



Left, archeologist Dave Ferguson explains to Boulder's fourth and fifth graders the excavation cell that revealed a hand-laid well (above) estimated to be from the stagecoach era of the 1880s or 1890s. (Photos courtesy of Stephen Platt)

IT'S ABOUT TIME: Digging deep into local history

ARCHEOLOGICAL DIG ON THE WHITETAIL UNCOVERS THE PAST

by Jan Anderson, editor

Thousands of years before there was a Jefferson County, there were people traveling what is now the Whitetail Road.

That much is for sure.

A recent archeological dig along the route has verified human activity there going back as far as 6800 years, and indications are that the area could have been occupied as far back as 10,000 years.

Finding archeological sites along modern roads is not unusual. In fact, it is so common that the Montana Department of Transportation employs an archeologist to oversee those sites that might be disturbed by road construction.

Stephen Platt, who is currently overseeing contracted excavation between Boulder and Whitehall, said many modern roads follow long-used travel routes.

"That's not unusual," he said. "What we have is an overlaying of human activity all in one place because of the lay of the land."

Between mid-August and mid-October, archeologists from GCM Services of Butte, joined by Platt about one day per week, excavated areas along Whitetail Road.

"We have evidence of Native American occupations from about 1000 years ago, about 3000 years ago and about 6800 years ago," said Stephen Platt, archeologist with the Montana Department of Transportation.

The 6800 year figure is significant, because the artifacts from that era lie just above a layer of ash from the eruption of Mount Mazama in the Cascades. Approximately 7000-8000 years ago the eruption sent a blanket of ash "at least as far

as central Canada," according to "Oregon Explorer." As far away as Greenland, "rare particles of Mazama ash have even been found in ancient ice," says the publication.

The eruption lowered the estimated 12,000 foot peak to create a bowl-shaped depression roughly five miles across that today surrounds Crater Lake.

"There is also some Native American material beneath the ash," said Platt. "That deepest material has not yet really been characterized but could be extremely old (9000-10,000 years old)."

He said the excavation units have been backfilled for the winter, but about a month's worth of additional fieldwork is expected next summer.

"Next year's fieldwork will explore the oldest levels in the site that were discovered quite late during fieldwork this past fall," said Platt.

What has already been uncovered, though, is intriguing.

"There was a homestead at the site in the early 20th century and we also found a hand-laid stone well that contains artifacts dating from the 1870s and 1880s," said the MDT archeologist.

The site has also yielded arrowheads, bone fragments and other artifacts going back long before travelers on the route drove four-wheelers across the area.

Because all of the excavation is on private land, the items uncovered technically



The students view a variety of spear and arrow heads. (Photo courtesy of Boulder Elementary)



belong to the landowners, said Platt. Often landowners where excavation is done say they want whatever is found, but “when they see the little pieces of rocks and bones in plastic bags with numbers,” they generally change their minds, he said.

“There’s probably not going to be anything exciting to display,” he said.

There certainly is evidence that excites the area school children, though. In September, fourth and fifth graders from Boulder Elementary visited the site after a classroom lesson from archeologist Crystal Alegria. Alegria spent about an hour with the students, teaching them about archeology and “in the afternoon we went out to the dig site for a wonderful day of learning,” said fourth grade teacher Cam Warfle.

At the site, they met Dave Ferguson, the principal investigator of a crew of four archeologists working on the dig. With the guidance of Ferguson and Alegria, they learned lessons they still recall with enthusiasm.

Students from Whitehall Elementary have also visited the dig.

Platt said the state tries to get area students to a dig whenever there is one nearby. It is an excellent learning opportunity that “dovetails with Indian Education for All,” he said.

The Whitetail Road basically follows the old Corrine Road, which ran from Salt Lake City to Bannack to transport goods to the territorial mining camp and the ore out of Bannack. That road likely extended to Helena along the current Whitetail Road, he said. And “that undoubtedly followed an old Indian trail,” he said.

Platt said federal law requires the Montana Department of Transportation to consider cultural resources, including archeological sites, when projects involve federal dollars. Plans are underway to rebuild the Whitetail Road. There are several cultural and archeological sites along the road, he said, but the area where the dig has been going on is “the only one we couldn’t avoid because it is on both sides of the road,” he said.

With its homestead, stagecoach-era, hand-laid well, ash layer and Native American artifacts, “it’s a nice site,” said Platt.

Fourth graders share what they learned at the dig

“When I went to the archeology dig site I learned how to throw an atlatl. I also learned how to make a arrow head. I also felt volcanic ash, and I felt a arrow head. I learned that archeologists study things fro the past. That’s what I learned there.” --- **Darrian**

“An archeologist came to our class and talked to us about archeology. Then we went to the site. First, we saw a lot of old tools. Then, we got to see another archeologist make an arrow head. After that, we learned how to throw an atlatl. Finally, we got to hold volcanic ash. It was a fun day.” --- **Caleb**

“During our archeology field trip we watched an archeologist Flintnapp a piece of obsidian. He grabbed a rock and an antler. Next he started to hit the obsidian with the other rock. Then he sharpened the obsidian with the antler. When he was done, it was an arrow head. Flint napping was by far the coolest thing we saw during our archeology field trip.” --- **Alyssa**

“We got to hold some volcano ash from a volcano that eruption in Oregon 7,000 years ago. We learned and saw where the Indians cook their food. They made fire then got rocks on the fire. Then the skins were filled with water. The water boiled to cook the food.” --- **Keegan**

“When we were at the dig site we got to see arrowheads. We also learned that not all Indians use bows they also use atlatls. There was also a well from 2,000. And there was a volcanic eruption from Oregon. The obsidian there was like glass but in a rock form. There were also rocks from boiling pots from 2,000 years ago.” --- **Reilly**

“I learned that an Archeologist is a bone and artifact finder.

“We saw and touched volcano dust from a volcanic eruption in Oregon 7,000 years ago. We learned how to make arrowheads. That hunters used them to hunt

animal. We got to throw an atlatl. That’s what I learned.” --- **Zoe**

“On our Archeologist field trip I learned how to make and throw an arrow. To make an arrow you need obsidian. Then you take another smooth rock and hit the obsidian until it is a fair size. Next you take a smooth piece and sharpen it. To throw an atlatl you need a special stick, but you put it the arrow on the stick. Hold it with 2 fingers, and throw.” --- **Rory**

“At the dig site we saw arrow heads from hundreds of years ago. And the whole entire class got to handle a pinch of volcanic ash! We got to closely examine a well-shapped rock stricter. Also we saw about 5 layers of different soils it was exciting to learn about all kinds of soils that were formed THOUSANDS of years ago.” --- **Terrance**

“On our archeology trip we learned a volcano erpted in Oregon 7,000 years ago. We got to hold the volcanic ash. It was very fine.

“We saw an old well that had nails, glass, and old cans in it. An archeologist named Crystal brought us around. We also learned about Native American boiling pots. They were made of stones and animal hide. We got to hold stones out of an old boiling pot.” --- **Saphirah**

“One thing I learned is how to throw a atlatl. I got to hold some white ash. I also know what a arrow hend look like. And that is all I can remember.” --- **Holly**

“I learned that they put sticks next the right next to a big square. They put W and S for West and South. We got to go in the square hole. It was fun! There was some ash and bones. We learned how to pronounce Archeologist. This was fun.” --- **Keyanna**

“A Volcano dust from a volcanic eruption in Oregon 7,000 years ago. I learned how to throw an atlatl. We also learned how and why cave man and Indians draw on the rocks.” --- **Genna**