



Linda S. Cordell

1943–2013

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
Stephen Plog*

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NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

LINDA SUE CORDELL

October 11, 1943–March 29, 2013

Elected to the NAS, 2005

Linda S. Cordell—a central figure in the archaeological study of the Ancestral Pueblo people of the American Southwest for four decades, one of the most esteemed and honored American archaeologists of her generation, a beloved colleague, and a significant mentor to scores of young scholars—died unexpectedly of a heart attack at her home in Santa Fe on March 29, 2013. As one of her colleagues and collaborators has written, Cordell’s “death reflected her life: she was found, pen in hand, in the midst of preparing a paper” for a conference on the late prehistory and early ethnohistory of the important Galisteo Basin region southeast of Santa Fe.¹ Cordell’s research interests were extremely diverse, ranging from simulation models of changing settlement patterns in the Mesa Verde region of southwestern Colorado, to exchange relationships, the sociopolitical organization and complexity of Southwestern societies, the migration of peoples to the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico during late Pueblo prehistory, the information that could be gleaned from various analyses of 14th-century ceramics of the Rio Grande Valley and nearby areas, and methods of identifying where corn recovered from archaeological sites was grown, particularly the corn recovered from the great houses of Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Much of Cordell’s research focused on the era from approximately A.D. 1000 to 1500, an era of transformative culture change across the Ancestral Pueblo world.



Linda S. Cordell

By Stephen Plog

Crosscutting those diverse topics was a strong focus on improving method and theory in archaeology, an interest that made her geographically focused research relevant throughout the discipline. Cordell often stressed the importance of the relationship between theory and laboratory and field methods, as well as the importance of testing propositions and models with relevant archaeological data from the Southwest. In addition, her research displayed her broad knowledge of anthropological theory and of Pueblo ethnography. Although she frequently noted the importance of recognizing the

impact on Pueblo culture of Spanish and American colonialism, she also emphasized continuities and the value of ethnographic information for developing archaeological models.

Early life

Linda Sue Seinfeld was born in New York City on October 11, 1943 to Harry Seinfeld and Evelyn Seinfeld Kessler. Cordell's mother was an anthropologist who was in the doctoral program at Columbia University, where she received her PhD in 1970. She taught at the University of South Florida in Tampa beginning in the late 1960s and continued until her death in 1977. Cordell recalled "visiting the office of her 'godmother,' Margaret Mead" (elected to the National Academy in 1975), "at Columbia as a young girl."²

Although Evelyn Kessler's later publications primarily focused on cultural anthropology, the title of her 1970 dissertation, *Mesoamerican Contacts in the American Southwest and Southeast*, demonstrates an early interest in archaeology. Others clearly recognized that interest as Kessler wrote a *Current Anthropology* comment on an article by Robert Sharer on the prehistory of the Maya region.³ Kessler's interests in Mesoamerican archaeology and interaction with geographic areas of North America perhaps presaged her daughter's subsequent interest in the prehispanic era in the American Southwest. Alternatively, they may have concurrently developed an interest in the regions, since Cordell herself had become involved in Southwestern archaeology by 1964. Kessler's 1976 *Women: An Anthropological Review* is dedicated to the "women who have shaped my life" and specifically mentions both Margaret Mead and her daughter.

Linda Seinfeld took her undergraduate degree at George Washington University where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1964 and graduated with distinction in 1965. During her undergraduate years, she worked as part-time laboratory assistant in the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian. In 1964 she was one of five undergraduates from George Washington who participated in a field school offered by Professor Florence Hawley Ellis of the University of New Mexico, where she was involved in the excavation of the late prehispanic pueblo of Sapawe in north central New Mexico (Figure 1). Sapawe, one of the largest pueblos ever constructed in the Southwest, was occupied as early as A.D. 1300 and may still have been inhabited during early Spanish contact.



Figure 1. Linda Cordell excavating at the pueblo of Spawe in New Mexico in 1965. (Photographer unknown.)

Ellis was perhaps the only female professional archaeologist directing excavations in the Southwest in the 1960s, and her field school was one of the few that accepted women. Ellis also was unusual among archaeologists of her era in having close relationships with members of Native American communities in the Southwest, a model that Cordell emulated throughout her career.

The next summer, Cordell served as a teaching assistant for the University of New Mexico field school, helping supervise excavations of pithouses near Taos, New Mexico under the direction of Professor J. J. Brody. From that point forward it was clear that Cordell has found the region and questions that would be the focus of her life's work, as

her research interest rarely wavered from the archaeology of the American Southwest, with a particularly strong emphasis on the Rio Grande Valley.

Between September 1965 and 1970 she was briefly married to John Camblin Cordell and adopted his surname. They did not have any children. After receiving her BA and getting married, Cordell entered the graduate program at the University of Oregon where she wrote her Masters thesis on Oregon archaeology—a rare departure from her Southwest focus—and was awarded her MA in 1967. She subsequently moved to the University of California at Santa Barbara where she took her PhD in 1972.

Cordell's advisor at Santa Barbara was Albert Spaulding, one of the first archaeologists to advocate the use of statistical methods in archaeological research. Cordell's time at Santa Barbara coincided with the first widespread availability of mainframe computers at American universities. She took advantage of Spaulding's guidance, the availability of the computers, and emerging methods of statistical modeling to develop an innovative simulation model to test hypotheses regarding settlement pattern change between A.D. 700-1300 on Wetherill Mesa in Mesa Verde National Park in southwestern Colorado.

In 1971 Cordell was appointed Assistant Professor at the University of New Mexico (UNM), where she remained until 1987. Early in her tenure at the University of New Mexico, she also assumed directorship of the department's field schools in the Rio Grande Valley over eight field seasons from 1974 to 1984. During three years of work at Tijeras Pueblo under Cordell's direction (Figure 2), the field school excavated portions of the site—a settlement occupied from roughly A.D. 1300 to 1425 that would remain a focus of Cordell's writing for several years—and surveyed the surrounding area.

The work at Tijeras was followed by one season of survey work on the west side of the Manzano Mountains along with some limited excavations at another late prehispanic settlement, Pottery Mound. In 1980, 1983, and 1984 the field school moved to Rowe Pueblo in the Upper Pecos River Valley, a smaller 200-room pueblo that was occupied before the significant, nearby late prehispanic and early historic settlement of Pecos (now Pecos National Historical Park). Working initially in collaboration with Walter Wait of the National Park Service and then with the New Mexico State University field school directed by Fred Plog, Cordell excavated portions of the pueblo and surveyed the surrounding area. In 1998, Cordell again played a key role in the supervision of excavations at Hummingbird, an important 200-room late prehispanic pueblo west of Albuquerque.

After 1984, Cordell generally was less involved in directing fieldwork, but over the next three decades conducted smaller field projects and frequently visited the excavations of colleagues, where she was quick to help and frequently gave talks to the students and staff. In addition to being a superb scholar, Cordell also was an outstanding administrator, and increasingly was asked to take on those responsibilities. From 1983-1987 Cordell served as chair of the anthropology department at UNM, a department that was regarded as one of the most outstanding in the United States. Cordell also served as Acting Vice President for Research at UNM in 1986. During her time at UNM, Cordell



Figure 2. Linda Cordell at Tijeras Pueblo in 1975.

(Photographer unknown.)

was selected as NEH Resident Scholar at the School of American Research (SAR) in Santa Fe where she spent the 1981-1982 academic year.

From 1987 to 1993 Cordell was the Irvine Curator and Chair of the Anthropology Department at the California Academy of Sciences and also was a Visiting Professor at Stanford University for one quarter in 1990. During her time at the California Academy her passion for educating the public resulted in her organizing a public symposium, “Chiles to Chocolate,” in San Francisco in March 1988. Cordell noted, “San Francisco is such a hotbed of culinary inventiveness, but people know very little about just how much of it originated in the Americas.”⁴ The symposium later resulted in the 1992 book, *Chilies to Chocolate: Food the Americas Gave the World*, co-edited by Nelson Foster and Cordell.



Figure 3. Linda Cordell during her years at the University of Colorado. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the University of Colorado.)

In 1993, Cordell moved to the University of Colorado, where she was appointed Professor of Anthropology and Director of the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History (Figure 3). At Colorado she reinvigorated the museum, hiring six new faculty members, encouraging new research programs, and strengthening the university’s master’s program in museum studies. Cordell also enhanced exhibitions and public programs, instigated changes necessary to achieve accreditation from the American Association of Museums, and organized the move of the multiple departments of the museum into a renovated building.⁵

Cordell was actively engaged with the department of anthropology as well. A colleague, Catherine Cameron, remembers that Cordell organized an ongoing “Archaeology Lunch,” at which colleagues presented in-progress research. Cameron recalls that the



Figure 4. Linda Cordell in 2007 when she was a senior scholar at the School for Advanced Research. (Photograph by Katrina Lasko, reproduced courtesy of the School for Advanced Research.)

lunch meetings significantly improved collegiality among the archaeology faculty, and suggests that Cordell “was being strategic in figuring out how to build the camaraderie that we needed.”

During her years at Colorado, Cordell also was Visiting Scholar at the Santa Fe Institute in the spring of 2002 and Arroyo Hondo Summer Scholar at the School for American Research in 2003 and 2004.

Cordell retired from her position at Colorado in 2006 and moved to Santa Fe where, she was a Senior Scholar at the renamed School for Advanced Research (SAR) and an External Professor at the Santa Fe Institute (SFI) until her death (Figure 4). Although she was free to focus on her own research, Cordell nevertheless engaged actively with programs at SAR, SFI, and other institutions in Santa Fe and with the research efforts of the many colleagues that were part of her life.

Cordell also returned to her fieldwork at Tijeras Pueblo, a place that was very close to her heart, both personally and professionally. She was collaborating with curatorial staff and volunteers at the Maxwell Museum to organize the artifact collections and research archives from

the UNM field school excavations and was developing a new map and integrated GIS database for the site at the time of her death.

Cordell’s research examined a number of issues that might be grouped into four foci. First, as noted above, many of Cordell’s publications address key questions about the late prehistory of the Rio Grande Valley. She published papers on subsistence and ceramics,

migration and demographic change, sociopolitical organization, and changing patterns of ceramic production and exchange, for example; authored or edited important site reports on Tijeras Canyon and Rowe Pueblo; and organized formal and informal gatherings to address key questions about the region.

Cordell also had a strong interest in settlement and subsistence patterns throughout the Southwest region, and at times employed innovative research methods to address those issues. Cordell's first well-known research was her dissertation on changing settlement patterns on Wetherill Mesa, subsequently presented in an article in the Southwestern journal, *Kiva* (1975) and later revisited (1981) in a chapter she wrote for a volume on computer simulations in archaeology. Her use of simulation models was one of the initial pioneering efforts by archaeologists in North America to take advantage of emerging methods for statistical modeling. Cordell's research in the Rio Grande Valley also included an emphasis on settlement and subsistence. Perhaps most significant, Cordell also conceived of the possibility of determining where maize, the most important cultigen in the prehispanic Southwest, was grown by determining similarities in chemical trace elements between corn recovered from archaeological sites and presumed agricultural soils. In particular, she endeavored to determine whether some of the maize recovered from Pueblo Bonito in Canyon, New Mexico—the largest pre-twelfth century settlement in the Pueblo region and the best known of the massive Chacoan great houses—might have been brought to the canyon from distant areas. Many archaeologists had long wondered how the local agricultural fields could have supported the estimated population of Chaco Canyon. Cordell collaborated with several colleagues to test her proposal, resulting in three papers (Benson et al. 2003, Cordell et al. 2001, Cordell et al. 2008) that support the significant hypothesis that at least some of the maize from Chaco was brought to the canyon from outside areas, some perhaps as close as the nearby floodplains of the Chaco River drainage and other potentially as distant as 70 km. Cordell's utilization of simulation models and trace-element analysis are two superb illustrations of her willingness to explore new methods for answering key archaeological questions.

The history of archaeological research in the Southwest, particularly the role played by female scholars, is another issue that Cordell frequently considered. She addressed the significant discoveries of a pioneering ceramic petrographer, Anna O. Shepard (Cordell, 1991); reviewed the significance of the University of New Mexico field schools that have been a constant of Southwestern field research for several decades (Cordell, 1989d); highlighted the substantial contributions that pioneering female archaeologists have made

to our understanding of the prehistory of the Southwest and how during some periods the impact of women had been minimized by restricting their fieldwork and confining them to tasks such as laboratory analysis (Cordell, 1993); and co-edited a volume on the history of Southwestern archaeological research in the twentieth century (Cordell and Fowler, 2005).

Finally, Cordell was the master at synthesizing archaeological knowledge not only of the Ancestral Pueblo, but also of the archaeology of the American Southwest as a whole. She wrote an important chapter on the eastern Pueblo region for the 1979 *Handbook of North American Indians* early in her career; authored a 1980 monograph for the U.S. Forest Service that summarized what was known about the Rio Grande Valley, penned a clear, succinct book for the public, *Ancient Pueblo Peoples* in 1994, and produced three editions of the major textbook on the Southwest region, the last co-authored with Maxine McBrinn.

In addition, Cordell co-edited important books on Pueblo culture change and on Chacoan sociopolitical organization, and also contributed numerous synthetic or concluding chapters for monographs edited by others. These publications have been key references for both colleagues and students for the last three decades.

Mentorship

Cordell will be remembered, however, as much for the significant role that she played as a mentor and friend to generations of scholars as for her own work. After her death, one of the most common remarks of her colleagues was about the vast network of colleagues and friends that Cordell maintained and how much research she kept abreast of. When asked, she willingly offered advice on their research projects. As David Stuart, a colleague who first met Cordell at the University of New Mexico in 1971, where he was Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and also conducted archaeological research on Ancestral Pueblo societies, succinctly noted, “her profession was her extended family.” Stuart added that “the last week of her life she spent two days with us in Albuquerque, very tired and drawn, but still reporting on the status of her network and providing research advice on a new edition of one of my books.”

As Jeremy Sabloff and Louise Lamphere noted (2013, p. 307) “Throughout her career, Linda was a dedicated mentor of archaeology students, and particularly women.” Catherine Cameron, Cordell’s colleague at the University of Colorado, has said that what she will remember most about Linda is:

her willingness and eagerness to help others learn and also to get a leg up in the profession. She was always looking for opportunities for her students – whether to collect data, meet other professionals with similar interests, or attend conferences. She was remarkable at networking and would instantly see connections between people’s work. Not only see the connections, but act on that knowledge by getting those individuals together and getting them started on a productive relationship.

Cordell also devoted remarkable amounts of time to the students whose theses and dissertations she directed. When Patricia Gilman was a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico, she “did not do as well on a set of my PhD exams as my committee had hoped,” so “they decided I was to meet with Linda once a week to discuss Southwestern archaeology and my dissertation research. Linda was very gracious and patient with me, especially since my ideas were quite unformed.” Gilman adds, “I still appreciate her willingness to...guide me intellectually. Linda continued to support me throughout my career.”

One of the students Cordell mentored, Kari Schleher, notes

[My] best memories of Linda are through the ‘Ceramic Slumber Parties’ she invited me to join in the late 2000s. She would decide there was some significant issue all of the archaeologists working on Rio Grande Glaze Ware pottery should get together to discuss and we would all show up...Linda was amazing at taking new scholars and students under her wing and introducing us to others we should meet and collaborate with. Many of these collaborations have had major impacts on my research. Whenever there was a new graduate student interested in topics similar to what we were doing, they were brought into the fold. She was especially supportive of female students and new scholars.

Another participant in the “Ceramic Slumber Parties,” Judith Habicht-Mauche adds, “For several of us, these meetings fundamentally shaped the future direction of our research.” She also emphasized that “most importantly, what emerged from the ‘slumber parties’ was a new way to do archaeological research, especially ceramics research in the Southwest; in particular, a more collaborative and team-based approach to ceramic materials analyses.”

Cordell also helped these students learn the importance of constructive criticism, in part by being reflective about her own prior research. Several years after completing her dissertation, for example, Cordell noted some of the problems with her simulation model. Similarly, two decades after co-authoring a key theoretical article on explaining cultural variation in the Southwest, Cordell noted some of the problems with the approach that had been advocated. Cordell brought this same perspective to her interaction with the students she mentored. As Kari Schleher notes “Linda could also be very critical of work that she was asked to review. She was known to say if you can’t take criticism from someone who you know is totally in your corner, how will you ever learn to take criticism from people who aren’t on your side?”

Many of her colleagues and students also highlight the interest and enjoyment that Cordell took in hearing not only about their research, but also other aspects of their lives, including their interests outside of archaeology and their families. Maxine McBrinn, Cordell’s co-author on the third edition of *Archaeology of the Southwest* wrote, for example,

when I returned from three weeks learning how to analyze textiles with Laurie Webster, Linda was very curious about what I had learned and how it could be used. She was always very interested in other peoples work and was eager to learn more, taking a real joy in what she learned and applying it where she could.



Figure 5. Linda Cordell with her long-time friend, David Hurst Thomas, at a National Academy of Sciences meeting.

(Photograph by Lori Pendleton, reproduced with her permission.)

Deborah Huntley, another of the participants in the ceramic group, had known Cordell previously, but believes she didn't really get to know her well until she stayed at Cordell's home with her energetic two year-old son, Sean.

I remember bringing him to her house for the first time and being terrified about him destroying her valuables - her house was full of Southwest pottery and other fine art. To my surprise, the two of them hit it off immediately. I remember him grabbing a small sculpture off of one of her low bookshelves. As I quickly tried to retrieve it she laughed, completely unconcerned, as she mentioned that it was a Picasso piece. We spent much of the day simply watching Sean race up and down her stairs. Later, 'Auntie' Linda organized play dates for Sean with her neighborhood children. I think that of the many things I value about Linda, some of the most treasured are my memories of her kindness, patience, and real interest in me and my family.

Long-time colleague David Stuart notes

By the 1990s both Linda and I were out of family except for several faraway cousins. We talked a lot about childhoods, creativity, passions, big ideas, hopes for a warmer, gentler profession, but also always students ... and what we could, should do for them and ask of them.

Honors and awards

Not surprisingly, Linda Cordell received an exceptional number of honors during her career. In 2001 the American Anthropological Association awarded her the A. V. Kidder Award for Eminence in American Archaeology, one of the most prestigious honors for a Southwestern or Mesoamerican archaeologist. The Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society bestowed her with the Byron S. Cummings Award in 2004 for outstanding research and contributions to understanding the prehistory of Southwest.

The National Academy of Sciences elected her a member in 2005. Long-time friend and colleague Jeremy Sabloff walked with Cordell to the induction ceremony in 2006 and remembers "she was very excited and told me that she was feeling quite proud that evening on two counts: first, she was proud that her archaeological accomplishments were being recognized by her scientific peers, and second, she was proud to be adding to the women elected to the Academy" (Figure 5). Cordell also was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2008, and received the Lifetime

Achievement Award from the Society for American Archaeology and the Emil W. Haury award from the National Parks and Monuments Association in 2009 (Figure 6).

When Linda Cordell died she left behind, in part through her own efforts in the Southwest, a profession in which many more women play a prominent role than had been the case at the beginning of her career. She also left us a body of scholarship that will be the inspiration for new ideas and new research for decades to come. But perhaps most of all, she offered us a remarkable model of mentorship and productive collaboration among scholars and a vast network of friends and colleagues that she had built through her tireless devotion to her field and to improving our understanding of the past.



Figure 6. Linda Cordell in 2012 at Arrowhead Ruin during Pecos Conference, an annual meeting of Southwestern archaeologist. (Photographer James, Snead, reproduced with his permission.)

NOTES

1. McBrinn, M. A. 2014 Linda Cordell, Southwestern Archaeologist. *El Palacio* 118:22-23.
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