Looking *back*

Prehistoric sites part of Redstone's past

Collectors can look, but just don't touch

By JULIE FREDERICK
For the Rocket

Redstone Arsenal is known for its background in missiles and space, but what about the history of this land before it became an Army post?

There are more than 800 prehistoric and historic sites documented on post, according to Danny Dunn, branch chief for Cultural and Natural Resources.

Prehistoric and historic sites are different. Prehistoric classifies the time in history before European goods, like modern tools or pottery. To put it in perspective, Carbon 14 dating has been used on several artifacts found on the Arsenal and proves that this land was used by people as early as 10,000 years ago.

One of the oldest artifacts found on the Arsenal is a spearhead (or arrowhead) known as the Redstone point, according to Ben Hoksbergen, Redstone's staff archeologist. The Redstone point is actually part of the Clovis point family of spearheads that dates back as far as 12,000 years.

A historic site is classified as anything from about 1500 AD, when Europeans first started searching out new land, to about 1956. The National Historic Preservation Association considers anything 50 years old or older to be a historic artifact. Most of the modern military areas on Redstone are considered historic sites and are eligible for the National Historic Register.

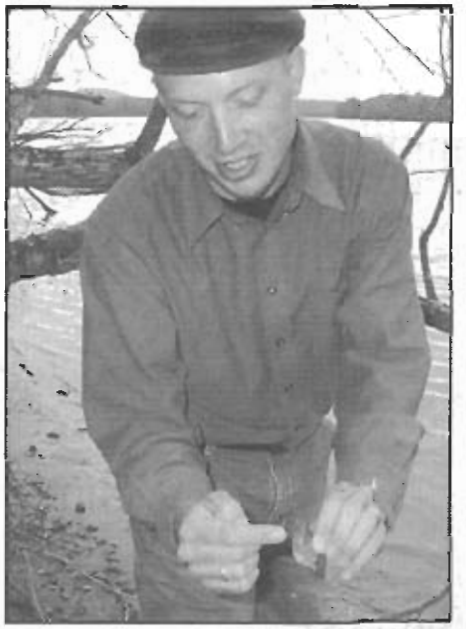

Photo by Julie Frederick

TEACHING POINT— Ben Hoksbergen, Redstone's staff archeologist, displays a prehistoric spearhead found along the riverbank that boarders the Arsenal and describes the flint knapping process used to make it.

Since about 1995, Redstone has been continuously doing a survey of the installation and marking archeological sites.

"Our goal is to find as many sites as possible to learn more about the people who inhabited this area before us," Hoksbergen said. "Our system was simple but time consuming."

Surveyors would mark off 100 feet of land, dig a hole about one and a half feet in diameter, and take a sample of the land. If they found any artifacts, they would tag the area as a site and move on to the next 100-foot plot. The entire Arsenal has been surveyed for archeological sites.

Once a plot has been tagged as an archeological site, the next step is to determine if it holds any significant artifacts. This determination is important because if a location is deemed a significant source of archeological information, then it cannot be disturbed or built on without first being excavated. This has significant impact on the planners and developers that are attempting to build new buildings and roads on this continually growing installation. Planners and developers must go through the Environmental office when making decisions about where to place a building because of this.

The historical status of an area also has a certain impact on the many novice history buffs and collectors that work on the Arsenal. As with all historical sites, looking is always welcome, but do not remove an artifact from the Arsenal. It is against the law. Since there are laws that protect all sites and artifacts, anything found here belongs to the government.

Taking any kind of artifact from this installation constitutes stealing from the government; and there are consequences for people caught pilfering an archeological site. Any government employee caught removing artifacts can be fined, reprimanded and possibly fired from government service.

"If people remove artifacts then we have no way of documenting and preserving that piece of history," Hoksbergen said. "Take the Redstone point for example. At around 10,000 years old it is possibly the oldest artifact found on the Arsenal. There are only five documented, and we don't have any of them because they were picked up by collectors."

While a treasure hunt through time would be fun, leave artifacts where they lie.

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