Tweakers 'N Diggers: Looters are pillaging Native American burial grounds to finance their meth habits

By Nicholas Phillips
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Disguised in deep-cover camouflage known as a Ghillie suit, Geoff Donaldson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Southern Illinois caught a major looter on video.

Johnson County, Illinois

In his illegal hunt for artifacts, Leslie Jones, 50, of Johnson County, Illinois, tore up enough federal soil to fill a semitrailer.

Nicholas Phillips

Geoff Donaldson and other agents at the federal and state levels spent

As Geoff Donaldson sprinted across a barren southern Illinois crop field at dusk on January 26, 2007, he breathed aloud a prayer: "Lord, *please* make me invisible."

The 35-year-old uniformed officer of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was trying to wriggle into his Ghillie suit, full-body camouflage that makes a turkey hunter resemble a mossy tree stump. He wasn't hunting turkey that evening, though. He was stalking a thief. And, after a year of cat-and-mouse, Donaldson wanted his man.

In March 2006 Donaldson received a tip: A car was often seen parked on private land near a remote corner of Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge, about 25 miles east of Cape Girardeau. He found the vehicle, peeked inside and found some hand-digging tools. People sometimes gather ginseng in these parts, he knew. But something didn't feel right.

The next day Donaldson was hiking along a creek bottom when he spied a man up on a ridge spur below a bluff acting "skittish." His name was Leslie Jones, 46, of Johnson County, Illinois. Jones had facial hair, Donaldson recalls, and a trim, muscular physique, "the picture of an axman."

Among tall oaks and maple trees, Jones kept hunkering over something, then glancing up. Donaldson dropped out of sight and tried to sneak in for a closer look. When he arrived a few minutes later, Jones was gone, though his handiwork remained: Hundreds of square yards of federal soil were torn up.

"It looked like hogs had gotten into it," Donaldson recalls. He noted several piles of broken spear points and stone chips. It appeared that Jones, for months, had been systematically unearthing Native American artifacts.

Picking up an arrowhead or digging a small hole on federal property might lead to a citation, but looting that causes damage in excess of $500 is a felony. Donaldson contacted the U.S. attorney's office, which listed the evidence they'd need for a felony conviction: a video of Jones excavating the

nearly a year chasing down artifact thief Leslie Jones.

Nicholas Phillips

Professor Neal Lopinot of the Center for Archaeological Research at Missouri State University says theft of prehistoric artifacts is "a serious problem" in the Ozarks.

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The giant "Indian Rockhouse" is one of several hundred sheltered sites tucked in the hillsides near Buffalo National River, Arkansas. This cave shows signs of human occupation dating back milleniums, and has a history of looting.

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Native American shell beads discovered within the last month on the Melton farm in northeastern Arkansas.

Tom Huck

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material, then pocketing it and returning home. "You've got to be kidding me," Donaldson thought.

For the next ten months, he and his colleagues spent more than 300 man-hours spread out in the woods, waiting for Jones. Digital cameras at the ready, they sat on watch through sweltering summer humidity and cold winter rains. Sometimes, officers from the U.S. Forest Service or Illinois' Department of Natural Resources joined the party.

"We kept *just* missing him," Donaldson groans.

Around 4 a.m. on that late January day in 2007, the team took up positions in the shadows of the forest. Hours crawled by and still no sign of the thief. Late that afternoon Donaldson radioed to the others: Pack it up. On their drive back to the staging area in Marion, Illinois, word came that Jones' car was parked near the refuge.

Donaldson, a devout Christian and father of two, remembers racing back to Cypress Creek under a darkening sky, praying to keep calm. "The idea is to become one with nature," he says. He reached the top of the bluff and scanned below for Jones. Nothing.

Then he inched down the slope toward Jones' "honey hole" — the site of the most intense digging. A tedious half-hour later, he was standing smack in the middle of it. All was quiet for several moments. Then he heard the thrashing of leaves.

Donaldson peered over his left shoulder and froze. A mere twenty feet away, Leslie Jones had stopped in his tracks. He was gripping a hand shovel and staring at Donaldson's neck. The officer assumed his cover was blown and prepared to show his badge. But Jones only blinked, looked past him and trudged off to dig someplace else. The camouflage had worked. "It was a heart-pounding experience," Donaldson recalls.

He shot enough incriminating video of Jones to secure a search warrant. When federal and state agents raided Jones' residence the next day, they discovered thousands of artifacts stored in old ammunition boxes, coolers and paint buckets.

Archaeologists later determined that 900 artifacts came from the refuge. A third of these were stone tools left by Native Americans that no human hands had likely touched since about 1,000 B.C., or earlier, the scientists reported.

But authorities also seized an additional 12,000 Indian artifacts of uncertain origin. Among these were needles and hooks made from animal bone, clay figurines, pottery shards and something more unsettling: fragments of human skulls, femurs, jaws and teeth.

"It was particularly disturbing that there was no hesitation picking up human remains," says Tim Santel, a Fish and Wildlife special agent.

Jones confessed to making money off the stolen artifacts by selling them to collectors. "He may have gotten spear points worth hundreds of dollars," suggests Mark Wagner, a Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Ozark Mountains, Buffalo National River

archaeologist who evaluated the seized items. "We don't know. They've all disappeared into this dealer network."

Leslie Jones was a familiar face to local law enforcement, having been arrested twice in Johnson County for growing marijuana on someone else's land. "I assume he was selling it," says Sheriff Elry Faulkner. That he was mixed up in the illicit trade for both artifacts and drugs was no isolated incident.

Folks have been picking around for arrowheads throughout the Midwest for generations. But now, archaeologists report that a nefarious breed of looter is stripping history wholesale from public and private soil. The worst ones are essentially grave robbers who come armed, often in the dark of night, to plunder Native American burial grounds. Some hawk the artifacts on eBay or other sites. Others use them as currency for drugs.

Deep in the Ozark Mountains, where authorities say the methamphetamine epidemic is again gaining steam, addicts known as "twiggers" (tweakers who dig) have been mining rock shelters and caves for anything of value — possibly even skeletal remains. The weird nexus between looting and meth has been noted by experts for several years, especially in the Pacific Northwest. Today, these shady characters are leaving their footprints in America's heartland.

"What's really frustrating is that archaeological sites are nonrenewable," says Neal Lopinot, a Missouri State University archaeologist. "Once they're destroyed, that's it. They're gone."

The bluff line running south from Cahokia Mounds to Dupo, Illinois, is "crawling" with archaeological sites, observes Julie Holt, who chairs the anthropology department at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "You can't put a shovel in the ground without hitting something," she says.

In the 1800s digging into Indian burials was something families did on Sunday outings after church. At the time, it was widely believed that the earthwork mounds along the Mississippi and eastward had been built by an advanced race that was squeezed out by the more primitive Native Americans.

As a result, if you plucked an intriguing item from a mound, you'd probably have no qualms about taking it home to display on the mantel, says Iowa-based archaeological researcher Bob Palmer.

"In some parts of the country people still find mound-digging to be acceptable," Palmer notes. Last fall, roughly 60 miles downriver from St. Louis, a landowner reported damage to the burial mound on his property, prompting Dawn Cobb of the Illinois historic preservation office to drive down to investigate.

"There was this huge, gaping hole with human remains scattered around," Cobb remembers. Illinois, like Missouri and Arkansas, has a law protecting unmarked graves. If someone gets an owner's permission, they can dig on private property. However, if they hit bone, they must stop. That law clearly failed to deter anyone in this case.

"We had no leads," Cobb says. "The hole was at least a year old. There's nothing the landowner can do from a legal standpoint."

South of the bootheel, on the Arkansas side of the Central Mississippi Valley, Terry Melton feels that frustration. The 42-year-old chicken farmer has been running looters off his family's land in the Strawberry and Black river bottoms for at least a decade. None has been convicted. On one occasion, he felt threatened enough by a trio of them to brandish an AK-47.

"There's got to be something down here worth selling, otherwise the idiots wouldn't keep coming back," Melton says, bouncing his pickup truck over a potholed dirt road as he heads toward a remote soybean field surrounding two small burial mounds.

The Meltons have been farming this flat expanse for at least a century. Humans first occupied it 10,000 years ago, according to radiocarbon dating of artifacts. Scientists have identified at least 40 ancient human skeletons in this area, where looters have struck three times since last October.

Juliet Morrow of the Arkansas Archaeological Survey began a meticulous excavation of one of the mounds in June 2009. "It's really depressing," she says. With a furrowed brow, she points out bone fragments and evidence of haphazard digging. The site is important, she says, because nothing is known about the Archaic period (8,000 to 1,000 B.C.) in Arkansas.

Melton says he's found so much trash over the years that he knows which brand of cigarettes and beer the trespassers like most (Marlboro Lights and Busch). He once even found a sock that someone used to wipe his butt.

Other clues are more subtle. The reason that dozens of small holes dot the soil, Morrow notes, is that looters slide fishing rods and old radio antennas deep into the ground to feel for something hard. Sometimes, they'll paint their shovels white to make them easier to see in the dark. You can tell they come at night, she adds, because they inadvertently leave behind perfect spear points, some 4,000 years old.

She can't say how much one of those might be worth to a looter. "Professional archaeologists do not appraise anything," she explains. "It's priceless; you can't put a dollar value on it."

The major prize for looters in this area used to be decorated ceramic pots dating back to the time of first European contact 500 years ago. But whole vessels are fairly rare now, and on these northeast Arkansan mounds, only shards remain.

Terry Melton's cousin, Jamie Nunnally, has parked his truck and joined the group. Clad in camouflage overalls, he says he once fired shots in the air to scare looters off his nearby field. "We'll probably never get it stopped," he says. "I quit calling the law."

Both cousins remember the wild nighttime chase of June 13, 2005. They caught two thieves leaving the mound around 12:30 a.m. and pursued them at high speeds through the bottoms. The perpetrators not only dropped their bag of stolen artifacts, they also jumped a small bridge, lost their muffler and ditched their pickup, leaving a shovel inside. Sheriff's deputies from two different counties showed up. No convictions resulted.

Melton complains that the judge won't discipline the looters, even though it's always the same crowd. Nunnally claims these individuals have also been picked up by the sheriff on drug-related charges. He's convinced they sell artifacts to buy dope.

The situation makes Morrow furious. "Maybe the judge or prosecuting attorneys consider this a petty crime," she says, exasperated. "But it's a felony."

A deputy did recently come out and collect evidence, she notes. But that only happened because the sheriff's office was pressured by Carrie Wilson, a member of the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma, which claims the area as ancestral territory.

"I can be very persistent," Wilson says later in a phone interview. "But Julie needs to be careful. *I* need to be careful. There would be people very glad to see us go away. You have to understand, there is a contingent that's dangerous. And sometimes, you're not dealing with somebody with a full deck."

After the scientists leave, Melton and Nunnally stroll through the field, searching for arrowheads. They regularly plow through the mound sites to plant crops. For Melton, that's not the same as digging into a grave. Farming activities are exempt under the burial protection law, he points out.

Back in his pickup, climbing out of the bottoms toward the nearest town, Melton admits, "I love history, and I'd love to dig. But I won't, out of the simple reason that there's dead people down there. It's about respect. Even if they're 4,000 years old, it's still a person."

Farmers in Missouri's Franklin and Jefferson counties have been bristling lately, says Joe Harl of the Archaeological Research Center in St. Louis. Here, where the Ozark Mountains begin to roll west and south, he hears more and more landowners complaining of unwelcome surface collectors — and sometimes diggers — on their property.

"Many have said they're going to get guns," Harl reports. "It's worse than the [illegal] deer hunters."

The problem is not confined to private land. Mark Twain National Forest covers approximately 1.5 million acres of Missouri, most of it in the state's southeastern quarter. Heritage program manager Keri Hicks says Mark Twain has the most caves in the national forest system, and a majority "have been looted into oblivion" since about the 1950s.

These days, an e-mail will trickle in every couple months from a forest employee who's discovered a hole, shovel or screen, says Hicks. When someone checks on it, they might find that the disturbance is a couple years old or more.

"We don't have enough law enforcement to be effective with trying to protect or monitor it," Hicks says.

Archaeologist James Halpern says he and another employee have been assigned to 515,000 acres in the southwestern portion of the forest. "It's pretty hard to check everything," says Halpern. "There are tons of sites and places on the forest I've never even heard of, let alone been to."

On the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, where 135 miles of the Jacks Fork and Current rivers are designated federal property, authorities write about five citations per year for pilfering arrowheads, says park archaeologist James Price. Each carries a $225 fine.

There was one major case there in the last decade, says Jodi Towery, a federal law enforcer on the Riverways. Looters wearing headlamps came cruising in at night on ATVs. They tore two feet down into a 20-by-30-foot plot. Towery caught them on camera but couldn't positively ID them. When a mushroom hunter stole one of her cameras, word spread that the site was under surveillance — and the digging ceased.

This particular case taught her one thing: "Some of the people who collect artifacts are also known to do drugs. It's kind of the same crowd."

Sergeant Kevin Glaser of the Southeast Missouri Drug Task Force has also noticed that connection. The number of meth-lab incidents has tripled from 2008 to 2009 in the ten counties under his supervision, he says. And he's noticed something odd: "We've gone into meth houses, and we'll literally find tubs of arrowheads."

Larry Keen, supervisor of the Southwest Missouri Drug Task Force, also reports that he often finds artifacts during meth busts. Posits Keen: "I think whenever they get high, they've got to do something, so they wander around and get arrowheads and rocks."

There's probably more to it than that, says Richard Rawson, a professor at UCLA's School of Medicine. For 35 years he has studied addiction, with an emphasis on methamphetamines. He says meth users can stay up for days, focusing intensely on a redundant task until they collapse from fatigue.

Rawson says he has not heard of any link between meth users and arrowhead hunting, but, he reasons, "Somewhere in the background of their thinking, there's some motive for getting these things. They're not out there collecting leaves."

Special agent Robert Still recalls catching a woman stealing artifacts from the Buffalo National River in northwest Arkansas. She grew so agitated that she pulled out a revolver and a large knife. "I had to disarm her," says Still. Then there was the looter who came lunging at him with a jagged-edged garden tool. "We've had officers shot over this type of stuff."

If theft here is more dramatic, so is the scenery. The flinty blue hills arcing across the horizon — known as the Boston Mountains — are the highest on the Ozark Plateau. Steep slopes of cedar, hardwood and pine drop down into streams lined by limestone bluffs. Tucked back into the hillsides are hundreds of rock shelters and caves, all of them rife with history — and vulnerable to plunder.

"Industrial-strength looters" have been invading the Buffalo River for several years, says federal archaeologist Caven Clark. He's worked at numerous parks in the western United States, including the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. Southeastern Missouri has a problem, he adds, but not like here. "When I got here, what I found was more looting than I'd ever seen before." Much if it, he says, is linked to drugs.

Of the 350 caves and rock shelters in and around the Buffalo, more than 95 percent of them have been worked over, Clark estimates. In the last three years, he says, 22 serious cases were reported, some of which went to federal court where the pillagers were prosecuted under the federal Archaeological Resources Protection Act. Passed in 1979, the act prohibits looting on federal property.

Crooks target the sheltered sites because humans have huddled in them for millenniums and artifacts have accumulated. Compared to the wet caves of the eastern Ozarks, the sites here are relatively dry, which has helped preserve the bark fiber sandals, fabrics and cordage. "Those things would fetch an unbelievable price," Clark says, but they are very rare.

The serious thieves wear camouflage and burrow ferociously into the ground. "I've seen some holes you could probably drop a Volkswagen into," says Clark, adding that they also leave plenty of trash. "We joke that Mountain Dew might as well be probable cause."

Special agent Still estimates that 70 percent of the archaeological crimes he's worked have some drug connection. Caven Clark has seen the same correlation. "Bad boys are bad boys," he says.

What complicates investigations, he continues, is that the artifacts are often used as currency and bartered for drugs. Looters know, for example, that a nice Dalton point (8,500-7,900 B.C.) might be sold on the Internet for a couple hundred dollars or more, while a more generic point might get $10 to $40 from a collector.

"If you're in a bluff shelter all day," Clark says, "you're all pumped up on drugs, and you find six points you can turn into $20 each — there's money to be made."

Outside federal property in this part of the state, "a new wave of looting has been seen in epidemic proportions" over the last ten years, according to Jerry Hilliard, assistant station archaeologist at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. He fields eight to ten calls a year from a landowner or sheriff's deputy about such crime. "And that's the tip of the iceberg," he says, "because university people are sometimes the last people to get called."

Landowners can't report looting if they're not aware of it, according to Arkansas state archaeologist Dr. Ann Early. But even if they're aware of illicit digging, she adds, they might still keep mum to avoid unwanted attention. "A lot of digging may be going on in the counties, and the sheriffs may know nothing about it," says Early.

Hilliard is alarmed by the scale of the thievery. He says backhoes and dump trucks have been used to secretly haul huge amounts of unsifted soil away from sites. In 2003 a group in Madison County rigged a pump from a stream to a power-sprayer then blasted the inside of a nearby cave to uncover valuable items.

More recently, in Carroll County, another gang fired up a generator and ran lights into a cave. There, they cooked crank and dug several trenches five feet deep in search of ancient objects. Authorities on the scene later collected scattered human leg bones.

The group even tried to sell a human skull at a flea market, Hilliard says. "I think there is a weird underworld of selling, buying and trading of human skeletal material, because I've heard these kinds of stories over the years," Hilliard says. "I'm not sure I'd want to get into that world.

Special agent Still believes there is a black market for human remains, though he's had no direct contact with it in the Midwest. After interrogating numerous grave robbers, he's noticed that "typically human remains still tend to give people the heebie-jeebies." They might use a human bone as a poker for their campfire or play with them and bat them around, he says, but generally, they leave the bones onsite.

If you stumble across ancient remains on federal property and then fail to report them, secretly remove them or try to sell them, you're guilty of violating the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act enacted by Congress in 1990. Anti-looting laws have not been warmly received in the deep Ozarks, where, jokes Clark, "digging is a custom among our people."

Hilliard agrees that quirks of highland culture play a role at the state level, too. "Government intervention has always been something that rural folks in the Ozarks have been very skeptical of," he says. "They don't want to be told what they can or can't do on their land."

Agent Still remembers how one man guilty of looting informed him in 2007 that only a prison term could stop him from digging. Sure enough, during the sentencing process, he was caught stealing in the exact area of his original offense.

"It's an addiction," Still says.

The artifact collector show held annually in Collinsville, Illinois, is one of the largest in the country. Before this year's event, on March 20 and 21, organizer Floyd Ritter said he'd be welcoming 3,000 visitors from across the nation. But anybody trying to hawk items unearthed from burial grounds, he says, was banned.

Asked how he could tell if an artifact was robbed, Ritter responds, "There's no way to tell."

Many archaeologists distinguish between good and bad collectors. The good ones, they say, display a good-natured curiosity about an arrowhead. The bad ones disregard the law and the artifact's history and care only about finding the highest bidder. They amass their inventories from low-level looters.

The finest specimens find their way to major dealers, who in turn sell them overseas, mostly to the Japanese, says Larry Zimmerman, an anthropology professor at Indiana and Purdue universities. "On the high-end stuff," he says, "Americans have been pretty much the middleman."

Zimmerman says collectors' shows, such as the one at Collinsville, are often "an archaeologist's nightmare." But eBay also worries him. Five years ago, as chair of the Society for American Archaeology's ethics committee, he lobbied the auction site to at least concede that the online antiquities trade is keeping looters in business.

"They basically said, 'Thank you very much for your concern,'" remembers Zimmerman. "They weren't very helpful." But he does point out that eBay will shut down any auction of human remains or artifacts known to be stolen.

"The problem is that eBay is so big, it's unmanageable," Zimmerman says. "Even if they had ten eBay cops, they couldn't control the antiquities trade."

Leslie Jones was sentenced January 25 in the Southern District of Illinois for his crimes at Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge. Archaeologists calculated that he had churned up enough soil to fill a semitrailer. The judge ordered him to serve 30 days in prison, perform 100 hours of community service and pay $150,000 in restitution.

"That's going to haunt him for the rest of his life," says Geoff Donaldson.

Dr. Julie Holt of SIUE was not as impressed. "The judge gave that guy a slap on the wrist," she complains. "Do you think if he dug up your grandma, he'd get 30 days? No. He'd be in prison for a long time with psychological testing. But somehow, it's OK if it's a Native American burial."

Donaldson says the origin of the skeletal material seized from Jones' residence is still under investigation. The offender declined to comment for this story.

Unlike Jones, most people sentenced for ARPA violations don't end up in prison. In Bob Palmer's analysis of federal prosecutions from 1996 to 2005, he determined that 83 looters were found guilty. Of these, less than a fourth of them did any time, and the ones who did served no more than a year.

Last June federal agents swooped into southern Utah and arrested two dozen people suspected of playing a role in a network of illicit Indian artifact trading. (Curiously, two suspects and one informant have since committed suicide.) Announcing the raid, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar hailed a "new chapter" for protecting such items. The time of the U.S. government "simply looking the other way," he said, "is over."

Meanwhile, Native Americans like Carrie Wilson look with anxiety toward the future. "Somebody's looting a site every day, whether a rock shelter or some other place," says Wilson, who consults for various Native American tribes and claims Quapaw, Peoria and Eastern Shawnee heritage.

"If they're not looting, agriculture is destroying our sites in such numbers that in a few years, there won't be sites left."