The New York Times
nytimes.com

January 3, 2006
Scientist at Work | Shannon Lee Dawdy

Archaeologist in New Orleans Finds a Way to Help the Living

By JOHN SCHWARTZ

NEW ORLEANS -"That's a finger bone."

Shannon Lee Dawdy kneeled in the forlorn Holt graveyard to touch a thimble-size bone poking up out of the cracked dirt. She examined it without revulsion, with the fascination of a scientist and with the sadness of someone who loves New Orleans.

Dr. Dawdy, a 38-year-old assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, is one of the more unusual relief workers among the thousands who have come to the devastated expanses of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. She is officially embedded with the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a liaison to the state's historic preservation office.

Her mission is to try to keep the rebuilding of New Orleans from destroying what is left of its past treasures and current culture.

While much of the restoration of the battered Gulf Coast is the effort of engineers and machines, the work of Dr. Dawdy, trained as an archaeologist, an anthropologist and a historian, shows that the social sciences have a role to play as well. "It's a way that archaeology can contribute back to the living," she said, "which it doesn't often get to do."

Holt cemetery, a final resting place for the city's poor, is just one example of what she wants to preserve and protect.

Other New Orleans graveyards have gleaming mausoleums that keep the coffins above the marshy soil. But the coffins of Holt are buried, and the ground covering many of them is bordered with wooden frames marked with makeshift headstones.

Mourners decorate the graves with votive objects: teddy bears for children and an agglomeration of objects, including ice chests, plastic jack-o'-lanterns and chairs, on the graves of adults. There is the occasional liquor bottle.

It is part of the soul of New Orleans, a city that through history has had strong ties to its dead. Dr. Dawdy calls it a prime example of "the amazing improvisational impulse of New Orleans," which creates beautiful things and powerful feelings from the everyday.

Dr. Dawdy looked across the ruined graveyard. Holt was a place she knew well and loved, she said, and when she first saw it after the storm, she broke down and cried.

"It made me realize that it's that ephemeral folk expression in New Orleans that is gone," she said, "and that probably, rebuilding efforts may erase."

Many of the objects on the graves were washed away by the storm, or shifted from one part of the graveyard to another. Dr. Dawdy has proposed treating the site as archaeologists would an ancient site in which objects have been exposed on the surface by erosion.

Before the hurricanes, the cemetery was often busy, a hub of activity on All Souls' Day, when people came to freshen the grave decorations.

"The saddest thing to me now was how few people we see," she said, looking at the empty expanse and the scarred live oaks. "I realize we're having enough trouble taking care of the living," she added, but the lack of activity in a city normally so close to the spirits of the past "drove home how far out of whack things are."

There is evidence of recent visits: blindingly white gravel sits atop some graves, and a fresh bouquet sits on the grave of Andrew P. Sherman, who was born in September 1924 and died in 1968. Dr. Dawdy picks up the bouquet and checks the tag: it was purchased on Nov. 6. "Here's archaeological dating for you," she said with a small smile.

Treating Holt as an archaeological site mean the government should not treat the votive artifacts as debris, she said, but as the religious artifacts that they are, with some effort to restore the damaged site, to find the objects and at least record where they came from.

FEMA simply tries to clean up damaged areas, and its Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams - called Dmort- deal with the bodies of the dead and address problems in cemeteries that might lead to disease.

If such places are destroyed, Dr. Dawdy said, "then people don't feel as connected here." She added that they might be more willing to come back to a damaged city if they felt they were returning to a recognizable home.

Though she has deep emotional ties to New Orleans, Dr. Dawdy was born in Northern California. She came here in 1994 to write her master's thesis for the College of William & Mary, and, "I wrote it all day," she said. "If I had written a minimum of five pages, I could come out for a parade at night." Over the eight weeks it took to finish the project, she said: "I fell in love with New Orleans. I really consider it the home of my

heart."

She started a pilot program at the University of New Orleans, working with city planners and grants for research projects that involved excavation, oral history and hands-on work with the city to safeguard its buried treasures.

She left that job to earn a double doctorate at the University of Michigan in anthropology and history that focused on French colonial times in New Orleans, then landed a coveted faculty position at the University of Chicago. She now lives in Chicago with her husband, Dan McNaughton, and their 5-year-old son.

Jean Comaroff, the head of the anthropology department at the University of Chicago, said in an e-mail message that it was only natural to be supportive of Dr. Dawdy's efforts to help New Orleans.

"I could think of no one better to serve FEMA in this role," she wrote. "The threat is great that much that was unique about New Orleans as a social and cultural world - qualities that are at once creative, poignant and fragile - will be lost in its reconstruction. Those of us who value these qualities feel moved to do all we can to conserve them."

Even before Hurricane Katrina, Dr. Dawdy had found ways to return to New Orleans. In 2004, she made an intriguing discovery while researching a possible archaeological site under an old French Quarter parking garage slated for demolition. Property records and advertisements from the 1820's said that the site had been the location of a hotel with an enticing name: the Rising Sun Hotel.

Dr. Dawdy found a January 1821 newspaper advertisement for the hotel in which its owners promised to "maintain the character of giving the best entertainment, which this house has enjoyed for twenty years past."

It went on: "Gentlemen may here rely upon finding attentive Servants. The bar will be supplied with genuine good Liquors; and at the Table, the fare will be of the best the market or the season will afford."

The historical record made her think that the building might have served as something more interesting than a mere hotel, a brothel perhaps. Digging under the garage, she found an unusual number of liquor bottles and rouge pots.

For Dr. Dawdy, it was a lucky break, the kind of find that can make a reputation. "Can you prove archaeologically is this a brothel?" she asked. "I can't prove it with a yes or no answer."

Nor can she say with certainty that this Rising Sun was the inspiration for "House of the Rising Sun," the famous song first recorded in 1937 by Alan Lomax, a musicologist and folklorist.

"I love the ambiguity of it all," Dr. Dawdy said.

New Orleans, she noted, has always been known for its libertine lifestyle. The French all but abandoned the city as its colony around 1735 as being unworthy of the nation's support as a colony. Novels like "Manon Lescaut" portrayed the city as a den of iniquity and corruption, and across Europe, "they thought the locals were basically a bunch of rogues, immoral and corrupt," Dr. Dawdy said.

She added that she saw parallels to today, as some skepticism emerges about rebuilding the city. Dr. Dawdy characterized that posture as, "Those people in New Orleans aren't worth saving, because they're all criminals anyway."

But even if the devastation makes it hard to envision the road back, the city, she said, is worth fighting for.

"The thing about New Orleans that gives me hope is they are so tied to family, place, history," Dr. Dawdy said. "If anyone is going to stick it out, out of a sense of history, out of a sense of tradition, it is New Orleans."