

Lamoka Exhibit Visits Museum

by Louise Stillman

In the early 1900's, one of the richest archaeological finds in the history of New York State occurred in Schuyler County. Discoveries of ashes and artifacts from primitive mounds in the Lake Lamoka area of the Town of Tyrone revealed the existence of a pre-Indian civilization. It was believed that these people were nomadic hunters and fishermen who may have migrated to this continent from Alaska and to Canada from Asia.

Dr. William A. Ritchie, a state archaeologist, made on-site explorations over the years and reported that charred bones and artifacts from Lake Lamoka "digs" had been dated 3500 B.C. through radioactive carbon studies. Findings of nuclear scientists support the theory that the Lake Lamoka tribes predated, by many centuries, the Iroquois Indians, formerly believed to be the earliest civilization in this region.

In 1927, Dr. Arthur C. Parker, former director of the Rochester Municipal Museum and an archaeologist announced that Indian relics had been found in an oat field on the farm of the late Frank Wood. Mrs. Sebring Howell, Town of Orange Historian, says the site was earlier known as the Alden Van Liew farm. This entire area, called "The Flats," contained black soil and once was swampland.

After finding many relics and traces of some possible pre-historic existence there, Dr. Parker mapped the territory for excavation. He was assisted by Harrison C. Follette, a representative from the Rochester Museum, and Charles Kraus of Weston. While digging, they lived in a tent on the Wood farm, daily making careful excavations. Frank Wood's son (Roy of Dundee) vividly recalls the tent, men working from dawn to dusk sifting every square inch of soil for artifacts and when larger relics were found, a case being built around each to be gently forklifted into trucks for transportation to the Rochester Museum.

These excavations continued into the sixties, but with limited knowledge the Lamoka culture is deemed a rather mysterious and isolated entity in western New York.

The unearthing of this old Indian village was a most exciting historical discovery. Dr. Parker himself supervised the packing of the specimens and the Rochester Museum and Science Center features a permanent display of many of these items.

Unearthed were several skeletons; 4,000 pieces of bones; countless implements and more than 9,000 pieces of pottery and stone relics.

Thousands of post molds revealed supports of homes. These posts formed patterns suggesting rectangular houses with rounded corners, ranging in length from 14 to 16 feet and 7 to 13 feet wide with compact earth floors. Many stood for long periods of occupation. As some structures deteriorated, new ones were erected on nearly the same site.

The Lamoka Lake site, spanning nearly three acres, revealed refuse, and deposits up to five feet thick yielded artifacts representing a variety of activities carried on by these early inhabitants.

There were projectile points and bone diggers for hunting; for fishing, net sinkers, bone fish hooks, bone gorges and net weaving tools; for clothing and hide

working, choppers, scapula scrapers and awls; for wood working and felling of trees, celts, unique stone adzes, bone and antler chisels, plus bone and antler flaking tools hammer and anvil stones.

Food remains consisted chiefly of deer and fish bones, charred acorns, and chips from the firing flint. Acorns were a most important food resource, used for acorn meal. Other common foods were fish, white tail deer, turkey and passenger pigeons.

Women used basin-shaped hearths for ordinary cooking purposes. These hearths were 14 inches in diameter and 16 inches deep with stone slab cover. Fire beds were found, 55 feet long and 10 feet wide, probably to dry fish over immense fir fires, to smoke fish and game and to roast acorns. Deposits indicated that possibly 200 people lived at this location.

Not only was this area ideal for abundance of fish and game, but the site was conveniently located for canoe travel through streams and rivers into the Susquehanna system.

The evidence of this unique archaeological discovery, within the borders of Schuyler County, tells a mute story of the civilization that thrived in our country long before the white man. The Lamoka Lake site is the first historical point in Schuyler County to be listed with the National Register of Historical Places.

Last spring, Mr. and Mrs. George Stillman, accompanied by Barbara Bell, Schuyler County Historian and Betty Landon, director of Gray Brick Tavern Museum, visited the Rochester Museum and Science Center to arrange for a loan of some of the artifacts.

George R. Hamell, Curator of Anthropology, agreed to select a few specimens from the Lamoka collection for indefinite loan to the Schuyler County Historical Society. On July 3, the Stillmans picked up the carefully wrapped artifacts and delivered them to the museum.

More than a half century after the discovery, Schuyler County can now show a small part of its ancient past. These rare artifacts may be seen in the museum at 108 N. Catharine St., (14) in Montour Falls, open daily from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. plus Sat. from noon to 4 p.m.

Perhaps knowing how this exhibit was arranged will encourage others to adopt similar tactics to secure exhibits for our museum.

Checking the August 1928 "Finger Lakes Magazine," early publication of the Finger Lakes Assn., Barbara Bell read about the relics from Lake Lamoka being sent to the Municipal Museum of Edgerton. A bit of sleuthing revealed that that museum was a predecessor of the Rochester Museum and Science Center. An inquiry there brought a favorable response from Mr. Hamell, of R.M. and S.C. staff, and Schuyler is richer for the loan of artifacts from one of our nation's earliest identified and proven villages.