Ancient past will be part of Bruce Center's future

Archaeological museum to have space, security

By JEN BRADY
Staff Writer

The new Arkansas Archaeological Survey station archaeologist at Southern Arkansas University may have had a rough first week on the job, but he's got big plans for the future.

Dr. Jamie C. Brandon was faced with discovery of the theft of 26 Caddo Indian artifacts on his third day on the job.

Though the incident is still under investigation, it has also caused Brandon to start the preliminary planning phases for the conversion of the former cafeteria in Bruce Center into an archaeology museum.

"It was certainly not how I imagined starting off — a bit more excitement than I had anticipated starting off with the Arkansas Archaeological Survey," he said. "But we're getting through it. If anything else, I hope it will cause us to think very seriously about security in the future, especially as we build the new SAU museum."

Brandon said the first thing he had to address were security issues, starting with closing off back storage areas of the Bruce Center that are used by other parties on campus. This would include replacing some of the doors so that there are no handles or locks on the "outside" of museum areas.

"After the robbery, there was a knee-jerk reaction where we all just wanted to try to do everything we could to make this place safer immediately," Brandon said. "What I immediately wanted to do was to put that in the larger context of building this museum. We didn't want to have to do something that we were going to have to undo in the long run."

Brandon then plans to wall-in the exisiting artifact collection storage area and create a single entry point. Artifacts needed for examination would have to be checked in and out on a daily basis.

Photo by Jen Brady

Dr. Jamie C. Brandon points toward future exhibit space in the archaeological museum planned for the former cafeteria in Bruce Center at Southern Arkansas University.

"What I tried to do is, with a minimal amount of infrastructural changes, create a safe and as large an exhibit area as I can," Brandon said.

Glass display units will be built into existing alcoves in the exhibit area.

A photography studio has been set up off the former kitchen area to be used for artifact documentation.

This studio has been put together with the help of Steven Ochs and the SAU art department, as well as Magnolia's Alcoa plant.

Brandon said one of the most ambitious things will be the transformation of the former kitchen into a conservation lab.

Other plans for the facility include two new offices and a conference room near the university entrance so archaeologist will be available for visitors to ask questions.

A public parking area and public entrance is planned at the east end of the building along East Lane.

Brandon said he has been and will continue to be working with the SAU Foundation to help raise funds for the transformation.

In addition to museum planning, he is planning to revive the local Kadohadacho chapter of the Arkansas Archaeological Society.

"The chapter has a long history," he said. "It was one of the first society groups when we started the statwide organization. So it goes back to 1968 or '69, but lately it has sort of fallen by the wayside."

Brandon said the society is for anyone interested in archaeology.

Meetings will be held on the second Tuesday of every month that will feature guest archaeologists. They may talk about local archaeology or far fields, such as Peru or the Middle East.

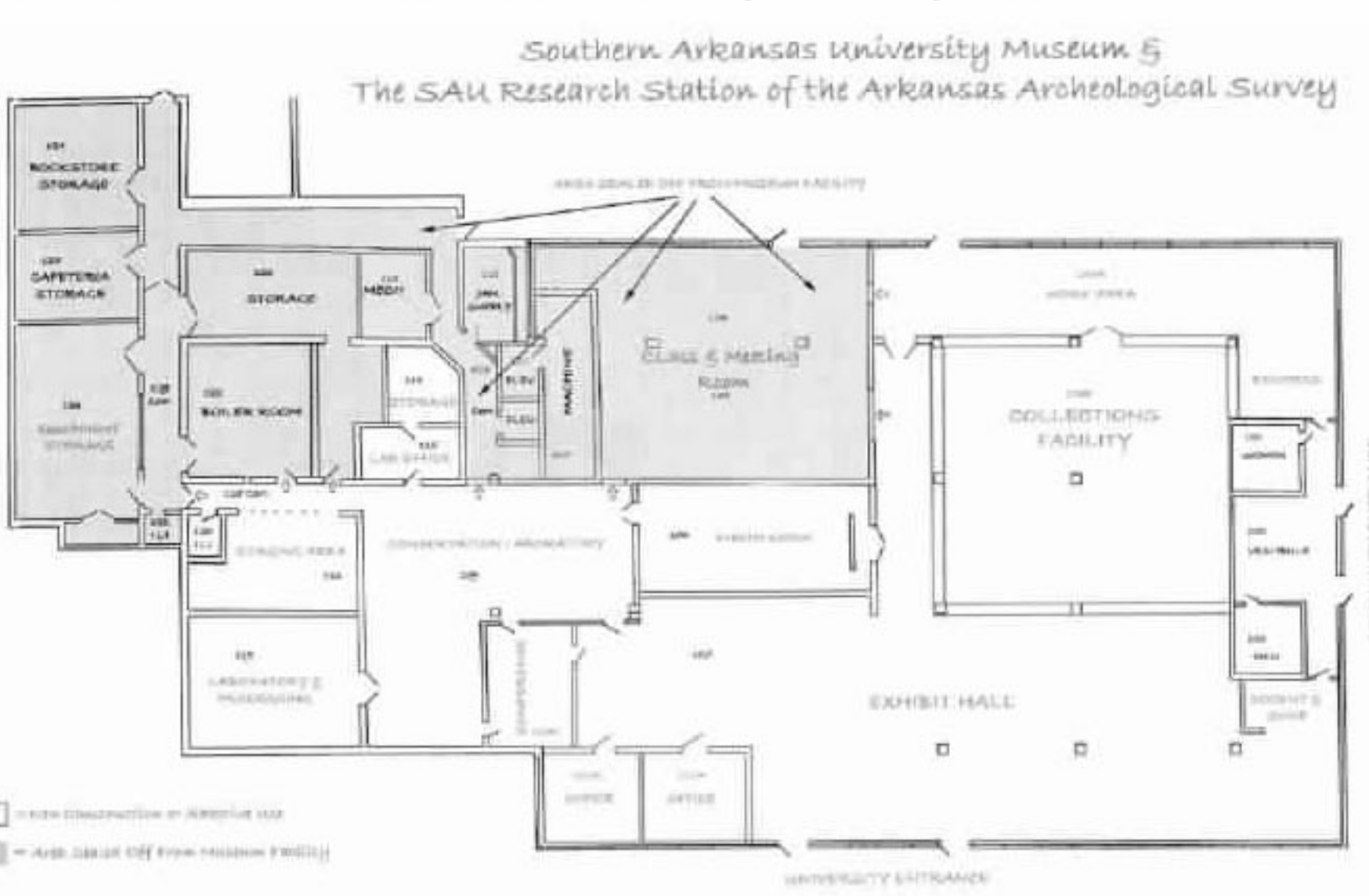
"The great thing about the Arkansas Archaeological Society is you can participate at whatever level you want," Brandon said. "So if you're just interested in coming and listening to talks, those monthly meetings are great. But also what you find out at those monthly meetings is where digs are going to be. If people want to come out and bring their kids and get some experience digging with professional archaeologists, we will be doing digs around Southwest Arkansas."

For two weeks every June, the society holds a state dig somewhere in Arkansas. Next year it will be in Arkadelphia.

Brandon grew up in Eva, Tenn., and said that South Arkansas reminds him of home.

He has been an archaeologist for 17 years and has worked on sites in 13 states.

Brandon graduated from the University of Texas with his doctorate in anthropology in 2004, from the University of Arkansas with his masters in anthropology in 1999, and from the University of Memphis with his bachelors in anthropology in 1995.

He most recently worked as a research associate for the Arkansas Archaeological Survey in the Fayetteville office. He has taught both archaeology and anthropology at four universities or colleges.

Brandon and his wife T.J. Vestal have been married for 12 years, and she will be moving from Fayetteville once she finishes her responsibilities there.