th Texas State Legislature in 2017 with House Resolution No. 479. The resolution honors the team for their work to raise awareness of the region's rich cultural and natural history, and forging relationships with regional institutions as a true community engagement entity.

"It's a legacy that's going to give back to people in the past," said Dr. Skowronek about CHAPS. "This work is bigger than me, than the sum of our parts. One thing we pride ourselves on at CHAPS is the personal pronoun 'I' is virtually non-existent. It's 'we' and 'us'. And the end result is that we have people that give of themselves. We are trying to show our students that it's not just sitting in a classroom and listening to someone speak, there are other ways to be educated."

CULTIVATING AN ENRICHED EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

As the founding director of the CHAPS program, Dr. Skowronek is intrinsically tied to the project and its successes. His passion for telling the story of our region is evident through his work, for which he too has often been recognized. In 2014, he was awarded the University of Texas System Regents' Outstanding Teaching Award and in 2015 he received the Norman Neuerburg Award from the California Mission Studies Association. In 2016, The Texas Historical Commission presented the CHAPS Program with the Chairman's Award for Community Engagement. Then, in 2017, he was named the Houston Endowment Chair for Civic Engagement by the University of Texas System.

Reflecting on being named the Houston Endowment Chair for Civic Engagement, Dr. Skowronek said, "I am constantly thinking of ways to give back to the broadest number of people possible. Holding this chair has allowed me to take what would have only been dreams—to take these ideas about community engagement—and be able to ask not if we can, but when can we do it. The impact of this endowment is huge: it's the immediacy of information now available through our projects [and how] we are reaching out far beyond the Valley."

Dr. Russell Skowronek goes beyond classroom teaching and demonstrates to students the relevance of what they are learning and how to apply those skills to the benefit of their community. He provides an experiential learning environment wherein the historical importance of a geographic region is discovered and deciphered, making the information accessible, meaningful, and enduring for students and the community as a whole. The impact of his work will have a prolonged positive impact on the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and South Texas.