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Archaeological excavations in Trempealeau reveal Mississippians' 1,000-year-old history

Emily Pyrek
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Archaeologist Danielle Benden talks about the Little Bluff Trail in Trempealeau.

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TREMPEALEAU — Danielle Benden has been uncovering artifacts in the Trempealeau area for the past decade, but the thrill of the find never gets old. **Archaeological excavations in Trempealeau reveal Mississippians' 1,000-year-old settlement**  3 comments

“It’s still equally as exciting now,” said Benden, archaeologist and co-owner of Driftless Pathways with husband and fellow archaeologist Robert “Ernie” Boszhardt. “Digging up something in the dirt that hasn’t been touched in 1,000 years ... it’s an amazing feeling.”

It’s an experience Benden has shared with many over the course of the Trempealeau Archaeology Project, a community-wide quest to uncover the history of the Mississippians, a group of 100 to 200 people who left the city of Cahokia, a 2,200-acre tract near what is now St. Louis and paddled 500 miles up the Mississippi River to the “Mountain Whose Foot is Bathed in Water.” Benden and Boszhardt, both formerly with the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center, recently developed the Trempealeau Interpretive Path: TRIP initiative to share the wealth of discoveries.

TRIP includes curriculum resources, with activities and breakdowns of their findings, and a three-part exhibit. An artifact display at the Shirley M. Wright Memorial Library includes historical illustrations and artifacts collected during both the group digs and by local individuals. An expansive indoor exhibit in the Perrot State Park Nature Center, completed last September, offers a comprehensive 13,000-year history of the region, with a look at geological, topographical and cultural changes in the area, and houses a display of traditional Native American clothing. Lastly, a new informational kiosk, signage and interpretive pathway have been added to the Little Bluff Mounds, the center of the Mississippian settlement.

“We believe the Mississippians came for the Trempealeau mountain,” Benden said. “It’s a unique landmark, the only place with a remnant bluff completely surrounded by water. They believed the mountain itself had a tremendous amount of power. It was almost like a mission trip — a Mecca.”

Early records of the mounds were composed by surveyor T.H. Lewis in the 1880s, and Benden, Boszhardt, UW-Madison students and dozens of locals ranging in age

from 7 to 70 have continued to uncover the symbolic platform mounds, religious temples, as well as excavate the village below, digging in yards for artifacts and remnants.

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When the Mississippians, known for their building skills and corn farming, arrived, they brought their culture with them, including their bright red pottery, stone tools and religious practices. The parameters of their religion are unknown, but is believed to involve sun worship, as the mounds are aligned to the cycles of the sun and moon.

Construction of the platform mounds was labor intensive, with millions of baskets filled with dirt hauled to the 100-foot peak of the bluff, leaving behind deep recesses in the ground, called borrow pits. Rectangular wooden structures with thatched roofs were erected atop the mounds, and upon digging a trench at the location, Boszhardt discovered the top of a temple and a hearth, where a spiritual leader was likely tasked with keeping the fire burning constantly.

“Your world would end if that fire goes out,” Boszhardt said. “You don’t want that eternal flame to blow out.”

The flame could be seen by the commoners residing below the bluff, as the vegetation was sparse at the time, the lack of trees offering a 270 degree view of the Mississippi.

“They could look down the valley toward their homeland,” Benden said. “We’re hoping to open up the vista for a full view.”

Artifacts and carbon dating indicate the Mississippians only stayed in the area for half a century, later settling in Aztalan in southeast Wisconsin. While the reason for their departure is unknown, it is not believed to be caused by conflict, as the lack of walls and barriers indicate they lived peacefully with the neighboring locals. However, the perimeter of the settlement has continued to expand with each discovery, a sign of a once bustling area.

“The community plan is much bigger than we thought,” Benden explained. “We want to try to put boundaries on it. Every year we continue to excavate. It’s science — we’re extrapolating and compounding on what we know.”

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Benden and Boszhardt will lead their next excavation this summer, unearthing the lawns of modern day residents for traces of dwellings long ago.

“The Driftless area is a special place to live now — it has been for 1,000 years,” Benden said. “There’s something about knowing where you come from. Perhaps these findings can help people connect and feel ownership over the place they live, and provide a sense of stewardship over the land. These are places definitely worth preserving.”

IF YOU GO:

WHAT: The Little Bluff Mounds Trail opening

WHEN: Noon to 2 p.m. today.

WHERE: The trail entrance is located on Main Street in Trempealeau.

DIRECTIONS: Can be found at www.tremptrip.com/little-bluff-trail.html.

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Danielle Benden, archaeologist

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Community health reporter

Emily Pyrek covers health and human interest stories for the La Crosse Tribune.

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