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WSA – Working at the Frontier Between ‘For Profit’ and Academia

By Sophie Braccini



Jim Allan discusses findings with WSA scientists in the lab.

Photos Sophie Braccini

Beware: scientists at work, high brain energy in the air – yet all is quiet in the offices of WSA, both in the Orinda office and the lab in Walnut Creek. WSA is an Orinda-based cultural resources management consulting firm where archeologists operate on the fine line between ‘for profit’ and academic work.

Headed by Jim Allan in Orinda,

who also teaches at Saint Mary’s College, and William Self in Arizona, the firm is called upon to investigate sites that are going to be disturbed, mostly by construction. Per regulations, all that work has to be paid by the project’s developer. “We used to hear a lot of complaints about these costs,” says Allan, “but now people are used to it and they know it is part of the game.” This

work can also lead to significant discoveries.

When a site contains elements of historical significance, archeologists must identify the findings, and depending on their importance, document, record, and/or preserve what was in the soil. If the findings are significant enough, a project may be modified or the findings archived in a State or National repository; sometimes resulting a published scientific article.

WSA was founded by archeologist William Self when he lived in Orinda. The archeologist took Allan as a partner and went to open a new branch of the company in Tucson, Arizona. Allan leads the California operation and a team of 22 scientists with advanced degrees, nearly half of whom hold a Ph.D.

He is also a specialist in sub-marine archeology (he takes a group of students to Bermuda every summer to research shipwrecks) and teaches at Saint Mary’s College. “Having both occupations is a ton of fun,” says Allan, “With the consulting work we are ‘doing’ archeology – it is profit oriented and has to be on time and on budget. Working with students is very energizing. The students push me and I can pursue scholarly interests with much less of a timeline.”

Locally WSA is finishing the preservation work around the construction of a shopping center in Pleasant Hill. “We knew from previous work that the site was a Native American settlement and burial site,” said Allan, “we were not expecting to find so many remains when we submitted our proposal.”

Just digging the trenches for utilities and other necessities in the parking lot uncovered 120 burial sites.

“What the tribal descendants wanted was that all the human remains that were excavated because of the construction be placed in a vault and buried back on the premises after proper ceremonies are performed.” Allan declined to indicate the exact location of the remains because it was the desire of the Native Americans not to identify it in any way.

A lot of the research work took place in WSA’s lab. Scientists studied the bones and drew conclusions on the type of life the indigenous people lived. “We’ve found two layers of settlements,” explains Rhea Sanchez, who particularly works on animal bones, “One that dates back 400 to 500 years and another one that’s more than a thousand years old.”

From their findings, the archeologists draw conclusions on the way of life of the native tribes, their migration patterns, what they ate, their religious and symbolic life. In the lab, the young scientists are still studying bones bearing symbolic carvings and pear-shaped carved stones that took hours to shape, hypothesizing on their functions.

WSA has been involved in several significant projects in the Bay

Area, including the Carquinez Bridge and the Bay Front Shopping Center. Closer to home, the consulting firm was asked its opinion of the J&J Ranch development project that comprises the historical Joaquin Moraga Adobe, constructed in approximately 1841, which is the oldest remaining adobe residence in Contra Costa County.

WSA evaluated archeological and paleontological resources on the site and identified potential project-related impacts, and completed a stand-alone Cultural Resources Assessment Report. The report, ordered by the City of Orinda, was conducted in collaboration with Architectural Resources Group that studied the historical and cultural resource assessment of the project. WSA concluded that the Moraga Adobe site, based on preliminary archeological site reconnaissance, appears eligible for listing as a historical resource. The consultants made several recommendations in the design of the project to limit its impact on the site (final decisions have not been made on this project).

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business briefs

Ribbon Cutting for Studio Jule
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On Thursday, October 13 at 5:00 p.m., Studio Jule will hold a ribbon cutting to celebrate its installation in a charming little downtown bungalow. Juleen Lapporte, the talented Lafayette resident and photographer, decided after about nine years in business to move her operations out of her home. “My family told me that they wanted to see pictures of themselves in the house, not of clients anymore!” With two teenage daughters in the house, it was time to separate her family and work life. Lapporte started her professional career as an environmental scientist analyzing data for Quality Assurance/Quality Control. After having children she looked for another way to balance her life. Lapporte finds that her work brings out the artist in her, while still using some of her love of math and science. “There is a scientific part to photography that has to do with the effect of light on people and places,” she says, “and math is definitely needed for the business part.” Being a professional photographer in a time where everyone has image capturing devices constantly with them and take pictures all the time can be challenging. “In fact it takes years to understand how light can express emotions, and that cannot be done with an iPhone,” says Lapporte, “I love that people can capture some precious little moments of life on their own, but there are times you need a professional that will create a work of art...I love being around people,” she says, “When somebody comes to me, usually the mom, we talk about what they are looking for. If I take a picture of a whole family, I like to have a little time with the kids to keep the atmosphere relaxed and playful. I guide them and they guide me. What also makes the portrait special is that we have fun doing it.” Lapporte has gotten all her work so far through word of mouth and feels grateful for the community she lives in. She participates in fundraisers for schools and is also a volunteer with ‘Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep’ (www.now-ilyayedowntosleep.org) a non-profit that takes photos of children who are not going to go home from the hospital, as a gift for their family. “It’s very hard, but it feels right,” says Lapporte.

**News from the three Chambers of
Commerce**

Lafayette

• The Chamber continues to support “Team Lafayette”, a group of city staffers that raises money for cancer research. The group was created three years ago by Town staff members Dana Anderson, Michael Cass and Lisa Martin to support a colleague who was going through treatment for breast cancer. The group is partners with Lafayette businesses (including Mangia Ristorante on October 5 and Powell’s Sweet Shoppe on October 12) that give a percentage of their sale on a specific day. “Wrist bands supporting them are on sale at the Chamber of Commerce Offices at 100 Lafayette Circle, suite 103,” said Barbara Gilmore.

• Monthly Mixer on October 12, 2011 at ManorCare Health Services, 5:30-7:00 pm, 1226 Rossmoor Parkway, Walnut Creek.

• Optimizing LinkedIn for Local Business Networking Workshop presented by Robin Fox, October 19, 8 am at the Lafayette Library & Learning Center. Reserve your seat at workshops@lafayettechamber.org.

• Ribbon Cutting for Robert Jenson Salon, October 20, 5:00 pm at 999 Oak Hill Road.

• 19th Annual Reservoir Run on Sunday, October 30, 6:30-10:00 am. For more information go to lafayettechamber.org/events/reservoir-run. Registration table opens at 6:30 am.

Moraga

Chamber Mixer & Speaker on Tuesday, October 25, 6:00-8:00 pm at the former Moraga Swim and Tennis Club, 1161 Larch Ave. Moraga. Hosted by the Moraga Country Club; with wine and cheese. Speaker Topic: Understanding the “Cloud.”

Orinda

Business Neighborhood Watch Meeting on Thursday, October 13, 8:00 a.m., at Kattenburg Architects, 11 Moraga Way, #3, Orinda. Next meeting of the group that aims at preventing crime in Orinda businesses, supported by the Orinda Police Department. Coffee will be provided. RSVP via email to info@orindachamber.org or phone (925) 254-3909.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at sophie@lamorindaweekly.com