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Archaeologists reveal city's past

Organization uncovers ancient cemetery, evidence of nomadic life

By STEPHANIE DUBE
Staff Writer

A cemetery for nomads and other prehistoric sites are giving local archaeologists a glimpse of what Corpus Christi was like thousands of years ago.

Areas now used for waterfront property or scenic walks were once inhabited by nomads who caught fish and set up homes covered with hides and grass.

“Often, we will find a prehistoric site and a house is built right on top of it,” said Skip Kennedy, a volunteer archaeologist with the Texas Archeology Stewardship Network. “What’s a good living area today was also a good living area 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. It’s strange that people always pick the same kind of areas.”

Kennedy, a local financial services representative, and Ed Mokry, an employee with the U.S. Postal Service, are among the stewardship network’s almost 80 volunteers. The stewards, acting as extensions of the Texas Historical Commission, monitor and preserve archaeological sites.

Last summer Mokry completed preservation work on a cemetery built by nomads near Oso Creek that dates from 3000 B.C. to 1000 A.D., the coastal archaic period.

“It was first encountered back in the ‘30s, and erosion has unfortunately uncovered several of the burials,” said Mokry, one of the original stewards who began volunteering in 1984.

The cemetery, about 150 feet by 75 feet, contains at least 200 individuals buried in the fetal position.

Because of limited funding for preserving the site, the property was sold in 1996 to the Archeology Conservancy in New Mexico, a national nonprofit organization to protect archaeological sites on private land. The preservation project was finished in June 1997, with the site covered in field dirt and native vegetation to prevent further erosion.

The area was used by people who didn’t remain in one place longer than several months, Mokry said. Their briefly occupied homes probably were built out of poles covered with hides or grass, Kennedy said. The nomads moved whenever the food supply was depleted.

“They’d eat just about anything,” Kennedy said. “We find a lot of deer remains and everything from snakes to mice to fish remains along the coast. If you’re having to go out and find every calorie yourself, you’ll eat just about anything.”

Creeks and rivers that empty into the bay were top living choices, Kennedy said.

“Corpus Christi Bay was a prime area to live because of the fish and shellfish,” he said. “They could just wade out and pick up a shellfish.”

As of 1995, 283 archaeological sites were recorded in Texas, said Dan Potter, coordinator of the Texas Archeological Stewardship Network.

“Many of these are on private property, so access to them is very limited,” Mokry said. “But periodically, when time allows, we go out and visit sites along the bayfront.”

“Every mountain top or hilltop in Texas probably has an archaeological site on it,” Kennedy said.

When landowners find a site, they often call the state archaeologist in Austin, who then directs them to Kennedy or Mokry.

The archaeology stewards record and monitor sites for vandalism or theft, give talks to civic and school groups and educate landowners about sites on their property.

Recently, employees at the Botanical Gardens asked Mokry to help them ensure an area they are considering turning into a garden is outside the limits of an archaeology site.

When Mokry visited the almost 1,000-year-old site Friday, he found the remains of prairie land snails, lightning whelks and oyster shells. The snails, he said, were a substantial part of the nomads' diet. The whelks and oysters, which are not normally found in the area, were imported by nomads, he said. He also found a clay nodule that is only created when soil is heated to at least 400 degrees Fahrenheit and solidifies, he said.

“It's a direct result of a hearth,” Mokry said.

Texas has an almost uncountable number of archaeology sites, Potter said.

“Right now in Texas there's about 50,000 recorded archaeological sites, and that's just a tiny fraction of the sites that are actually out there, literally a drop in the bucket,” Potter said.

Other local archaeologists are working on sites in San Patricio, said Jerry Bauman, secretary of the Coastal Bend Archeology Society.

One of the San Patricio areas being excavated was a military campsite for some of Zachary Taylor's troops in 1845 and 1846, Bauman said. So far, the archaeologists have found military buttons, spur fragments, weapon parts and other items.

The company-sized military detachment was guarding the roads into town, Bauman said.

“That must have been a pretty cold winter,” he said. “Judging by the square nails found in the campfire, they were tearing off wood from buildings in the town as well as furniture (for firewood).”

Texas' archaeological history stretches from Spanish missions back to the Ice Ages, Potter said.

“There's 11,000 or 12,000 years of human history in Texas,” Potter said.

“We have Civil War battle sites in Texas, we have prehistoric campsites where people lived for two weeks and then moved on.

“Some are real well-known, like the Alamo, and others are very poorly known or not known at all. They can be little campsites that you walk across and never know you were on an archaeological site.”

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