

(Untitled) by Scott Berg, Friday, July 28, 2006

Vivian Eicke has a case of her favorite beverage coming to her -- her preferred drink being Arnold Palmer Lite Half & Half lemonade/iced tea -- and she's going to be a squeaky wheel until she gets it. She earned the refreshment in 2004 as a volunteer on an archaeological dig at a prehistoric rock shelter in Montgomery County along the Potomac River, where she uncovered a nearly intact 3,000-year-old spear point.

"We'd been looking through lots and lots of shale, and there it was," Eicke says. "I stared at it, and I said, 'Is this what I think it is?' Talk about making my day."

The excavation's leader, county archaeologist Jim Sorensen, was duly impressed. So was Eicke, who wanted her liquid prize, whether or not the professionals and other volunteers had always made the offer as a kind of running joke. She'd been involved in Montgomery County digs for seven years before making the discovery; it was and is the highlight of her archaeological career to date, and she good-naturedly reminds Sorensen about her bounty nearly every time she sees him.

"Every now and then you find something that says 'pick me up,' " Eicke says. "The point was large and in good shape, and I knew I had a really good find."

Eicke is just one of hundreds of archaeology volunteers in the Washington area, a dedicated band of sleuths working side by side with professional archaeologists to assist counties, parks and sites such as Mount Vernon and Gunston Hall Plantation as they examine thousands of years' worth of physical history. Eicke's own foray into the past began in 1997 with a little case of familial envy when her son Steven, 9 at the time, was attending archaeology camp at Needwood Mansion in Derwood. As Eicke explains it, just a few minutes into a "bring your parents to dig day," she found a new and unexpected avocation.

"I was hooked," she says. "I started begging and pleading with them to have an archaeology camp for adults, and when they did that, I started begging and pleading with them to take on volunteers. I don't know what kind of part I played in getting their program started, but I'm happy they started it."

Amateur archaeologists like Eicke aren't just hobbyists tagging along to indulge a curiosity; rather, they've become crucial to the work of many of the region's professionals. Fairfax County archaeologist Mike Johnson explains that the considerable excavation and interpretation work required would be impossible without volunteers, thanks to the enormous number of identified sites of historical importance -- running into the many thousands -- and the severely limited resources available to recruit and hire salaried archaeologists to explore them.

Johnson describes how he and Pamela Cressey, city archaeologist for Alexandria, had recently discussed the unique nature of volunteer archaeological efforts in the Washington area, efforts that frequently focus on working the sites in advance of development, sifting through several layers of the area's rich history before and after Europeans landed. "In this area, we do a lot of what we call 'running in front of bulldozers,'" Johnson says, "but there's also an enormous collection of recognized, historically important sites. It's important for the public to discover, or rediscover, their own common cultural heritage, and archaeology is a way they can tangibly do that, a way they can touch that heritage themselves."

Cressey, who runs Alexandria's volunteer program out of the Alexandria Archaeology Museum in the Torpedo Factory Art Center, is impressed by the variety of age, experience and motivation she encounters in the people who contact her. "They really do volunteer for all kinds of reasons," she says. "They may be looking to explore a possible career change, or they may simply be curious about the work that historians or museum curators do. They may have an expertise in lab work or database management that they want to apply in a different way, or they may be interested in learning more about the history of the place where they grew up."

The work done by Eicke and other volunteers in Montgomery County is typical of the area in its scope and diversity. Sorensen says that the list of archaeologically important locations he has put together for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission includes more than 700 identified sites, which means that much of what he and his volunteers do is a matter of prioritizing. Active projects run by Sorensen and the M-NCPPC in Montgomery County include Oakley Cabin, a reconstructed slave residence near Brookeville; Dowden's Ordinary, the site of a tavern in

Clarksburg that once served as a resting place for George Washington on his way westward with Gen. Edward Braddock during the French and Indian War (a route that, incidentally, did not include Braddock Road); Hailstone Hill, a prehistoric quartz quarry excavation in the way of the proposed Intercounty Connector; and the plot currently occupying the greater part of the M-NCPPC's attention, a sprawling patch of wooded land along the eastern shore of the Potomac River between Muddy Branch and Seneca Creek called Blockhouse Point. Here, thousands of Union soldiers kept watch for Confederates invading the capital as part of defenses hastily created along the river in the wake of the early debacle at Bull Run.

The work at Blockhouse Point is a classic illustration of the eclectic nature of archaeology and the pressing need for volunteers with a wide variety of backgrounds. As Sorensen says, "It's not all digging in the ground," and many volunteers find other ways to bring hobbies, avocations or a career's worth of experience to the tasks at hand, making them as important to the archaeology as any salaried professional. Don Housley is one such asset, an M-NCPPC volunteer who for 25 years was chair of the history department at Wheaton High School. Housley had worked a few summers in the archaeology programs of Colonial Williamsburg and knew when he retired last year that he wanted to find a way to apply that experience, knowledge and interest.

He found the ideal opportunity when he showed up to work on the Blockhouse Point site and realized that all the previous research into the site -- decades' worth -- was stored piecemeal in several places. "I saw the situation, and I thought, 'I'll try to put all of this material together into one very large research report,'" Housley explains. "So far it's always been someone writing a memo and saying, 'This is what we found,' and then putting it all into a box. That's interesting, but a day or so later it can be forgotten. I wanted to put it all into one place where it could be useful."

The work on that report, now more than 100 pages and still under construction, led Housley not to a local excavation site but to the U.S. Army War College Library in Carlisle, Pa., where he began to pore through the letters of the regimental groups known to occupy Blockhouse Point. What he found was useful and intriguing enough that he'll be leading a new group of interested amateurs back to the library next month as part of a two-week adult archaeology camp centered on the Blockhouse Point site and conducted by the M-NCPPC in connection with the mid-Potomac chapter of the Archeological Society of Maryland.

Housley, who had never considered himself a military historian, can now snap off regimental names and the dates of important battles. He is eager to expose new volunteers to the fascinating personal histories contained in the Carlisle letters, while at the same time he hopes to uncover enough specific mentions of the Blockhouse Point site to allow him to paint an accurate verbal picture of life there to go along with the artifacts being taken out of the ground.

"It's the difference between macro history and micro history," Housley says. "As a high school teacher, you're covering a lot of ground, and you don't have time to get into the details. Every once in a while you can bring in a few little stories to liven things up. But here's a single site inside Montgomery County that was used from the beginning of the war to the end of the war. We know who was there and what they were doing. Because of its location, they would hear about battles and troop movements. It helps me to understand history from a very different perspective."

To expand the scope of her own detective work, Eicke has committed to a 240-hour training program run by the Archeological Society of Virginia that will eventually qualify her as a certified archaeological technician, or CAT, with expertise in the fields of laboratory techniques, field surveys and excavation. "It's like going to college," she says, and indeed, the curriculum has also provided her with the opportunity to get an overview of the prehistory and history of Montgomery County. It's a mark of the level of involvement of many volunteers that she doesn't plan on using her certification to do anything except deepen her experience on the sites she's already working.

"The CAT training means that I can do other things, participate in more ways," she says. Like many volunteers, she says her ties to the area are the real attraction. "I've lived in Montgomery County my whole life. It's nice to know that I've had a part in preserving something of the history of the place," she says.

People interested in volunteer opportunities in archaeology should contact the volunteer coordinators at the jurisdictions and sites listed below. Those coordinators will help potential volunteers sort through their interests, the type of work they might prefer or be best suited for, their availability and other factors. Some groups have orientation programs or commitment requirements, though all try to accommodate varying schedules and levels of interest.