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A Glance Back in Time

by [Tom Thiessen](#)

The Midwest Archeological Center has been in existence for over thirty years. During that time, its mission changed from recovering, or "salvaging," data and artifacts that were endangered by reservoir construction, to supporting the archeological resource management needs of National Park System areas. The Center evolved from a long tradition of salvage archeology that preceded the establishment of the Center and shaped its mission during the early years of its operation.



MBP excavators often raced against time and rising reservoir waters to recover information and artifacts that otherwise would be inundated.

The Midwest Archeological Center was established on July 1, 1969, from the facilities, personnel, and equipment of the Smithsonian Institution's Missouri Basin Project (MBP). The MBP was a research office founded in Lincoln by Dr. Waldo Wedel in 1946 as the headquarters for River Basin Surveys investigations throughout the Missouri River basin, a vast region equivalent to one-sixth the size of the forty-eight contiguous states. The River Basin Surveys program was part of the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program (IASP), which came into existence in 1945 for the purpose of identifying and excavating archeological sites that would be destroyed as a result of planned Federal dam and reservoir construction throughout the United States. With over 100 dams planned within the Missouri River basin alone, that watershed--and particularly the series of large reservoirs to be constructed on the Missouri River itself--became the focus for an intensive, long-term program of archeological surveys and excavations designed to "salvage," or recover, archeological data and artifacts before they were forever lost to the water resource development needs of our nation. The IASP involved close coordination and cooperation between a variety of participating parties, including not only the Smithsonian's River Basin Surveys, but also the National Park Service, the Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, and dozens of state and local institutions of higher education, museums, and historical societies.

The MBP operated in Lincoln from 1946 through June 30, 1969, when the River Basin Surveys program was ended and the MBP was transferred to the National Park Service and renamed the Midwest Archeological Center. From 1969 through 1974-1975, the Center continued the archeological salvage mission in reservoir areas throughout the ten states of the Service's Midwest Region. Because of the passage of new legislation in 1974, many other Federal bureaus took on the responsibility for managing archeological

resources on lands under their administration. As other bureaus acquired archeological staff to oversee these new responsibilities, Congress stopped appropriating funds for IASP work in Federal reservoir areas, and the National Park Service reorganized its cultural resource functions. As a result, the Center no longer performed archeological investigations in reservoir areas administered by other bureaus, and re-oriented itself to meeting the archeological resource management needs of the National Park System areas.

In observance of the rich tradition of archeological research represented by the history of the Midwest Archeological Center and the Missouri Basin Project, the Center has initiated several actions. First, representative specimens of equipment that bear the distinctive red and yellow paint markings by which the MBP equipment was distinguished, have been removed from the Center's equipment inventory and preserved for their historical value. Second, in 1999 the Center published a brief overview of the history of the IASP in the Missouri basin. Third, original copies of IASP manuscript reports--many of which are one of a kind--in the Center's library have been repaired to prevent deterioration and preserve them for the future. And fourth, documents, photographs, and other items relating to the IASP work in the Missouri basin are archived at the Center, so they also can be preserved.

For more information about the IASP and the Midwest Archeological Center's participation in the salvage program, consult "Emergency Archeology in the Missouri River Basin: The Role of the Missouri Basin Project and the Midwest Archeological Center in the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program, 1946-1975," by Thomas D. Thiessen (Midwest Archeological Center Special Report No. 2). Copies may be requested free of charge from the Center.



An impromptu jam session during an evening in an MBP field camp.

For more information on the photos above, see the [photo album](#).