Harriet and Burton Cosgrove

A. V. Kidder

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HARRIET AND BURTON COSGROVE SHOULD REALLY BE CALLED MR. AND MRS. MIMBRES, for no two people ever did anything like as much as they, both by their own efforts and by stimulating and aiding others, to advance knowledge of the ancient Mimbres. Hattie and Burt, as they always were known to their host of friends, were of pioneer stock and old-time residents of Silver City. She was a Kansan, he a New Mexican, one of the few Anglos of his generation to be a native of Santa Fe, where he was born in 1875. His father held a contract, in the early 70’s, to carry the mail from Santa Fe to Tucson. The Apache were a terrible danger in those days, and Burt remembered hearing Mr. Cosgrove telling of times when he had to do his travel at night and hole his buckboard up in an arroyo during the day.

Dr. Alfred V. Kidder, the dean of American archaeology, was, until his retirement in 1950, a member of the faculty at Harvard and Curator of American Archaeology at the Peabody Museum. He began work in the Southwest in the first decade of this century, and is the author of many books and reports on the archaeology of this region. In 1934 he was given an Honorary L.L.D. by the University of New Mexico, and for some years he was Chairman of the Board of the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe.
In 1909 Burt and Hattie settled in Silver City, where he went into the hardware business. They soon became interested in local antiquities and in those to the east in the Mimbres Valley. At about that time it was discovered that burials, accompanied by the beautifully decorated pottery characteristic of the area, were to be found under the room floors of Mimbres ruins. The bowls brought large prices from collectors and an orgy of pot-hunting set in. The Cosgroves, realizing the loss to science that such careless and always unrecorded digging was causing, set about doing everything they could to protect the ruins. They persuaded many ranchers to post their properties. And in 1919 they bought a piece of land on which were the mounds of a typical Mimbres village.

With the purchase of Treasure Hill, for so they christened the place, the Cosgroves were definitely launched upon their career as archaeologists. I use the term advisedly, for even in those first days of their interest in the Mimbres, long before they had the slightest idea of going into the work professionally, they acted as archaeologists rather than pot-hunters. Their digging was of necessity intermittent, for it could be done only on Sundays and holidays. But they kept notes, made plans, took photographs, saved every sherd and bone and broken tool. Treasure Hill proved to be a rich site. Its investigation raised many technical problems. So, in the summer of 1920, they spent their vacation studying field methods at the excavations of F. W. Hodge at Hawikuh, of N. M. Judd at Pueblo Bonito, and of the writer at Pecos.

That was when my wife and I first met Hattie and Burt. They camped at Pecos for several days, and in 1922 I visited them at Silver City. There I saw the fine and well-labelled collection they had already made, not only from the Mimbres, but from many other parts of New Mexico and Arizona. This they later presented to the Museum of Northern Arizona at Flagstaff. Although they were fully occupied with their own studies, they found time to work for the further promotion of Mimbres archaeology. At their invitation Messrs. Chapman, Bradfield, and Bloom of the Museum of New Mexico made a reconnaissance of the district in 1922. During the same year the Cosgroves aroused the interest and enlisted the help of Mr. John M. Sully and Mr. D. C. Jackling of the Chino Copper Company, and brought them into touch with the Museum, thus making possible the inauguration, in 1923, of the excavation of the Cameron Creek village, a project recommended by them and carried out by the late Wesley Bradfield, whose splendid report is one of the classics of New Mexican archaeological literature. The Cosgroves' efforts also led to work on the immensely important...
Galaz site by the Southwest Museum, their son, Burton, being in charge. Later this work was continued by the Royal Ontario Museum. They helped E. H. Morris to secure excavation rights for the University of Colorado at several ruins; they assisted Paul H. Nesbitt, then of Beloit College, in making arrangements for digging in the Mimbres country.

In 1924 Burt retired from business and with Hattie joined the staff of Harvard's Peabody Museum. After a survey of the whole Mimbres Valley, they selected the Swarts Ruin, which they excavated completely, a four-year undertaking that continued through the field season of 1927. Their joint report, another classic, includes Hattie Cosgrove's meticulously accurate drawings of the complete designs of the scores of beautiful Mimbres bowls recovered at Swarts.

During the work there, Burt investigated some nearby caves. The specimens he found, having always been protected from moisture, were not only in remarkably perfect preservation, but represented an important sequence of prehistoric cultures, including that of the Classic Mimbres, then known only from sites not sheltered from rain. This made it seem desirable that the Peabody should shift its activities to the dry caves of southern New Mexico and southwest Texas, an area then practically unknown archaeologically. There they worked intensively in 1928 and 1929.

As at Swarts, the Cosgroves' finds were so many and so important that they were busy until well into the 30's working over them in Cambridge, where they had been living since 1925. Their magnificent report, Caves of the Upper Gila and Hueco Areas in New Mexico and Texas, was published as by C. B. Cosgrove, for it was delayed in going to press until after his death, and Hattie, who had shared equally in fieldwork and in its preparation, insisted that it stand as a memorial to him. Their last project in southern New Mexico was in Hidalgo County, where my wife and I had the rare privilege of working with them, on the Pendleton site at Cloverdale, close to the Mexican border. In 1938, I was allowed by Donald Scott, then Director of the Peabody, to bring Hattie to Guatemala to mend beautiful, but horribly crushed, vessels from Maya tombs. She did her usual fine job on them; one big jar was in over two hundred pieces. They are now among the most prized exhibits of the Museo Nacional.

When J. O. Brew, the present Director of the Peabody Museum, undertook the excavation of the great pueblo ruin of Awatovi in the Hopi country of Arizona, there was naturally no question that the
Cosgroves should be among his principal assistants. So it was granted to Burt to be happily engaged in the work to which he had dedicated himself, and to which he had made such great contributions, until almost the day of his sudden death, which took place in the Indian Service Hospital at Keams Canyon, near Awatovi, on October 25, 1936.

Dr. Brew has told me how wonderfully Hattie took this crushing bereavement; how, after the funeral in Atchison, Kansas, she returned to camp and continued her work on the pottery, of which she had entire charge during the four years of the Awatovi expedition. That pottery also occupied her at the Museum, where she saw to the restoration of the quantities of vessels and the sorting and cataloguing of the many thousands of sherds. Her keen interest in ceramic decoration and her noteworthy ability with pen and brush resulted in a series of drawings that are proving of the greatest value to Watson Smith, who is now preparing a monograph on the wares of Awatovi and earlier sites that were investigated by Dr. Brew.

Hattie Cosgrove reached retiring age in 1942, but because of the War and the consequent shortage of personnel at the Museum, she continued on the active roll for another two years. However, being perennially youthful and indomitably energetic, she served four years more as a volunteer. She once wrote me: "I just worked on till I had finished up with many things I wanted to see finished."

Being a digger myself, I've concentrated on what Southwestern archaeology owes to the Cosgroves and their doings in our common profession. I only hope that, between the lines, the readers of the Quarterly can sense something of this rare couple's quality as human beings. I haven't the pen to do them justice, nor, I know, would Hattie approve of superlatives. But it was fun to be in camp, as my wife and I often were, with them on the Mimbres. (And what enchiladas Hattie could make!) As I wrote of Burt in the foreword to his posthumously published book: "To camp with a man week in and week out, day after day to be with him on an excavation, is to know him in a way not otherwise possible. I had the privilege of being much in the field and of digging with Burton Cosgrove. His cheerfulness and his utter unselfishness under all sorts of difficulties made that association an unalloyed pleasure. And I had the opportunity to observe, in the trenches, around the campfire, and in the laboratory, his indefatigable energy, his fiercely conscientious thoroughness, and the honesty and clarity of his thinking." Every word of that is equally true of Hattie.