

UC Merced

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Don Tuohy: My "Boss" for Nearly 30 Years

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zf1g6wp>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 38(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

Dansie, Amy

Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed

Early Archaic Cultural Complexes from Three Nevada Localities (1989), and *New Information Regarding Early Holocene Manifestations in the Western Great Basin* (Tuohy and Dansie 1997) are readily accessible examples. Everyone who works in Great Basin archaeology knows Don's report on the legendary Smith Creek Cave (Tuohy and Rendall 1980), and his long collaboration with Alan Bryan and Ruth Gruhn as early advocates for a pre-Clovis occupation.

Don retired from the Nevada State Museum in 1999, but he continued to attend the Great Basin Anthropological Conference when he was able. He was the quintessential field and museum archaeologist. He strained under the regulatory apparatus of Cultural Resource Management, as it seemed to test his patience with its banality. He stood up for himself in the sometimes fractious disagreements that frequently occur in the practice of archaeology (e.g., Tuohy 1993).

As a student employee, sitting at my drafting table in a very quiet museum basement, I remember his wry sense of humor and hands-off, you-figure-it-out approach to management. He frequently told stories of the desert, and his love of exploration was evident in his membership in the Sagebrush Studebaker Drivers Club and their caravan road trips. At one time he owned five Studebakers! He also owned a Volkswagen bus, and he described adventures with his family in Baja California. They don't much make them like Don Tuohy anymore.

* * *

DON TUOHY: MY "BOSS" FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS

Amy Dansie
Nevada State Museum (Retired)

Don Grayson called Don and me "a quirky pair" in a Seattle newspaper interview; he had no idea.... Don Tuohy hired me not once or twice, but three times. He was the Curator of Anthropology at the Nevada State Museum. Shy and insecure, he saw in me just what he needed. I was a non-threatening assistant who could take care of the most precious archaeological heritage I could imagine: the dry cave collections at the Nevada State Museum (NSM), plus collections and records for all the sites in the state. And I could identify bones, too.

While a student at the University of Nevada, Reno pursuing a degree in physical anthropology, I did research on mummies on loan from the NSM, meeting Don briefly in the process. At the same time my mother Dorothy reported the Paleoindian-age Dansie site in the Carson Sink to Tuohy, taking me along for the ride. The Dansie site, named for my mother, Dorothy Dansie, was briefly reported by Don (Tuohy 1968), but probably did not receive the attention it should have. It was inconceivable that 50 years later I would be giving the opening paper at the 2016 Great Basin Anthropological Conference Plenary Session about the unique, Paleoindian Dansie site (Dansie 2016).

I dropped out of graduate school in 1971, and during a year off from academia, my father showed me a news story that Sierra Pacific Power Company had signed a contract with the NSM to conduct an archaeological survey across Nevada. He suggested I contact Don in case he needed someone to help. What could I lose? I called and Don hired me, but I learned he did so only as an afterthought, since he initially figured he would do the project himself. The 450-mile survey started at the eastern Nevada border in the bitter cold of January. Don also hired my younger brother Bill to serve as my crew for \$10 a day. Brother Bill had nothing better to do and he could read a topo map. Furthermore, I could trust him with my life, which I did every crazy day for six months, leap-frogging over the mountains of central Nevada with one truck and a lot of luck. Four hundred and fifty miles. January. Central Nevada.

Bob Elston joined us on one trip, and Don participated during two trips between snow storms. One time we got separated from Don as night fell. He had walked out to the highway and hitched a ride to the sheriff's office in Eureka. Our truck became stuck, and by the time we got it out of the mud and found the right road, we could see Don's foot prints in the headlights, so we knew he made it out of the wilderness. Being exactly 60 miles from both Eureka and Ely, we ended up going to Ely, putting us 120 miles from Don. I called the Sheriff in Eureka, and before I could say anything he chuckled "I bet you're looking for your boss." About 3 A.M. the next morning, Don tapped lightly on our hotel room door, saying that he had made it safely back to "base camp." He never mentioned this embarrassing moment again, a reflection of Tuohy's honorable character.

I worked with Don, Ruth Gruhn, and Alan Bryan the first year at Smith Creek Canyon. It was 1971, and being a time of sexual revolution, I did skinny dip in the gloriously cold Smith Creek below Kachina Cave. Don was a real gentleman, and I want to say how grateful I am to Don Tuohy for providing me with a career with no hint of inappropriate behavior.

Having never discussed a future, when I finished the report on the powerline survey, I left him a note saying I was going to Montana to get a bear hide. My older brother shot the bear during a dangerous encounter while elk hunting, but he couldn't afford to preserve it. So, without any plan, I walked out on my wonderful career, again. I did hear again about that bear a couple of times.

After this taste of freedom, it was 1973, and I was an unwed mother needing a fresh start. I asked Don about the Long Valley project at an Am Arcs of Nevada meeting. Don was reluctant because of the bear story, but my Mom pointed out that I would be much more reliable now since I had a baby to care for. So, Don hired me again to cook and catalog on Bob York's 10-week field project at Sunshine Well in eastern Nevada (Dansie 2009). Although I obeyed instructions to the letter and took the initiative whenever appropriate, why Don took a chance on me again, with a six-month-old baby in a dry camp 65 miles from town, I will never know.

Tuohy somehow found enough money to keep me on full time for the next five years, mostly doing Nevada Archaeological Survey field work, cataloging in the lab, and occasionally some faunal analysis. Then in 1977 I was suddenly faced with a 50% cut in hours, and I was pregnant again. The new Nevada Department of Transportation archaeology section needed a lab manager, and I took a permanent full-time State position that I just couldn't refuse.

What should have been the end of my NSM career took another turn when Doris Rendall, Don's long-time research assistant, passed away in 1978. Tuohy hired me the third time to an even better full-time State position than the one I had at NDOT. When I asked what my job was, he just said, "Do what Doris did," so I figured it out for myself. I typed his papers, cataloged his artifacts, and organized the collections. More importantly, Don encouraged my research in zooarchaeology and Lahontan prehistory. He let me teach myself about computers when they were still primitive, so by the time NAGPRA was

passed in 1990 we were able to keep track of the federal collections as we faced rules far beyond what earlier archaeologists had ever dealt with.

Don Tuohy was a dirt archaeologist to the core. He was also a master of the field literature. He was generous toward students, and a really good man. However, Don was most happy when he was buried in his archaeology with limited distractions. Thus, we almost never talked about personal issues, or actually much of anything, and we virtually never argued. We were compatible in our voluntary mutual isolation, and we made a good team—a quirky pair.

Don had a superstitious streak. He once asked me if I was a weather shaman, just because he knew I got off on thunderstorms! He never failed to throw a coin into Pyramid Lake whenever we were there. As we unloaded the Stillwater burials from his truck, he gleefully exclaimed how great it was that it was raining, enabling each box to be sprinkled and purified.

Don's quest for Clovis in Nevada was well known, and he was sure he would eventually find his mammoth. Yet his elusive mammoth was under his nose all along, in the collections of the museum; harpoon heads and leisters from Pyramid Lake were fashioned of bone from extinct megafauna. When the museum received the artifacts, I informed Don that some of them were made of bone from megafauna, but he only mentioned them in passing over the years. Our plan was to date human skeletal remains suspected of being from Paleoindian contexts, but NAGPRA complications put that on hold. So, in 1999, after 15 years of knowing about the bone and ivory tools, they were dated shortly after Don retired, in part because there were research dollars that had to be spent by the end of the fiscal year. The harpoons were indeed Paleoindian in age, $10,360 \pm 50$ and $10,340 \pm 40$ radiocarbon years old (Dansie and Jerrems 1999, 2005). Perhaps they reflected the last Clovis mammoth hunters, and the last *Bison antiquus* (Jerrems 2016) surviving around the hot springs and permanent water of Pyramid Lake, but Don would have been restrained about the interpretation despite the dates.

As part of our roles at the Nevada State Museum, Don and I provided a unique service to Nevada archaeology. We responded to the rather frequent unexpected finds of ancient burials. My favorite was one deeply buried downstream from Rye Patch dam, in a fresh flood-

scoured river bank accessible only by small boat. The fisherman never said it was a burial, just a skeleton. Don took it to be a human burial, so we drove 150 miles. He almost backed out when we saw that it was not human and was situated at the bottom of a dark U-shaped channel. It turned out to be a bit of Nevada history; a tiny milk cow who made it all the way across the continent only to perish in 1849 or so on the Emigrant Trail in the muddy bottom of a Humboldt River slough. It was perfectly preserved in the sediments below a hundred-year-old olive tree. I insisted we do it right even though it was not human, and Don was a good sport about it as we collected the cow bones from the river bank.

The Stillwater Marsh air-boat archaeology was a lot of fun, but it signaled the beginning of the end of Don's career. Don suffered a stroke in 1986. The stroke ripped language out of his conscious mind for a few terrifying weeks, but Tuohy's determination to write the Stillwater report wrestled the language back, word by painful word. That was his last large final report, and it was written in very plain English: "There was one square-stemmed point made from obsidian. . . . This point and the crescent fragment may be the earliest artifacts in this collection known from the Refuge" (Tuohy et al. 1987:220). That is all Don could muster about his favorite topic, but it was sufficient.

Both of our careers ended essentially at the same time. Don wanted to keep working on Pyramid Lake, but he was forced to retire in 1999, and I was driven to early retirement the next year by the new Republican administration in Nevada. There were several reasons for this, but one still irritates me. This was a time of wrestling with what to do about hundreds of mostly fragmentary ancient Native American skeletons in the statewide collections. Don wrote a controversial article for the museum newsletter in 1999 that discussed the emerging conflict between Native American remains that may be thousands of years old, their value to science, and the cultural patrimony of the descendant tribes. In a sign of the times, the political appointees charged with handling the museum wanted to avoid conflict. Don retired and quit working on Pyramid Lake. I was told that it did not matter how important the Spirit Cave mummy was, he was just a political problem to be eliminated. I knew my career was over, and within a year, I sold my house and moved off the grid.

I did not attend Don's funeral in 2012, only being informed of it the day before, making the 100-mile trip too much on short notice. However, no archaeologist appreciated Don Tuohy more than I do. He was a competent, clever, traditional dirt archaeologist, and he reported his work. Don never really understood how to do the New Archaeology, even though he comprehended it when he read it, saying we were "fortunate" to have a "modern-day archaeologist," Bob Kelly, working in the Carson Sink asking all the right questions (Tuohy et al. 1987:313). He tried to do justice to the heritage represented by the Nevada State Museum. I once asked him about the mummies in the museum collections, and he replied, "We will do no mummy before its time!"—mimicking a current wine commercial. He knew we lacked the science to do them justice, but we could have done more to preserve and document their context. Don Tuohy was reliable as a friend, and was central to my career.

* * *

A MEMORY OF DONALD R. TUOHY

Robert G. Elston
University of Nevada, Reno

Don Touhy was a brave man who could keep his wits about him. At the end of WWII, Don served as a tail gunner on a B-24 Liberator bomber. On a training flight in Colorado, his aircraft collided with another. His pilot managed to keep the plane in the air long enough for everyone to escape, including Don, who had to get from his position in the tail to a place he could exit the plane. Don became a member of the Caterpillar Club, whose members have used a parachute to save their lives from a disabled aircraft.

On the other hand, as Curator of Anthropology at the Nevada State Museum, Don was, if not afraid of the Nevada State Museum Board of Directors, very circumspect about how he aroused their attention.

In the early 1970s, I worked as his research assistant at the Museum. During this time, one of the legal, licensed brothels in Nevada was the Cottontail Ranch located in southern Nevada at Lida Junction, the intersection of U.S. Route 95 and State Route 266. The establishment (said to have been patronized by Howard Hughes) was a prominent landmark on our frequent trips to Las Vegas. It was run by a woman named Beverly Harrell, who ran