

Unearthed Maine Indian site boon to archeologists

By Donald J. Frederick
National Geographic Society

AZISCOHOS LAKE, Maine: A paleo-Indian site almost 11,000 years old, complete with a hearth and thousands of stone tools, has been excavated in a dry lake bed in western Maine.

Discovery of a nearby killing ground where animals were speared by the Indians makes the site on remote Aziscohos Lake unique in the East, according to archeologist Richard Michael Gramly of the Maine State Museum, who directed the excavation.

"Similar paleo-Indian habitations have been found in the East, but they've never been accompanied by a killing ground," he explained.

The hunting area, yielded four complete fluted or grooved spear points "in mint-sharp condition" and tip sections of six more.

THE INTREPID hunters built their first fires in the area in the shadow of a waning ice age. Most of the great ice sheets had retreated to central Canada 11,000 years ago, although scattered remnants may have lingered in the highlands around the site.

Gramly pointed out that the climate at the 1,600-foot-high encampment, surrounded even today by wild hilly country, was comparable to the weather encountered at 7,000 to 8,000 feet in the Rockies or similar mountainous re-

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— Richard Gramly

gions in Alaska.

"We can now infer," he said, "that no part of the eastern United States was off limits to these prehistoric peoples just because of a harsh environment."

Supported by the National Geographic Society, the archeologist uncovered more than 13,000 stone artifacts at the site. Almost half of them were shaped into tools such as spear points, knives, scrapers, and wedge-like chisels.

The great number of artifacts leads Gramly to believe that the habitation site — located at the end of a broad mountain river valley in ancient times — was occupied by perhaps one or two family groups on at least 30 different occasions. The visits may have continued on and off for as long as 100 years.

BITTER WINDS and blinding snows drove the hunters from the region in the colder months, just as they do modern-day visitors. During a harsh winter the temperature can plunge to -

35 F in the area.

So why did these early people return again and again after wintering elsewhere? Abundant game was one attraction.

A survey of the terrain revealed a spot where a small stream bisected the river in the valley. It was the only place where migrating animals could easily have reached the other side, and it was at this confluence that Gramly found the spear points. Unfortunately, there were no animal bones remaining on the site; the acidic soil had long ago devoured them.

But there was another reason the Indians were drawn to the valley. They wanted to replenish their tool kits. Just 20 miles north of the site, Gramly found Ledge Ridge, a rocky forested outcrop yielding a fine grade of stone.

"There's no question that the stone

used to manufacture the tools at the habitation site came from this ridge," he said. "It's just a question of time until we can find the workshops."

Last year the archeologist had great success finding such workshops at Mount Jasper, a small mountain rising above the mill town of Berlin, N.H. Indians began digging into a cliff near Jasper's summit 7,000 years ago. They were after rhyolite, an igneous rock prized for making tools such as knives, spear points, drills and scrapers. Chunks of rhyolite weighing as much as 20 pounds were broken off the main mass with the aid of heavy greenstone hammers.

BY THE TIME generations of these primitive miners had exhausted the rich source of stone centuries later, they had tunneled 30 feet into the mountain. The pillar of rock that they wisely left to support the roof of the mine still stands near the entrance.

"The mine is one of the only ancient Indian subsurface working areas yet found in North America, and is a striking example of the ingenuity of these early people," observed Gramly.

The earliest craftsmen shaped the stone on the crest of the mountain. Later workshops were situated on the banks of the Dead River several hundred feet below.

Gramly and his team found prodigious amounts of worked stone at these lower workshops. In one 30-square-foot area, more than 100,000 pieces were recovered.

But exploring the rugged, wooded terrain from top to bottom wasn't easy. As the archeologist put it, "On this site we learned our three R's very quickly — roots, rocks, and raw knuckles." The hard work turned up about 400 finished tools at Mount Jasper, and promised new insights into ancient travel patterns.

The first people to mine the mountain stayed in the area, whereas later Indians ranged widely throughout what is now New England.

Said Gramly: "They stopped at other lithic source areas, made new tools of other rocks, and by the time they returned a year or more after wandering the northern woods, they discarded some of their badly battered tools at Mount Jasper. Similarly, I feel that as other ancient stone sites are discovered, we'll find stone from Mount Jasper at some of them."



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