

DAYS GONE BY

History of Palm Bay

Monthly Article

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IN THE VERY BEGINNING

A million years ago Brevard County was a much narrower and shorter spit of land. Fossils found locally contained replicas of 400 or more marine species, including oysters, clams, sand dollars, sea worms and sponges. Some of these species are now extinct, but the majority still exists, gradually losing ground against the encroachments of civilization.

The geology of Florida is not a simple matter. To the north of the state, a geologist can look at the old range of the Appalachian Mountains and accurately tell you their history. In Florida, lakes appear and disappear, sinkholes swallow up homes, and geologists quarrel about the paths of the subterranean waters. The last major geological survey of Brevard County was made in 1957. One state official, who visited Brevard County in the late 1960's looked at the changing face of the country and muttered, "We really should have another survey of this area."

The 1957 report indicated that the county is underlain by a series of limestone foundations, the upper several hundred feet of which constitute the artesian aquifer. Overlying the aquifer are deposits of sandy clay, shells, and more clay, topped by sand and coquina. The top layer is recharged by rains and the lakes. The ground water in Brevard County moves eastward and westward to discharge into the Indian River and the St. Johns River, respectively.

It took millions of years to build up the few inches of soil that cover sandy Brevard County. The richest soil is along the rivers and in the few remaining hammocks. In Brevard County, we treasure the skimpy soil; the key to survival in this area is water and the key to the water supply is the St. Johns River Valley with its chain of lakes near the western County border.

Underlying present-day Melbourne, stretching out to an ancient shoreline beyond our present beaches, lies a formation called the Melbourne Bone Bed. In this jumble of bones, paleontologists have identified the bones of the woolly mammoth, camels, a small precursor of the horse, the saber-toothed tiger, peccaries, and many other forms of life long extinct on the North American mainland. Bones of a short, heavy-set man with a thick skull have been found with this jumble.

A seven-foot skeleton of a man was discovered in Vero Beach in 1916 and a similar skeleton in Melbourne in 1924. The "Melbourne Man" is interesting because his bones were found in association with prehistoric animal bone.

The importance of these massive frames was dismissed by the leading anthropologists of the time because they did not fit in with the theories of the period.

As recent discoveries have pushed back the date of the arrival of man in North America, current theories upgrade the importance of the "Melbourne Man". Seven-foot skeletons have been rumored in other areas of Florida, but we know nothing about this tall race and can only theorize that it was in Florida at the same time as the woolly mastodon.

In 1927, while digging a well on his Malabar Road property, A. T. Anderson struck a large mastodon bone. Anderson showed this and other specimens from his "dig" to members of the Ceramic Repository of the United States. Anderson, formerly a tool and die maker, discovered what he thought was the oldest human cemetery in the world--formerly an island at the southern tip of Florida where the people came to bury their dead. The South Indian Field, as it is known, is a treasury of cemeteries containing

skeletons of men dating back 12,000 years, little men, big men taller than man is today, cannibals, elephants, mastodons, saber-toothed tigers, tapirs, camels, buffalo, and unclassified creatures that Anderson can't name. The cemeteries are about 12 miles west of U.S. Highway No. 1 on property owned by Al Anderson.¹

In 1979, a Cocoa man, Eugene Loveland and his co-workers, of the J. H. Villeneuve and Sons Construction Company, working at a site near Scottsmoor in North Brevard, uncovered approximately 30 body pieces of prehistoric beasts believed to have inhabited Florida as long as 17,000 years ago. They included pieces of an ivory elephant tusk, a 7-inch piece of a core of a giant sloth claw, the jaw of a tapir, bone from a giant sea turtle and miscellaneous pieces of bone from these animals, according to Bud Knoderer of The Brevard Museum, Inc. He said the remains were believed to be 7,000 to 17,000 years old.²

Also in 1979, the preserved skull of a 25 to 30 year old Indian chief, estimated to be about 5,500 years old was found in West Cocoa. A dragline operator was widening a drainage ditch near Maplewood Village when he discovered the skull in an ancient burial site. Work in that area had previously uncovered the burial spots of 120 men, women and children of a Caucasian Indian tribe.

A more astounding discovery was made in 1982 by Bill Tanner, a backhoe operator in Titusville, when his heavy machine unearthed rocks as large as footballs. Suspecting something unusual, he alighted from his perch and found them to be human skulls.

The site of Tanner's discovery was Windover Farms, a real estate development owned by EKS, Inc. Jim Swan, the developer, ordered construction stopped in the area, and invited scientists from Florida State University to determine the age of the skulls.

Dr. Glen Doran and Dr. David N. Dickel of the university uncovered more bones and skulls. Due to the preservative quality of the peat bog, tools fashioned from the bones of deer and

panther were discovered intact. The tick, oozing mud also had preserved articles made from wood, primitive ceramics, and even woven cloth. Carbon-dating established the bones and artifacts as part of a burial site used by the Indians who inhabited Brevard County more than 7,000 years ago. These Stone Age Indians are labeled "Archaic". They were primarily hunter/gatherers, though advanced enough to make the atlatl, a spear throwing device that predates the bow and arrow.

Even more astounding, after the scientists carefully pumped and drained the water filled bog, they found skulls containing perfectly preserved brain matter. This was a historic first, prompting headlines in the New York Times and capsules on local and national television. The London Times and National Geographic sent journalists to Brevard. The brain matter was forwarded to laboratories to be examined and tested by the scientific community.

Large numbers of Indians inhabited the area of Brevard County over the centuries. Early settlers marveled at the giant shell mounds they discovered in every part of the county. Sometimes 30 feet tall, these mounds were the middens, or garbage dumps, of the Indians who inhabited Brevard for eons, mostly the extinct Ais. One mound on Cape Canaveral could be seen from 30 miles out to sea and was used as a marker by early sailors.

Another such mound was regularly visited and described by W. Lansing Gleason, grandson of the man who gave Eau Gallie its name. As a boy, Gleason climbed on the mound at the west end of the present Eau Gallie Causeway area (in what is now Indian Harbor Beach). By sifting through the sand and shell refuse, he found fragments of pottery and ancient tools. Deer femurs had been fashioned into knives, tools, and even the hairpins needed to fasten the long tresses worn by both Indian men and women.

As many as 30 to 40 shell mounds of similar size also were discovered on Merritt Island. The artifacts found in these shell mounds

provide some information about the lifestyles of the Ais Indians.

Water and its various movements mark the progress and history of Palm Bay. As sea levels receded during the Pleistocene age, old sand dunes were abandoned. Two dune lines stand--one parallel to U. S. Highway No. 1 and another west of the Palm Bay Community Center. Turkey Creek was formed as water drained from high lands to the sea. The broad, often meandering, flow brought refuge to the animals in need of drink and shelter. Old, sick, or injured animals seeking sanctuary died at the water's edge or in the creek, their bones still protected in the rich humid soils of the flood plain.

Early man followed game along the broad savannas of the mighty St. Johns River, once an arm of the sea extending from Jacksonville. These nameless hunters camped at perhaps fifty sites in what is now Palm Bay.

All the ingredients for a secure and prosperous village were brought together at the mouth of Turkey Creek. Indian villages and camps ringed Turkey Creek. Vast oyster beds lined the broad expanses of the stream west of what is now the Florida East Coast Railroad bridge. A freshwater spring flowed near the shore. High banks and cliffs provided an observation point for sentinels marking the movement of friend and foe along the major thoroughfare of the time, the Indian River.

In 1882, archaeologist A. B. Douglass spotted an Indian mound at the Estes citrus grove on Turkey Creek at the city bay, but the manager, Civil War veteran Captain Williams, refused to let Douglass dig there.

Nevertheless, in 1883, a citrus laborer digging in the mound's sand turned up the first of 14 prehistoric finely carved pendants, some shaped like ducks or turkeys, along with copper beads. Carved between the time of Christ and 1,000 A.D., the pendants were not found with any bones. "... I venture to think they were a (stash) by a northern Indian who intended to exchange

them for beads and shells peculiar to Florida ..." Douglas wrote.

Before 1915, early settlers also dug up fragmented colonial Spanish olive jars along with pottery out of another mound at the residence of real estate promoter W. A. Tubbs, one of the organizers of Tillman's famous Indian River Catholic Colony.

Tubbs lived near the center of the city bay shoreline. Tillmanites told researchers that the Tubbs property once had an Indian shell mound 40 feet high. But the mound was supposedly leveled during the Florida land boom of the 1920's when the Tubbs area was cleared and laid out into city blocks. Before many houses were built, the bubble burst, leaving no more mounds and only grassy building sites.

During the boom, however, human bones were dug up during the construction of the tourist cabins along U. S. 1 just south of the Tubbs place. Indeed, that discovery site is roughly where a map maker named Mexia marked an Indian village midway between the mouth of the Banana and Sebastian Rivers.

Lastly, on the south side of Turkey Creek, Tillmanite Robert Rowe turned up pottery fragments while digging a well on his property. An archaeologist called in by Rowe dug a 28-inch deep test pit, revealing the remains of Indian campfires.

(to be continued next month ...)