Looking for Shiny Bits

Murray C McClellan, "Shiny Bits," 2022. Mobile of found objects (mostly fragments of jewelry) from Oviedo, Asturias (Spain), driftwood, twine, and fishing line, 83 × 31.5 cm.

It all began when I was five or six years old.

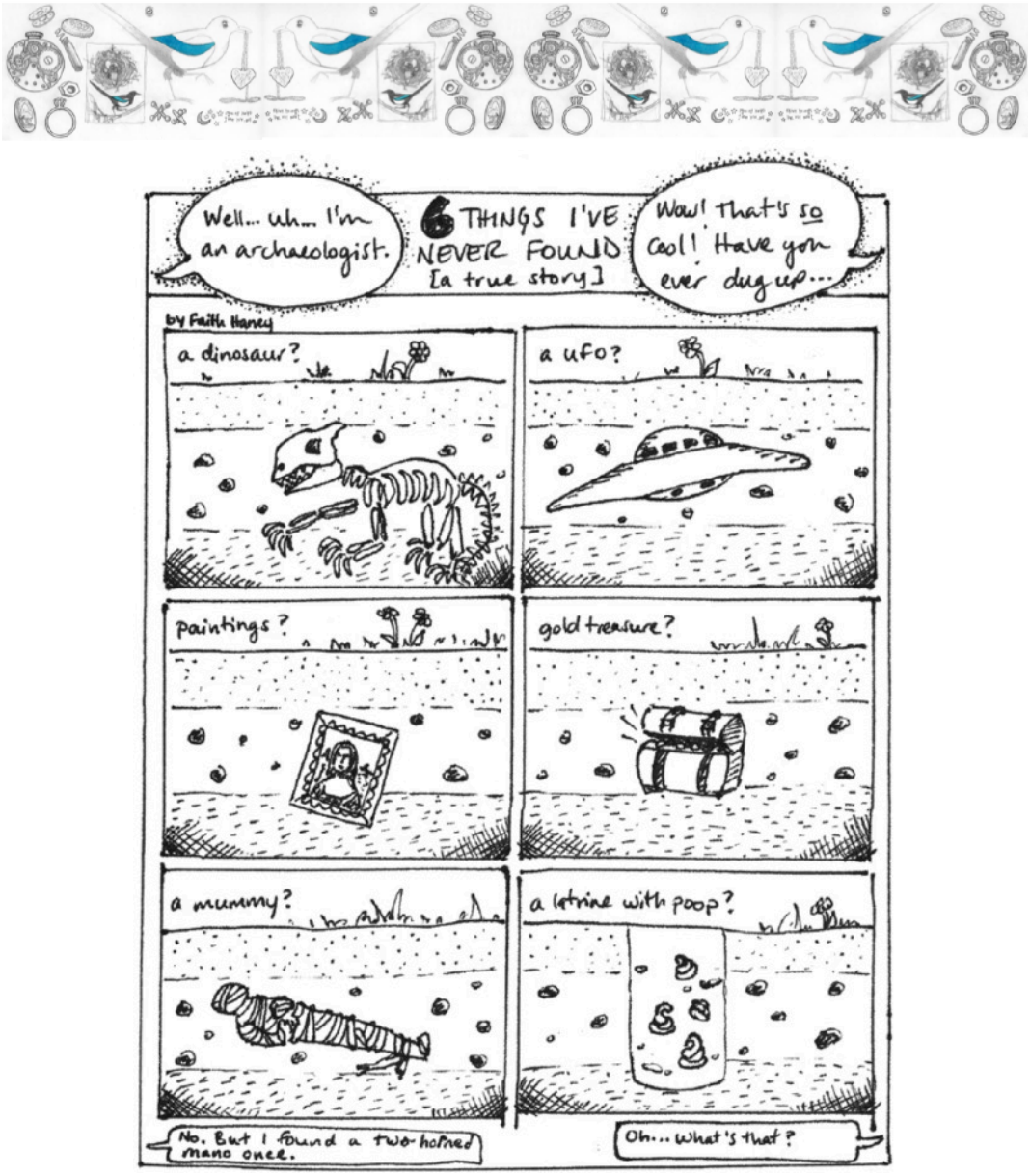
As I was growing up, every summer vacation my parents would pack me and my two older brothers (and, later, my younger brother) into their station wagon and drive us from from our home in New Jersey (and, later, Pennsylvania) down to Gatesville, Texas, where both sets of my grandparents lived. It was always exciting to pile into that big old car, jostling with my brothers to see who got to sit in the far back and tearing through the pile of new comic books my mother had bought to keep us occupied on the long trip. (I always ended up with a lame Archie while my brothers got to read the newest Superman first.) And then there were the motels to look forward to—splashing in a chlorinated pool before going out to a Howard Johnson dinner.

But the real joy started when we arrived at Gatesville. We stayed with my maternal grandparents—Grampa and Mamaw—in the cosy little brick house that Grampa (J.R. Graham) had built on 803 Waco Street, a block from the lumberyard and hardware store he created in 1932. Grampa would give each of us a gruff, but warm, hug. (Grampa was a tough old central Texan farmer, rancher, and lumberyard owner; my mother was his only child, and he clearly loved having a pack of rough-housing boys around.) Mamaw, who always wore a pinched-up expression and rarely, if ever, showed any demonstrable signs of affection, would hand us a big jar of dimes that she had been saving up for months from the hardware store; we boys would divide up the loot (I always suspected that I got fewer dimes than my older brothers), which would last us a summer of buying candy and Dr. Peppers (which cost 6¢ at the old-fashion vending machine where you would put in a nickel and a penny and pull down on a big lever to have your bottle of Dr. Pepper come flopping out; we never had to pay for our Dr. Peppers at the soda fountain, where my father's father, Jim, would take us across the street from his insurance office.)

We spent many an hour in Grampa's lumberyard, crawling around the stacks of lumber arranged in tall racks lining the gravel drive that curved through the open-air lumberyard. Mamaw and Grampa would pay us 1¢ for every rusty old nail that we found on the gravel drive, presumably dropped there by the farmers who drove into the yard as they were buying their hardware, lumber, or tin sheets. Over the years, I must have spent dozens of hours walking up and down that gravel drive, trying to pick out a manmade nail against the backdrop of the yellowish-brown gravel. (We would also pay special attention to a spot behind the 2 X 4's where Grampa would sneak off to drink an illicit beer in that dry Coryell County; Grampa would pay us 5¢ for each bottle cap that we found, but only if we didn't tell Mamaw.)

I am convinced that this early childhood training in finding artifacts played a major role in my becoming an archaeologist. I seem to have a particular talent for discerning a manmade object against a natural backdrop; I can turn on a "mental filter" that makes whatever I am looking for—black-glazed sherds, worked flint tools, green sea glass on the beach—pop out from the background noise. In the early 1990's, when I was excavating the Late Roman site of Kalavasos-Kopetra on Cyprus, just to keep in practice I used to walk through the plowed fields around the site, taking a shiny 10¢ Cypriot coin out of my pocket and throwing it as far as I could; I would then head out in that direction to find the coin amid the clods of sun-dried soil.

The limestone outcropping brimming with Late Cretaceous fossils at the back of the Waco Street house was one more thing about those Gatesville summers that helped set me on the life-path I've taken. I would spend hour upon hour scrambling around that slope, picking up "dinosaur eggs" (actually, gastropods and bivalves). Once I came across a little limestone slab with what appeared to be the fossilized bones of some animal; when I was in junior high, we took that slab to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, where they gladly accepted it into their collection. (Of course I swelled with pride, although I never did learn what kind of creature those bones belonged to!)



Faith Haney, "Six Things I've Never Found [A True Story]," *Shovel Bum #13*, 2012, p. 9.

Every dig has its own, special, "shiny bits."

Although excavations are conducted for a variety of reasons, modern archaeological research is generally conducted "scientifically"—i.e. a set of hypotheses are developed about a given site and then evidence is sought to confirm or negate those hypotheses. Gone (or *mostly* gone) are the days of mounting an excavation just to find gold jewelry or marble statues, to uncover some building mentioned in an ancient text, or simply to see what is under the ground. But, if they are honest, all archaeologists—myself included—are motivated by a deep-down desire to find treasures. Yes we want to distinguish ourselves from tomb-robbers and to excavate in an anthropologically "scientific" manner. And often the "shiny bits" we are looking for are rather mundane parts of the past material record that could help answer our anthropologically generated questions. But, no archaeologist is disappointed when they dig up a gold coin.

Like Faith Haney joked about in her *Shovel Bum* comic, I am often asked "what was the coolest thing that you have ever found?" I usually answer "the pound of gold jewelry we found in Tomb XI at Kalavasos-Ayios Dhimitrios in Cyprus" That usually satisfies my questioner, without my having to go on to explain that I was just a trench supervisor on Alison South's excavation at that Late Cypriot II site, or that the physical anthropologist on the team actually dug the tomb and I was just one of the people who helped sift the dirt coming out of the tomb, occasionally finding a small gold bead in the geological screens we were using. If my questioner asked for more details about the tomb, I would go on to tell them that we found the skeletons of two young women buried on ledges on the side of the tomb, together with the bones of two neonates buried under the tomb floor, that there were several ceramic vessels left as grave gifts including an imported Mycenaean painted crater, that on a finger bone of one of the young women was a man-sized gold ring inscribed in the still undeciphered Cypro-Minoan script, and that, for me, the "neatest" thing about the burials was that the bones of one of the women had been disturbed—presumably when the other burial occurred—and that an arm bone had been switched with one of the leg bones.

If my questioner asked for other examples of "cool" finds, I might mention being on Donald White's dig at the Sanctuary of Demeter in Cyrene, Libya, where the team dug up several life-sized Hellenistic and Roman marble statues. Or, when I was digging in Corinth as a regular member of the American School of Classical Studies in Greece, finding a row of grooved stone blocks with painted letters belonging to a 5th-century BCE starting line for the foot races that took place in the agora. Or I might mention the remains of the three early Christian churches we uncovered when I was directing the excavations at the small rural site

of Kalavasos-Kopetra on Cyprus. If I were on a roll, I would talk about another Donald White dig at Bates Island in the lagoon at Marsa Matruh, Egypt (near the border with Libya), where we found sherds of Cypriot White Slip pottery, evidence of an East Mediterranean trading network in the Late Bronze Age. Or I might bring up the cache of flaked stone pebble tools, dating to four or five hundred thousand years ago, I found when conducting an archaeological survey at the US Naval base in Rota, Spain.

As one climbs the steps of an academic archaeological career as I did, one is increasingly divorced from doing any actual digging, going from a field-school student, to a trench supervisor, to an excavation director—where one pulls out a trowel only to instruct a work boy or a student how they should proceed with uncovering what *they* have found. It wasn't until I resigned my position in the Department of Archaeology at Boston University and was living in Keene, NH, that I myself actually did some more digging. I volunteered at Robert Goodby's excavation at the small Wantastiquet Mountain site in Hinsdale, NH, where I dug up a circle of fire-cracked stones—remains of a temporary occupation along the Connecticut River by a band of Native American hunter-gatherers some four thousand years ago. A few years later, in 2014, I volunteered on Martha Pinello 's field school at the Wyman Tavern in Keene, where I found a highly oxidized late 18th-century half dime, in circulation only a few decades after the 1762 construction of the tavern.

Dave Horton, *Hortoon*, 2008.

I admit it, I am a magpie.

(Actually, magpies and crows, unlike the Australian bowerbird, don't line their nests with shiny objects. Magpies and crows will occasionally pick up a shiny thing like a gum wrapper or a piece of jewelry, but that is only because they are curious and looking for food; we just especially notice it when they have a shiny thing in their beaks.)

In 2017, I moved to Spain. Here in my new adopted home of Oviedo, the capital of the province of Asturias on the northern coast of the country, I am surrounded by antiquity. I live in a small ground-floor apartment in a converted casona (manor house) originally constructed in 1776. I can walk a block up the hill to see traces of the Medieval wall that originally surrounded the city, or walk a few blocks more through the narrow streets in the totally pedestrianized city center to gaze upon Oviedo's marvelous 15th-century Cathedral.

But, as had been the case wherever I've lived, I mostly keep my eyes peeled to the ground as I walk. I am forever stopping to pick up something that glitters. I especially like to go to a nearby park here in Oviedo after the Sunday flea market held there is over, where I enviably find lots of "shiny bits" left behind by the vendors. (Most of the beads and broken bits of jewelry in my "Shiny Bits" mobile, above, came from there.) And, over the past several months as I have been renting an off-season cottage a block from the beach in Ribadesella, I have been putting on my "sea-glass mental filter" on my daily walks along the beach; I have also been taking to making mobiles out of those "shiny bits."

My eyesight is beginning to fail me in my old age, and stooping over to pick up a glittering object (which, increasingly, is turning out to be a gum wrapper or a fragment of gold-foil confetti) is becoming more and more of a, literal, pain in the neck. But, as long as I can keep doing it, I'm going to keep on looking for "shiny bits."