



At Montana's historical state parks, archaeologists are unearthing clues to how settlers, prospectors, and early American Indians once lived.

BY LEE LAMB

# DIGGING DEEP INTO HISTORY

Unearthing the buried city of Pompeii or discovering ancient Assyrian treasures may be what archaeologists dream about. But most of their work resembles what John Fielding is doing this summer day: sifting through an old garbage dump. Under an already scorching midmorning sun, Fielding crouches low inside a 1-meter-square pit at the base of the Meade Hotel in Bannack, Montana's legendary ghost town. He slowly and meticulously removes half-inch layers of dirt from the pit and sifts the soil through screens. Fielding works for Western Cultural, a Missoula-based "cultural resource services" firm that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has contracted to explore the outside perimeter of several buildings at Bannack—Montana's first town and territorial capital—that are scheduled for structural renovation. Today he is excavating below an old hotel kitchen window where trash was commonly tossed in the late 1800s. Most of the remains are rocks, broken glass, and pieces of brick, but occasionally the screens trap an artifact, such as an animal bone, dish shard, and what appears to be a bullet casing. "My guess is that it's from a handgun," Fielding says, "but we won't know for sure until we can identify it back at the lab."

For decades, FWP has conducted excavations at Bannack, Fort Owen, Pictograph Cave, Madison Buffalo Jump, and other historically significant state parks to find, document, and

**BURIED TREASURES** Archaeologists have unearthed pottery shards, jewelry, arrow points, tools, and bones at Pictograph Cave and other state parks. Shown here are artifact replicas on display at the Montana Historical Society.

MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

protect artifacts as required by state law. In 2007, the department stepped up its archaeological activity by creating a Heritage Resources Program. The program's goal is to improve FWP's ability to find and document cultural artifacts at state parks and enhance agency and public understanding of cultural preservation. The program also aims to ensure that historical resources unearthed from state parks are properly managed and interpreted for the public's interest and enjoyment. "Creating a program like this for state parks just made sense," says Joe Maurier, FWP acting director and previously chief of the department's Parks Division. "We have 22 state parks with high historical or cultural importance and eight National Historic Landmarks within our park system. We needed a professional cultural preservation program like those at other Montana historic sites and in other states' park systems."

**REQUIRED BY LAW**

The Montana Antiquities Act, enforced by the State Historic Preservation Office, requires state agencies to consider how proposed projects would affect prehistoric and historic sites on state-owned lands. In the past, FWP complied with the law by contracting archaeological site testing and survey work when it built a new latrine, installed a parking lot, or made other

*Lee Lamb is a freelance writer in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.*



**NOTHING FANCY** Archaeologists excavate a site at Fort Owen State Park using ordinary household tools such as brushes, trowels, shovels, yardsticks, and screens. Among the items discovered was an old farming implement (right), perhaps used to dig potatoes.



MONTANA FWP

**“History is typically written about great events and great people, but what we learn from the artifacts we excavate is about ordinary people in their everyday lives.”**

says. "But the artifacts indicate a higher class of living in that isolated settlement."

**SURVEY BEFORE DIGGING**

Testing sites of proposed development is important, whether artifacts are found or not. Recently archaeologists excavating an area at Fort Owen slated for a new latrine found a fragment from a pipe bowl. The bowl may have been the one founder John Owen lost and wrote about in his mid-19th century journals. At Pictograph Cave State Park near

The archaeologists have found previously undiscovered rock cairns, tepee rings, and pictographs hidden among the tall grasses and rocks. "Having information like that from the get-go is the ideal way to operate," says Scott. "That way we can work it into our management plans and know where the best places are to lay down campgrounds and trails, rather than just waiting until after a project is planned and then have to adjust construction plans to reduce damage to archaeological and historic sites."

improvements to state parks. Though the survey results were recorded at the State Historic Preservation Office, the information was scattered. "FWP didn't have an efficient way to see which areas had already been surveyed and what archaeologists had found," says Sara Scott, who coordinates the FWP Heritage Resources Program. "Another concern was that other significant prehistoric and historic sites existed in state parks, but because the areas hadn't been checked out, we didn't know what we had and whether those resources needed protection."

To locate resources potentially needing protection, Scott hired an intern to gather information from the State Historic Preservation Office. The intern created a com-

puter database of maps showing the locations of previously surveyed areas in each park and the exact boundaries of historic or archaeological sites. The database showed more than 200 heritage sites in Montana's 52 state parks. With this information, Scott can determine if a location for a proposed state park improvement project has already been surveyed and what was found.

At Fort Owen State Park, for example, University of Montana students had conducted field excavations beginning in the 1950s. They eventually collected 50 large boxes of artifacts from Montana's first permanent white settlement. Because the artifacts were owned by FWP, the university could not work on them and kept the boxes

in its Anthropology Department basement. Recently, FWP and the university signed an agreement that allows the university to record and analyze the artifacts and create a permanent collection.

Graduate student Don Merritt is now sorting, identifying, and recording the more than 10,000 artifacts. Most are pedestrian items such as tin food containers, but Merritt has also discovered a rare glass egg—placed in nests to entice chickens to lay real eggs—as well as champagne bottles, elegant candy dishes, and fragments from crystal drinking glasses. "Keeping in mind that Fort Owen was founded on the frontier in 1850, you would think its inhabitants would lack luxury items," Merritt

Billings—once visited by generations of Indians who left paintings on the cave's rock walls—FWP hired archaeologists to excavate an area where the agency plans to build a new visitor center. The findings were insubstantial: just a few chipped stone flakes and animal bone fragments. That was good news, however, because it meant FWP could proceed with its building plans. At another Pictograph Cave site, however, where a new hiking trail was planned, surveyors found a fire hearth and an 850-year-old bison bone—findings that required minor changes to the project.

FWP recently hired Aaberg Cultural Resource Consulting Service of Billings to survey First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park and 400 newly acquired acres to the park.

In addition to survey work, FWP is improving heritage resource management by training existing staff. Scott is developing policies on caring for artifacts in state park visitor centers, standards for site surveys and testing, and instructions on Montana Antiquities Act compliance. Recently she provided park managers with maps of their parks showing where previous survey work was done and locations of known historic and archaeological sites. "Park managers have always been responsible for cultural resource management, but our goal is to have them include it in their working vocabulary the same as recreation or natural resources management," says Ken Soderberg, chief of the FWP Parks Division Interpretive Services Bureau.



Springfield Model 1873 similar to those used on the Rosebud Battlefield (now a state park)

Poker chips from Bannack State Park

Glass egg from Fort Owen State Park

Deer tooth between 200 and 500 years old, from Madison Buffalo Jump State Park

Fragment of a meerschaum pipe possibly once owned by John Owen, found at Fort Owen State Park

Bison jawbone from Madison Buffalo Jump State Park

Lead or pewter Monopoly battleship game piece, produced between 1935 and 1941, recovered from Ghost Cave at Pictograph Cave State Park

Blue Willow Ware bowl fragment from Fort Owen State Park

Spoon found at Bannack State Park

LEFT TO RIGHT: MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; JODY DURAN; MONTANA FWP; MONTANA FWP; MONTANA FWP

LEFT TO RIGHT: JODY DURAN; AABERG CULTURAL RESOURCE CONSULTING SERVICE; MONTANA FWP; MONTANA FWP



**LAYERS OF HISTORY** Right: Heritage Resources Program manager Sara Scott points to a pictograph (closeup, above) at Pictograph Cave State Park. Though this one depicts firearms, some of the cave's pictographs are more than 2,000 years old. Below: Archaeologists found this 850-year-old charred bison bone in a prehistoric hearth excavated at the park.



**BOTTLES, BULLETS, AND BAUBLES** These glass containers, keys, and other old items were found at Bannack State Park. Other artifacts recently unearthed include the bullet casing from a .44-50 Henry Flat rifle, champagne glass shards, and children's toys. Seeing artifacts like these helps visitors imagine how people both young and old lived in this frontier gold mining town.

**RICHER HUMAN STORIES**

FWP's heightened cultural preservation work will also enrich the experience of park visitors. At Bannack, for instance, information about recently unearthed artifacts will be woven into visitor center displays and interpretive talks. The artifacts—including jewelry, beads, toys, and the bullet casing (which turned out to be from a .44-50 Henry Flat rifle)—will be catalogued and added to previously discovered treasures stored inside Bannack's historic buildings. Visitors will be able to peek through windows for a glimpse into the lives of people who lived there during the gold rush era. "History is typically written about great events and great people, but what we learn from the artifacts we excavate is about ordinary people in their everyday lives," says Dan Hall, lead archaeologist with Western Cultural. "For instance, toys indicate that

**“I think their real value is when we can tie them back to the people who originally owned or used them. That's when it really becomes a human story that connects with our visitors.”**

there were kids in Bannack, which wasn't always the case in late 19th-century mining towns. Maybe some of the miners planned to raise their families there instead of just grabbing the gold and heading elsewhere.”

Soderberg says state park visitors are hungry for such insight into the lives of people who previously lived in or used places that are now Montana state parks. “When you think of Bannack, typically it's of the prospectors who were digging for gold. But Bannack was composed of many other people who were just trying to eke out a living by selling merchandise, providing goods and services, things like that,” he says. “So while the things we're finding are definitely important as historical artifacts, I think their real value is when we can tie them back to the people who originally owned or used them. That's when it really becomes a human story that connects with our visitors.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MONTANA FWP; MONTANA FWP; LARRY DEARS; AMBERG CULTURAL RESOURCE CONSULTING SERVICE

