

Burke archeological survey is completed

By SUSAN GRIER
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Ever stand in a crowded parking lot, close your eyes, and try to imagine what stood on the ground beneath all that concrete 10,000 years ago?

For Burke County, it's likely that a herd of buffalo, an Indian or two, or just a lot of forest was parked on that spot where cars now gleam in the sunlight.

But the story that goes with these prehistoric conditions may have been lost forever when the bulldozers moved in, says Larry Clark, chairman of the department of social and behavioral sciences at Western Piedmont Community College.

Clark, who spent last summer digging into the past of Burke County, has recently completed his archeological survey of the area. Although his initial goal involved merely recording and reporting on the artifacts and sites he found, he soon developed another concern, he says: preserving them.

Clark's study was carried out mainly by tracking down people in the area who had found or received any collections of objects from the past. These usually include pottery fragments, pieces of tools, and projectile points, or spearhead-type artifacts.

Some of the people had found the objects on their own land, many times while farming, he says: "In most cases, there's a plowed field out near their house."

Others have more extensive collections that have been in the family for years. This was the most exciting part of his work, he says.

"It was a thrill to meet so many people in the county who had collected Indian relics, in some cases for years and years. Their excitement, in turn, made me excited about it."

But, he adds, he quickly discovered that these collections may soon be lost forever. "I began to find that so many large collections are gone. They've been lost in the last 100 years. My concern now is for the present collections."

And he is also quick to offer a solution: Burke County needs a museum for its historical artifacts, he says.

The need is there, he is convinced. Many of those with collections, while interested in what they had found, are also confused. They don't know where to go to identify their findings and discover how they relate to Burke County's history, he says.

Two gentlemen in the area, he says, have even offered to give him their collections if he can find a place for them to be permanently displayed. "People with collections want a place for them," Clark says.

His most shocking discovery during his study was the number of collections that have already been lost. Perhaps the largest and most well-known of such collections was that of James M. Spainhour, a Lenoir dentist who in the late 1800s followed a serious hobby of collecting Indian relics for more than 30 years. There is now no trace of his work, Clark says.

The collection is believed to have been auctioned off at a sale of family property years ago. Like many other collections, Clark says, it is probably split up among people who do not appreciate its archeological value.

Even when people preserve artifacts which they have received in this way, the collection is usually of little value to the archeologist, Clark says, because the source of the objects is no longer known.

"From the archeologist's point of view they are lost," he says. "If you don't know where it was found, it is of no use."

Several collectors have sent their artifacts to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. But even many of these, says Clark, have been lost or traded to other museums across the country.

Tracking down the various collections still intact made him feel "kind of like a detective," Clark says. One collector would lead him to another, but the search

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proved often to be a hit-and-miss proposition. Often the collector he was sent to no longer had his artifacts, had died, or had very little to show. But Clark would spend time with each one, taking a count of the types and number of artifacts the person had.

Some of the people he was sent to had only "a pitiful little handful" of objects. But they were excited about them all the same, Clark says. Others had huge collections of more than 1,000 pieces, accumulated over a period of maybe 40 years. A few collectors were suspicious and hesitated to show Clark anything, he says.

In addition to his researching of the already-discovered materials, Clark did a little digging on his own, with the help of an interested student, Alan Kirksey. How does one know where to look for old relics

of the past?

"You think like an Indian as best you can," Clark says. "You want water—fresh water—and it appears that most prehistoric cities appear along the banks of rivers and streams."

The oldest projectile point found in Burke County does indeed go back 10,000 years, proving that Paleo-Indians, big game hunters, roamed through the area seeking the buffalo and elk that were common here, he says.

Yet, his study says, we know very little about these people. Our questions about the past can be answered in future years, he says, but "only if we are able to preserve this fragile story in the soil of Burke County."

Copies of Clark's study are on sale at The Muses and at the WPCC student store for under \$2.



Larry Clark