

Self-taught sleuth probes Indian past

By MARGARET MILLER

An Indian who roamed the North American continent a century before Columbus sometimes attends criminal justice classes at Madonna College, Lyons.

Instructor Robert Smith brings him in.

An amateur archeologist, Smith has the brave's bones and some of the tools he used in cardboard boxes. The tools show that the man whose grave Smith uncovered was probably a Chickasaw Indian, one who lived in this country at least 600 years ago.

The students in Smith's classes also get to occasionally see some of the tools and weapons their teacher has come upon during vacation-time digs. "I show these things in class," he explained, "because I want to let my students know you don't have to be a Ph. D. and have a lot of sophisticated equipment to find things out of the past."

"These things are right here and it's fascinating to look for them."

Smith, a retired Detroit police officer, does wish, however, that he had a little more knowledge of digging when he made the find that turned a general interest into a can't-turn-back fascination.

IT HAPPENED in the '50s when he was a student at Vanderbilt University at Nashville.

"I had done some reading about archeological findings," he said, "and I saw in a newspaper that evidence of an Indian graveyard had been discovered where a subdivision was being built."

"I went out to the area and requested permission to dig. They told me to go ahead as long as I didn't get in the way," Smith said.

It was his first try at archeological discovery, and he described it as "very successful."

"I knew from reading that the graves were close to the surface," he recalled, "and I was able to locate a grave with just a little probing with rods. I found the stone slabs that marked the grave and framed it out, and then I started to dig as quickly as I could."

With the bulldozers bearing down, Smith said he worked until dark, taking out the skeleton of the brave and an assortment of his possessions that were buried with him.

"I didn't have the knowledge to pre-

serve properly the things I found," Smith said, "but it's still good that I got there. The next morning the whole area had been bulldozed."

"I've grieved about that ever since. There were some unbelievable artifacts there."

THAT FIND had Smith hooked, and since then he's made many more discoveries.

Near an old Chickasaw camp ground in southern Tennessee—ceded to the United States in 1825 and not occupied since then—he came upon some of the equipment the Indians used in food preparation.

There was a hollowed rock and grinding stone used to prepare corn—"by a left-handed squaw," guessed Smith, noting the position of indentations for the thumb and the angle of the grinding surfaces.

"My brother and another fellow actually dug those up," he said, "and amazingly, they were right together."

He also has a piece of lumpy, yellowish quartz that he said the Indians called "honey rock."

"They used to heat it in the fire and then they would put the hot stone in their bowls to make the water boil and cook their corn," he explained.

SMITH ENJOYS reconstructing the long-ago lives his diggings touch. Besides feeling "99 per cent sure" that the squaw who ground maize did it with her left hand, he has deduced that his brave did some traveling and trading and believed in charms.

"There are a lot of arrowheads, and all different," he pointed out. "Different tribes and maybe different makers had their own trademarks. And one of the arrowheads is red flint. That comes from the southwest, not the Tennessee area."

He noted the careful work on a small tomahawk he took from the grave. "Just see how well done it is," he said, "you can tell that he spent many hours on it."

The talismans Smith found were a medicine ball—again a different kind of stone and evidently worn on a thong about the neck—and a buffalo tooth.

"Indians were buried with their possessions," he said, "because apparently the belief was that they needed them to move on to the next life."

"This one had food in his grave."



Amateur archeologist Bob Smith shows how a left-handed squaw used to grind corn. (Staff photo by Bob Woodring)

There are some animal bones in a broken clay dish."

INDIAN ARTIFACTS are not Smith's only finds.

Along a river bank near New Orleans, the spot where the battle of Shiloh was fought during the Civil War, he extracted some "mini-balls from confederacy guns."

"Things like that are there, if you think about how to look," he said. "I started thinking about that battle, and decided if the shots were fired across the river they probably didn't all make it to the other side."

"So I looked along the banks and found some balls imbedded," Smith said.

He came upon a piece of stone plate sticking out of the ground near Ann Arbor Trail. And a few years ago he took his young daughter to a spot near Clare where he knew there used to be a rough cabin.

"She started digging around and found a metal box with Indianhead pennies inside," Smith said. "She was really thrilled."

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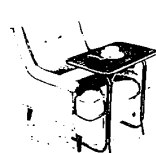
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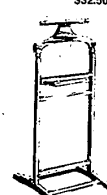
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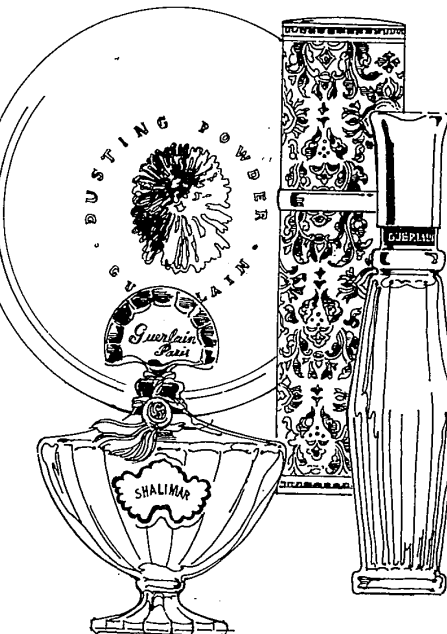
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