

Photograph by Eliza Wells Smith, 2007.

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David Grant Noble

With Robert Wilder

David Grant Noble is a writer, photographer, editor, and archaeological guide whose books include *The Mesa Verde World: Explorations in Ancestral Pueblo Archaeology*, *101 Questions About Ancient Indians of the Southwest*, and *Ancient Ruins of the Southwest: An Archaeological Guide*, which has sold more than 100,000 copies. Noble moved to Santa Fe in 1971 and worked for the School of American Research—in a variety of capacities—for close to twenty years. He is an active member of Friends of Archaeology, a group that supports the work of the Office of Archaeological Studies, through the Museum of New Mexico Foundation. Robert Wilder spoke to Noble at the Mission Café in downtown Santa Fe.

Wilder: You're known as a writer and a photographer. Which came first for you? Was it the photography or the writing?

Noble: Actually, I began taking a serious interest in photography when I was in the army in Vietnam in 1962. I became friendly with two missionaries who were living up in the highlands where I was stationed, and they were both avid photographers. They helped me get a camera and showed me their photographs of the Montagnards who live up in that country.

When I came back from Vietnam, I was teaching French and writing a novel—the great American novel, I thought—about the Vietnam War. So writing came next.

I taught French on the top floor of an old building in New York where I discovered the only other room was a darkroom. But I didn't know how to do darkroom work and was having all my films commercially processed. So I taught myself how to use the darkroom by going back to the school late at night and working till about three in the morning. Then I'd teach in the afternoons.

Wilder: When did your interest move towards archaeology and Native American history and culture?

Roger Horne, Mohawk,
a steelworker in New York City.

Photograph by
David Grant Noble, 1970.



Noble: I was doing street photography in Manhattan and one day stopped to photograph construction workers along Park Avenue. When they got off work, I noticed a couple of them were wearing feathers in their hard hats. I asked them if they were Mohawks, they said they were, and we started chatting. I went back every day and photographed them, until the building was far above street level and I couldn't reach them. Then they invited me to come up on the building with them. I did that off and on through the summer. When one of them married, he invited my girlfriend, Ruth, and me to his wedding.

They lived on a reservation near Montreal, and I had this idea of photographing contemporary life of Iroquois people. We visited all the Iroquois reservations in the northeast and eastern Canada. It was a wonderful adventure, meeting the people, seeing how they lived and how many tribes there were, and photographing when I could. In Chippewa country everyone was very welcoming, and I was invited to photograph the wild rice harvest in the sloughs along Lake Superior. We went out to Wisconsin and Minnesota two summers to do that. The Indians set us up with canoes and beaters and invited us to go out and harvest wild rice with them, which is something that non-Natives rarely get to do. I took a lot of pictures, which recently the Beinecke Library at Yale acquired.

Wilder: You say in one of your books that there are few areas of the country that can boast a collection of archaeological ruins equal to that of the Southwest. Why is that?

Noble: Much of the United States is woodland, and many of

the archaeological sites consist of little more than soil stains. Up in New England, for example, at Iroquois' sites, archaeologists get really excited when they find a patch of dirt that's a different color, because they might represent the remains of a long house. And in the Midwest, many sites have been plowed under corn and wheat fields. There really isn't much archaeology for the layman to see across most of the country.

In the Southwest, on the other hand, sites are well preserved, not only because of the aridity but also because a lot are located in dry caves. The Southwest is an archaeological museum. It's why there are so many parks and monuments that include archaeological sites.

Wilder: I know from your work that you're a big fan of rock art.

Noble: That's right. It's the depth of human history and human culture—and the sense of mystery. There's very little understanding as to what rock art means, and yet it's a very direct communication. It lends a spiritual and sacred dimension to landscape because at least some of the rock art, quite a bit of it I think, was made for religious purposes. Petroglyphs also are something to discover and photograph in the landscape, beyond the landscape itself.

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Wilder: That discovery must be really exciting.

Noble: Yeah, it is—to know that somebody was there before and that they had something to say or wanted to express. Today we can only guess at ancient peoples' reasons for creating rock art because it relates to their religious traditions and their oral narratives and their world view that in some cases is 2,000 or 4,000 years old.

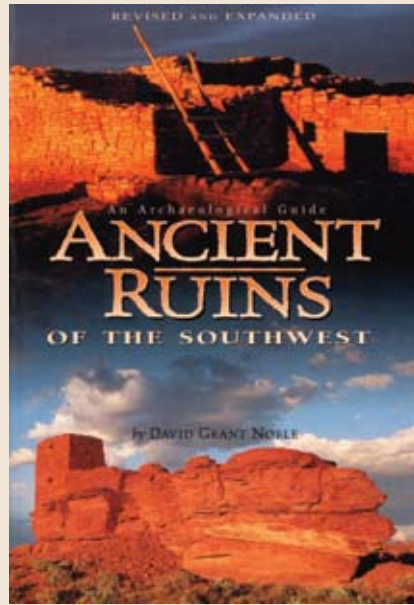
Wilder: Let me ask you about the guiding part of your life. You just came back from guiding an Archaeological Conservatory group in southeastern Utah. What is that like for you?

Noble: I'm the study leader on archaeological rafting trips on the San Juan, Yampa, and Green rivers. We have a little over twenty people, all archaeology buffs from all over the country. It's rewarding to take Conservancy members out to these remote archaeological areas, because they have really a strong interest. The challenging part is often dealing with the environment. On this last trip, for example, the temperatures ranged between 95 and over 100 in the desert, so we had to be really watchful that people were not getting dehydrated or heat stroke.

On the last trip, we went to a cliff dwelling that I had been to many times, and it happened to be midday on the Summer Solstice. We saw a petroglyph of a spiral just around the corner from the cliff dwelling, where, as we watched, a shadow moved up and neatly bisected the spiral. Then it moved on up the cliff. That was quite intriguing to see because there's so much interest in archeoastronomy and how rock art records the equinoxes or the solstices.

Wilder: Is that why you started editing guidebooks?

Noble: I already had edited a number of books—on Chaco and Mesa Verde and the Hohokam, for example, and one on the history of Santa Fe. What got me interested in editing is something I found in the course of writing my archaeological guide. I was meeting archaeologists and finding that they had a wealth of information and knowledge about the



prehistory of the Southwest—different places in the Southwest, peoples of the Southwest—and they weren't getting it out to the general public. Many of them were communicating what they knew only to their peers, in technical reports and scholarly journals.

In the mid-70s the Chaco Project was wrapping up. This was a ten-year, tax-funded project in Chaco Canyon and the last big excavations that will be done in Chaco for a long time. I went to the director of the project and said, "Look, the public has supported all this work you are doing, and it doesn't know much about your discoveries."

The result was *New Light on Chaco Canyon*. I wanted to have the people who had done the primary research tell their own story about the place. I worked editorially with nine or ten archaeologists who had been working in Chaco to write about their research and make it accessible—get rid of jargon and that kind of thing. That was in 1984. Twenty years later I edited a revised and expanded edition titled *In Search of Chaco: New Approaches to an Archaeological Enigma*, published by the School for Advanced Research Press.

Archaeologists usually are thrilled—after the painful editing process is done—to be able to reach a wide public audience. Another good thing that comes out of all of this type of archaeological education is that the larger the public pool that understands and appreciates archaeology and Native American history, the more protected the sites are from looters. It just becomes less acceptable to pot hunt and loot when there are more and more people who understand the value of archaeological places. ■

Robert Wilder's essays have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Details*, *Salon*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. He teaches English at Santa Fe Preparatory School, and his column, "Daddy Needs a Drink," is published monthly in the *Santa Fe Reporter*. His first book, *Daddy Needs a Drink*, was released in paperback in May. His second, *Tales from the Teachers' Lounge*, was published by Delacorte in Fall 2007. Photo by Jennifer Esperanza.

