
Central Gulf Coast Archaeological Society

A Chapter of the Florida Anthropological Society



MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

October 2005



Editor: David Burns

*****October Meeting*****

Wednesday, October 12, 2005

At

**Saffron's
1700 Park St. N., St. Petersburg**

7:00 P.M.

Return of Mac and Linda Faye Perry's Artifacts

Dorothy Ward and **Mark Winterbottom** have completed the Mac Perry Site Archaeological Report. We will all have dinner together followed by a brief board meeting. Afterwards, we will present the report and artifacts collected to Mac and Linda Faye. Come join us for a pleasant evening of visiting with the Perry's. We hope to see you there. Please contact Roger Block if you will be attending.

Maize, the Miracle Food

H.W. Peterson

The cultivation of maize, or corn as we know it, spread rapidly through the Americas and has fed American Indian civilizations from Lake Ontario to Argentina.

The archaeological search for the origin of maize began in 1949. Richard MacNeish excavated well preserved cobs in dry caves in the mountains of northeastern Mexico, and then turned his attention to the Coxcatlin and San Marcos caves in the Central American highlands where he was convinced Maize had originated. Radiocarbon samples received dates of 5,000 to 4,000 B.C.

The oldest cobs were no more than two inches long, with eight rows of six to nine kernels. At first, it was claimed that these small cobs belonged to an extinct, wild ancestor to domesticated maize. Other botanists disagreed and claimed that teosinte, a wild grass that still grows in Mexico, was the true ancestor. A generation later, new research by other botanists led to the conclusion that the genetic evidence for teosinte being the wild ancestor is rock solid.

For years, the MacNeish radiocarbon dates were widely accepted as the origins of farming in the Americas. So matters remained until 1983 accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) revolutionized radiocarbon dating. AMS is more accurate and permits dating of tiny fragments of organic matter. When Austin Long dated cobs from San Marcos, he obtained readings 800 to 2300 years younger than previous estimates. However, Bruce Smith with the Smithsonian Institution cautions about being too optimistic about these dates. He has indicated he wouldn't be surprised if future excavations yield corn at least 1,000 years earlier.

How then, did the domestication of maize begin? Smith believes that maize farming started with deliberate planting of harvested wild seeds over a wide area to expand the range of existing stands. Then, by setting aside seeds of particular varieties and planting them separately, genetically altered plants adapted to a manmade environment; for example, kernels packaged in easily harvested cobs, rather than small grain spikes found in teosinte.

As time went on, the product of this early maize domestication gravitated to North and South America. In the Midwestern United States, it had been around for several centuries before becoming important from an economic standpoint around A.D. 750. By A.D. 900, however, it had become an integral part of the diets of many Midwestern groups. It was the primary crop for the people of Cahokia, the large Indian village society with tens of thousand people, centered east of the Mississippi River, but spread out on both sides of the river in many mound groups. These large villages started around A.D. 900 and peaked around A.D.1050 to 1250.

By the time Columbus arrived, American Indian farmers had domesticated at least 300 grasses, fruits and root species, more than any other society in the Old World. However, of all these products, the development of corn had the greatest impact on history. Today, corn represents three fifths of the world's crop production.

So, when you go to the garden to pick corn for the table or to the grocery store to buy this miracle food, recognize that this important food source is one of the many gifts given by American Indians to modern civilizations.

Note: Material for this handout is from a paper written by Brian Fagan for the summer 1997 issue of *American Anthropology*, and *The Prehistory of Missouri* by Michael J. O'Brien and W. Raymond Wood.

In Print

LOST WORLD

- Rewriting Prehistory -

How New Science is Tracing America's Ice Age Mariners

Tom Koppel

Atria Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY
2003

17 + 300pp, 22 b/w pictures, acknowledgements, prologue,
index

\$26.00 (hard cover) ISBN 0-7434-5357-3

reviewed by H.W. "Pete" Peterson

Tom Koppel majored in anthropology briefly in college before pursuing a career as an author and journalist for over twenty years. However, for the last ten years, he has followed and written about the search for early people on the Pacific east coast, earning two awards from the Canadian Archaeological Association. Ian Tattersall, curator, Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, refers to the book as a "magnificent historical account about many well-known and some not so well-known scientists searching for answers about how and when the Americas became inhabited."

Gathering material for the book stretched over a long period, required a series of research trips, interviews with many scientists, and published materials from others. The foregoing included invitations by scientists (such as Jim Dixon) to join them and participate in archaeological work at significant Pacific coastal sites as they attempted to unravel the mysteries of the flooded shoreline.

The book opens on the Prince of Wales Island, Alaska, during the summer of 1999. The bear and seal bones found in caves dated to "either end of the glacial maximum." This provided further evidence that the northwestern tip of Prince of Wales Island had been an ice-free land, leading to speculation that other islands to the west and north of Prince of Wales Island would probably have been ice-free as well. The author noted

that Tom Ager of the U.S. Geological Survey has been systematically tracing the glacial flows through the Alaska archipelago. He has determined that there were a number of distinct glacial refuges and that a few of them were hundreds of square miles in size.

The author aptly describes the conditions associated with digging in remote areas in the rain forests. It is no walk in the park. Providing sea and air transportation to sites, working in the mud, the need to run a thousand feet of hose to a water source for wet screening, living in tents, the lack of roads, and long hikes were typical situations facing the work crews, not to mention the burden of bringing in sufficient supplies to support maybe ten to twelve people or more. Another difficulty is that it's expensive to conduct land and underwater archaeological research along the Pacific coast of Alaska and British Columbia. Funds have not always been forthcoming due to the uncertainty of finding human remains and competition from other research agencies. However, this is changing.

Even given these working conditions, there were nevertheless moments of excitement. For example, at the end of the last day of an excavation when washing the last two bags of sediment, the scientist in charge discovered a mandible and a pelvis that were clearly human. Another bone in the same sediment was probably the rib of a mammal that had been ground down on the sides and tapered. It was considered to be an artifact of some kind, possibly a punch for flaking stone. Judging by the age of the bear and seal bones that had been found, "it could prove to be very old." However, there was a hitch. Under U.S. law, when ancient human remains are found in such a setting, work has to stop and Native American authorities have to be consulted. In time, a working relationship was worked out with the tribes and dates for the human remains were obtained and found to be 9200 years old, just like the main occupation layer outside the cave. Fortunately, the limestone cave favored preservation of the bones.

Not all pieces of the puzzle came from gathering bones in Alaskan caves. For example, it is also significant that obsidian found on Prince of Wales Island was not from the island. Geologists have also taken pollen samples from bogs, lakes and peat lands indicating that the area was ice-free during glaciation, and determined the length of time that a line of erratic boulders hundreds of miles long had been exposed to the sky. Other important information has come from a research ship dredging the sea floor off the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia, a few hundred miles to the south. On the aft deck of the *Vector*, dredging was almost a production line operation, a dramatic change from when the author was on the same ship in 1994. What used to be a slow process, now took only about ten minutes to send down a grab, bring it back up, dump the contents on the deck, and shovel it all up into boxes and buckets for later screening. They had the ship moving to the next target before the grab was all the way to the surface. There was time to take a few cores as well. Chunks of wood and clumps of peat were brought up, blackened but with still identifiable leaves and clamshells. From the pollen in the peat, it is possible to tell

what was growing at the time. The clam shell density demonstrated that there were ample food resources here back to at least 12,000 years. Pieces of stone were brought up that may have been worked but were classified what you might call "maybes" and have to be closely examined at a later date. The author also described the sophisticated computer equipment that could portray underwater sites on a screen and determine exactly where to put down the grab.

In support of his belief that the first Americans came by sea along the Pacific coast, the author devotes considerable space to the lack of evidence supporting Bering Sea migrations and growing doubts concerning the ice-free corridor to the south. The author cites "the total lack of evidence that people had been in the corridor along the Mackenzie River or east of the Rockies prior to 10,500 years ago. Paleontologists and biologists could not even find traces of animals, or the plant resources needed for animals to subsist upon, that dated earlier than 11,000 years." The foregoing is reinforced by comments from scientists who have studied the corridor concept. However, there are those who still believe that a viable corridor *had* to have existed.

In effect, how and when early man arrived continues to be controversial and will most likely remain that way for some time to come. However, as demonstrated by Koppel, more and more information is surfacing. While this does not necessarily relieve the controversial aspect, it does add fuel to the various and changing positions held by anthropologists, which makes archaeology so interesting.

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*Frolicking Bears, Wet Vultures, & Other Oddities: A New York City Journalist in Nineteenth-Century Florida* by Jerald T. Milanich, 2005, University Press of Florida, hardcover, ISBN 0-8130-2848-5, \$24.95 In this engaging collection of nineteenth-century newspaper columns written for his cosmopolitan readership, an enterprising New York City journalist uncovers the Florida behind the paradise touted in brochures to reveal an as yet untamed wilderness.



Celebrate the Trail's 5th Anniversary  
at the 2005 Annual Membership Meeting  
**Friday, October 14 1-8 pm**  
Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville

Visit the Trail on the web: [www.trailofthelosttribes.org](http://www.trailofthelosttribes.org)

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| Editorial Assistant | Dorrine Burns     |                                                                          |               |

## The Society

Central Gulf Coast Archaeological Society (CGCAS) is an association of amateur and professional archaeologists and concerned citizens dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of Florida's great cultural heritage. CGCAS is a chapter of the Florida Anthropological Society (FAS) and is a state chartered non-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible. Visit our web site at [www.cgcas.org](http://www.cgcas.org).

## Membership

Membership is open to anyone with a sincere interest in the cultural past of Florida and who is dedicated to the understanding and preservation of that heritage

Amateurs, professionals and concerned citizens are welcomed as members. Membership is yearly and begins in the month of dues receipt. Contact Membership Secretary, CGCAS, P.O. Box 9507, Treasure Island, FL 33740.

|         |      |         |
|---------|------|---------|
|         | Dues |         |
| Regular |      | \$15.00 |
| Student |      | 10.00   |
| Family  |      | 20.00   |
| Life    |      | 150.00  |



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P.O. Box 9507  
Treasure Island, FL 33740

