Memorial



George Irving Quimby, 1913–2003

George Quimby at the wheel of a sailing schooner, Hudson Bay, 1939. (Photo courtesy Ed Quimby, previously published in Quimby 1993 and 1994.)

George Irving Quimby succumbed to pneumonia-related causes on 17 February 2003 in Seattle, Washington, at the age of 89. With his passing, historical archaeology lost one of its last true pioneers, a major scholar of international repute, and a prolific contributor to the literature of our discipline. Beyond his well-earned status as a leading figure in the profession, George was a loving husband and devoted father, as well as a dear friend and mentor to three generations of archaeologists. His ready wit and treasure trove of vivid stories on the early years of American archaeology, including those derived from his own remarkable adventures, were fascinating attractions that none could resist.

Born on 4 May 1913, George spent his childhood in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His lifelong sense of adventure as well as his abiding interest in Native Americans emerged early in life. At age six, having read about the Seminoles of Florida in *National Geographic*, he loaded his wagon with soap bars and headed south to trade with them as the pioneers had done. George was discovered that night in a barn some four miles from home, tired but undaunted. His subsequent travels as a young man, though, would take him much farther afield, immersing him in landscapes that later significantly informed his understanding and interpretations of the past.

While a teenager, George spent three summers sailing a wooden schooner on the upper Great Lakes (at times, by his own accounts, running whiskey from Canada during Prohibition). In summer 1939, as an assistant to geologist George M. Stanley, he canoed along the eastern coast of Hudson Bay, mapping glacial landforms and correlating them with archaeological sites—an experience that George would later recall as being like a trip in a time machine. He also lived in the Deep South, as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) archaeological field director in 1939–1941, while America emerged from the Great Depression. In each of these diverse places, George observed many small communities that, as he put it, "were more typical of the 19th century than of the 20th, ... scenes more familiar to my ancestors than to my descendants" (Quimby 1994:116–117).

George Quimby completed a BA in anthropology at the University of Michigan in 1936 and his MA at the same institution in 1937, having studied under James B. Griffin, who would become a lifelong friend. He then enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Chicago but cut short his studies for work with the WPA after James A. Ford offered him a job while attending the first Southeast Archaeological Conference at Birmingham, Alabama, in 1938. Once, when asked in casual conversation why Quimby had not continued to study for his PhD, Griffin answered matter-of-factly that there simply was not anyone who knew enough to give George a comprehensive exam.

With the WPA Archaeological Survey on the campus at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, he met Helen Margery Ziehm, then an art student majoring in sculpture, and they were married in 1940. When his position was eliminated in July of 1941, the couple moved to western Michigan, where Quimby briefly held the position of director at the Muskegon County Museum.

In 1942, Quimby's Chicago contacts paid off when Chief Curator Paul S. Martin offered him a position at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, where he advanced from assistant curator to curator of North American archaeology and ethnology in 1954. Until he left the Field Museum in 1965, he conducted research on the archaeology and material culture of such far-flung locales as the upper Midwest, the Southeast, the Southwest, the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, and the Kamchatka Peninsula of Siberia. Along with Martin and fellow curator Donald Collier, Quimby also introduced several courses in museum methods that were taught at the Field Museum through the University of Chicago.

Quimby's comprehensive knowledge of North American archaeology served him well when in 1947 he joined Martin and Collier in publishing *Indians before Columbus: 20,000 Years of North American History As Revealed by Archaeology.* The book was one of the first comprehensive surveys of American prehistory and stood as a standard text on the subject until the application of radiocarbon dating provided an accurate chronology for prehistoric cultural developments. Likewise, his book *Indian Life in the Great Lakes 11,000 B.C. to A.D. 1800*, published in 1960, was the first systematic treatment of that region's archaeology. Unlike most of the archaeological books of the era, this one did not end with the advent of European contact but took the reader well into the early Historic period that had long intrigued him.

In fact, it is worth noting that Quimby's very first publications in the late 1930s dealt with the analysis of historic material culture, specifically the use of European trade items and particularly silver ornaments for dating archaeological deposits. In 1966, he summarized the culmination of almost 30 years of research on the fur trade and its material culture in *Indian Culture and European Trade Goods: The Archaeology of the Historic Period in the Western Great Lakes Region.* This book was his best known and, perhaps, most significant contribution to historical archaeology, and scholars of the fur trade today still frequently refer to it.

One chapter in that book, "The First European Trade Ship on the Western Great Lakes," is particularly remarkable for its early consideration of maritime history in an archaeological text. During his 23 years at the Field Museum, Quimby had developed an academic interest in the search for LaSalle's *Griffin* and, though not a diver, was a strong advocate for scientific underwater archaeological research. Indeed, he was a participant at the first Conference on Underwater Archaeology held at St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1963, which some authorities mark as the catalyst for the creation of the Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology.

Quimby announced in 1965 that he had accepted an appointment as full professor of anthropology at the University of Washington with a joint appointment as curator of ethnology at its Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum. He privately noted at the time that it was his first real teaching position and that he enjoyed starting at the top. Certainly it was a novel career change, not only because of the regular teaching duties he would assume but also in the total departure from his Midwestern roots and experience. As he himself explained, "A person should do something radical—once every 25 years."

In Seattle, Quimby turned his attention and considerable energies to the Northwest Coast and its native cultures, and he was soon named director of the Burke Museum in 1968. Bringing to the job a clear commitment to professionalism, in short order Quimby reorganized and modernized the museum into a first-class institution, which emphasized indigenous cultures of the Pacific Rim and was devoted to both research and public education. Not limiting his efforts to the confines of his own institution, he was also instrumental in developing one of the very first interdisciplinary academic programs in museology in North America, established at the University of Washington in 1972. He also lent his assistance and encouragement to the Makah Nation in their efforts to create a museum of tribal heritage.

Quimby's demanding administrative and teaching duties, however, did not interfere with his own scholarly research. Urged on by an insatiable curiosity, he continued to investigate and publish on new topics in archaeology and ethnohistory: the fur trade of the Pacific Northwest, native art of Northwest Coast tribes, and underwater archaeology in Puget Sound. He also took a keen interest in ethnographic film and collaborated on the award-winning restoration of photographer Edward Curtis's 1914 silent classic, *In the Land of the War Canoes*, re-released in 1973.



George Quimby assists Makah craftsman Steve Tyler in carving a traditional single-log cedar canoe, Makah Tribe Archaeological Laboratory, Neah Bay, Washington, 1977. (Photo by Ed Quimby.)

In addition to his scholarly output, Quimby gave much of himself to the profession, serving the Society for American Archaeology as its secretary (1948–1952) and president (1957–1958), and he twice served The Society for Historical Archaeology as a director (1971-1973 and 1975–1977). In return, his colleagues honored him in many ways over the years. Among the outstanding tributes paid to him in later life was a retirement festschrift, Lulu Linear Punctuated: Essays in Honor of George Irving Quimby, edited by Robert C. Dunnell and Donald K. Grayson in 1983 (Anthropological Papers, Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, No. 72, Ann Arbor), the coveted J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology, presented by SHA in 1986, and SAA's Distinguished Service Award in 1989. Perhaps most notable, Grand Valley State University, located near his hometown in Michigan, recognized Quimby's numerous contributions by awarding him an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters in 1992 and has since established a memorial fund in his name to assist deserving students.

In a career that spanned seven decades, George Irving Quimby authored more than 170 publications, including many that were written for the general public—a practice whose time has now come in our profession, but which he anticipated by a half-century. He also gave countless papers

at conferences, well into his late 70s, and could frequently be spotted roaming the meeting halls in his trademark bow tie or talking with students about their common research interests in the hotel lounge. Having made an indelible mark in the fields of archaeology, museology, and ethnohistory, George will be best remembered for his engaging and often impish personality, with which he could quickly bring calm to a tense faculty meeting or put an awestruck student immediately at ease.

Surviving George are his wife of 62 years, Helen Ziehm Quimby of Seattle; his daughter, Sedna Helen Quimby Wineland, of Boulder, Colorado; sons G. Edward, John E., and Robert W. Quimby of Seattle; and five grandchildren.

For those of us who were fortunate enough to know George Quimby, his passing does not so much evoke a sense of sadness but, rather, a reason to celebrate his life and remarkable character. Where archaeologists gather, glasses will be raised to George for generations to come. What will be missing is that certain twinkle in his eyes, a wry grin, and a twist at the tip of his mustache, all of which would let you know that there was a real whopper coming!

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The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago for a time (ca. 1943–1965) was called the Chicago Natural History Museum. To avoid confusion, citations herein consistently refer to the Field Museum, regardless of the particular title page imprint.

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