Decades Past Retirement, UA Anthropology 'Giants' Still at Work

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For many, retirement marks a time to kick back and relax – perhaps spend some more time on the golf course. This could not be further from the truth for three retired University of Arizona anthropology professors who, several years after their official retirement dates, remain actively engaged and deeply respected members of the UA community. Ray Thompson, Vance Haynes and Art Jelinek – all nearing or above 90 years of age – continue to contribute to UA research, scholarship and institutional memory. All three say they felt a strong sense of responsibility to their field and their colleagues to keep going with what they started at the University.

This month, which is Arizona Archaeology and Heritage Awareness Month, the UA School of Anthropology will host a special event to honor the three men for their dedication. Colleagues will gather at Arizona Inn on March 19 at 4 p.m. for the celebration, which has been dubbed "Haynes, Jelinek, and Thompson: They Put the Non-Age in Nonagenarian."

"We in the School of Anthropology recognize how privileged we are to benefit from the continued mentorship and guidance of these three individuals and wanted to celebrate them and their ongoing contributions to our school, the University of Arizona, the field of anthropology and our society," said Diane Austin, director of the School of Anthropology.

Ray Thompson

Thompson's interest in archaeology began when he was a boy growing up in Maine. He was fascinated with Native Americans of the northeastern U.S., and says he "read out all the libraries in the state of Maine" on the subject.

"I gradually began to realize that I was not going to be an Indian, but I could study Indians," he said.

By high school, Thompson knew he wanted to be an archeologist. Tufts University, which offered him a four-year scholarship, didn't have an archaeology program, so he enrolled as a geology major.

Knowing that the UA and Arizona were considered "nirvana for archaeologists," Thompson applied during his junior year at Tufts to the UA's Point of Pines archaeological field school. He was accepted, and it was at that summer field school, on the San Carlos Apache reservation in Arizona, that he met Emil Haury, then director of Arizona State Museum and what was then the UA Department of Anthropology.

"That was the beginning of my life, so to speak," Thompson said. "There, I met not only Haury, but a galaxy of famous archaeologists, many of whom became my supporters early in my career. I also met a woman, Molly Kendall, who became my wife of 66 years."

Thompson returned to Point of Pines the following summer as dig foreman. He continued his education at Harvard, where he earned his master's and doctorate. He went on to teach at the University of Kentucky, where he stayed in contact with Haury, who offered him a UA faculty position in 1956.

"He adopted me; he furthered my career in many wonderful ways," Thompson said.

Thompson followed in his mentor's footsteps, succeeding Haury in 1964 as the third head of the Department of Anthropology and director of Arizona State Museum. He also became director of the Point of Pines field school.

Thompson guided the highly ranked anthropology program through a period of booming growth in higher education, during which time the department ballooned from 14 to 40 faculty members.

In 1980, when the anthropology department and museum were split into separate units, Thompson stepped down as department head, but remained museum director until 1997, when he officially retired at age 73.

Now a sharp-witted 93-year-old, Thompson hasn't let age hold him back, despite having a hip replacement following a bone cancer diagnosis about two years ago.

He still spends a great deal of time at the museum and remains a popular and frequent speaker at events there.

"I'm a man who requires completion," he said. "I carry some guilt that I was not able to finish several research projects, but fortunately others have been able to pick those up, so the guilt is disappearing rapidly."

Thompson jokes that he now has the "unenviable role" of being treated as "memory bank" for the anthropology school and museum.
"This business of being the memory bank has put me in a position of being constantly asked for help, and I have always responded positively," he said. "It’s enabled me to develop a close working relationship with the people who’ve succeeded me."

Among the projects in which Thompson is currently involved is the work of Arizona State Museum Director Patrick Lyons, whose research at Point of Pines picked up where Thompson left off.

"One of the things that's amazing about Ray is he remembers everything," Lyons said. "I can't remember what I had for breakfast, but I can give him a feature number or structure number from something he excavated in the 1950s, and he can tell me who dug it, who that person's roommate was, what college that person went to, and, if he tries really hard, the name of the boyfriend or girlfriend of that person. We're lucky that he remembers so much, because Point of Pines has fantastic records in terms of the primary data that were created during the excavations, but what does not exist are interpretations and syntheses. So we are fortunate to have the benefit of his opinions and his interpretations."

Lyons, who's in his fifth year as director of the Arizona State Museum, says Thompson is a mentor not only as a researcher but as a leader. Thompson was among the first museum directors in the country to bring in computers and conservators. He also began the process of repatriation – returning Native American cultural items to their tribes – before it was required by law, and he lobbied for and helped get passed the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

"He's a true giant," Lyons said. "Ray has been at the forefront of everything good in archaeology and Southwestern anthropology."

For Thompson – who has two daughters, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren – the decision to keep working is a lifestyle choice and the continuation of a childhood dream.

"The wonderful thing about being an academic is when you retire, it isn't the same as retiring from a factory," he said. "You can continue to enjoy the same kind of life that you had in your job."

Vance Haynes

When Haynes retired from the UA almost 30 years ago, in 1999, he had some 30 unfinished projects.

He was determined that they wouldn't stay that way.

Haynes, who turned 90 this year, still comes into his office in the School of Anthropology every day. He also remains active in the field, working just last summer at a mammoth kill site in Wyoming.

"I feel obligated to get this work out that other people helped me with," he said.

Haynes is currently working with colleagues in New Mexico to publish research on the Clovis occupation of Arizona’s San Pedro Valley (the Clovis were a prehistoric Paleo-Indian culture). He’s also working on a book about the origins and development of the post-Civil War Springfield Officers Model Rifle, designed and manufactured by the National Armory from 1875 to 1885 and sold only to officers of the U.S. Army and Navy. Only 487 of the lightweight sporting rifles were made, and the collectors’ items have fascinated Haynes since he was a boy.

Haynes began his college education at the Colorado School of Mines, studying geological engineering. But he had always been interested in archaeology, especially early man.

"Eventually, I was told by various archaeologists, ‘You know, you can make a living at this,’” he said.

In 1961, Haynes came to the UA to learn about radiocarbon dating, and earned his doctorate in geology four years later. He taught at Southern Methodist University before being hired to the UA anthropology and geosciences faculty by Thompson in 1974.

Throughout his career, Haynes’ research on Paleo-Indians and the peopling of the New World, as well as climate change in the hyperarid eastern Sahara, took him across the globe, from southwestern Egypt and northern Sudan to China. Among his proudest career accomplishments was being elected into the National Academy of Sciences in 1992, but he says his greatest reward is his students who have gone on to have distinguished careers of their own.

When Haynes retired, he turned over his geoarchaeology lab on campus to his colleague, anthropology and geosciences professor Vance Holliday, but he set up his own mini lab in his garage at home, where he often pre-treats radiocarbon samples before they go to the UA.

"He’s been one of the key players in the history of radiocarbon research here going back to the ‘60s," said Holliday, who was a graduate student at Texas Tech University when he first met Haynes in 1975. "He’s been right at the heart of radiocarbon research, in general, for many years."

Holliday, who has collaborated with Haynes on a number of projects, describes Haynes as a "consummate scientist" – a meticulous man with incredible integrity and patience.

"I realized very early on that he got along with just about everybody," Holliday said. "There are some colorful characters in
our area of study, and Vance has worked with and gotten along with most of them, and I admired that because he has a lot more patience than most of the rest of us."

Haynes and his late wife, Elizabeth "Taffy," whom he met while stationed in Alaska in the Air Force, had one daughter, Elizabeth "Lisa," who, like her father, also worked at the UA. She was a wildlife biologist studying big cats before retiring.

While officially a professor emeritus, Haynes is more than happy to continue working.

"To me, playing golf is a total waste of time," he said. "There's so much other stuff to do before one passes away."

Art Jelinek

Like Thompson, Jelinek began developing an interest in archeology when he was young. He remembers picking up Native American artifacts around his grandmother's summer home in southwestern Michigan.

After serving in the Marine Corps, Jelinek went to the University of New Mexico on the GI Bill. He earned his bachelor's degree in anthropology there before going on to get his master's and doctorate from the University of Michigan.

He taught at the University of Chicago and University of Michigan before Thompson hired him at the UA in 1967.

Jelinek's research, which focuses primarily on Neanderthal culture, has taken him to prehistoric sites and collections all over the world, including locations in Israel, France, Germany, Turkey, England and Scotland.

He's published more than 70 academic articles and delivered 60 professional papers at national and international meetings, continuing to publish research long after his official retirement date in 1993.

"I retired so I could work," he quipped. "I spent 20 years after my retirement date finishing a major report on my last archaeological excavation, and it was published by the University of Arizona Press in 2013 – 'Neandertal Lithic Industries at La Quina.' It weighs 5 pounds."

Like Thompson and Haynes, Jelinek felt obligated to persevere with his work.

"It was something I felt I owed to my colleagues to make that information available in a form that I thought made sense," he said.

While Jelinek's research output is impressive, he says his proudest career achievement is "the number of students that I trained who've gone on to successful careers."

Jelinek, who will turn 90 this summer, has outlived some of those students now, but continues to stay in touch with those he can – many of whom have now retired or are nearing retirement themselves. He also occasionally meets with current UA students working in areas related to his.

Steve Kuhn, who has taught in the School of Anthropology for 25 years, says Jelinek has the air of an "old-school academic."

"I'm 61, and I still feel like a student when I go talk to him," said Kuhn, who has done work with Jelinek related to Tabun Cave in Israel, which Jelinek excavated in the 1970s. "We're good friends, but still I feel nervous, and I don't go talk to him unless I really have my act together."

Once you get to know Jelinek, however, you see that he's genuine and warm, with an incredible sense of humor to go along with his incredible breadth of knowledge, Kuhn said.

"He's almost 90 but continues to be active and interested in the field – interacting with students and professionals when they come through," Kuhn said. "It's something we should all aspire to. I don't know what his secret is."

When he's not working, Jelinek does photography – mostly landscapes. He has one son and has been married for seven years to his second wife, Carol Gifford, who received her anthropology degree from the UA in 1952.

Jelinek said this month's event to honor him and his colleagues epitomizes the collegiality of the UA anthropology family.

"It's an example of the congeniality of the school and its continuing interest," he says. "It's nice to be recognized by so many good people, and in such good company as my two colleagues, who are both close friends and have been for many years."

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