

# Reflections of a Digger



A “What in the World” broadcast in the 1950s. From left to right, Carleton Coon, Jacques Lipschutz (the sculptor), and Alfred Kidder II examine an artifact while Froelich Rainey offers encouragement.

Photo courtesy of The University Museum Archives

**F**roelich Rainey served as Director of The University Museum from 1947 to 1976. During those years he helped to make the Museum one of the pre-eminent institutions in this country devoted to archaeological excavation and the innovative application of scientific technology to archaeology. Under his leadership more than 200 Museum expeditions were sent into the field; these included major projects at the sites of Tikal in Guatemala, Hasanlu in Iran, Gibeon in Jordan, Gordion in Turkey, and Ban Chiang in Thailand.

The Museum recently announced the publication of Rainey’s *Reflections of a Digger: Fifty Years of World Archaeology*. The book is full of anecdotes of his adventures around the world, recounted with a delightful sense of humor and a keen insight: growing up in Montana during the early decades of the 20th century,

traveling aboard a tramp steamer to Shanghai in 1929, living with the Eskimo on St. Lawrence Island in Alaska, service during World War II hijacking muletrains of cinchona bark in Ecuador, and later, during the occupation in Germany, serving on numerous committees for worldwide legislation to control the looting of archaeological sites and the commerce in unprovenanced artifacts.

When he first became Director of the Museum, Fro knew little about the city of Philadelphia and even less about Philadelphians. In the true spirit of a well-trained academic and curious archaeologist, he set about correcting this deficit.

If one expects to become an expert on Ruhr coal mining, it is wise to learn what goes on at the heart of the matter—the coal seam thousands of feet deep—not only what happens in the boardroom or

the manager’s office. Probing for the heart of the matter in Philadelphia, I found Mrs. Charles C. Harrison. She was straight out of the nineteenth century—as one of the museum guards put it, “That old lady came in with the bricks”—and she had all the charming downright quality of old Philadelphia that knew exactly where it was going. Her father-in-law was the man with the “little black book” in which he wrote down the names of Philadelphians and the amount of money he decided they should give to the Museum—usually matched by himself. About once a month I was summoned to tea at “Chuckwood” on the Main Line. It began with tea with bread and butter, then progressed to bourbon whiskey. Each time the exposure of Philadelphia and Philadelphians progressed in the same way, from the bland to the pungent. The key

to most jobs, I suppose, is people, and it was a tremendous help to find someone who was not addicted to the delicate euphemisms of contemporary times, but rather spelled out bluntly who was who, what did what, and why—including affairs both overt and covert. For a man raised on a ranch in Montana by a crew of cowboys, it was a fascinating education in a world I never knew.

Fro Rainey was interested in interpreting archaeology and anthropology so that it would be appealing to the non-professional. In his career as teacher, Museum director, and field archaeologist, he inspired many students. In the 1950s Fro helped to create the Peabody award-winning television series "What in the World?" utilizing the relatively new and increasingly popular medium to make archaeology accessible to the public.

To the surprise of everyone, the studio was besieged with letters from the Philadelphian audience demanding that the program be restored. The manager called me, agreeing to a modest fee for the panel, and proposed that we get down to a serious production with a director, three cameras, a set man, a producer, and a professionally designed TV program.

*A Christmas party at The University Museum with staff members dressed in ethnographic costumes from the collections: left to right, Loren Eiseley in Chinese court robe, Froelich Rainey in Tlingit potlatch costume, and Henry Fisher as Arabian sheik.*

Photo courtesy of Froelich Rainey




Someone in the studio came up with the idea of calling it "What in the World." A bright young producer from Hollywood conceived the idea of having each mysterious object materialize out of a cloud of smoke produced by dry ice, and of introducing mood music that set an entirely different tone to the whole affair. Also he was ingenious enough to recognize that if the audience was told, off-stage beforehand, what each object was, they would have the titillating satisfaction of seeing the professors sweat it out when they themselves already knew the answer.

Within six weeks "What in the World" was taken up by the Columbia Broadcasting System and was appearing weekly all over the United States. Soon it received the Peabody Award, and a story about it appeared in *Life* magazine. Strange objects from strange places made by unknown people suddenly became interesting to millions who had never heard of archaeology and anthropology, or who thought of such subjects as dry as dust and boring.

As moderator of the show, Rainey's job was not an easy one; his wonderful sense of humor is evident in his description of some of the pitfalls of "live" transmission.

In the early days, when all programs were live, I had a "panic button" to switch the voice off the air in a crisis. It was primarily necessary because of Carl Coon. Half the tension in the studio was the result of our fears as to what he might say. Often his language was unprintable. But at times he had us all laughing so hard that no one remembered the panic button. There was the occasion when I asked Professor Albright what his personal friends called him. (We always used first names or nicknames on the air.) He blushed and said that no one ever called him by his first name. Irrepressible Carl popped up with "What does your wife say, 'Roll over, Professor Albright?'" And then there was the time he began to swear at Margo Plass because she insisted that a small ape skull was that of a monkey—and his announcement that a carved figure of the Madonna and Child was a mother with a child with adenoids.

Fro Rainey has always tried to infuse people with his enthusiasm for anthropology and archaeology, for past times and diverse cultures—through his teaching, through his work on television, and by taking the time to talk and share his knowledge. Now, through this book, he has made a further contribution to communicating his philosophy and his joy in the worlds he has explored.

Popularization of archaeology had, and probably still has a bad name among scholars in the discipline. That is sad because it restricts the impact of one in many fields of learning in the twentieth century that are expanding the conception of our world. Literacy and contemporary communications release ideas to great numbers of people who, in turn, generate original thought. Teaching, in an academic sense, is by nature a limited thing. Communications are worldwide. Often the untutored come up with the most original ideas. 

*Reflections of a Digger* is available at the Museum Shop or may be ordered from Museum Publications, 33rd and Spruce Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 898-4090. The retail price is \$22.50.