INTRODUCTION

The problem with archaeology is that too often we are speaking only to ourselves or to a small audience of aficionados who share our sometimes-arcane interests. This is a problem in part because public monies, primarily in the context of heritage preservation, largely fund archaeology in modern industrial states. Many archaeologists have pointed this fact out and challenged archaeologists to reach out to a general public. Most of these calls assume that archaeologists as the experts should define what is of interest in the past and that the problem of reaching a general public is simply one of popularizing what the archaeologists know. In the Colorado Coal Field War Project we have adopted a different philosophy and taken a different approach to broadening the audience for archaeology. We see archaeology as a craft that can be put to the uses of many different communities. In this approach the questions and what is important about the past is decided through a dialogue between the archaeologist and the communities that we serve.

The Colorado Coal Field War of 1913–1914 was one of the most significant events in U.S. labor history. On the morning of April 20, 1914, Colorado National Guard troops engaged in a pitched battle with armed strikers at a tent colony of 1,200 striking families at Ludlow, Colorado. The shooting continued until late afternoon, and then the troops swept through the camp looting it and setting it aflame. When the smoke cleared, 20 of the camp’s inhabitants were dead including
two women, and 12 children. The Ludlow massacre is the most violent and the best-known incidents of the 1913–1914 Colorado Coal Field War, but its significance goes far beyond this struggle. The killing of women and children at Ludlow outraged the American public and popular opinion soon turned against violent confrontations with strikers. It marks a pivotal point in U.S. history when labor relations began to move from class warfare to corporate and government policies of negotiation, co-option, and regulated strikes. Today the United Mine Workers of America maintain the site of the massacre as a shrine and descendants of the strikers and union members make regular pilgrimages to the site.

The Colorado Coal Field War project consists of faculty and students from the University of Denver in Colorado, and Binghamton University in New York, and has included students from several other institutions, including the University of Manchester. The Colorado Historical Society has funded our work using public monies that were generated from taxes on casino gambling (The Colorado State Historical Fund). We begin with the assumption that our work should and does serve multiple communities (Shanks and McGuire, 1996). These communities include the scholarly community of archaeologists and historians, as well as the traditional, middle-class, public audience for archaeology. But, the primary community that we wish to address is unionized labor in the United States. We are building an archaeology of the American working-class that speaks to a working-class audience about working-class history and experience. We are doing this through an ongoing dialogue with both the descendants of the participants in the Colorado Coal Field War and with unionized workers in southern Colorado.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC

The relationship of archaeology and the public is usually framed in terms of an opposition between conveying finding within the discipline and communicating with a general public. A consumerist model lies at the heart of most of our efforts to communicate with the public. In this model the archaeologist produces a product, usually a dumbed-down version of the academic edition and sells it to a “general public.” This approach assumes that archaeologists as the experts have the authority, the knowledge, the skill, and the right to determine what questions we should ask about the past and what the answer to those questions should be. The problem then becomes one of how to communicate or sell