

Archeology Department helps Prairie Island community discover its past

\$100,000 pledge

The Prairie Island Community tribal Council has pledged \$100,000 to the Archeology Department for continued study of Mdewakanton Dakota artifacts, and for education programs that expose children to archeology.

By Jon Swedien, Republican Eagle staff writer [published in the Republican Eagle, Red Wing, MN, 10/6/2007]

This past summer Cole Jacobson, a Twin Bluff Middle School student, had the opportunity to get his hands dirty doing some archeology fieldwork.

Jacobson found pieces of pottery and arrowheads, among other things, during his brief stint as an archeologist.

“It was kind of cool to learn about something that was here thousands of years ago,” Jacobson said.

Jacobson was one of about 40 students from Prairie Island and Red Wing schools who had the chance to visit archeologist Ron Schirmer’s field school.

Schirmer has been conducting fieldwork since 1998 — since 2003 with Minnesota State University — in the Prairie Island/Red Wing area. He and college students have been conducting research by carefully and painstakingly digging for artifacts from 1,000-year-old civilizations.

Schirmer said the area is a hotbed of burial grounds and other artifacts because centuries ago it was “a place of congress for people all over the mid-continent.”

MSU’s anthropology department will soon be starting a program so every year students like Jacobson can have the chance to see the work archeologists do and to participate themselves.

The Prairie Island Indian Community Tribal Council on Thursday pledged \$100,000 to the department to help support the program over the next 10 years.

Department Chairman Paul Brown said most of that money will support graduate students so they don’t have to rely on part-time jobs for income and can focus on their anthropological studies.

Some of the money will also be used for education programs that expose kids to anthropology. Brown said the department would love to have Mdewakanton Dakota people doing fieldwork themselves.

“It may sound funny,” Brown said, “but we would love to work ourselves out of a job.”

The department wants to utilize the knowledge of the Prairie Island Indian Community. As an archeologist, Schirmer said it is important that he blends Western science with the American Indian’s cultural self-knowledge passed down through oral histories.

The education program will help further the relationship between the department and Prairie Island.

Tribal Council Treasurer Alan Childs II is a supporter of the relationship. He participated in last summer’s field school. Childs said the knowledge gained through archeology is important to American Indian youth because informing them about their past helps reinforce their identity.

Tribal Council President Audrey Bennett said the program gives tribal youth an important opportunity and could spark the interest of a youth who may someday become an archeologist.

Jacobson — still only in Middle School — said he isn’t sure what career path he is going to pursue, but he did have a good time at the field study.

He also said it was more than fun.

Jacobson said the knowledge found in archeology is important for all kids, not just Mdewakanton Dakota youth.

“It was weird holding something someone made 1,000 years ago,” Jacobson said.

“It kind of connected me to my past.”