Jeffrey R. Parsons was first shaped by, and then helped shape, archaeology at the University of Michigan where he received his doctorate in Anthropology and served on the faculty for nearly four decades. Jeff became a leader in regional settlement pattern research in archaeology beginning with the Basin of Mexico settlement pattern project, one of the most influential regional archaeological studies ever undertaken. The development of systematic regional survey methods and related analytic procedures made it possible for archaeologists to frame theories of early state formation and urbanism from a regional perspective. Jeff and students from the University of Michigan and elsewhere applied the methodology to other parts of Mesoamerica and to other world regions. The settlement pattern project in the Basin served as Jeff’s springboard for surveys in the Andes, for his excavations of Aztec chinampas, for “his archaeological ethnographies,” and for his site conservation efforts.

Starting out

Jeffrey R. Parsons was born in Washington, DC on October 9, 1939 to Merton S. Parsons (1907–1982), a descendent of generations of New England farmers, and Elisabeth Oldenburg Parsons (1911–2005), born
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to German immigrants in Connecticut who had ranched in Alberta Canada after moving there from Montana in 1901. Jeff’s father was an agricultural economist who after completing his education at Cornell University worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Parsons lived in Maryland until 1941 when they moved to Philadelphia for five years before settling in Fairfax, Virginia, where Jeff’s parents resided for the rest of their lives.

In the course of his work, Jeff’s father frequently traveled to university campuses to visit agriculture departments. In 1955 Jeff accompanied his father on one such visit to the Pennsylvania State University in University Park where they stayed at the Nittany Lion Inn. This trip prompted Jeff in his senior year in high school to apply to Penn State, along with Bucknell. He was accepted by both universities and decided to attend the home of the Nittany Lions. At that time, Penn State required first-year students to declare majors when they matriculated, and based on results of an aptitude test Jeff chose geology. Jeff also had a vague interest in classical archaeology; he had heard about the Olmecs but was unaware of anthropology as a discipline, that archaeology could be studied as part of anthropology, or that one conceivably could earn a living as an anthropological archaeologist. His senior year at Penn State and the preceding summer were a pivotal time for Jeff.

Born, raised, and educated in the east, Jeff headed west for the first time in his life in the summer of 1960 to exotic Wyoming for a geological field school that taught him to orienteer and to map geological features using topographic maps and aerial photographs. Jeff would later adapt this use of aerial photos to archaeological survey. From the field school Jeff joined Penn State Geology professor, Rob Scholten for additional survey in Idaho and southwest Montana (Parsons n.d.). Scholten introduced Jeff to the idea of understanding landscape formation on a regional scale. Scholten’s impact on Jeff extended beyond geology. Scholten’s respect for local shepherders became Jeff’s model for
interacting with local people during his own years of fieldwork in Latin America. From Scholten, Jeff also learned lessons of war. In Nazi-occupied Holland the Gestapo had sentenced Scholten to a forced labor camp where he “faced a collage of death and survival, heroism and acceptance of release. This was pretty heady stuff to me, a sheltered middle class American who had known neither war or violence” (Parsons n.d.).

Another major figure entered Jeff’s life after he returned to his studies at Penn State. As a Geology major, Jeff was in the School of Mineral Industries and its rigorous curriculum allowed little opportunity for electives. In his senior year, Jeff felt he should use his few electives to broaden his education, and perusing the course catalog, an anthropology class on Mesoamerican archaeology taught by a young archaeologist, William T. Sanders, caught Jeff’s attention. Although Jeff had not taken the prerequisites for the class, Sanders allowed Jeff to take the course as long as he also enrolled in the general introductory anthropology class and in the introduction to archaeology, also taught by Sanders.

Jeff was so engaged by archaeology and general anthropology that he decided to pursue his studies further and he sought advice from Penn State graduate students and faculty about graduate programs in anthropology. The Penn State graduate program in anthropology was newly established and Sanders felt that Jeff held such promise that he should consider one of the top, well established departments. Fred Matson, who had attended the University of Michigan, encouraged Jeff to apply there, which he did, as well as to the University of Arizona. Both universities were skeptical about Jeff since he had no completed anthropology courses on his transcript when he applied, but based on his strong grades both accepted him. Jimmy Griffin, Director of the Museum of Anthropology, tipped the balance in the University of Michigan’s favor by offering Jeff an assistantship.
The Teotihuacan Valley Project

Sanders announced in his Mesoamerican archaeology class that he was looking for students to work on a field project in Mexico during the upcoming summer. Influenced by Gordon Willey’s (1953) now-famous settlement pattern survey of the Virú Valley, Peru, Manuel Gamio’s (1922) landmark multidisciplinary study of the Teotihuacan Valley, and Pedro Armillas’s (1947) materialist approach to the evolution of pre–Hispanic civilizations, Sanders initiated the Teotihuacan Valley Project in 1960 (Nichols 1996; Parsons 1972, 1990, 2004; Sanders 1999; Sanders et al. 1979). Sanders intended the project to be the first in a series of regional surveys of what he called the Central Mexican Symbiotic Region that was a core area for the development of early cities and states. Sanders explicitly designed the Teotihuacan Valley Project as an application of cultural ecology to explain the evolution of pre–Hispanic civilizations in Central Mexico, and as a test of the settlement pattern methodology.

Archaeologists’ growing interest in settlement patterns was part of a larger reorientation of archaeology that began after World War II and led in the 1960s to “processual archaeology” that emphasized an anthropological and social science problem oriented perspective. In Mesoamerica the focus of archaeology shifted from aesthetics and culture history to questions of cultural evolution, the origins of agriculture and village life ways, urbanism, state formation, and stratification. Systematic regional settlement pattern research was one of the most important contributions of archaeology’s post-war reorientation (Nichols 1996; Sabloff and Ashmore 2001).

Broader social changes also contributed to developments in archaeology and a demographic and intellectual shift from an elitist to middle class perspective, as we see in Jeff’s career. The Spanish Civil War brought archaeologists like Pedro Armillas to the Americas, where they introduced ideas from European archaeology. World War II and the GI
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Bill made higher education accessible to the working and middle classes, and also allowed U.S. anthropologists, including Eric Wolf and Bill Sanders, to study in Mexico. The post-war baby boom and economic growth further fueled the rapid growth of universities, and state universities such as the University of Michigan became leading centers of research and graduate training in anthropology. The Cold War expanded government funded research. During the 1960s and 1970s the National Science Foundation provided most of the funds for regional settlement pattern research in Mesoamerica by U.S. archaeologists, including Jeff’s surveys in the Basin of Mexico and later Peru.

Archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and ethnographers interested in the development of the ancient civilizations of Central Mexico met at a conference in 1960 to discuss future research directions (Wolf 1976). From these discussions, René Millon (1964) initiated the Teotihuacan Mapping Project while Sanders focused on rural areas and regional settlement patterns beginning with the Teotihuacan Valley. Today, systematic regional settlement pattern research is a standard methodology in archaeology; but in 1960, few knew how to do it, and some were skeptical of its value. Jeff played key roles in developing the survey methodology and implementing the Basin of Mexico settlement pattern project that introduced a regional perspective to understanding urbanism and state formation in Central Mexico. The project provided a whole new body of data on these developments, formulated methods of population estimation, and proposed and tested theories of the origins of early civilizations. It also anticipated later trends in household archaeology and ethnoarchaeology.

Sanders envisioned Jeff’s role as the project’s geologist. However, with only a B.S. degree in Geology, Jeff lacked sufficient expertise for what Sanders had in mind. Jeff’s knowledge of how to use air photos for orienteering and mapping geological surface features, however, proved invaluable in developing the pedestrian survey method that would be
employed in Basin of Mexico surveys and in other parts of the highlands and other world regions. Willey had used aerial photos to identify sites in his survey of the Virú Valley, a discovery technique suitable for sites with visible architecture. However, in the Basin of Mexico, sheet erosion, alluviation, and centuries of plowing long ago reduced much of the pre–Hispanic architecture to scatters of artifacts and remnants of mounds. Jeff knew from his experience with geological survey that aerial photographs were much better for orienteering than topographic maps and he recognized that this use of aerial photos could be extended to mapping surface archaeological remains (Charlton and Nichols, in press).

To obtain a better understanding of site layouts and architecture, and also refine the ceramic sequence for dating surveyed sites, the project focused on excavations in 1961 and 1962. Most of the surveys were done in 1963 and 1964 when field methods and tactics were worked out with some trial and error over the course of the project. During the initial years of the Teotihuacan Valley project, Jeff, along with William Mather, formed the technical staff, with Mather handling photography and Jeff focused on site mapping with a plane table, a technique he had learned in geology.

Jeff was especially well suited for archaeological survey because of his ability to walk all day. According to Dick Diehl, “he never stopped.” (Jeff’s student, Liz Brumfiel, now President of the American Anthropological Association, had to take up jogging to prepare to survey with Jeff in the southern Basin.) Jeff weighed students at the beginning and end of a survey field season to see how much weight they lost. Dick Diehl recalled that the total figure was impressive.

For Jeff the summer of 1961 provided not just an introduction to archaeological fieldwork but to the pre–Hispanic civilizations of Central Mexico and to cultural ecology. Jeff found Sanders inspirational to work with. Sanders was (and still is) energetic and passionate in his interests about pre–Hispanic civilizations. Jeff’s low-keyed, down-to-earth
personality complemented Sanders’s rambunctious and charismatic character. The project was based in the town of San Juan Teotihuacan, near the ruins of the great ancient city of Teotihuacan. In addition to the imposing remains of Teotihuacan and traces of pre–Hispanic towns and villages they recorded on survey, Jeff also took an interest in the life ways of local farmers and craft producers. Sanders took Jeff and the other students on weekend trips to the chinampa zone, to visit the Formative period villages excavated by George Vaillant (1938), now covered by the suburbs of Mexico City, and to major sites, including Cholula, Xochicalco, and Tula. Jeff followed this practice on his later field projects and he regularly took students to visit sites and museums (Blanton et al., in press).

Jeff continued to work on the Teotihuacan Valley Project until it ended in 1965. There were no Mesoamerican archaeologists on the University of Michigan faculty when Jeff began his graduate studies, as the focus of the archaeology program was the Eastern Woodlands. The assistantship that Griffin offered to lure Jeff to the University of Michigan was to work as radiocarbon dating clerk. The university had the second oldest radiocarbon dating lab and it was Jeff’s task to handle the paperwork when samples were submitted for dating, take them to the Physics department, and prepare reports of the results. Jeff learned a lot about archaeology. Because of Griffin’s extensive network, archaeologists from many places submitted samples for dating. One of Jeff’s assistantship responsibilities was to write an annual report on the samples that had been dated at the University of Michigan which Griffin and physicist, Richard Crane, submitted to *Radiocarbon*.

As a graduate student Jeff took numerous ethnology courses from Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, Leslie White, and Eric Wolf. These ethnologists shared mutual interests with archaeologists in cultural evolution. Jeff spoke frequently with Service about Sanders’ application of Service’s evolutionary model to the development of pre–Hispanic civilizations in Mesoamerica (Sanders and Price 1968). Jeff was dedicated
to his studies but he was willing to assist other students, and readily available for a late Friday afternoon beer at the Golden Falcon.

American universities and social science departments, including Anthropology at the University of Michigan, underwent a period of exceptional expansion in the 1960s. The cohorts of faculty hired in that decade shaped many departments of Anthropology for the next 30 to 40 years. In 1964 Michigan set out to hire an archaeologist working on complex societies in Latin America. They interviewed William Sanders, offered him the position, which despite the efforts of Eric Wolf he declined. Donald Lathrap then was offered the position, but he also declined. A group of graduate students led by Bob Betteral proposed Jeff for the position.

The field of archaeology was smaller than today and the academic job market was much different as demand exceeded supply. Hiring procedures also were less formalized and regulated. Jimmy Griffin raised the idea with Jeff of joining the Michigan faculty. There, however, was one hitch; Jeff needed to complete his dissertation and he had yet to even select a topic!

During the survey phase of the Teotihuacan Valley Project, Jeff focused on Aztec settlements (Parsons 2000). After trying several strategies, Sanders settled on a two-stage approach to surveying the Teotihuacan Valley. First they conducted a general pedestrian survey, and then in 1963, different graduate students, each with expertise in the ceramics of a particular period, resurveyed multicomponent sites several times (Charlton and Nichols, in press; Sanders et al.). A review of his site reports indicates that over the course of the 1963 field season Jeff gradually began a field-by-field survey and covered adjoining fields between Aztec sites. This strategy has become a standard survey procedure in highland Mexico and elsewhere (Charlton and Nichols, in press).

Although he was interested in farming systems and considered a dissertation on that subject, Jeff decided that refining the Aztec ceramic
chronology for his dissertation was an important and more manageable topic in the time available. In 1962 Sanders had brought to Penn State Aztec ceramics from excavations and this allowed Jeff to build on important work done by Griffin and Espejo (1947, 1950) and others. Jeff also examined collections at the American Museum of Natural History from Vaillant’s excavations at Chiconautla where he received valuable assistance from Gordon Ekholm. (Christina Elson [1990], who received her doctorate from the University of Michigan in 2003, is currently working with these same collections of Vaillant.)

To get around Penn State and Ann Arbor while working on his dissertation, Jeff drove a 1950 Hudson that had clearly seen better days. The floorboards had so rusted as to suggest to passengers they should stick their feet through them and drag their shoes if (or when) the brakes gave out. Nonetheless, Jeff completed a 745-page dissertation, *The Aztec Ceramic Sequence in the Teotihuacan Valley*, and defended it in January 1966, two weeks after he started teaching as an Assistant Professor (Parsons 1966).

Jeff’s dissertation quickly became a central work on Aztec ceramics and the basis for subsequent refinements. Tom Charlton (1968), who had also worked as a graduate student on the Teotihuacan Valley Project, showed that the Aztec ceramic tradition persisted after the Spanish conquest and that Aztec IV is largely, perhaps exclusively, post–conquest. Leah Minc and Mary Hodge, both of whom received their doctorates from the University of Michigan, were able to recognize spatially restricted variants in Aztec Black–and–Orange pottery and Minc (1994) has proposed refinements in the dating of Aztec red wares (Hodge and Minc 1990, 1991). Brumfiel (in press) refined the ceramic sequence for the important Aztec site of Xaltocan in the northwest Basin. Jeff’s subsequent work in the southern Basin revealed that the difference between Aztec I and Aztec II pottery was geographic, as well as temporal (Parsons et al. 1982). His work, along with that of Hodge and Brumfiel, suggests...
chronological overlap among major Post–classic ceramic styles that once were thought to have been sequential (Parsons et al. 1996). During the Middle Post–Classic, prior to the formation of the Aztec empire, ceramic complexes were more heterogeneous than in any preceding period; this suggested to Jeff that later socio-political borders came to prevent the once fluid movement of commodities (Parsons 2001:78).

During the fall of 1965 while working on his dissertation, Jeff hired a first-year graduate student, Mary Hrones, to draw Aztec pottery. Mary subsequently took the first course Jeff taught during winter 1966. This was a class for first-year graduate students developed by Jeff on the archaeology of complex societies. Mary and Jeff discovered mutual interests in each other, as well as archaeology. When Jeff and Mary were dating he lived in a first-floor apartment at 433 Hamilton Place in Ann Arbor; Karen and Dick Ford had a third floor apartment in the same building. Jeff noticed that people frequently looked into the windows of his apartment. He learned from the Fords that the apartment had been occupied by a newly wed couple who never pulled their shades and left their bedroom windows open so all could hear, as well as see, them chasing each other around the apartment. Thereafter, Jeff was always careful to lower his shades. He had arrived at 433 Hamilton Place in his old Hudson, but it was in such a decrepit state that the caretaker banished the car. Jeff put it out to pasture on Earl Prahl's rural home outside Ann Arbor, where it remained until its death.

In 1968, Mary and Jeff were married, and they have collaborated together on many field research projects. Jeff’s hiring marked the beginning of a rapid expansion in the archaeology program with the addition shortly thereafter of Kent Flannery, Richard Ford, Bob Whalen, and Henry Wright. In Jeff’s view, Griffin guided the museum’s growth as a benevolent despot; he allowed the younger archaeologists to pursue their interests, but most did not want to cross him. However, acts of resistance did occur, even from Jeff. After Jeff completed his survey of
the Texcoco region, Griffin repeatedly asked Jeff, “When are you going to excavate?” To Griffin real archaeology meant digging. Jeff stood fast and finally told Griffin, “You have to do survey to be a complete archaeologist.” Griffin never again raised the issue.

As the archaeology faculty expanded, the University of Michigan came to be recognized as the leading graduate program in anthropological archaeology. Despite some theoretical differences and tensions among its faculty, Jeff and the other University of Michigan archaeologists shared a commitment to an integrative, holistic view of anthropology and archaeology as a science-like discipline. The strength of the archaeology program became the theoretical and methodological training the graduate students received, the breadth and excellence of the faculty, and the high caliber of its graduate students’ dissertation projects. The challenge the program has faced is finding sufficient funding for its very talented graduate students and now maintaining faculty strength in the face of retirements and an uncertain economy.

More archaeology on foot

Sanders envisioned the Teotihuacan Valley project as the first in a series of surveys, and Jeff took a leading role in carrying out that program. In 1966, Jeff, assisted by Richard Blanton and Mary Hrones, returned to the Teotihuacan Valley to survey areas not covered in the earlier years. With support from the National Science Foundation, Jeff directed a systematic settlement pattern survey in 1967 of the Texcoco region in the eastern Basin of Mexico (Parsons 1971). He further refined the survey methods and combined the general and intensive surveys of the Teotihuacan Valley project into a single reconnaissance of survey strips that ran from the bed of Lake Texcoco to base of the main sierra. Survey team members spaced themselves 15 to 100 meters apart as they systematically walked over an area and noted the presence of archaeological mounds, artifacts
concentrations, and other indications of ancient human activity. They completed standard survey forms on each site and collected grab samples of diagnostic pottery. Jeff refined this methodology for the Texcoco survey and employed it with only minor modifications for surveys of the rest of the Basin. The site typology used by Jeff and the method of population reconstructions derived from Teotihuacan Valley Project have also been adopted by archaeologists working in other places (Parsons 1971:21).

Jeff’s student Richard Blanton (1972) took up the task of surveying the Ixtapalapa Peninsula that was rapidly building up as the population of Mexico City expanded, a harbinger of changes to come in other parts of the Basin. Jeff conducted a four-month survey of the Chalco area in the southern Basin in 1969 and returned in 1972 for 10 months to finish the southern Basin survey. The following year he spent seven months on the survey of the Zumpango region in the northern Basin. Sanders employed Jeff’s survey procedures in 1974–1975 when we covered the Cuauhtitlan and Temalscalpa regions of the northern Basin (Sanders et al. 1979).

The broad objective of Jeff’s settlement pattern studies was to understand from a regional perspective why and how small-scale horticultural societies of 1500 BC evolved into large-scale urban states that dominated much of Mexico by the early 1500s. In contrast to Sanders theoretically driven approach, for Jeff this research was “an empirical inductive study” that provided a mass of regional data (Parsons et al. 1982:4). With these data, archaeologists in the 1970s began to build regional models of social, economic, political, and more recently, ideological dimensions of settlement patterns. The idea of the Olmec as Mesoamerica’s mother culture that perhaps even colonized the Basin of Mexico was (and still is) much debated. Except in selected sites, the surveys found little evidence of direct Olmec interactions, even in the southern
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Basin where the population was concentrated. Jeff felt that the data supported Flannery’s model of chiefly prestige exchange (Parsons 1971).

When the Basin of Mexico surveys began, the prevailing model of Teotihuacan was that of a theocracy, a model that Jeff regarded as “subjective, ethnocentric, and based on fragile information” (Parsons 1968). The surveys showed a dramatic restructuring of regional settlement patterns as Teotihuacan emerged as the dominant power in Central Mexico and, for political and ideological reasons, concentrated most of the population of the Basin of Mexico into the city. Throughout Teotihuacan’s long heyday, the population of the southern Basin was so low relative to the pre–Teotihuacan era “as to suggest that the population was deliberately prevented from rising to a level more in keeping with the rich agricultural resources of the area” (Parsons et al. 1982:369). The marked change from the regional state system of Teotihuacan to Post–Classic city-states has become a major focus of Jeff’s subsequent work.

From the outset, Jeff recognized limitations of the survey methodology (Parsons 1972). The decision to obtain greater area coverage versus more intensive site mapping and artifact collection limited the information on site function, social composition, and ideology. Jeff viewed the surveys as an initial stage that would be followed by more intensive investigations at selected sites. For various reasons, the follow-up surveys and excavations did not happen on the scale envisioned. One such project was undertaken by Jeff’s student Elizabeth Brumfiel. For her dissertation, Brumfiel (1976a) tested the symbiotic model of Aztec city-state relations using intensive surface collection data from Huexotla, an important early Aztec city-state center surveyed by Jeff in the eastern Basin. She (Brumfiel 1986) subsequently continued her research on Aztec state formation with investigations at Xico in the southern Basin, and since the late 1980s Brumfiel (in press) has had a long-term project at the island center of Xaltocan in the northwest Basin.
Mary Hodge at the time of her death was preparing to pursue further investigations at Chalco, an important Aztec city-state center in the southern Basin (Hodge, in press; Nichols and Parsons 1997). Susan Evans (1998) investigated Aztec village life at the site of Cihuatecpan, first surveyed by the Teotihuacan Valley Project in the 1960s. Charlton and I made intensive collections at Aztec sites previously surveyed by Jeff as part of our investigations of the Otumba city-state (Charlton and Nichols, in press).

Jeff, William Sanders, and Robert Santley published a synthesis of the results of the Basin of Mexico surveys in 1979 in which they offered an ecological cultural evolutionary model that prompted much debate (Sanders et al. 1979; Zeitlan and Zeitlan 1980). By the late 1970s archaeologists were broadening the theoretical frameworks used to interpret settlement patterns. Jeff made his survey data available to others, including to University of Michigan graduate students whose own analyses sometimes challenged his interpretations (Brumfiel 1976; Earle 1976; Steponaitis 1981). Rich Blanton (Blanton et al. 1993) and his colleagues advocated regional analysis and the application of models from economic geography, as did University of Michigan archaeology–student–turned–geographer Larry Gorenflo (Gorenflo 1996; Gorenflo and Gale 1990). This highlights a point that Jeff has repeatedly made, that settlement pattern data can be used to address questions from different perspectives and issues not even conceived of at the time they were collected (Parsons 1990, 2004).

Another example of this can be seen in recent research using survey collections to look at the relationship of politics and economics in Aztec state formation. Jeff and others thought that the uniformity of Aztec pottery was because most of it was made at the imperial capital, Tenochtitlán. Mary Hodge and Leah Mine developed a new approach to analyzing survey data. They examined decorated pottery sherds from Griffin’s collections at the University of Michigan and subsequently
Parsons’s collections from the eastern and southern Basin surveys (Hodge 1992; Hodge and Minc 1990, 1991; Hodge et al. 1992, 1994). They found geographic differences in the distribution of certain styles and motifs that previously had not been recognized. Hodge and Minc used Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis of pottery pastes and clays to show that Aztec pottery was made in multiple centers, providing new data on commodity flows and consumption patterns. Charlton and I built on our investigations of craft production at the Aztec town of Otumba and extended the application of INAA to materials from sites in the northern and northeast Basin (Charlton et al. 2000; Nichols et al. 2002). None of this research had been anticipated when surveys were done.

Walking in thin air: the Andes

In 1969–1970 Jeff took a break from surveys in the Basin of Mexico to investigate pre–Hispanic sunken field agriculture on the coast of Peru (Parsons 1968; Parsons and Psuty 1974, 1975). In 1975, the year Jeff’s daughter Apphia was born, he returned to Peru to collaborate with Ramiro Matos and his student, Chuck Hastings, on a highland survey in the Upper Montaro Valley and nearby drainages (Parsons 1998; Parsons and Matos 1977, 1979; Parsons et al. 1997, 2000). They were interested in understanding the development of pre–Inka complex societies and the changing relations between herders and cultivators. After completing the survey, Jeff’s reading of ethnographies led him to recognize how the survey data revealed the importance of ideology and ritual in the integration of herders and farmers (Parsons 1977, 1979, 1998; Parsons et al. 1997). In the mid-1990s Jeff extended his investigations to the southern limits of the Inka Empire with a pilot project in Puna de Jujuy, Argentina.
Through both his own fieldwork and teaching students, Jeff introduced the Basin of Mexico settlement pattern methodology to the Andes. His knowledge of settlement patterns and survey, however, extends well beyond Latin America. He has participated on projects conducted by colleagues and students in Australia, Egypt, Iceland, Italy, and Mongolia and in the U.S. in Alabama, Kentucky, and New Mexico. I know of no other archaeologist with such a breadth of survey experience.

Ethnography and political economy

As Director of the Museum of Anthropology from 1983 to 1986, Associate Director in 1990–1991, and two-time Acting Director of the Program in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Jeff’s administrative responsibilities did not allow time to direct a major field project. He did, however, turn this into an opportunity to conduct ethnographic studies of crafts and exploitive technologies that were not well documented but that Jeff suspected played important roles in the pre–Hispanic political economy. He and Mary studied maguey use in the eastern Mezquital in 1986 (Parsons and Parsons 1990), salt making in Nexquipayac on the shores of former Lake Texcoco in 1988 (Parsons 2001), and insect collecting in Chimalhuacan in 1992. Jeff’s ethnographies document details of crafts and exploitive technologies once widely practiced, but they go beyond description in several important ways.

When Cortes and his soldiers marched into Tenochtitlan in 1519, the Basin of Mexico had a population of over one million persons. It was one of the most densely occupied places in the world with an urban tradition going back over 1,500 years. Yet Mesoamerica was the only world region where primary civilizations developed that lacked domestic herbivores like sheep, goats, or llamas. Jeff has sought to understand how this was possible. His ethnographies draw attention to technologies, crafts, and aspects of the landscape overlooked by archaeologists
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preoccupied with the productivity of maize agriculture. Jeff used ethnographic and historical data to show that maguey was a much more important economic plant that provided food, fuel, and fibers, especially in the drier, northern Basin of Mexico (see also Evans [1990]). The presence of specialized maguey-fiber workshops at the Aztec city-state capital of Otumba north of Teotihuacan bears out Jeff’s contention (Charlton et al. 2000; Nichols et al. 2000). Jeff and his student, Andrew Darling (Parsons 2001b; Parsons and Darling 2000a, 2000b), argue that maguey provided a similar complement to seed agriculture as camelid herding did in the Andes.

Jeff’s investigations provided new insights into the significance during the Post–Classic of the shallow lakes that covered the floor of the Basin of Mexico. Jeff’s surveys found that Teotihuacan’s strategy of concentrating people at the urban center for political and ideological reasons resulted in a significant underutilization of the rich agricultural resources of the southern Basin. It was not until after Teotihuacan began its decline in the Epi–Classic that large settlements appeared on the flat lakeshore plain and lakebed suggesting artificial drainage on a moderate to large scale. The large-scale chinampa conversion of Lakes Chalco-Xochimilco in the 14th century made them the urban breadbasket, a role that continued into the 20th century. Jeff points out that this change destroyed most of the corporate basis of rural villages in the southern chinampa zone. Most of the rural Late Post–Classic population on the lakebed was composed of landless tenants who farmed estates created by state drainage projects. (Parsons 1976, 1991).

The importance of the saline Lakes Texcoco–Zumpango–Xaltocan for canoe transport of commodities and people to Tenochtitlan has long been recognized, along with their role in Mexico’s historical charter. Settlement surveys showed that the saline lakeshore was lined with mounds from pre–Hispanic salt production. Jeff’s ethnographic and historical research documents just how important the salt industry, along
with tons of edible insects, fish, and waterfowl, were to the political economy (Parsons 1994, 1996, in press). An increased demand for salt beginning in the 1100s caused a major technological change in production methods prompted not just by the rapidly growing regional population but by new demands from the political economy for larger amounts of dried fish, dyed textiles (salt probably was used as a fixing agent in dyes), cleansing agents, and standardized packages of salt as a medium of exchange.

Jeff recognized the larger importance of changes in technology and in the organization of pre–Hispanic production systems because of his ethnographic studies. New methods of salt making were part of a complex of new technologies that were widely adopted following the breakup of the Teotihuacan regional state (Parsons 1996:456). This included *comales* (ceramic griddles), *molejetes* (grater bowls with scored bottoms), specialized pottery linked with salt production, specialized scrapers to extract maguey fibers, and ceramic molds to mass produce spindle whorls of various sizes and shapes. Spindle whorls can be made from many kinds of perishable materials, but manufacturing them of fired clay in molds would have improved thread standardization. Adoption of these new technologies was linked to increasing specialization in processing and production, greater commercialization, and expanded tribute systems. Jeff predicts that the bed of the saline lakes “may hold one of the archaeological keys for understanding the profound socio-cultural changes that appear to have accompanied the Classic to Post–classic transition throughout Mesoamerica” (Parsons 1996:456).

The earlier archaeological surveys in the Basin had mostly ignored the lakebeds. Jeff and his colleague Luis Morett (Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo) addressed that lacuna in 2003 with an intensive survey of part of the former central bed of Lake Texcoco. They employed a siteless survey approach and recorded 1,100 off-site loci ranging from isolated artifacts to pottery and lithic scatters. The methods used in the regional
surveys did not systematically record small artifact scatters. What constitutes an archaeological site partly depends on the problems being addressed and the scale and intensity of the survey. Parsons and Morett’s (2004) survey found no traces of Formative or Classic use of the central lakebed that warrants further investigation.

Further surveys of the lakebeds will need to be done soon because of the rampant site destruction as the population of the Basin of Mexico continues its rapid increase. Jeff has taken up the issue of the importance of site conservation and curation of archaeological collections in Central Mexico (Parsons 2001c, 2003). Partly because of his interest in conserving Mexico’s patrimony, Jeff is widely and warmly regarded by his colleagues in Mexico, and also in the Andes. The monumental sectors of large sites such as Teotihuacan are protected, and Jeff has focused on the problem of conserving small sites that are equally important to understanding ancient societies and social change.

Jeff regularly participates in symposia and professional meetings in Mexico as well as in the U.S., and he has been a visiting professor at universities in Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico. His unassuming personality, genuine interest in the work being done by local archaeologists in Latin America, and collaborations with local archaeologists offer a model for how anthropologists should conduct fieldwork.

The same professionalism marked his tenure as Director of the Museum. He successfully oversaw the hiring of John O’Shea and the securing of a position for his wife, a physician engaged in medical research at the University of Michigan Medical School. He also looked out for the students and staff of the Museum and sought to protect its intellectual strengths. He supported the “Brown Bag” lecture series through cycles of waxing and waning interest. Jeff’s commitment to intellectual diversity will be continued by a lectureship in his name.
Jeff’s modest personality extends to material consumption. The family farm in Parsons Farm, Maine, where Jeff vacations, has minimal electricity. Jeff is no American couch potato, as he only acquired television in recent years. Rather than watching “the tube” for diversion, he reads widely, from classic novels at night before retiring, to The New York Times in the morning. For nearly 30 years Jeff and Dick Ford discussed world problems during their daily lunch together.

Jeff has never been fashion-conscious, but he does like to tease others about their attire, as my former student from Dartmouth, Alan Covey, discovered. On the day of Alan’s dissertation proposal defense, Jeff rounded the corner on the fourth floor of the Museum, spotted Alan in black dress pants and an overcoat, and announced to all who could hear: “Look, if it isn’t Mandrake the Magician!” Fortunately, Mary was often around on such occasions to keep Jeff in check with some pointed comments of her own about what he was wearing.

In addition to acquiring a television, Jeff has taken advantage of other modern technologies for his teaching and research. To teach students about Andean ecology in the 1970s he filmed traditional agricultural and craft production, and archaeological survey techniques. After three decades, however, the films lost their novelty and became artifacts. Jeff and his student assistants began the task of computerizing the Basin of Mexico settlement survey data. On his recent survey of the Texcoco lakebed he used GPS to record site locations.

Jeff is a dedicated teacher who introduced many undergraduate students at the University of Michigan to the archaeology of ancient civilizations. He has served on over 75 doctoral committees, representing research done by graduate students in Africa, Asia, Europe, Mesoamerica, the Middle East, North America, and South America. Former students consistently express much respect for working with him both in the classroom and in the field: “We are convinced that Jeff’s egalitarian mode of field direction infected people with a level of enthusiasm, allowing us
Final thoughts

In recognition of his research in Mexico and Peru, in 1998 the American Anthropological Association awarded Jeff the distinguished A. V. Kidder Award. In granting Jeff the award, the AAA noted in particular his role in the development of regional survey methodology, his insights into culture change in pre–Hispanic Central Mexico, and his leadership in ethnoarchaeological studies. As archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology have drifted further apart in recent decades, Jeff’s career exemplifies the value of their integration.

At the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Salt Lake City, Jeff’s friends and colleagues gathered to honor him at a retirement reception organized by his former student Rich Blanton and sponsored by Chuck Stanish, the Director of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA that is publishing a volume in honor of Jeff (Blanton et al., in press). Recovering from a medical procedure, Jeff was unable to attend, but Carla Sinopoli provided a cell phone so he could hear remarks from Rich Blanton, Dick Ford, and Bill Sanders. The phone was then passed around the room packed with archaeologists. Despite his absence, Jeff drew a huge crowd! Archaeologists of diverse theoretical stripes came to recognize Jeff’s many professional contributions and how the regional perspective that he has fostered changed the way archaeologists understand landscapes of the past and the ecological and social dynamics that shaped them.
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It was a great privilege to be asked to write this article. In 1974 and 1975 as a graduate student at Penn State I worked with Bill Sanders on the final stages of the surveys of the Basin of Mexico. I used data from the Cuauhtitlan survey to contextualize findings from excavating an early irrigation system in the northern Basin for my dissertation, and Jeff served on my doctoral committee (Nichols 1980). I have continued to benefit from his advice, suggestions, and insights, as I did in preparing this article. I thank Rich Blanton, Mary Parsons, Luis Morett, and Carla Sinopoli for allowing me to cite from their introduction to a forthcoming volume in Jeff’s honor. Dick Ford and Richard Diehl generously shared stories and their thoughts about Jeff, as did Kamyar Abdi and Alan Covey. Yoko Sugiura provided perspectives from Toluca. I have also learned about Jeff over the years from long-time colleagues Liz Brumfiel, Tom Charlton, Bill Sanders, and the late Mary Hodge, who left us much too soon. John Watanabe commented on a draft of the paper. Mistakes, omissions, and other shortcomings are my own.

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