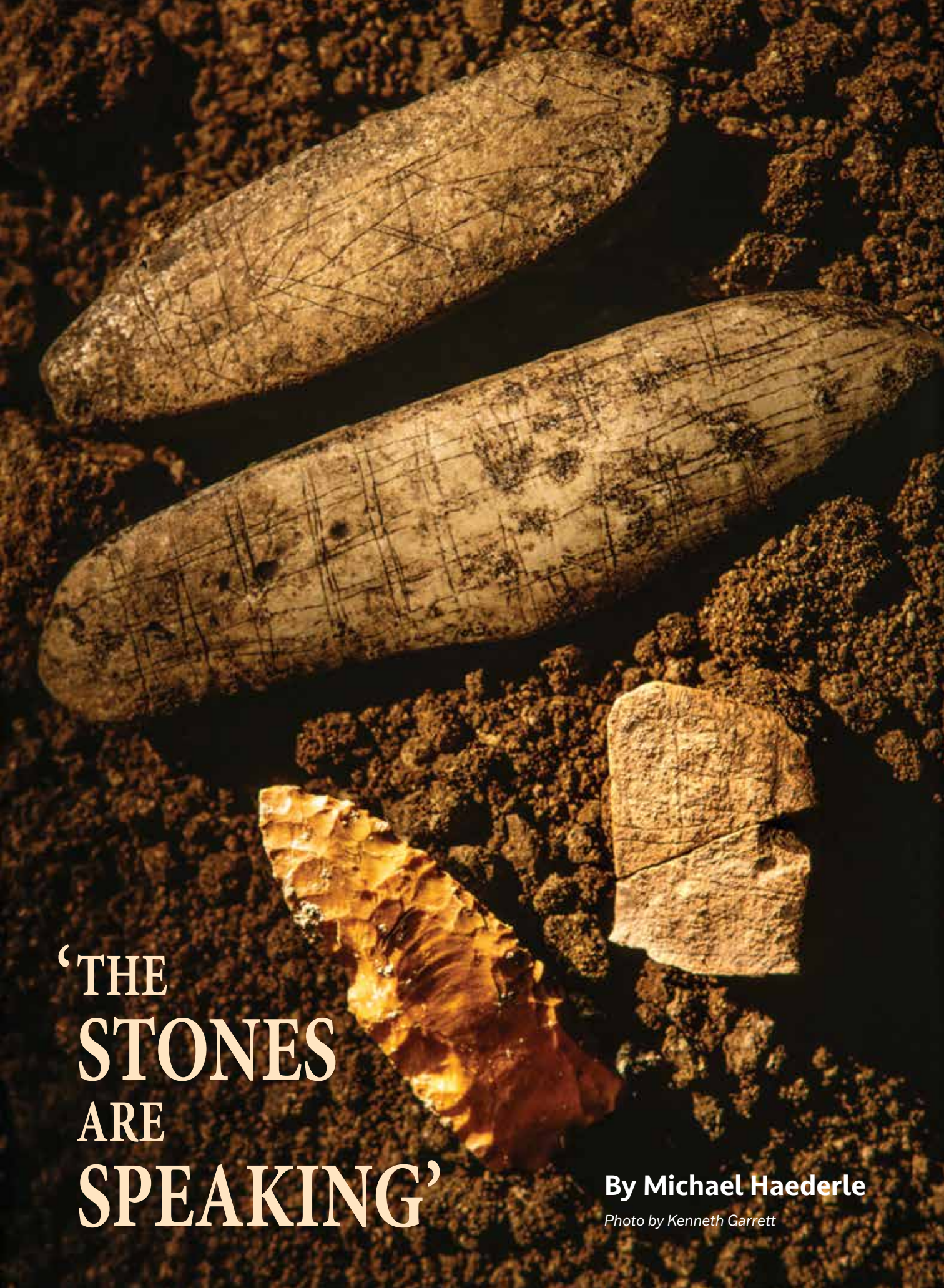

‘THE STONES ARE SPEAKING’

By Michael Haederle

Photo by Kenneth Garrett

Archaeologist Michael Collins and documentary filmmaker Olive Talley. *Photo by Kenneth Garrett.*

The saga of saving Texas' Gault site is a compelling story of determination and patience that became one archaeologist's life's work and one documentary filmmaker's years-long passion project.

On a cool, rainy morning in February, I found myself traveling south on Interstate 35 with my friend Olive Talley, bound for a patch of pasture and woodland lying along a small creek in central Texas. It's a trip she has made dozens of times in the course of making a documentary about one of the most remarkable archaeological sites in North America. Her film, *The Stones Are Speaking*, tells the story of the Gault site, which preserves a rich record of human presence as far back as 20,000 years, and focuses on the role of Michael Collins, the respected Texas archaeologist who was so determined to preserve the site for future generations that he bought it and donated it to The Archaeological Conservancy. The documentary premiered last

Camera operator Matt Franklin, Olive Talley, and Mike Collins film at Collins' ranch. *Photo by Ryan Goodrich.*

October at the Austin Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award for Best Texas Independent Feature Film. In late March, it aired on Texas PBS stations, and now Talley is working to make the film available on various streaming platforms. Clearly, the project was a labor of love, even as she had to dip into her own savings to see it through. "I feel like if I don't make a penny, I've been enriched—in that I've grown and I've learned and I've been challenged, and my world has expanded," Talley said. "You can't put a price tag on that. I sort of look at it as I've been going to archaeology school, and I think how lucky I am."

I have known Talley, an award-winning Texas journalist, since we worked together nearly 40 years ago. True to her country upbringing on a farm outside of Houston, she is one of the most gracious and hardworking people I know—and on the job she is fiercely tenacious. She has been an investigative reporter for major newspapers, worked as a news producer for two television networks, and won a prestigious Nieman journalism fellowship at Harvard University. I wanted to know what it was about Gault and Mike Collins that motivated her to pour herself into a project that would consume the better part of five years. So, we planned a road trip from Talley's home in Dallas to the Gault site, nestled in a small valley about 50 miles north of Austin, hoping it would afford me a chance to pose some questions.

The way she tells it, the story begins on a ship bound for Antarctica. Talley took a National Geographic-sponsored Linblad Expeditions trip to Antartica in 2017, which featured talks by some of the magazine's celebrated photographers. Famed American photographer Kenneth Garrett, with a decades-long career shooting archaeological sites across the world, lectured on the peopling of the Western Hemisphere. "He mentioned a site in Texas that he characterized as pivotal in adding another piece of critical evidence to the debate about when and where people were in the Americas," she said. Excavations at Gault suggested people had been shaping stone tools and spearpoints there much earlier than 13,000 years ago, when the Clovis culture was presumed to have marked the first arrival of humans in North America. "I never heard of this place, and it begged the question, how could I not know about this as a journalist who has covered Texas all of my life and devoured media coverage of all things Texas?" Talley said. Her curiosity piqued, she pestered Garrett for more details, and by the end of the trip he told her, 'When you get home, just put your list of questions to Mike Collins and he will answer them for you.'"

Talley followed his advice and tracked Collins down, thinking she might want to write a magazine story. He was generous with his time, telling her about his work and suggesting she set aside four days to tour Gault and the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory (TARL), where many of the Gault artifacts

were stored. "I said, 'I don't have four days to just come down and do this,' and he said, 'Well, I need to help you understand the context, Olive,'" she told me. Talley says that was typical of Collins, whose straw hats, suspenders, and folksy demeanor belied his professional standing. "I've covered NASA, I've covered medical stories, I've covered research stories, but I had never met a scientist who was so willing to share his knowledge and so enthusiastic about educating this dummy about the field," Talley said. "And I had no idea of his stature."

Collins, it turned out, had made major contributions to archaeology. A Midland, Texas, native, he'd studied anthropology and geology at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Arizona. As a graduate student, he conducted fieldwork in France and the Middle East, mastering lithics analysis. His expertise also took him to Chile, where excavations by renowned anthropologist Tom Dillehay at the Monteverde site upended assumptions about the peopling of the continent with convincing evidence of human habitation 1,000 years older than Clovis culture.

From Collins, Talley learned that the Gault site (named for an early 20th-century landowner) had been visited by people for thousands of years. The area—where the Edwards Plateau meets the Blackland Prairie—had everything they needed, including water, abundant game, and chert outcroppings ideal for fashioning stone axes, spearpoints, and arrowheads. UT's first anthropologist, J.E. Pearce, excavated the site in 1929 and sought unsuccessfully to have it protected by the National Park Service. Later, a landowner opened it to anyone who was willing to pay to dig for artifacts, which meant priceless information was irrevocably lost.

In 1991, an arrowhead collector digging at Gault uncovered engraved stones incised with cross-hatched lines and distinctively shaped Clovis stone points. Collins and his TARL colleague, Thomas Hester, were called to the site, which they found pockmarked with pits haphazardly dug by relic hunters. Despite the damage, Collins saw thick undisturbed deposits that likely contained important artifacts. A wealthy donor paid the landowner to permit a brief 12-day test excavation at the site, which

Mike Collins and students study Gault site artifacts. *Photo by Kenneth Garrett.*

convinced Collins and Hester that it held potential for further discoveries. But then they had to move on. By 1998, new landowners had stopped the pay-to-dig operations, but they were using a skid-steer loader in their own hunt for relics. After carving out one of their pits, they uncovered a mastodon's jawbone and a Clovis point. Realizing they had found something unusual, they called the University of Texas to report their find. Hester and Collins returned to Gault, and this time they negotiated a three-year lease starting in 1999 to conduct proper archaeological excavations at the site. Collins called in favors from colleagues across the country and volunteers showed up in waves for a methodical dig that yielded more than a million artifacts, including the richest collection of Clovis tools ever discovered.

When the lease expired in May 2002, the landowner opted not to extend it, but he eventually offered to sell the tract. Determined to protect Gault from further looting, Collins and his colleagues spent the next four years seeking money to buy the land, to no avail. Finally, in 2006 he and his wife, Karen, decided to pool their resources and mortgage their own property to buy the site, which they then donated to the Conservancy. Starting in 2007, through the next seven years, a new 12-square-meter block was excavated 10 feet down to bedrock, yielding a trove of new artifacts.

As Collins related the Gault story to Talley, he told her that spearpoints uncovered in the deepest excavation—dubbed the Gault Assemblage—appeared to be significantly older than the Clovis material, adding to the growing evidence that the Clovis model was no longer tenable. A paper reporting the findings was being prepared for submission to a journal, but at the time, they were not yet ready to be publicized. Talley interviewed other Gault researchers and approached editors about a magazine story, but they demurred, preferring to wait for publication of the team's findings. Disappointed, Talley asked Collins to let her know when the paper was published, then reluctantly put the project aside to attend to other work. "For three years I thought about this story, and I never could let it go," she said.

Talley was surprised in 2020 to hear a radio news report about the Gault research findings. The study team had published

Volunteer Celia Isbrecht watches Gault School of Archaeological Research (GSAR) staff archaeologist Tom Williams and volunteer Steve Davis as they excavate Area 15 at the Gault site, which was dug all the way to bedrock in 2011 and 2012. *Photo courtesy of GSAR.*

Mike Collins works in the dirt at Area 15 in its early stages of excavation in the late 2000s. *Photo courtesy of GSAR.*

their paper in *Scientific Advances*, finding that optically stimulated luminescence testing of stone tools excavated from the deepest strata provided age estimates of 16,000 to 20,000 years before present. Collins, it seemed, had forgotten to alert her. It was Talley's first inkling that Collins was experiencing memory issues, which would be later confirmed with an Alzheimer's diagnosis. Around that time, Talley was contacted by Lynn Boswell, with whom she had worked at NBC. Boswell sat on the board of the Gault School of Archaeological Research (GSAR), which Collins had established, and knew Talley had interviewed members of the research team. "She said, 'Olive, just do the documentary,'" Talley said. The pair met with Collins and the GSAR staff, who agreed to share their video, field journals, research papers, and correspondence, but it appeared unlikely that the archaeologists could help raise money to make a film. "I looked at Lynn and she said, 'Oh, Olive, you can do this.' Some friend!" Talley laughed. "That's how it started."

The Gault site isn't much to look at these days. We drove west from I-35 along an empty country road lined with scrubby trees, passing several large open-pit limestone quarries before pulling up to a gate marking the entrance. We were met by GSAR board member Mary Condon, the former mayor of the small nearby town of Florence, and as we parked, a herd of whitetail deer startled and bounded off through the trees. The site is modestly appointed with a metal building that houses the GSAR museum and new informational signs describing the archaeological work carried out there. We picked our way down a muddy path and crossed Buttermilk Creek, which wound along the base of a slope studded with chert outcroppings. Across the creek was a grassy meadow where three black cows idly grazed. The place was so quiet it was hard to picture it as it had looked when it was swarming with archaeologists. All evidence of the excavation had been erased when the pits were backfilled, and grass reclaimed the site. For Talley it brought back memories of her first visit to Gault with Mike Collins. "When I came out here, it looked like a cow pasture," she said. "I kept saying, 'I'm sorry—I just don't get it.' And Mike was saying, 'Look at the land formation, look at the alluvial soils and how the deposits built up over time.' And I'm thinking, 'Deposits? Alluvial soils? Chert? So what?' It amazes me that we got here, because the educational process for Olive Talley was long and deep." Condon said most

local residents know surprisingly little about Gault. "Schools would come in from Scotland—different groups came in from all over to work here, and it's right in our backyard," she said. "Certainly, more people know about it in town now, since the film."

On the drive back to Dallas, Talley recounted the grueling process of raising money to finance the film, most of which came from several foundations and hundreds of individual donors. The logistical challenges of identifying and retrieving archival photos and film footage, hiring camera crews, conducting scores of interviews with the archaeologists and others who figured in the Gault story, and getting the film edited were also formidable. But the biggest hurdle appeared at the outset, when it became clear that Mike Collins' advancing memory loss would hamper his ability to participate in the film. Talley was able to shoot an interview with him in May 2020, soon after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which he recounted his work at Gault while sitting on his porch. Noticing he was having difficulty answering questions, Talley devised a workaround on the fly, seating Mike and Karen Collins side by side on camera, so that she could prompt him to remember things. "As cogent as he is in that interview, that was him after he was already starting to show some signs of memory loss," she said. Collins was aware of what was happening to him and the impact it would have on GSAR, she added. "He said, 'You know, my mother had Alzheimer's. I think I need to start putting things in motion for me to step aside and the board to take more control.'"

Early on, though, Collins was game to help Talley raise money for the film. "He was still having really good days and not-so-good days," she said. "He went with me several times to meet funders, and he was able to converse; they had no idea. Up until last year, I could take him out to the Gault site, and he would snap back. He would have recall. He would think about things." But as his memory loss worsened, an early diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment gave way to full-blown Alzheimer's, their encounters turned poignant. In December 2023, Talley drove Collins to Gault for a barbecue picnic with supporters. As soon as they parked, he bolted from the car and set off down the path. "I said, 'Why is your step so fast? What's going on? What are you thinking?' He just turned around and looked at me and he said, 'Well, it's just like connecting with an old friend.'"

While Talley and her camera crew shot their interviews, Karen Collins made an unexpected contribution to the film. "She walks out with a cardboard box and says, 'We were looking through some files and stuff and I found these old films. Would you have any interest in in these?'" They turned out to be reels of 8- and 16-millimeter films from Mike Collins's childhood that had been shot by his father—scenes of him as a Boy Scout and as a young visitor to archaeological sites in the Southwest, a goldmine for a documentary filmmaker.

A few days later, I caught up with Mike and Karen Collins via Zoom from their home in Austin. Married for more than 60 years, they have an easy rapport. Mike was warm and engaged, but he couldn't recall many details of the Gault story, so Karen, who has some doctoral work in history under her belt, did most of the talking. "At some point Olive wanted to meet me, and I was hesitant," she said. "Mike had told me Olive wanted to write a story, but I didn't see that I would have anything to add to that. But it later evolved that she was going to do a film. At that time, we learned that Mike's memory was slipping. Olive convinced me, and so both of us helped in every way that we could at that point." Karen was happy with the outcome. "The film is just a marvel," she said. "All the problems she had to deal with getting to the finish line were remarkable. Mike couldn't help her. She had to dig out all of these details, and in the process, she has learned more about Mike's career than either he or I know at this point."

Several of the archaeologists Talley interviewed for *The Stones Are Speaking* say the film faithfully captured their experiences of working with Collins at Gault and conveyed the significance of his contributions. Jon Lohse first met Collins as a graduate student during the 1991 test excavation at Gault. He later joined in the three-year excavation and now serves as president of the GSAR board. He says Talley's film accurately depicts Collins' desire to make archaeology understandable, even to lay people. "The whole point of Mike's work is to pay things forward," Lohse said. "The film could be a very important tool for that. I think it'll make its biggest impact as folks get involved in

Mike Collins hosts a tour of Gault Site to visiting archaeologists. *Photo courtesy of GSAR.*

archaeological education and use it as a tool to show the tremendous good that archaeology can do in the world."

Ashley Lemke was a University of Texas undergraduate when her class visited the Gault site in the mid 2000s. "Mike Collins gave us a tour and he had this line: 'We have this lab and we're doing this research. If any of you want experience volunteering, reach out.' I'm the only person in that class who reached out." Collins and his colleagues at TARL took Lemke under their wing. "They talked to me about archaeology all day, every day, and then on Saturdays we went out and excavated at the site," she said. "It's so rare to have an opportunity like that as an undergraduate. I got hands-on experience learning how to excavate from Mike and all these people." Lemke is now an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee where she specializes in underwater archaeology. When she attended the film's premiere in Austin, she was surprised that it played more like a feature than a documentary. "I was bawling at the end of it. I get really emotional thinking about how much Mike did for me in my career. There's me in the background, where I'm a child of 21, excavating behind him." Lemke consulted with Talley throughout the making of the film, describing her as a "force of nature who is such a sweet, kind, wonderful person. I'm glad that she did it, because nobody would know that story otherwise."

April Brown, the Conservancy's Southwest Regional Director, praised Talley's depiction of Howard and Doris Lindsey, the artifact-collecting couple who leased—and later sold—the Gault tract to Collins. "They were just people in her film," Brown said. "She kind of lets the viewer draw their own conclusions. I thought it was very gracefully done." The film "has great potential to educate the public on the way to behave at an archaeological site—why it's so important not to pick things up or move things around," Brown said. "If it's on the ground and I pick it up and remove it, then it removes all the context. I think that this film kind of drives that home."

After a long day in the car, Talley and I got back to Dallas as the light was fading. It seemed to me her determination to share Mike Collins' story closely mirrored his determination to save Gault: each had single-mindedly pursued their goal in the face of adversity and at considerable personal expense. So, I asked her what it was about Collins that had driven her to devote so much time and energy to making the film. The answer was Olive Talley in a nutshell. "If you have to boil it down, it's that he inspired people to act for the greater good," she said. "We don't see enough of that in our world today. That is what has driven me and kept me engaged for all these years, because I think this is an important story. Because if anyone else can take away that message, maybe we can do some good."

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FURTHER READING

- Learn more about the film at *gaultfilm.com* or watch it at *pbs.org/show/made-in-texas*
- Gault School of Archaeological Research, *gaultschool.org*
- ***Evidence of an early projectile point technology in North America at the Gault Site, Texas, USA***, Thomas J. Williams, Michael B. Collins, et al., *Science Advances* (2018), *science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aar5954*
- See other publications from research at the Gault site, *gaultschool.org/research*