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## **Digging in the Dirt**

*For Jim Wilson and his firm Archaeologix, Inc., science and business go hand-in-hand*

By Suzanne Boles

As far as timing goes, it really couldn't have been any more apropos. Last October 31, as construction crews worked the land at the corner of Rectory and York streets, the site of the new \$13.5-million Western Fair agriplex, a human skull appeared, rolling down a pile of backfill.

It was a Halloween beginning to a discovery of nightmarish proportions. The site would eventually give up 24 complete skeletons and an additional 100 body parts, many belonging to children.

Grisly stuff, to be sure. Unless, that is, you're Jim Wilson, founder and president of Archaeologix Inc. For Wilson, such discoveries are his joy and his job.

Archaeology, the science of recovering, analyzing, describing and explaining the remains of past human cultures, has become big business in Ontario. Simply put, it's a business, driven by government legislation, that's all about finding hidden treasures or not.

For instance, before a developer can begin work on a housing subdivision, they are required by law to have an archaeological assessment performed. Firms like Archaeologix are hired to ensure that no historically significant artifacts are hidden on the land or below the soil before the work begins. In cases where something is found, it's up to the archaeologists to unearth the artifacts, catalogue them and prepare a report of their findings. Once they have satisfied government requirements and the artifacts have been removed, the builder can get on with the work.

According to Wilson, Archaeologix uncovered about 450 graves at the Western Fair site, all part of a 19th-century cemetery that had been closed in 1879. Most of the bodies had been relocated to Mount Pleasant Cemetery in the late-1870s, but not all. As he points out, the extended mild weather allowed his team to continue to excavate the site well into January. "Normally there's no field work at this time because the ground is frozen," he says. "So we write reports, analyze collections and take our vacations and try to catch our breath and get ready for the next field season when the ground thaws in the spring.

Armed with an undergraduate degree from UWO, an MA in anthropology (he is still working on his Ph.D. in archaeology from McMaster University) and field experience working for the city's Vision 96 process and local firm Mayer Heritage Consultants Inc., Wilson began laying the groundwork for his business in early 1997 with help from the London Small Business Centre. "(I) began piecing together a business plan and filling in some pieces of information that I needed," he recalls.

By the fall of 1997, he had launched Archaeologix from his townhouse basement. "I marketed heavily to the aggregate sector," he explains, "people who do new quarries and gravel pits, because the Aggregate Resource Act had been changed to include a requirement for archaeological assessments for new licenses for aggregates and quarries. I knew there would be a new segment of the market there that would be looking for archeological consultants. And that proved to be my lifeline to get the company up and running."

Prior to the aggregate act change, in the early 1980s, the Ontario Ministry of Culture, under the auspices of the Planning Act of Ontario, began to require developers to conduct archeological assessments in advance of development. Revisions to the planning act followed in 1983, and again in the early-1990s, making specific reference to archeology. "The industry really took off then," says Wilson, "Pretty much anywhere dirt gets moved in the province, which hasn't been disturbed before by previous development, an archeological assessment is required."

Of his first full operating year, Wilson says, "We did around \$125,000 worth of business, and it's grown every year." However, he's quick to point out that the early years were tough as he built a clientele.

"When I started the company I was in the field all day and working on reports all night," he says. "There were a couple of years where I really had no assistance at all in the office. I did everything from laminating the report covers to all the graphics, and I really worked two jobs, seven days a week. I used to look forward to long weekends because that meant on the Monday I only worked one job instead of two I didn't have to go into the field and that was my break."

Today, Archaeologix has a permanent staff of seven working out of offices on Oxford Street West a number that jumps to between 18 and 22 in the spring and summer. Archaeologix clients come from a variety of sectors, including private developers and government agencies like the Ministry of Transportation (MTO). Archaeologix is also on retainer with the cities of London, Hamilton and Kitchener.

The company excavates between 15 and 20 sites a year with 60% to 75% percent of the work done here in London. Wilson, a father of three (an 11-year-old son and two daughters, ages five and three), anticipates sales of close to \$1 million this year, making Archaeologix the second largest archaeology firm in Ontario, just behind a large Toronto-based company.

The scope of the work varies greatly, says Wilson. "In a typical week we could be working on a new aggregate license under the aggregate act. We could be working on a housing subdivision or we might be working, for instance, for the City of London on all the new bicycle trails through the park systems."

With a surprising number of companies offering similar services ("There were more archaeologists here at one time, living and working in London, than there were in Toronto," says Wilson), customer service has been the bedrock of success for Archaeologix. "That idea of service was really critical to the success of the company in terms of making personal contacts with the clients as well as getting to know them and what their needs are," says Wilson. It's critical to inform them as to what they may be anticipating and help them with their logistical planning, and let them get to know us and to build that relationship and trust.

"When we started the company we really put a strong emphasis on getting the reports done quickly," he continues. "Getting the field work done is one thing, but clients really appreciate that we put a big push getting the reports done quickly. That's so critical to them because, while a lot of developers are keenly interested in the heritage on their properties and seeing that the work is done right, ultimately they're business people and what they want is the letter of clearance from the government that is going to facilitate the development plans. And they can't get that letter of clearance until the report is in and reviewed by the government."

In addition to performing field services in the local area, Archaeologix has been at work across the province, including Windsor, Pelee Island, Niagara Falls, the Kitchener-Waterloo corridor and right up to the Quebec border.

They've been digging at one site in Barrie for the past two years for home builder, Auburn Homes. Wilson says the site work has revealed findings about 11,500 years old. "It's about as old as it gets in Ontario there would have been mammoth and mastodon in the area at that time. These sites are incredibly rare and incredibly significant."

In fact, the site is so significant that Wilson has been interviewed about his work by several media outlets. An article about his findings at the site is slated for an upcoming issue of Canadian Geographic magazine.

Asked if he ever anticipated Archaeologix would become a company of its size, doing the scope of work it is, Wilson modestly admits he didn't see it happening. "I thought the first year was pretty good," he recalls. "I thought wild success would probably be doing half of what we're doing now. And I didn't anticipate getting there in this short a time frame. So quite honestly, no, I didn't expect this kind of success. But it's clear this work is out there."

As for growing Archaeologix further, Wilson is cautious. "To significantly grow we'd have to open up a Toronto office. And it becomes a question of whether we want to do that or not."

Certainly his family plays a key role in the decision. Wilson's wife is a professor at UWO's Brescia College, and there are the kids to consider, so uprooting his family isn't in the cards right now. But Wilson says there are many ways to expand locally and the opportunities are there.

"We'd like to see ourselves doing work with more engineering firms and that's an area we'd like to expand our business in.

"People tell me I've got a really fascinating job and I love doing archaeology and it really, really is interesting. But I always tell them that one of the things I enjoy about my job, as much as the archaeology and the archaeology is fascinating is dealing with the clients. I've made so many friends in the development industry, and to me running the business is as enjoyable as the archaeology."