

Indiana Jones, Amelia Earhart and Dr. Pettigrew

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The building resembled a barn with a rust-red gambrel roof. Inside was an office hung with maps and dinosaur comics. It smelled of yellowing papers, wool carpets and autumn rain. A man with swan-white hair and azure-blue eyes was scribbling at his desk.

So this was him—geologist, historian, linguist, mathematician—all packed into one. Dr. Richard Pettigrew is the executive director of the Archaeological Legacy Institute, which educates people about archaeology.

“I don’t think I fit the archaeologist stereotype,” he said. “I have a hat like Indiana Jones, but that’s as far as it goes. I don’t have a whip. I don’t steal things from native peoples or shoot them on the street. And I don’t take part in intrigues.”

He laughed. “Archaeology is not always digging. Sometimes you use evidence that has nothing to do with artifacts.”

Pettigrew compared himself with an investigator. “It requires sleuthing,” he said. “It’s like detective work, or maybe police work. It’s like analyzing a crime scene.”

Pettigrew is based in Eugene, Oregon, and works primarily in the Pacific Northwest.

“When people think archaeology, they think—Egypt!” he said. “I prefer to study things no one has ever studied before.”

Pettigrew has studied rock strata in eastern Oregon’s high deserts. He has charted prehistoric chronology in the lower Columbia River. He has worked with Native Americans, incorporating their oral histories while unearthing their past.

On some projects, he works alone. But on one large project spanning northern Alberta to southern California, he led 150 people and spent \$20 million on excavation and preservation.

Most archaeological sites are opened by accident or disruption, Pettigrew explained. “There are tens of thousands of sites, and only a tiny fraction have been studied.”

He also works in the lab doing lithic analysis—studying stone tools and their residues to identify patterns of trade, travel and culture. “You have to do mundane things,” he explained. “You’re dealing with countless flakes that you have to count. But the end goal is exciting.”

Pettigrew often travels. He has worked in Thailand, Malta, Guam and Iran.

Last summer, National Geographic paid for his expedition to Nikumaroro, the remote Pacific island where Pettigrew believes Amelia Earhart lived her final days—waiting for help that never came—after her plane went down. The National Geographic team pinpointed where they believe Earhart’s body decomposed. Tests are in progress to see if DNA from dirt samples matches Earhart. “We hope to get results very soon,” Pettigrew said.

Pettigrew didn’t want his work to sit on a dusty shelf, so he founded The Archaeology Channel. He produces documentaries and hosts an annual international film festival at Eugene’s Shedd Institute.

“Knowing about our past is critical to knowing who we are,” he said.

Rain tapped on the window. He looked out at the trees, burgundy and gold.

“The deeper we dig, the more mysteries we find. Who are we? Where did we come from? It’s a huge story. It’s timeless. All of life is a discovery process.”
