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## Meet Tierra's Resident Hot-Rodder and Historic Vehicle Specialist: Archaeologist Jeff Jones

When vintage cars are found during archaeological surveys, Tierra's own Jeff Jones is the guy to call. Jones has been working in archaeology for nearly three decades, but for more than five, he's been restoring vintage cars and modernizing them into speed demons with kick. He knows everything you ever wanted to know about cars and can build one from the chassis up. The older, the better—he sees right past the rust—and he's bought, rebuilt, and sold dozens of near-goners to prove it.

Jeff's uncle was a hot-rodder and machinist who built racecar suspensions for a living in Modesto, California. That's hundreds of miles from Buckeye, Arizona, the small town where Jeff was born and raised, but Jeff was around him enough to acquire solid skills working on cars, both by watching and by doing.

Jeff also knows his way around vintage farm equipment, having worked on it throughout his youth at his grandfather's place. His grandfather even had horse-drawn vehicles that Jeff helped convert into tractors. Jeff's first "baby" was a 1929 Ford that he bought in 1962. "I drove it to high school and college, drove it in the 1970s, drove it after I got back from the service, and then—well, I got married, had kids, and everything went to hell." He's joking, of course. Jeff's wife, Helen O'Brien, an archaeologist and the Coordinator of the Archaeology Centre at Pima Community College in Tucson for the past 30 years, tolerates not only the five vintage vehicles he currently owns but also the dozens more he's dragged home over the years as hot-rod projects.

Though the 1929 Ford is still his favorite, a close second is probably the 1947 Studebaker truck Helen bought him as a wedding gift. It was affordable because it was a dilapidated mess, just how Jeff likes them. He took it right down to the chassis before restoring and modernizing it.



***"Cool—it's a 1940/41 White—probably a 1 ½-ton or larger."***

*—Jeff Jones, regarding this truck from a recent survey conducted by Tierra Archaeologist Jesse Murrell in New Mexico. The White Motor Company was an American manufacturer of automobiles, buses, farm equipment, bikes, roller skates, and even sewing machines from 1900 to 1980.*



*Jeff's first love, a 1929 Ford, which fell back into disrepair while in a relative's care in the '70s.*



*Jeff's first love today, in the process of being restored to her former glory.*

Jeff's love of vintage vehicles wasn't what drew him to archaeology, but his knowledge has certainly been a boon to his work. It's not unusual for him to get calls from archaeologists at other firms to identify old automobiles or parts, and they've learned he often needs only a photograph to do it. "I've been around cars all my life," he says. "Played

with them, drove them, fixed them. I've been a car nut since I was a little bitty kid."

In 2013, Jeff led a crew of archaeologists on the 17,000-acre "El Cabo" survey for Tierra in Torrance County, New Mexico. For Jeff, the project was the stuff dreams are made of, with a homestead on nearly every square mile.

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During the survey, Jeff and his crew found several vintage vehicles dating back to the Dust Bowl. All of the vehicles—as well as an old train car and heaps of vintage farm equipment—were rusted husks that, to the untrained eye, look like junk. There was only one that Jeff couldn't readily identify: a sedan that was apparently converted to a chicken coop after its demise. (Keep in mind that during the 1920s, there were hundreds of different makes of vehicles. But in the decades prior, the infancy of the automobile industry, there were thousands; it took time for lasting companies to establish themselves.) Unsure of the make, Jeff turned to his fellow hot-rodders online. Within an hour, a New Zealander identified it as a 1929 Cadillac Landau Sedan—a relative rarity, just like one the guy himself owned.

So, how exactly do such vehicles serve as a diagnostic tool for dating archaeological sites? Jeff says the short answer is that they don't, but that doesn't mean they aren't important to a survey. They can provide detail, color, affirmation of other research—just not exacting temporal placement.

Nor do they stand on their own to reveal the nature of a site (i.e., that it was used as a homestead). Finding a 1928 tractor, for example, would not necessarily mean that the site itself dates to 1928. However, it could reveal that farming equipment was used by the people who occupied that land, or indicate the type of farming they did. And it would indicate that the site fell into disuse no *earlier* than 1928.

Jeff says that, by far, the most common vehicle found during cultural resource surveys is the “Tin Lizzy.” That's slang for the Model T Ford, which was manufactured between 1913 and 1927 and was the cheapest, most dependable car of its time. While conducting a survey for Tierra in Arizona's Navajo County in 2011, he found *four* Model T fenders—a sizeable count for a single survey. Jeff has a solid theory about where the rest of the parts went. He explains that, starting in the late '30s, Sears, Roebuck, & Company sold a kit for converting a Model T into a tractor. That kit was said to be capable of doing the work of two or three horses.



*This 1922 Model TT Ford truck found during Tierra's 2013 "El Cabo" survey was such a peach, Jeff made an offer on it. The property owner declined because the storied vehicle belonged to a long-dead homesteading relative.*



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Based on other research at the site, Jeff theorized that the missing cars “grew up” to be tractors.

Vintage vehicle identification is important enough to the field of archaeology that whole books have been pulled together cataloging every make, model, and part imaginable. If Jeff reaches out his left arm from his office chair, he can grab *Clymer's Historical Motor Scrapbook* from a crammed bookshelf almost without looking. Asked if there are any specialists in this informally recognized micro-branch of archaeology, he'll nod and smile with a little bemusement until it dawns on you: *he's it*.

Restoring these kinds of vehicles generally takes Jeff at least a few years. However, his average time may be speeding up soon thanks to the recent addition of a protégé, Jeff's 8-year-old grandson, who's learning the art of hot-rodding by jumping right in and getting his hands dirty, just like Jeff did. The guinea pig is a 1968 Mustang, and Jeff says he's

letting his son-in-law and grandson do pretty much all of the work. That's fitting, because the car isn't quite old enough to satisfy Jeff. His rule of thumb when buying and remodeling vintage vehicles is that they have to be older than he is. He's a “1947 model,” but he bends his rule sometimes for the right car at the right price, including a 1963 Studebaker Avanti that recently caught his eye. “I called my wife and said, ‘I accidentally bought a car.’”

These days, Jeff travels to car shows about once a month to pop the hood on his vehicles and exchange stories with other hot-rodders. And though his wife has called *uncle* for now on collecting, he's always got an eye out for the next diamond in the rough. He doesn't have to buy them to appreciate them. Part of the fun is knowing what they once looked like and what they could become again. He's in the right profession for that, as almost every new survey has the potential to encounter another piece of American automotive history.



*Jeff with one of his four daughters (Breann), his grandson (Eli), and the '47 Studebaker his wife (Helen) bought for him.*