

## Digging into the past

# Time stands still in the hills of Israel

By CARMINA BROOKS

Overhead, bombers flew toward the Lebanese border five miles away. Near her feet, a scorpion raised its tail in warning. The slender woman in a

clean, white shirt and khaki pants calmly raised her architectural tool and clubbed the large scorpion to death.

The woman was Michele Oka Doner of Franklin Village, homemaker, artist,

wife of an advertising executive and mother of two sons. During the summer of 1980 scorpions underfoot and bombers overhead were part of the daily routine.

And what was this woman, raised in affluence and cleanliness, doing in a hot and dirty Israeli hole-in-the-ground in the summer of 1980? She was participating in an archeological dig, looking for Third Century artifacts.

To people who know her, this was a natural thing for Ms. Doner to do.

She is obsessed with the mysteries of nature, the unravelling of processes, and the links of time. This is visible in her art and it has distinguished her from other artists to the point where this year for the first time she is listed in "Who's Who in American Art."

Mrs. Doner is known locally for her ceramic sculptures of pelvic bones, tortoise skulls and tattooed baby dolls.

"WE WERE searching for how these people lived in the Third Century, how they did things, where they got their water and how did they use it," Mrs. Doner said of her summer experience.

The "dig" was at Tel Anafa, a mound near Kibbutz Shamir in Upper Galilee. Excavation began at Tel Anafa in 1968 and expeditions are now conducted jointly by the universities of Missouri and Michigan.

Arriving home last week after a month of living with only bare necessities for comfort and survival, Mrs. Doner was still off balance from jet lag.

The experience began on July 8

while on an overseas trip. She said goodbye to her husband, Fred, and moved from the swank King David Hotel in Jerusalem to the Tel Hai Youth Hostel in the hot, barren hills of Galilee where Israeli soldiers were camped nearby in bunkers and bomb shelters. During the next three and a half weeks, her American lifestyle came to an abrupt halt.

Why did she want to endure such physical hardship and go on this expedition?

ALONG WITH AN Master's in Fine Arts degree from the University of Michigan, Mrs. Doner has a love of history. She applied to go on the expedition and was accepted.

"I could go as the artist and do the drawings. I wanted to see what it was like," she said. The differences were immediate.

"Your sense of time alters," she said. "A dig shows a different sense of time, a departure in use of materials, a different conservation of resources than we have now. I am still curious how we ended up with these purposes," she continued.

"I am a fossil hunter," she said. "When I was a child on the beach, I found fragments — wonderful shapes and colors. I wondered where they came from, how they fit together, and what lived inside the bits and pieces. I wondered what other beaches were like."

"I don't think you can live by the ocean without being seduced by it. The dig was just another aspect of the kind

of exploring that I do every day in my backyard," she said.

Mrs. Doner exudes an essence of wonder in search of discovery. This inherent part of her life and art is manifested by an unusual collection of bird skulls, neatly arranged by size, on display in the foyer of her home.

"I love processes," she said. "That is why I bake my own bread. I love to play with dough and see it rise."

THERE WERE about 50 other people from all over the United States on the Tel Anafa expedition. Most were in "classics" schools like Latin and Greek where there is a devotion to the questions of how these things came into being, she said.

The group had expertise in pottery, plaster, glass, bones, stone tools, coins, early building materials, chemical ingredients and the essential anthropological science with knowledge of ancient art, cultures and history.

She smiled at questions about hardships.

"The hot weather was the least of it. I learned to kill the scorpions before they noticed me. They don't run. We were aware there was a war going on and could hear the bombings. Every morning planes passed overhead."

The Israeli Museum, she said, has the first pickings from the findings at Tel Anafa. Chosen for the museum will be something that it doesn't already have an example of, something that is one of a kind or incredibly unusual.

"You must enjoy sifting through tremendous amounts of soil to find a fragment to piece together something that goes beyond yourself," she said.

Because they would be cooler, she wore white blouses along with khaki shorts and sneakers. Her companions commented that she didn't seem to get dirty.

"I didn't touch my face," she explained. "Everybody perspired and rubbed their faces or wiped their hands on their clothing. At the end of the day they were dirt-streaked from head to foot. I kept my hands away from my body."

"Our dirt was red-brown ocre. At another dig the dirt was red."

I could tell which of us had been in the shower before me by the color of the dirt."

Mrs. Doner slept in a room smaller than her hallway at home with 10 other people. She wrapped her bedroll around her like a shroud and wiggle into her sleeping bag, "so the insects couldn't find me."

SOME OF HER companions had nightmares and became ill, but no one spoke of it.

"There was an unspoken rule about not articulating fears," she said.

Mrs. Doner blamed the illness on the lack of hygiene. She said she was careful about what she ate and kept herself as clean as possible, washing out her

(Continued on Page 11B)



Hands can convey as much of the rapture of the experience of being on a dig in Israel as the voice. In this case, the hands belong to Franklin Village artist, Michele Oka Doner. (Staff photos by Dick Kelley)

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