

North Carolina Students Dig Into History

By ELEANOR LEE YATES

MORGANTON, N.C. — Some students at Western Piedmont Community College have recently been eagerly digging into history — the kind that gets your hands dirty. Helping excavate an archaeological site 15 miles from the school, the students have unearthed a world settled 500 years ago by several Spanish explorers.

So far, 30 students have participated in the excavation, which is expected to take 15 to 20 years to complete. Among some of the students' finds have been nails and bits of brass from a Spanish settlement, as well as arrowheads and shards of pottery from a Catawba Indian village.

Working also on the project with Western Piedmont is Warren Wilson College, located in nearby Swannanoa.

According to historians, explorers Hernando de Soto and Juan Pardo led expeditions through the area in 1540 and 1567 respectively. Dr. David Moore, an archeology professor from Warren Wilson and the coordinator of the project, said the site is probably Pardo's Fort San Juan.

Pardo and his army left the Spanish settlement of Santa Elena on the coast of South Carolina to establish a road to Mexico. Pardo's army built five forts, three in what is now North Carolina, one in South Carolina and one in Tennessee. Moore said the Burke County site, apparently the first of the forts to be built, is the only one that's been discovered.

About 30 soldiers were stationed at Fort San Juan. Moore said in 1568 the Spanish settlers had apparently "worn out their

welcome," and the fort was destroyed when a group of Indians revolted against them.

The site was never excavated, primarily due to a lack of funding, but Moore is now applying for grants from National Geographic Magazine, the National Science Foundation and other institutions. For many years archaeologists didn't want the public to know about the fort out of fear it would be damaged. But now word is getting out because funds are needed to help support the excavation.

WPCC joined the dig after Linda Wall, a college trustee, and Lynne Galvin, coordinator of interior design, volunteered at the site in the summer of 2001, when the excavation first began. The women thought it was an ideal project for the school.

Students Get the Dirt

Both curriculum students and continuing education students are part of the project, said Mary Charlotte Safford, coordinator of social sciences at WPCC. Curriculum students get credit through a cultural studies humanities class, which was in place before the excavation began and focused on the 16th century Catawba Indians in the area. Continuing-education students run the gamut, from high school students to an 80-year-old woman.

At "field schools" held during two two-week summer sessions at the site, students scoop dirt with a shovel. As they dig deeper, they use trowels, sifting the dirt onto screens and sliding their hands through it.

Recording basic information on their findings, students pass it on for more extensive record keep-



DIRTY WORK From left, archaeologist Crickett Heffner, Western Piedmont Community College instructor Mary Charlotte Safford, student Jan Cook, trustee Linda Wall, student Mary Lou Furr and Assistant Field School Director Chris Rodning map out the day's digging at the site of a 500-year-old fort. The college is collaborating with nearby Warren Wilson College on the project. Below, WPCC student Michelle Smith sifts through dirt, on the lookout for artifacts. Students have already found several pieces at the site.

this year.

Hannah Anthony, an English and history major, said the experience she had last summer was "one of a lifetime."

"It was hot, dry and dirty, but a lot of fun," she said. Anthony found what officials believe is an Indian game piece — a round, very flat stone.

"I was looking for some rocks to hold down some tar paper and there it was," she said.

Some other items found include a soldier's belt buckle, lead balls for a portable matchlock gun and a brass aglet — a tip for the end of a boot lace.

Student Ralph Chapman, who is considering studying architecture, found two arrowheads and some pottery pieces.

"It's exhilarating to find these things," Chapman said. "The dirt is very soft and you're going layer-by-layer. You have such anticipation of what you might find." ▲

ing, known as cataloging. Moore said cataloging takes between six and nine months.

"Our students never would have this opportunity without this program," Safford said.

The classes are so popular that some students line up hours before registration, and there's a waiting list because the site can't accommodate large numbers of students

at one time.

The WPCC Foundation has given a grant to the project, the college's print shop has produced literature about the site for community information sessions and civil-engineering instructors have lent equipment and helped survey the site.

Meanwhile, the college has been asked to host the North Carolina Archeological Association

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