When I was growing up, the Egyptian wing of the Field Museum in Chicago was my favorite place to be on a weekend. As I got older, my childhood interests grew into full-fledged history geekdom, and there wasn’t a time period—ancient Greece, medieval England, Renaissance Germany—that I didn’t find fascinating. And then I saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* for the first time and got excited about the idea of finding forgotten history and bringing it into the light of the modern world.

As I finished my junior year of high school, I decided I wanted hands-on experience to determine for sure if archaeology was the career I wanted to pursue. Online, my mother found the summer High School Field School at Crow Canyon Archaeological Center. At first I was hesitant because I didn’t know much about Native American archaeology. But a dig was a dig, so I signed up.

**Summer Home**

In June, I flew to the tiny airport in Durango, Colorado, where I was met by staff from Crow Canyon. Arriving with me was another girl, Elana, who by the end of the day would be one of my roommates and my friend.

We took a bus from the airport to the Crow Canyon campus. As we approached, I got my first sight of Sleeping Ute Mountain, a peak in the Ute Mountains that run along the northern edge of the Ute Tribe Reservation. Over the weeks, whenever we’d been away for a long day trip, the sight of the Sleeping Ute against the sky would signal that we were home.

Elana and I were the first kids to arrive. Over the course of that day and the next, the rest trickled in—five boys and five girls in total. We met our teachers, Paul and Tyson, as well as our counselors, Marsha and Colleen, who welcomed us to the program and helped us get settled. The next day, we would get our first glimpse of the dig.

**Playing in the Dirt**

We were excavating at the Sagebrush site on Indian Camp Ranch, a large tract of land adjacent to Crow Canyon. The Sagebrush site is mostly Pueblo II, the penultimate era of the Ancestral Pueblo peoples. A Pueblo II settlement is characterized by three features: room blocks, kivas, and middens. A room block is a type of housing made by stone rectangular rooms laid end to end. Outside the room blocks, built mostly underground, would be a kiva, a circular structure that served both as a community center and a place for religious activities. Finally, the midden was a large area designated as a trash heap. I found the midden most intriguing: If an elementary school fascination with espionage taught me anything, it’s that there’s a life story in every trash can.

Fortunately, my dig partner, Jake, and I were assigned to a unit in the midden. At first, digging up the prickly grasses and tossing out beetles was tough going, but it wasn’t long before we were rewarded for our hard work. We found a wealth of artifacts—pot sherds, stone tools, and animal bones that were at least 800 years old. One of our best finds was a piece of polychrome (red, white, and black) pottery. Whether those pieces were made on purpose or through an accident in the firing process, they’re not common.

Logan and Henry, the two guys working in the kiva, made another important find: a large charred piece of a wooden beam. Wood is invaluable to archaeologists: Using a process called dendrochronology, they can use wood to put a precise date on the site. That piece of beam was very carefully bundled up and taken away to the labs.
Digging was hard work, as was hauling buckets of dirt to be sifted for minuscule artifacts. The sun beat down on us, and the wind blew dust in our eyes and mouths. But working outside was without a doubt my favorite part of my experience at Crow Canyon. One would expect that after a while, the novelty of digging broken pots and stones out of the ground would wear off. But for me it never did.

**The More You Know**
When we weren’t in the field, we were in the lab or the classroom. The team of lab scientists and archaeologists worked closely with us, teaching us about all the lab procedures. Every artifact from every site excavated by Crow Canyon is analyzed in that lab. Among the tasks we performed were processing botanical samples, sorting pottery sherds, and sorting fragments of stone. Just as in the field, the work we did contributed to Crow Canyon’s research.

In the classroom we learned about a range of topics—the development of the Ancestral Puebloan society, the significance of corn in the Southwest, the art of the Four Corners peoples. I remember all of us leaning forward in rapt attention during Paul’s PowerPoint about ancient Pueblo rock art, our minds thoroughly blown by the staggering amount of symbolism that could be squeezed into a few lines and dots.

But even more valuable to me was what we learned from the native people we met. Dan Simplicio, a cultural specialist for Crow Canyon who is a member of the Zuni tribe, spent a lot of time with us over the three weeks, answering questions about his people and their history. We were also fortunate to have guest speakers from the Ute and Navajo peoples come for evening programs. I learned more from them about the histories, religions, stories, art, and languages of America’s native peoples than I had in over 11 years of school.

**Into the Light**
At the end of three weeks, we all had to say our goodbyes, to each other and to Crow Canyon. The day before we all left for the airport was emotional to say the least. I sat on the edge of my excavation unit with Jake, putting the final entry into my field notes. I took a moment to look around at the site, trying to comprehend for myself what it all meant, both to me and to the greater body of work coming from all of Crow Canyon’s excavations, and all the excavations in Colorado. What I came up with was this:

There’s a scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where Indiana is about to destroy the Ark of the Covenant. His rival, Dr. Belloq, puts his hand on the Ark and says, “Indiana, we are simply passing through history. This, this is history.” Now, we didn’t have anything like the Ark of the Covenant in our hands. But the principle was exactly the same.

Standing on the Sagebrush site, I could feel spirits moving around me, walking the same paths around the village they would have walked hundreds of years ago. In some ways, they wouldn’t have been so different from us—pushing through their chores, laughing with friends, taking moments to feel the ground beneath their feet and the wind on their faces. Handling even the tiniest fragments they left behind made me feel close to the ancient hands that once touched them.

This summer, I brought the past into the light. And on the last day, sitting in my unit, I knew that yes, I am just passing through history. But the pot sherds and the grinding stones and the charred beams, the soil and the sun and the infinite Colorado sky—they are history.