

# 'Velvet Bulldozer' retires after almost 4 decades

Mel Aikens, 66, has been a forerunner in the field of archeology and a visionary leader at the University

BY SHELDON TRAVER  
NEWS REPORTER

After spending 36 years as a professor and archeologist at the University, the "Velvet Bulldozer" is ready to retire.

Mel Aikens, 66, the director of the Museum of Natural and Cultural History, archeologist and professor since 1969, will retire at the end of spring term after spending decades working with students and conducting research as part of the University's archeology program. Under his direction, Aikens said nearly 40 students received their Ph.Ds and now work around the world in various capacities.

Friends and colleagues said he is leaving behind a legacy at the University and that he will be missed.

Senior Staff Archeologist Dennis Jenkins said he came to the University in 1985 specifically to work with Aikens. He said he was "enthralled" by Aikens' work in the Great Basin region of Utah and wanted to work alongside him.

"There are only a few people that stand out in their field," Jenkins said. He added that Aikens was very "knowledgeable and friendly" and that Aikens' words of encouragement guided him while he completed his doctoral dissertation.

"It's the very human part of Mel Aikens that made me want to work with him," Jenkins said. "I wanted him to be my friend and not just my adviser."

Jenkins said students come to the University expecting to be touched by their professors. He said Aikens' success as a professor shows in the number of former students who have made successful careers utilizing the archaeological and anthropological skills they learned under Aikens' teaching.

"If you look around the West, he's got former students everywhere," Jenkins said. "His success as a professor shows through the success of his students."

Denise Hockema was a student of Aikens' from 1993-99 and currently works as an anthropologist for the Coquille Tribe in Oregon.

"He's one of the most supportive professors I had," Hockema said.

"Any time someone had an idea, he tried to help them with it."

She added he was always willing to consider other points of view and admit when he didn't know something.

"He was always willing to say, 'I didn't know that. I hadn't thought of that,'" Hockema said.

Tom Connolly, director of research in the anthropology department, said his personal effect was felt outside the classroom as well.

"As an archeologist he was sought out by tribes to help resolve conflicts," Connolly said. He said this happened during a period of time when disputes between American Indians and archeologists were heated.

In 1990, the federal government passed a law titled the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act that required museums or research facilities holding American Indians' remains and sacred objects to trace the lineage of the remains and objects and return them to the appropriate decedents. Aikens said many archeologists cried foul.

"When this first happened, many archeologists thought the sky was falling," Aikens said. He said it was a decision between his colleagues and the University to make forthright attempts to return as many of the remains and sacred artifacts as possible. Aikens said this has been an ongoing process on which the department is still working, and he feels it is the morally correct thing to do.

"For more than 100 years, scientists have been collecting the remains of Native Americans as 'scientific specimens,'" Aikens said. "You can imagine how you would feel if it was your grandmother."

Aikens said he isn't as interested in the fieldwork of archeology and instead puts the fieldwork of others together like a puzzle to find the "big picture." He said he enjoys the way things interconnect and tell the story of long-term cultural growth.

Aikens said he enjoys working with students and teaching but admits he had a hard time during large lectures.

"I'm naturally shy, so speaking to 350 students was hard to do," Aikens said. "But I enjoyed telling them what I knew."

He said he hasn't taught a formal course since 2000 when he retired under the 600-hour program. This allowed him to retire and receive benefits while still working 600 hours per year at the University.

Patty Krier, the museum's director of programs, said Aikens developed a natural rapport with each student.

"Each student he talks to, it's like they're his only student," Krier said. "I've never met anybody who didn't like him. Never."

Alice Aikens said even when he isn't working at the University, her husband of 42 years is reading scientific journals and editing what he and others have written. She said he is very precise, always choosing his words carefully. This precision carries over to other daily activities.

"Whenever he ate ice cream it would be in increments," she said. "A half-inch. An inch. Even when eating ice cream."

Since 2000, Aikens has served as director at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History, overseeing its renovation, a project completed in February. Connolly worked with Aikens on the renovation and said there were many different views of

the museum should be designed from various participants in the project. He said Aikens used his calm demeanor to

bring people together. He added that this is one part of Aikens' personality that shines through in many circumstances.

"He's always had the attitude that people on polar extremes have some element of truth in their views," Connolly said. "Accentuate the positive and find common ground."

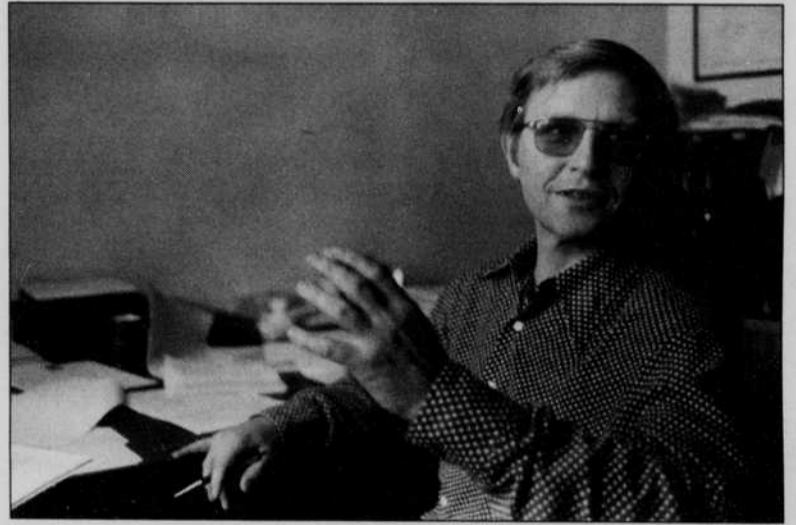
Krier said Aikens is leaving the University with a vision for the future.

"He's a tremendous visionary leader," she said.

Aikens said he is looking forward

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DENNIS JENKINS | Senior staff archeologist



COURTESY



TIM BOBOSKY | PHOTOGRAPHER

Director of Museum of Natural and Cultural History Mel Aikens talks about his time in the field of anthropology at the University.

to retirement not as a means to stop working but as a way to allow him time to complete other projects he wants to work on.

"I plan to do the best things I've been doing all along without the day-to-day work," Aikens said.

He said he plans to travel and continue research in Korea and Japan that he has been working into a book highlighting the archeological similarities between early Korean and Japanese civilizations. He's also working on a book about the "Millennial History of the Ute-Azteks." He would like to spend more time with his 3-year-old granddaughter and flying model airplanes, a hobby he recently acquired.

Connolly said Aikens will be

missed and believes his legacy will continue in the Northwest.

"I think we owe him a debt of gratitude for his contribution to the culture of the Pacific Northwest," Connolly said.

Aikens said he feels his name, the "Velvet Bulldozer" is appropriate and fun. He attributes it to the way he spurred his students to achieve more.

"I'm always encouraging them to go for it," Aikens said. "It amounts to pushing them to do more."

Connolly said Aikens' nickname was used as a term of respect and endearment.

"He doesn't drive people," Connolly said. "He makes them want to drive themselves."

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