

[Old Main Project unearths ISU relics, artifacts and history](#)

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As ISU's Old Main Project unearths interesting stories of alumni and reanalyzes recovered artifacts, current students and community members get a chance to discover the rich history hidden below their feet.

The project, which began in 2009, is an extension of the earlier excavation which took place 30 years ago this month. While digging a trench on the Quad in 1981, workers unearthed what was eventually discovered to be the foundation and much of the first floor of the Old Main building.

Old Main, which was demolished in 1958, was the oldest and biggest building at ISU. It was finished in 1860, only three years after the school was founded, and was the main building for most classes and students up until the 1950s. It was originally located on the north end of the Quad, where the flower beds are currently located.

"A lot of people who went to college in the '40s and '50s loved the Old Main building; it was the gem of campus ... they had a lot to tell me besides just architectural details, they had personal stories," Jessica Griffin, graduate assistant for the Old Main Project, said.

Griffin is a graduate student in historical archeology and has worked on the project for over a year and a half. The Old Main Project is divided into oral histories of past alumni and the recovered artifacts from the excavation. Archaeology professor James Skibo was the originator for the project.



Andrew S. Avitt / Daily Vidette Photographer: Jessica Griffin, a graduate assistant for the Old Main Project, examines the contents of one bag of artifacts recovered from the Old Main, in Schroeder Hall, on Oct. 14.

“I’d been thinking a lot about it for a while ... I walk by the flower beds on campus all the time and I started thinking to myself, ‘someday it would be cool to do a project right on campus that includes artifacts and oral histories,’” he said.

In choosing a co-director for the project, Skibo found another professor on campus who was just as passionate.

“I work closely with getting the oral histories for the project ... it’s really important to have that for future generations,” Gina Hunter, associate professor of anthropology, said.

The oral histories and recovered artifacts have worked well together to form an intriguing picture of what campus life was like during the 1930s and '40s. Thanks in part to the close relationship with the Illinois State Museum, the school has been able to preserve the materials retrieved at the site and focus on bringing them to life.

“A vast majority of the things in the boxes are broken ... I’m trying to focus on glass bottles, but there is enough of other materials for others to do research,” Griffin said.

The original excavation in 1981 found a great amount of glass, but they also found remains of ceramic and metal in the cistern. Since community trash pickup didn’t arrive in Normal until 1946, the cistern was often used as a place to dump trash and the artifacts and oral history support this.

“We have tons of glass remains found in the cistern ... the fact that we have all these booze bottles is fascinating, and a cool thing you can see through the artifacts” Skibo said.

The remnants of the bottles are particularly interesting for members of the project because ISU was a dry campus until 1962.

“Well, imagine you’re drinking on campus. You don’t want the glass bottle to be sitting in your trash can [since it’s a dry campus], so you’d probably sneak out at night, maybe hide it under your coat, and pitch it under the porch into the cistern,” Skibo said.

If students think that being caught drinking on campus is a serious offense now, imagine drinking during the prohibition, when it was illegal for everyone.

“Actually, students could have been expelled for drinking on campus or even coming onto campus drunk,” Jessica Miller, graduate assistant for the Old Main Project, said.

Miller has been working on transcribing and posting the 11 interviews acquired to the project’s webpage, oldmain.illinoisstate.edu. Although she is newer to the project, she looks forward to working with the stories of the various alumni.

“I love listening to the interviews I’m transcribing ... and I’m looking forward to actually being able to do some of the interviews myself,” Miller said.

The shape of Old Main changes for each subject interviewed depending on their age. As time went by, Old Main was slowly taken apart. First, the dome was removed, followed by the front and rear porches, the fourth floor and finally the entire building was razed. For archaeologists like Skibo, however, this isn't the whole story.

“People think that the Old Main was demolished in 1958, but that's not totally true, it's still very much there,” Skibo said.

The spirit of the building remains through the foundation below the Quad and the stories of the alumni, and the project is only just beginning to discover the whole story.

“We've only barely scratched the surface, we have a lot more interviews we can do and a lot more stories we haven't even put on the webpage yet,” Hunter said.

As the Old Main Project continues to learn new and intriguing facts, history comes to life and students and community members begin to understand the rich history of which they are a part of.

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