

“IT’S WHAT I DO”: PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS REGARDING DR. MARK Q. SUTTON AND HIS IMPACT ON CALIFORNIA ARCHAEOLOGY

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This article is from a paper I presented as a tribute to Mark Q. Sutton at the symposium held in his honor at the 2022 SCA Annual Meeting. I would like to begin with a few qualifiers. What I have to say is not research based, rather it is a qualitative and personal review of Mark and the tremendous influence he has had on me and many of my colleagues, as well as the field of California archaeology. I also apologize in advance if this sounds more like a story about me than Mark, but its purpose is to demonstrate the ways in which he impacted my life in so many positive ways. That said, let’s get to it.

I first met Mark Q. Sutton in the spring of 1984 when I was going through something of a “mid-life crisis.” The field that I had been working in since my mid-20s had changed quite a bit and become tiresome and unfulfilling. In an effort to alter my situation, I began taking a variety of community college classes that I hoped might spark interest in a new career path. I had earned a B.A. in sociology years earlier but never worked in that area. One day, while looking through the course catalog for Fullerton College, I came upon *Introduction to Archaeology*. “Hmmmmm, that looks interesting” I thought. I had always enjoyed *National Geographic* stories that focused on archaeological subjects, and also as a hobby I spent time poking around ghost towns of the western U.S. and visiting well-known Native American sites such as Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon, so I signed up for the class.

That in many ways turned out to be a life-altering decision. It was the most interesting class that I had ever taken and each week (it was a night class), I would hang around when class was over to ask questions and listen to stories. About halfway through the semester, we went on a field trip to the Mojave Desert. Our instructor, Del Alcorn, was friends with a guy who worked for the BLM named Mark Sutton and Mark was helping a friend of his, a U.C. Riverside graduate student named Joan Schneider, with her Master’s degree field project at Afton Canyon. Sutton had put out a call to several educational institutions asking them to assist with the fieldwork. The work that weekend was hard but rewarding.

Saturday night brought a big bonfire and lots of beer drinking, then back to work the next day. At the time, I had a Jeep with no top on it and on Sunday, as a break from screening, I got to drive Joan all around through some rough terrain so that she could better understand the geomorphology of the area in which her site was located. To this day, I still smile when recalling her standing in the back of the Jeep holding onto the roll bar pointing and issuing commands to her driver. Throughout the weekend, Mark consistently stopped by to check on all of the neophytes and provide us with useful information and tips. Being out in the desert, a place that I loved, working hard with other like-minded people, learning about prehistory and partying in the evening, what could be better? Then I learned that people actually got paid to do it! That field trip pretty well sealed the deal for me.

Sunday evening when I got home, I announced to my wife, “Ginny, I want to become an archaeologist!” She later confided in me that her first reaction was, “Yeah, right,” but she was supportive. The following weekend, I returned to Afton Canyon and worked with Mark and four others and this gave me a great

opportunity to get to know him better. I picked his brain all weekend long about the best ways for me to get into the field of archaeology.

Not too long after the episode mentioned above, we invited Mark and his wife Melinda to a party that we were giving. I was excited because this would be the first time that I ever socialized with an archaeologist on my turf. Two key things happened that night which changed the way I would think about things from then on. The first of these was as follows. I guess you could say that my wife and I were sort of amateur “pothunters.” Over time in our travels through the southwest, we had accumulated a small but nice collection of projectile points, pot sherds, and even a few well-preserved maize cobs. The items were nicely displayed on a shelf in our living room. I was quite proud of them and anxious to show Mark what we had. His initial comment was, “What the hell is this stuff?” That was followed by a stern lecture regarding context and how our collection may have altered sciences’ understanding of western prehistory. While deflated, I did get his message loud and clear.

The second and even more important thing happened later that evening. In the course of conversation, Mark and I were trying to come up with a weekend date that we were both free. Virtually all of his Saturdays and most Sundays were full for the coming month or two with some sort of archaeologically oriented endeavor. My weekends were generally taken up with yard work or some other mundane tasks, as my job was basically a 9:00 to 5:00 affair, five days a week. When I commented on how much time he spent on archaeology he replied, **“It’s what I do!”** Mark’s simple statement really started me thinking. What in life was I so committed to that I could say “It’s what I do?” I pondered this question for a long time and unfortunately concluded that the answer was nothing, or at least, not much. Rather than leading a purpose-driven life, I was kind of drifting along reacting to whatever came my way. For me, that realization led to a sea change in my philosophical approach to almost all future endeavors. While epiphanies such as this are not uncommon, and all of us have them on some level from time to time, I credit Mark with initiating this one for me. Now, it was up to me to make something happen.

As mentioned earlier, I had loosely decided to pursue a career in archaeology but now needed to take steps to make that a reality. One obvious requisite to achieving that goal would be education, so I enrolled in anthropology/archaeology classes at CSU Fullerton at night to fill in my academic deficits. Additionally, I volunteered for field work every chance I got. Mark was now in a Ph.D. program at UC Riverside and he would call me whenever opportunities to volunteer arose. He and I were now staying in touch on a regular basis. Several years into this action plan, I quit my old job and, with the help of another friend, Hank Koerper, managed to land an entry level position in the field of cultural resource management (CRM). The next few years found me gaining experience in the field by day and taking classes at night. By this time, Mark had earned his Ph.D. and was hired as a professor of anthropology/archaeology at California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB), where he allowed me to be sort of a junior assistant at his weekend field class at Koehn Lake in the western Mojave Desert. I knew enough to help introductory level students and was able to learn more myself by working closely with him.

A few years into his new position at CSUB, Mark set about the task of building a graduate program in anthropology at CSUB. One Sunday evening, I received a call from him that would have a profound impact upon my life and career track. He asked me to consider leaving my job and enrolling in the new Master’s Program in Bakersfield. By that time, I had been working in the CRM department of an engineering firm in Orange County and, because of my previous experience in the business world, had worked my way into a middle management position. Things were going very well there, but I knew that in many cases, I was managing people who had more education and experience than I did as an archaeologist and this bothered me.

After much discussion with my wife, I decided to take Mark up on his offer and move to Bakersfield, while my wife would remain in our Riverside home and retain her job in Orange County.

When I got to Bakersfield, Mark, Melinda, and Stephanie (their daughter) graciously allowed me to stay in a spare room at their house for a month or so until I got my own place, and for the next five years I worked closely with him as he mentored me through the program and beyond. Aside from the usual trappings of graduate school, such as coursework and research, Mark introduced some unique opportunities for both graduate and undergraduate students. In conjunction with the University Foundation, he established a CRM program called the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) which contracted with private entities and government agencies to perform archaeological investigations. The benefits provided by CAR were numerous. First and foremost, it provided “real world” on-the-job training for students and enabled them to apply what they were learning in the classroom and gain practical skills.

Working for CAR meant that students did not have to have side jobs “flipping burgers” while in college and helped to minimize student debt. Another benefit was that of networking. By interacting with the companies and agencies that did business with CAR, students were spotlighted and often upon graduation (Figure 1) were hired by one of those entities. Unfortunately, this networking sometimes had an unexpectedly negative effect in that some of the “spotlighted” students were hired prior to their graduation; a good thing in some ways but it also somewhat defeated the primary reason for attending graduate school. Another feature of CAR was that it brought revenue into the University and this created a positive bond between the school and the anthropology department.

The graduate program in anthropology/archaeology Mark initiated at CSUB provided other practical advantages to students, and these advantages also tickled down to undergrad classes as well. All who were enrolled were required to do field work for a quarter or two (CSUB was on the “quarter system” at the time), then perform lab analysis on the recovered materials and finally, write up their findings and present them at professional meetings. Those papers were most often then published in an archaeological journal of some type. While most students found the idea of presenting at a professional meeting daunting, it was great experience and also meant that right out of college, their CVs had some professional substance. As we will come to in a minute, I taught in a community college Social Science department for over 20 years and found that very few of my colleagues in other disciplines had ever presented at a conference or published a paper on their work, or anything else, for that matter.

Mark also encouraged students to join professional organizations such as the SCA and become active in them. One of the statewide Archaeological Information Centers is located at CSUB and that provided another somewhat unique and practical opportunity. In addition to teaching assistantships, all grad students were required to work at the Information Center for at least one quarter to become familiar with the system and its operation. When time permitted, such as Christmas break or spring break, Mark often selected a few students to accompany him on special field projects, usually revisiting a site that had been investigated many years ago. This gave the students an opportunity to work closely with him and get lots of one-on-one time. He rotated students on these special projects so that everyone got a chance.

One last component of the graduate program that Mark initiated was to regularly bring guest speakers who were prominent in the field of archaeology to CSUB. Immediately following the speaker’s presentation, everyone would adjourn to the Suttons’ house for a party where we got to interact with some pretty important people on a casual basis. This brings us back to the concept of networking mentioned earlier. If at some time in the future you had occasion to seek counsel from one of these individuals, a good opening line might be, “You probably don’t remember me, but we met at a party in Bakersfield a few years ago.”

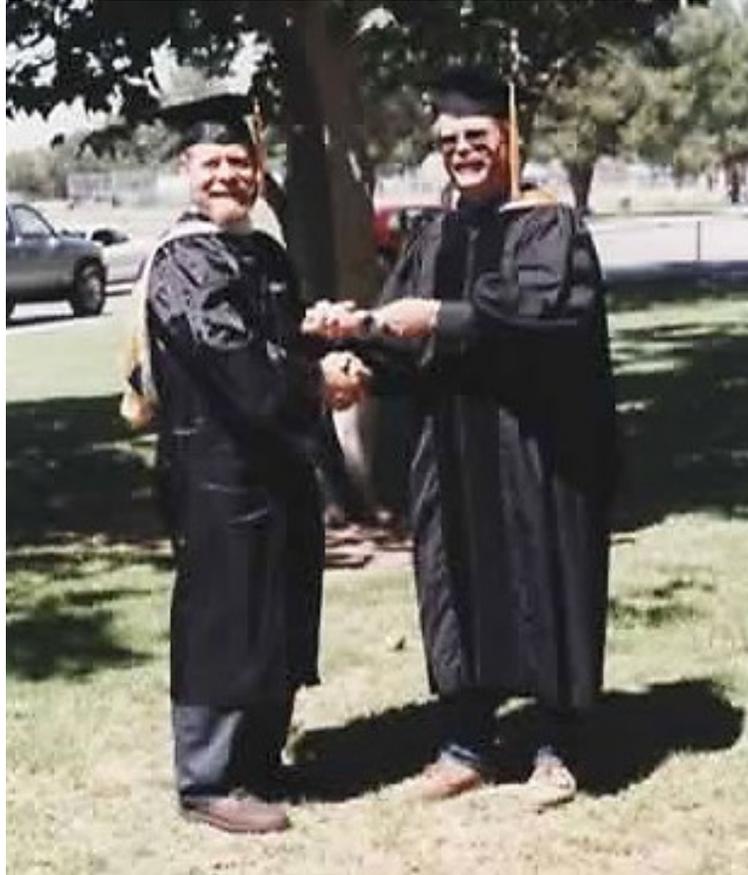


Figure 1. The author's graduation day from the Master's Program in Anthropology at CSUB in 1995, shaking hands with Mark Sutton (on the right).

Mark's prolific writing and many other contributions to the field of California archaeology are well known, but I wish to point to another contribution, the training he provided to so many who now work in the discipline. Many of his former students are currently working for agencies, companies, and other institutions that are helping to unravel the prehistoric and historic narrative of this great state.

One day while I was still in school, Mark received a call from an administrator at Porterville College (PC), a small rural community college about 45 miles northeast of Bakersfield. Their only anthropology instructor was diagnosed with cancer and they were asking about the possibility of a student who was fairly far along in the program to replace her for the semester, which had been underway for several weeks. I had completed my coursework and been a teaching assistant for a number of classes but had never considered teaching. In fact, the idea scared me to death. Mark strongly suggested that I take the temporary position and related stories of his early days as an adjunct instructor. Over the course of a few days, he slowly but surely twisted my arm to say "yes" to PC. This turned out to be one of the best decisions of my life and I will be forever grateful to him for pushing me in that direction.

Organizing this essay gave me pause to look back on my 23 years at PC and reflect on how many aspects of my teaching were directly influenced by my mentor, Mark Sutton. As he had done, my classes always featured field trips as a mechanism for engaging students in the course material. Those who showed a

particular interest in archaeology were encouraged to accompany me to professional meetings and a number of them presented papers. In my early days at PC, I developed the Cultural and Historical Awareness Program (CHAP) to bring speakers to campus. Students were able to interact with the guest lecturers either through a pre-talk dinner or a post-talk get-together. That program continues today. Members of the Anthropology Club were all invited to annual Christmas and graduation parties at our house. I might add, the graduation parties were modeled after the potlatch celebrations that Mark brought from UCR to CSUB. We called them “gradlatches” but the format was the same.

As I said at the outset, I apologize if this paper seemed to be more about me than it should have, but I wanted to demonstrate how important Mark Q. Sutton has been in my life. I only hope that I have had a fraction of the impact on my students that Mark had on me. His guidance and mentorship through the years led me to the place where if someone asks, “Why do you get so involved in so many things?” I can simply reply, **“It’s what I do!”**