

A detailed historical map of the Mississippi River basin, showing various geographical features, rivers, and place names. The map is overlaid with a dark grey horizontal band containing white text. The text includes the journal title, issue information, and a URL. The map itself shows the Mississippi River flowing through the center, with numerous tributaries and lakes. Labels include 'CHIPEWAY COUNTRY', 'MISSISSIPPI RIVER', 'M'DEWAKANTON COUNTRY', and 'WARTPEKUTEY'. The map is a sepia-toned historical document with a grid overlay.

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The cover image is a detail from Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River From Astronomical and Barometrical Observations Surveys and Information by Joseph Nicolas Nicollet, 1843.

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University of Minnesota

Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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FEATURE

LIFE, LAND, WATER, AND TIME: ARCHAEOLOGIST DOUG BIRK AND THE LITTLE ELK HERITAGE PRESERVE

By Author Name

The title of the 1976 novella by Norman Maclean, *A River Runs through It*, is also an apt description of the career of Minnesota archaeologist Douglas A. Birk, who passed away unexpectedly in March 2017. Actually, several

rivers run through his remarkable and pioneering career, which spanned nearly 50 years. Birk was among the first historical archaeologists to conduct underwater investigations of sites relating to the North American fur trade along



Archaeologist Doug Birk speaking to St. Cloud State University anthropology students enrolled in the author's 2014 archaeological field school at the Little Elk River Mission site. Image courtesy of the author.

the “voyageur’s highway,” the chain of rivers, lakes, and overland portages that run along the Minnesota-Canadian border. He was a prominent participant in the Quetico-Superior Underwater Research Project (QSURP), a joint Canadian and American effort to locate underwater archaeological evidence of canoe wrecks and submerged terrestrial sites such as Fort Charlotte on the Pigeon River at the west end of the Grand Portage, which linked Lake Superior to the rivers and lakes of the interior of North America (see [Allard and Cipolla](#), this issue).

But it was the Mississippi River that loomed largest in Birk’s life and archaeological endeavors. Those who knew Doug tell the story of his fascination, since sixth grade, when he learned of Zebulon Pike’s exploration up the Mississippi River in 1805–06 and the possibility that the expedition might have crossed over his parent’s property near Pine River. Many years later, Doug would lead his own expedition to locate

the archaeological remains of Pike’s fort on the Mississippi near the mouth of the Swan River. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s Doug focused much of his professional attention on a short stretch of the Mississippi River at its confluence with the Little Elk River in present-day Morrison County, Minnesota. For Doug, the Mississippi River was part of a vast land- and “water-scape” that facilitated the movement of people, goods, and ideas both before and after the arrival of Europeans (Birk 1994). Doug’s research often revolved around the intersection of people and the environment. He was interested in the human-land/water relationship and how these interactions shaped human relations within and between different groups. Doug took a particular interest in the early colonial and settlement periods of Minnesota history and in particular the role of the fur trade and missionization on the relations between Native Americans and Euroamericans.

Settlements on the Little Elk River

As Native and European people visited, settled in, and passed through the Mississippi River valley, they created stories, memories, and sites that reflect the importance of this place. Speaking of the Little Elk in the nineteenth century, Hole-in-the-Day, an influential chief among the Ojibwe, remarked that he hoped that establishing a village here would make it “a great place” (Birk 1991b:27). In this short piece, I recount Doug’s efforts to once more make this a great place through the creation of an archaeological and cultural heritage preserve along the Mississippi and Little Elk Rivers.

In the early 1970s, Doug was working as an archaeologist for the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) conducting surveys in the Mississippi Headwater region to locate archaeological sites potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places (Birk 1991a:251). In 1972, Doug and the MHS archaeologists were

drawn to the mouth of the Little Elk River by reports of rock piles thought by local residents to be “Indian mounds” and documentary evidence noting that the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church had established a mission nearby. According to Birk’s research (1993), the records of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions reveal that missionaries had set up shop at this location at the request of Hole-in-the-Day. While this initial foray was not successful in locating the Little Elk River Mission site, Doug did take the time to map the so-called “Indian Mounds.”

Although skeptical that they were mounds when he mapped them, Doug would soon be drawn back to the Little Elk by these curious piles of stone. As he tells the story in a 1991 publication, Doug happened to meet Bruce Mellor, a poet, historian, and archivist with the Morrison County Historical Society, in 1978. As fate would have

it, Mellor was one of a group of young boys who had, in the mid-1960s, dug into the rock piles, supposing them to be full of Indian artifacts. Mellor told Doug that to their disappointment all they found was more modern looking materials like nails and “dishes” buried in thick layers of ash (Birk 1991a:251). Doug was sure that those rock piles were not “Indian mounds” but rather were collapsed stone chimneys. His curiosity now piqued, Doug was astounded to learn that Mellor still had some of these old relics stashed

away in a shoebox. Upon viewing the artifacts, Doug knew that they dated to the mid-eighteenth century, possibly earlier than 1760. This date was significant because it suggested that the site was associated with the French colonial period of Minnesota history (Birk 1991a:253). Along with the still un-relocated nineteenth-century mission site, and now this eighteenth-century site, the mouth of the Little Elk was proving to be a historically and archaeologically significant stretch of the Mighty Mississippi.

Research, Education, and Stewardship

It was around this time that fate once more stepped in to draw Doug’s interests and efforts to the Little Elk. In 1981 Doug’s employment as an archaeologist with the Minnesota Historical Society came to an end. What seemed to be a career setback actually turned out to be an incredible opportunity. Along with two other former MHS archaeologists and a University of Minnesota Ph.D. student, Doug founded the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology (IMA) in 1982. The mission of the IMA was “research, education, and stewardship” as they pertained to the archaeological heritage of Minnesota (Gilman 2008:73). Although throughout its twenty years in operation the IMA was an organization with “no reliable source of income and never more than half a dozen full-time employees,” it made important and enduring contributions to Minnesota archaeology (Gilman 2008:72). Doug’s work at the Little Elk was a significant component of the IMA’s efforts throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Invigorated with a fresh start and eager to explore the eighteenth-century site at the Little Elk,

now more commonly known by its Minnesota state archaeological site number, 21-MO-20 or just MO20, Doug and the IMA conducted test excavations at MO20 in 1982 to “substantiate the mid-eighteenth-century date” of the site and to try and identify the site’s “purpose and identity” (Birk 1991a:257). Using the rock piles and other surface features to guide the placement of their excavations, the crew uncovered the charred remains of one wall of a building built in a typical French colonial style known as *poteaux en terre*. This style of vernacular architecture used closely spaced vertical timbers set directly in the ground to form the walls of a structure. The building appears to have burned. The artifacts such as glass beads and pottery sherds found in and around the structure did indeed appear to date the site to the mid-eighteenth century. Remarkably, one of the recovered pottery sherds fit back together with one found by Mellor and his childhood friends in the 1960s (Birk 1991a:257). Even more fortuitous for Doug and the IMA, the owners of the property where the site was located decided to put the land up for sale that same year.

Establishing the Little Elk Heritage Preserve

In 1983, Jan Warner, Director of the Morrison County Historical Society (MCHS) and the Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Memorial Museum,

joined the IMA Board, establishing what would turn out to be a long-term relationship between the MCHS, Doug, and the IMA. That year the

IMA also partnered with the Minnesota Parks Foundation (MPF) to purchase the property containing the MO20 site (Birk 1991a:257-258). This land acquisition marked the beginnings of what would become the Little Elk Heritage Preserve. Over the next five years, the IMA and the MPF would acquire 93 acres of land along the Mississippi River, above and below the mouth of the Little Elk River. In 1988 the title of the Little Elk Heritage Preserve was transferred to the IMA. At the time the Little Elk Heritage Preserve was the “largest privately owned archaeological preserve of its kind in the Midwest” (Birk 1991b:7). Significantly, a covenant attached to IMA’s title requires that the land is forever to be “held, developed, and managed as to preserve and

enhance its archaeological, historical and natural features and significance for the future education of and enjoyment by the public” (Birk 1991b:7).

This was the mission of Doug and the IMA over the course of the next 15 years. In 1987 the IMA conducted an archaeological survey over the entire 93 acres of the Little Elk Heritage Preserve. They recorded several archaeological sites spanning from at least 400 B.C through the late 19th and into the early 20th centuries. In addition to MO20, Doug and the IMA archaeologists discovered a historic mill, dam, and commercial complex, a stone quarry dating to the 1850s, and another rock pile thought to be the collapsed chimney of a ca. 1840 log cabin (Figure 1). This

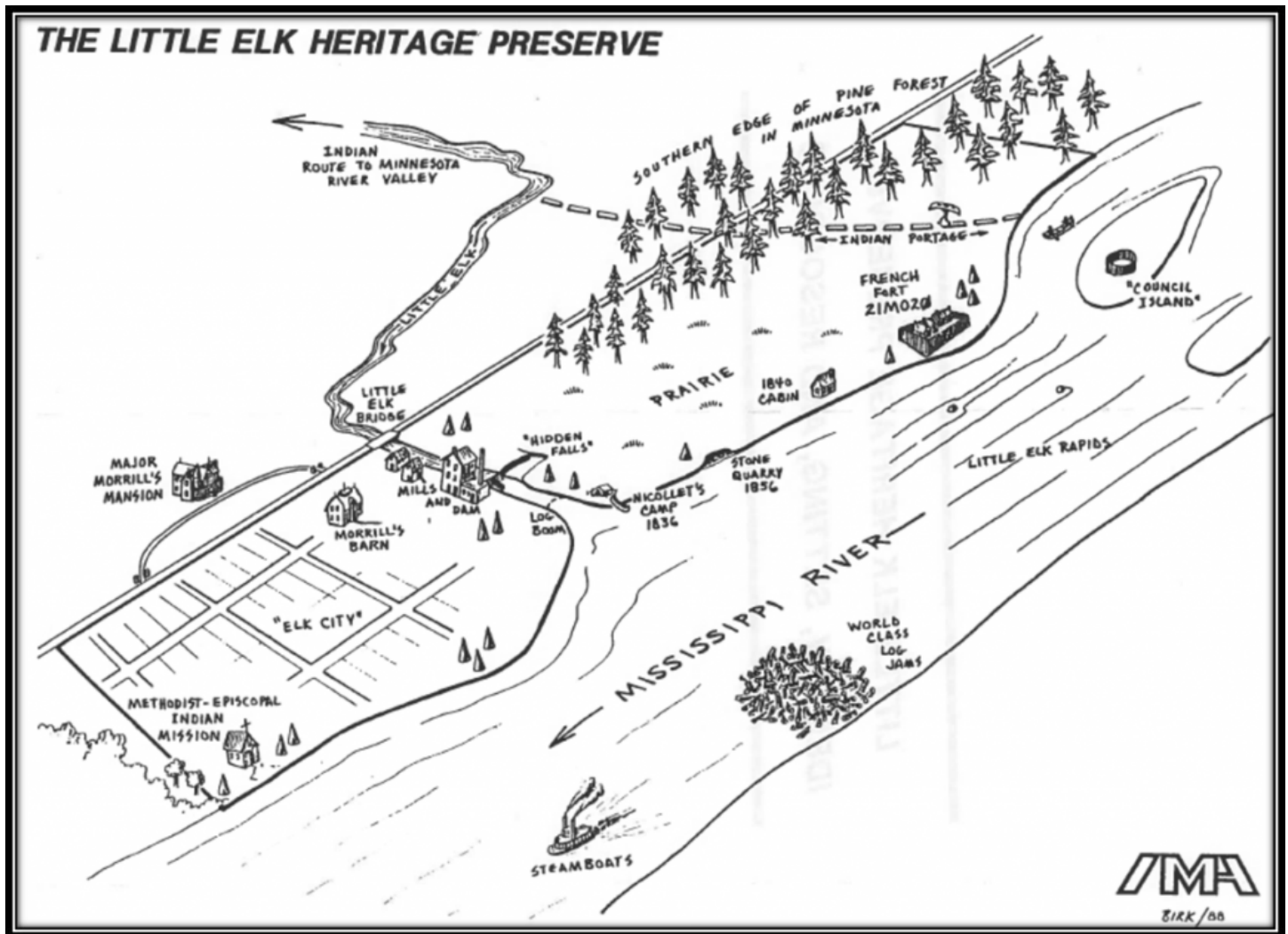


Figure 1. The Little Elk Heritage Preserve as Drawn by Douglas A. Birk. From Birk 1991b:9.

cabin may be related to the Little Elk River Methodist Episcopal mission site that had eluded Doug in the 1970s. That site was finally located by Doug following the discovery of additional documentary evidence that suggested the mission was south of the mouth of the Little Elk River. In 1985, Doug and Brian Hoffman found the site using a combination of metal detector survey and shovel probes. They discovered several iron fragments believed to be from a cast-iron stove as well as other nineteenth-century artifacts such as transfer-printed ceramic sherds and machine cut square nails. Doug and an IMA crew returned to the mission site in 1987 and excavated a 1 x 1 meter test unit at the site and also made a surface

collection of artifacts from gopher mounds. Once more they recovered a variety of nineteenth-century artifacts.

Meanwhile, research at MO20 continued apace. In 1983 MO20 was cleared of vegetation, mapped, and secured from vandals by the erection of a six-foot high fence. The clearing revealed that the site consisted of at least three structures, four fireplaces, and several other surface depressions that likely represented cultural features. (Birk 1991a:259). Doug, along with archaeologist Dean Anderson, also excavated several test pits. It was during these excavations that Doug implemented the exacting field methods that would

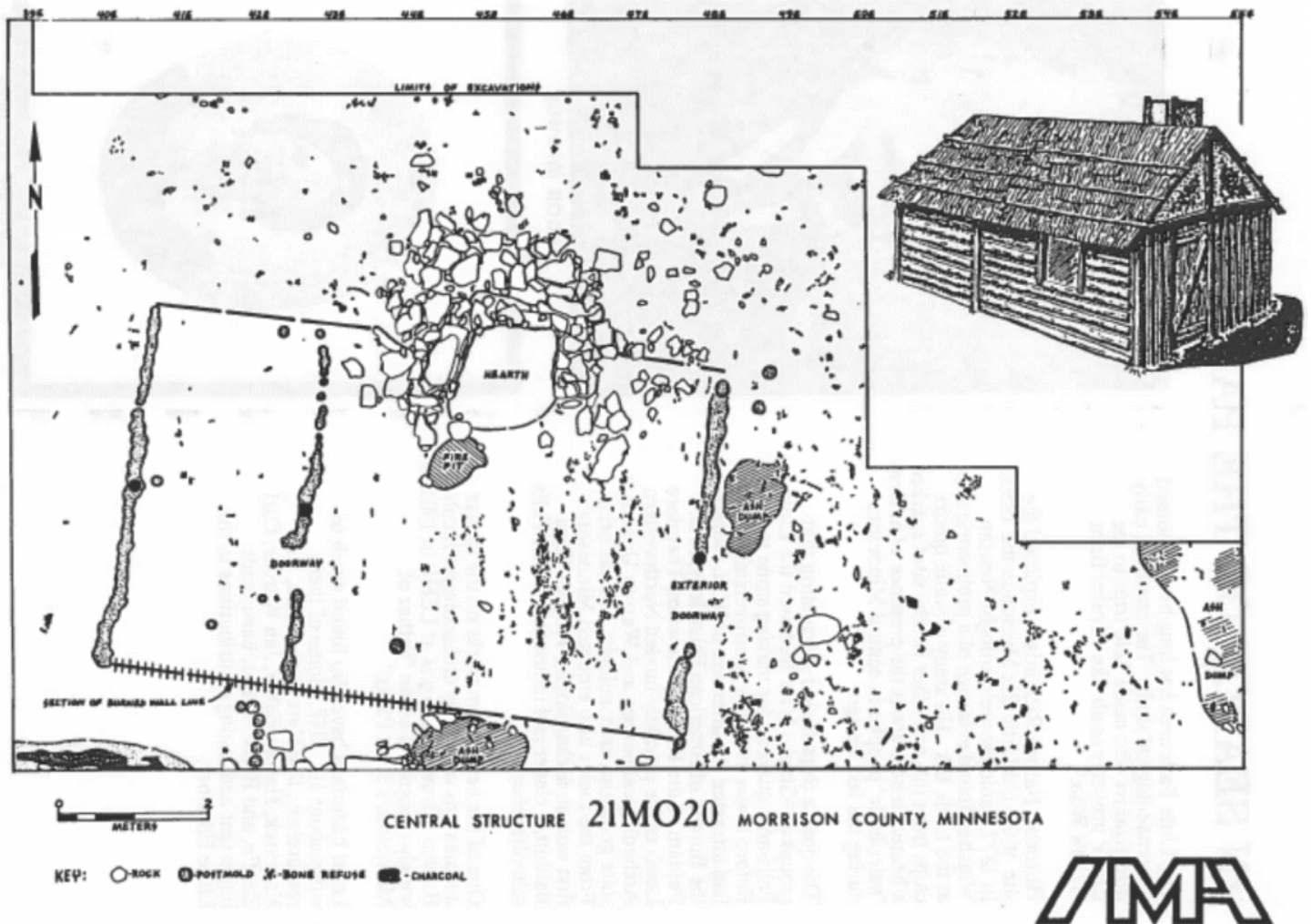


Figure 2. Archaeological Plan View Map and Artist's Reconstruction of the Central Structure at MO20. From Birk 1991b:24.

allow for the recovery of very small artifacts such as pins, needles, glass beads, lead shot, tiny fish and animal remains (Birk 1991a:258). These methods included washing all excavated soils through 1/8 inch mesh screens and hand excavating test units by trowels (rather than shovels) in order to plot the exact location of uncovered artifacts, stones, and cultural features (Figure 2). These efforts were done in advance of nominating the site to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). In 1984 the MO20 site was successfully listed on the NRHP. That year also saw the first large-scale excavations at the site, implementing the field methods mentioned above.

Between 1984 and 1988, Doug directed several field seasons of excavation at MO20. The goals were to determine the age of the site, how long it was occupied, the identity of the people who lived there, and the activities that took place there (Birk 1991b:251). These investigations focused on the central structure at the site. This structure measured 5 m (16.4 ft.) by 7.5 m (24.6 ft.) and consisted of two rooms, one heated by one of the stone hearths originally mapped by Doug back in 1972. The second, much smaller room was likely used for storage. Artifacts found in this structure offer some clues to life at the post. For example, artifacts found in proximity to the fireplace indicate that this space was used both as a place for leisure, as represented by bone and lead gaming pieces, and a place for labor, as represented by lead waste from the manufacture of small lead brooches (Birk 1991a:262). Careful excavation of the ash deposits within the fireplace indicate

that this structure was used at least two separate times over the course of a year or two as the traders left the post in the spring and returned the following autumn. The archaeological evidence suggested to Doug that MO20 was occupied sometime during the mid-eighteenth century. Combining this data with a careful combing of the early historical records, Doug proposed that MO20 represented the material remains of Fort Duquesne, a temporary outpost built somewhere in central Minnesota by Joseph Marin, an “explorer and officer in the French regular troops” (Birk 1991a:253). It should be noted that Doug always presented this interpretation of MO20 as a “working hypothesis” to be “tested with every new turn of a trowel or archival page” (Birk 1991a:257).

During this time MO20 became the focal point for public outreach activities at the Little Elk Heritage Preserve. Public outreach efforts included press releases, site tours, open houses, lectures, and a traveling exhibit entitled *Under the Fleur de Lis: The Archaeology of a French Colonial Fort in Minnesota*. Site tours and annual open houses attracted hundreds of visitors to the Little Elk Heritage Preserve and a riverside trail with interpretive signage brought additional visitors to the site. Doug and the IMA also partnered with the Minnesota Historical Society to develop a unit on the history and archaeology of MO20 for the state’s history curriculum. It was taught in the Little Falls school district and in other public schools across Minnesota (Birk 1991b:39-40; Gilman 2008:76-78).

Life, Land, Water, and Time

These were the halcyon days for the Little Elk Heritage Preserve. In 1988 a management study, entitled *Life, Land, Water, and Time: A Resource and Planning Guide for the Little Elk Heritage Preserve* and authored by Doug, was a product of the Little Elk Planning conference held at the Morrison County Historical Society’s Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Memorial Museum in Little Falls

(Gilman 2008:78). Expanded and revised in 1991, *Life, Land, Water, and Time* maps out the future development of the Little Elk Heritage Preserve, noting that the archaeological sites within its 93 acres “represent a cultural continuum extending from the prehistoric past through the period of historic contact to more recent episodes involving Dakota and Ojibway peoples, fur traders,

explorers, missionaries, lumbermen, millers, merchants, settlers, and others. The research and educational potential of these sites is unsurpassed in central Minnesota” (Birk 1991b:7). The goal was to create a “friendly place for anyone who has an interest in human and natural history or who simply wants to bird watch, contemplate the changing of seasons, or enjoy a walk in the towering pines or open grasslands on the banks of the world famous “Father of Waters” (Birk 1991b:43). Doug envisioned that development of the Little Elk Heritage Preserve would unfold in three phases. The first phase would focus on preservation, education, and research. Some aspects of phase one were realized and are still extant, such as a main public entrance and small parking area, an expanded system of trails and interpretive signage on the north side of the Little

Elk River, and a “ghost” framing of the central structure at MO20 based on the archaeological evidence.

Phases two and three proposed to further develop the Little Elk Heritage Preserve to include a paved parking area, restroom facilities, and a cultural program center. A pedestrian bridge over the Little Elk River and additional trails and signage were envisioned to better include the natural and cultural resources, including the Episcopal-Methodist mission site, south of the Little Elk River. Unfortunately, these developments would not come to pass. The 1990s were tumultuous for the IMA, which suffered financial setbacks and internal fissures with the creation of a for-profit cultural resource management subsidiary known as the Institute for Minnesota



Figure 3. Archaeologist Doug Birk speaking to St. Cloud State University anthropology students enrolled in the author’s 2014 archaeological field school at the Little Elk River Mission site. Image courtesy of the author.

Archaeology Consulting-IMAC (Gilman 2008:79-85). Work at the Little Elk Heritage Preserve slowed but did not cease altogether. In the mid-1990s, teacher workshops were held on-site at MO20. Later, in 1999, an open house, site tours, and a public outreach campaign were designed to reenergize efforts to develop the Little Elk Heritage Preserve as a local and regional cultural and educational resource (Gilman 2008:84-85). In the spring of 2000, the Minneapolis Star Tribune ran a series called “Mystery of Little Elk” that could be used by teachers in the classroom (Gilman 2008:85). On the archaeology side, the IMA conducted a remote sensing survey over portions of the preserve. This included the site of the Episcopal-Methodist mission to the Ojibwe. Remote sensing uses sophisticated technologies to detect subsurface archaeological materials, which may later be targeted for archaeological excavation. The remote sensing survey was the final archaeological investigation undertaken by Doug and the IMA at the Little Elk Heritage Preserve. As the new millennium began, the IMA continued to face ever-mounting financial challenges. By 2002, twenty years after its founding, it was clear that the IMA would not survive, and in 2003 the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology was formally dissolved.

Today, the Little Elk Heritage Preserve is a unit of Charles A. Lindbergh State Park, keeping intact the preservation covenant protecting the natural and cultural resources at this special and uniquely Minnesota place that Doug Birk

A Legacy of Stewardship

Doug’s passing in March of 2017 was not only the personal loss of someone I considered a colleague and friend, but also a loss to the archaeological community of the entire Great Lakes region. Over the course of nearly five decades as a professional archaeologist, Doug had amassed an unsurpassed grasp on the archaeology of many aspects of Minnesota’s past and, in particular, the history and archaeology of the Mississippi

spent much of his career researching, documenting, and promoting. Doug Birk was the first archaeologist I contacted when I arrived in Minnesota to take a position as a professor in the Department of Anthropology at St. Cloud State University (SCSU) in 2013. I had known Doug since 1997, when he assisted me with my dissertation research at a fur trading post on the Wabash River in Indiana. Once I was settled in at SCSU, he invited me to visit the Little Elk Heritage Preserve and we began to make plans to collaborate on research projects. Doug was also in the process of organizing his vast library and archives in preparation for finalizing many of the projects he had been working on over the course of his career, including the MO20 and mission site projects at the Little Elk. We began making arrangements for Doug to set up internships with graduate students in our Cultural Resources Management-Archaeology M.S. program. Graduate students would assist Doug in these projects and in return would gain valuable hands-on training in many aspects of Minnesota archaeology and earn graduate credit for their time and effort. Our collaboration extended to the field as well. With Doug’s encouragement, I taught an archaeological field school at 21MO38, the site of the Episcopal-Methodist mission to the Ojibwe in the summer of 2014 (Figure 3). These were to be the first of many future collaborations and I was excited to begin the next phase of my career as a Minnesota archaeologist partnering with Doug.

River valley of central Minnesota. Fortunately for all of us, Doug was probably also unsurpassed in his record keeping and note-taking skills. As of September 2018, Doug’s library and archives will be housed permanently within the Department of Anthropology at SCSU. Over the next few years, we will be working to inventory Doug’s materials and make them available to students and researchers across Minnesota and beyond. Our

goal is to continue Doug's legacy of stewardship, research, and public outreach/education. The former Little Elk Heritage Preserve is part of this legacy and I predict that in keeping with Doug's

vision for its future, we will continue to promote a program of field archaeology, public education, and scholarship at the Little Elk Heritage Preserve.

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About the Author

Rob Mann is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Archaeology Laboratory at St. Cloud State University. He is an anthropological archaeologist with interests in historical archaeology, ethnohistory, and the North American fur trade, whose research centers on the processes of colonialism and ethnogenesis (the formation of new cultural identities). His research on the role of tobacco pipes and smoking in the daily lives of the Native and European participants in the fur trade is published in *Smoking and Culture: The Archaeology of Tobacco Pipes in Eastern North America* (U. of Tennessee Press, 2004) and *Archaeological Perspectives on the French in the New World* (U. Press of Florida, 2017).