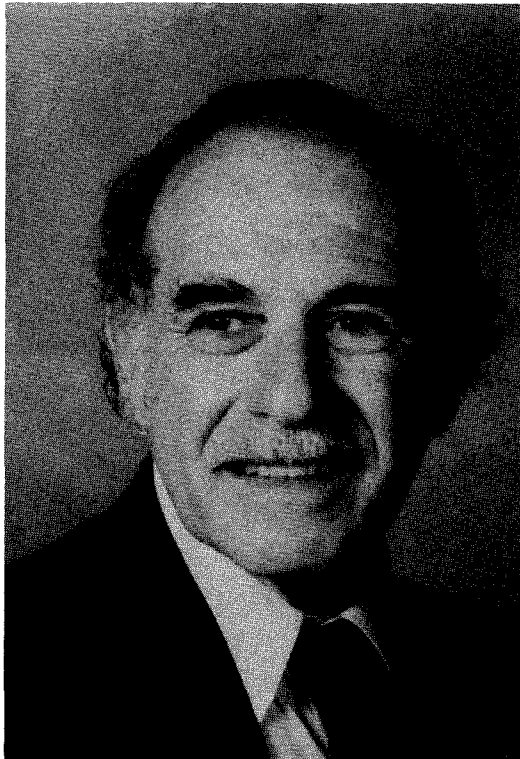


J.C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology

BERT SALWEN 1990*



Bert Salwen was born on New York's Upper West Side in 1920 and grew up in suburban Queens during the Great Depression. Although his own family was comfortably off, he was very much aware of the suffering of the poor and underprivileged around him. This awareness was heightened by listening to conversations between his conservative Republican father and his liberal Democrat mother. His father was a school teacher, shop teacher, and volunteer basketball coach, as well as a businessman. His mother was active in Jewish self-help organizations like the Hadassah. Between them, they instilled in Bert, through their example, a concern for the rights of all individuals, regardless of their status.

Bert received a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering from Columbia University in 1941, and was immediately employed as a design engineer working on autogyros for helicopters, and later for small gliders for low level bombing raids. During the nine years Bert spent working in the

*Photograph by Ethan Salwen

aeronautics/defense industry he observed inequities in the way people were treated, and he became actively involved in civil rights and human rights activities. Eventually he was fired for union activities at the plant where he was working—an action which he fought before the National Labor Relations Board and eventually won.

By the early 1950s Bert was living in Trenton, driving an egg and poultry route to support his family, and still very much involved in fighting for social justice. When six black youths were framed for a murder, he joined in and helped win reprieves from the gas chamber. The case is still remembered as the Trenton Six. At the same time Bert ran for the office of Mercer County Freeholder and was responsible for what to this day is the only legal challenge of the Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950. Not all of Bert's activities were of the same level of importance. I can remember him speaking with equal enthusiasm of his attempts to organize the employees at the Trenton plant of the Trojan prophylactic company. All of this was going on at the height of the reign of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and as you can well imagine, his activities did not go down well with his neighbors. On one occasion a cross was burned on the lawn of his house. On another, several gunshots were fired through his kitchen windows. Worst of all, his eldest son Pete was ostracized by his peers.

When construction began on Levittown, Pennsylvania, Bert, who had been trained as a cabinetmaker by his father, went to get work as a carpenter. The employment test was very practical. Bert was asked to take a hammer, a saw, and a 2 × 4 and build a sawhorse. Bert was an engineer, and his father had taught night school shop classes and had been an amateur cabinetmaker. By watching what others were doing he managed to pass the test.

It was while living in Trenton and working in Levittown that Bert came, rather late in life, to archaeology. I have heard several versions of the story that ignited his interest, but the one I like the best—which I suspect has suffered some elaboration over the years—is as follows. His son Pete, who was studying the Leni Lenapi Indians in the fourth grade, developed a passionate desire to find some arrowheads like the ones in the museum. After some initial reluctance Bert agreed to drive Pete out into the nearby countryside where they found some farm fields and began to walk over them. They found some interesting looking pieces of stone and pottery and took them to the New Jersey State Museum where they left them with the secretary in the Bureau of Archeology and Ethnology. About a week later, Bert received a postcard from the museum. "Come pick up your rocks," it said.

Not one to be easily deterred from a task once he had set out to do it, Bert spent the next several weekends walking fields and bringing his finds to the museum. The result was always the same—a postcard with the same "come pick up your rocks" message. After this had gone on for some time, the secretary at the museum, who by this time had quite a collection of Salwen rocks in her desk drawer, took pity on Bert. On his next visit to the museum she said, "If you really want to find some good things, follow State Street until you see a big red barn, turn left, go one mile until you can see the river, walk into the field on the right, and dig down about 18 inches."

Bert followed her directions, which led to the heart of what was to become the Abbot Farm National Historic Landmark, walked around and collected some more pieces of stone which he promptly returned to the museum. A week later the postcard arrived. This time, however, the message was different. It read, "Please stop by the Museum to pick up the Salwen collection—one projectile point, a stemmed knife, and three fragments of Woodland pottery." This Bert promptly did. He remarked to the secretary that this stuff was really interesting and asked where one went to learn more about it. The secretary replied, "First, you have to study anthropology."

Within a relatively short time Bert had relocated to New York City and enrolled as a graduate student at Columbia. Under the tutelage of Duncan Strong and Ralph Solecki he began to develop the skills and knowledge of archaeological fieldwork and analysis that would serve him the rest of his life.

Everyone who has ever worked in the field with Bert knows him to have been the consummate field

archaeologist. Bert's fieldwork experiences while at Columbia included a stint in South Dakota under the direction of Carlyle Smith, working for the Smithsonian River Basin Survey program. This was followed by a major expedition to the North Slope of Alaska with Ralph Solecki. As a trained engineer Bert understood the need for precision in recording data. However, Bert also possessed that sixth sense about where to dig.

I remember the first time I met him. I was a senior enrolled in a spring field class at CCNY. We were excavating at the Goodrich site on Staten Island. Sharing the site with us were field schools from Columbia and NYU. One afternoon, after work at the site had been going on for several weeks, I had occasion to walk over to the portion of the site where the NYU crew was digging. In the space of several minutes I saw more artifacts recovered than the Columbia and CCNY crews had found to date. Clearly, this was the guy who knew where the goodies were. I also noticed that the NYU trenches seemed to have walls that were just a little bit straighter.

Bert's sixth sense about archaeology manifested itself in other ways. He once confided to me that at a meeting of the Society for American Archaeology at Yale University, during a lunchtime walk through the New Haven green, he bent over and picked up a small-stemmed projectile point. Everyone accused him of having dropped it down his pants leg—something which, in later years, many a developer was facetiously to accuse him of doing at the construction sites.

Bert was nearing completion of work on his doctorate when an opportunity became available to accept a position in the Anthropology Department at Bennington College. Bert's Columbia classmate Morton Klass had been teaching at Bennington and one day received a message that some arrowheads had been found during the construction of a local highway. Prof. Klass along with some colleagues and as many students as they could find, none, students or faculty, with any experience in archaeology, ran out to the site. As Mort described it, "We dug—from early in the morning until late at night we dug—and we found absolutely nothing." The next day the highway came through. Later that week, Mort had occasion to talk to Bert, and he asked Bert what he should have done. Bert went on at great lengths about the laws that could have been called on and the procedures that should have been followed. After taking it all in, Mort said, "Bert—we dug all day long—all day long in the hot sun—and we found nothing—absolutely nothing. How can you stand it?" "Well it's like this," Bert answered. "You have to develop the right temperament. Let me tell you what I do. I drive around until I see a farm, a place that looks interesting. I stop and ask the farmer for permission to walk around. I spend a couple of hours walking around. Sometimes I make some surface finds, sometimes I see a place that I'd like to come back to, and sometimes I just have a pleasant walk in the sun." Mort was so impressed that he convinced Bennington to hire Bert to come to Vermont to solve all of that state's archaeological problems—which Bert did in short order.

About the same time, Bert completed his doctoral dissertation, which is still a basic reference on the relationship between sea level change and archaeological sites. In 1966 he returned to New York to join the new anthropology department at New York University. From the time he joined the department at NYU Bert was actively involved in its development and evolution. He served over the course of his career at various times as Acting Chairman and Director of Graduate Studies, and was a founder of NYU's joint Ph.D. program in history and historical archaeology. The latter was a source of great satisfaction to Bert. It represented the culmination of a long-term goal truly to integrate the disciplines and departments of history and anthropology in a form that was meaningful to both.

In his roles as teacher, advisor, and administrator, Bert always treated students, undergraduate and graduate, as people who had rights. Bert was always there whenever a student was having a problem with the university administration. He would never advocate or support breaking rules, but whenever possible he would find a way to bend them if the result was a fair resolution of a problem. Bert's concern for the professional development of his students is typified by the number of his publications with students as co-authors.

Although Bert's primary training was in cultural anthropology and prehistory, his interest in historical archaeology came naturally, developing out of his work at Fort Shantok, Connecticut, where he was studying the effects of European contact on Native American populations. The transition from prehistorian to prehistoric/historic archaeologist was natural for Bert. After all, as he put it, archaeology was "the study of behavior in the absence of the behavior." Whether one was studying a prehistoric site or a historic one, the ultimate goals were the same.

During his early years at NYU, Bert became involved in the excavation of a number of prehistoric and historic sites. One of these was in Kingston, New York. Working with the State Historic Sites Bureau, Bert found, under a sidewalk on Green Street, the remains of the 17th-century stockade constructed by Peter Stuyvesant. Think about it, under the sidewalk! From that time on, one of the things that could get him angrier than almost anything else was when someone would say, "There can't be anything left there—it's all been disturbed by modern construction."

It was at about the same time that Bert began to put his old political savvy to work for the cause of historic preservation. He was one of the founders, along with Marion White, of the New York Archaeological Council, the first of the state professional councils. It was not long before NYAC was involved in a lawsuit charging the New York State Historic Preservation Officer, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and 50 some odd municipalities with violating the provisions of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

The New York SHPO and the U.S. EPA were no match for two seasoned anthropologists who had challenged Joe McCarthy. An out-of-court settlement resulted in EPA agreeing to conduct cultural resources surveys on all their construction grant projects. It would no longer be sufficient for some local official to say the location of a proposed sewage treatment plant was all disturbed. The burden was now on that official to prove that it was, not on the archaeologist to prove that it was not. The result was that hundreds of surveys were undertaken, and, not incidentally, hundreds of archaeologists were ultimately employed.

Bert's belief that he could find evidence of past behavior in the most unlikely places never wavered. What area could be more disturbed than downtown Manhattan? Bert was up to the challenge, and even more important, he was willing to look for archaeology where no one else would—under sidewalks, in vacant lots, under paved streets and parking lots, even on sites where large office buildings had been demolished. The results include the Stadt Huys Site and the Telco Block, Hanover Square, and Sullivan Street sites. All of these became the focus of major excavations carried out by Bert's students, always under Bert's sometimes official, and some times unofficial, watchful eye. All too often Bert stayed in the background. A much published photo of the Stadt Huys excavations does not include Bert. Featured in the photo are Mayor Ed Koch, Principal Investigator Nan Rothschild, field director Diana Wall, and New York City Landmarks Commission chairman Kent Barwick. Bert was busy taking the picture. A large part of the reason that the subject of urban archaeology—not just archaeology in the city, but the archaeology of the city—is such a large part of our discipline today is because of the pioneering principles set forth by Bert Salwen.

Bert was always able to communicate his enthusiasm for archaeology and the need to protect cultural resources to everyone. His annual summer field schools are legend. They included—in addition to his many seasons at Fort Shantok and Shantok Cove, Connecticut—work at Fort Ninigret in Rhode Island; work at historic and prehistoric sites in the Delaware Valley; work with the National Trust for Historic Preservation at Drayton Hall, South Carolina, and Lyndhurst, New York; and work in Danville, Virginia, and Virginia City, Nevada.

Bert used to say that he did not publish enough. Perhaps he felt that way because he was busy making sure that there would be sites around for the rest of us to publish on. Throughout his career he worked to change the way our discipline functions in the political arena. As the president of the New York

Archaeological Council, the Professional Archaeologists of New York City, and our own Society; as a member of the boards of directors of the Society of Professional Archeologists, the American Society for Ethnohistory, the Association for Field Archaeology, and the Council on Northeast Historical Archaeology, Bert worked to ensure the passage and continued enforcement of laws to protect archaeological sites.

Bert was not content, however, with preaching to the converted. For more than 10 years he served as an official and unofficial consultant to numerous federal, state and local governmental agencies. One of the accomplishments of which he was especially proud was his development and participation in a Department of the Interior archaeological training course for non-archaeologists with responsibility for managing cultural resources. Ten years later, these courses are still being given throughout the United States. His work on developing archaeological standards for the Outer Continental Shelf environmental review program, and with the Office of Technology Assessment earned for Bert the annual Conservation Award of the American Society for Conservation Archaeology. Bert was that rare person among archaeologists. He was someone who spent as much time looking ahead to the future as he did looking back into the past.

Bert Salwen died suddenly on Christmas Day 1988. At the time he was enthusiastically making plans to attend the SHA annual meeting last year in Baltimore, because a number of his colleagues (all former students) were giving papers. This is part of Bert's professional and personal legacy—a population of professionally active archaeologists whose lives and careers were touched and, more often than we realize, shaped by Bert. The SHA has come a long way since Bert served as the Program Chairman for the third SHA annual meeting in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—the first annual meeting with concurrent sessions, two. Historical archaeology is what it is today in large measure as a result of Bert.

JOEL I. KLEIN*

*Arnold Pickman, Nan Rothschild, and Diana Wall commented on various versions of this tribute and made many useful suggestions which have been incorporated.