

## **Finding buried, one-of-a-kind treasures**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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During the early Pliocene period, approximately 12.5 million years ago, Solano County and the Bay Area was a vast alluvial plain and the Sierra Nevada was a relatively low mountain chain.

Streams and rivers meandered among wide stretches of grassy plains. The area was inhabited by four-tusked mastodons, three species of camel, a form of rhinoceros, rabbits, lizards, foxes, horses, and an assortment of other animals.

Climatic changes, droughts, cataclysmic shifts in the earth's crust, meteor impacts and any number of other reasons contributed cause to their extinction. However, a few species that were able to adapt to the changes or migrate to other geographic areas survive today in one form or another.

Fossil records now provide the only evidence that many of these animals ever existed. Major discoveries in the Black Hawk and Mount Diablo area furnished evidence of many of the animals that inhabited the Bay Area.

In Solano County, unearthed evidence includes fossils that were deposited some 2 million to 3 million years ago.

A bulldozer working on the Anderson ranch in the Montezuma Hills uncovered two fossilized ivory tusks 18 feet below the surface belonging to a species of elephant-like creatures called a Pliomastodon, which preceded mammoths perhaps by a million years.

The discovery of fossilized camel and horse teeth was made in 1959 in a gravel pit on the Guy Stewart ranch about one mile south of Denverton. A mammoth tooth was found on the old Leo Lewis Ranch in Putah Creek about five miles east of Winters, and in the same area, a 6-inch sabre-tooth tiger's tusk.

Mammoth fossils also were found on April 16, 1862, on Bennett Hill (known today by many as "Hamburger hill") in Vacaville during road excavation work.

In Vallejo fossils were discovered when Sonoma Boulevard was being extended toward the Carquinez Bridge. The cut in the hill in South Vallejo just north of Magazine Street revealed scores of clam fossils.

When the foundation was being excavated for the California Auto Association office on Admiral Callaghan Way, clam fossils were discovered in the heavy clay.

In our area it appears that human, specifically Indian occupation, can be traced back to about 4,000 years, a mere blip in geologic time. But even then, discovering our past occasionally comes in unexpected forms.

It could just as easily have been dumped aside and forgotten, but Contractor Bill Frost thought he had something when he uprooted an old log while operating a drag line in Montezuma slough near Kirby Hill on a November day in 1969. Kirby Hill is about one mile west of Shiloh Church near Birds Landing. Fortunately, Bill recognized that it could be an Indian mortar and contacted Rod Rulofson, curator of the Pena Adobe.

Rod, whose specialty was Indian history, first thought Bill had been mistaken. He knew that log mortars for grinding acorns had been in use, but none had ever been found. More than likely, any that had existed had long rotted away.

Rod's excitement became quite apparent when he went to see Bill's find. It was the real thing. They carefully wrapped the artifact and transported it to the Pena Adobe. It was soft and soggy and in need of immediate preservation.

Rulofson cautiously removed a couple of plugs of material from the bottom of the log and sent one to the U.S. Department of the Interior for carbon dating. The test dated the mortar to 1520, A.D., making it possibly the oldest wooden artifact and most certainly the only known wooden mortar crafted by California Indians in existence.

During a newspaper interview Rod said, "As it turned out, I was surprised the mortar wasn't younger and the Department of the Interior was surprised it wasn't older. They're going to run another carbon-14 test to double-check the first date. I'm going to request a tree-ring test on it, which would also place its approximate age."

Knowing the mortar would disintegrate if allowed to dry out and remain exposed to the air, Rulofson, with the assistance of Dr. Elsasser, head of the University of California, Davis, Anthropology Department, and Bob Allen, the current President of the Vacaville Heritage Council, went to work. They preserved the log mortar using a method developed by the Norwegians to preserve old water-logged Viking ships found mired in the mud.

They placed the mortar in a plastic-lined trench filled with water while preparations were made to preserve it. To shrink and harden the wood, the log was boiled for 24-hours in a bathtub containing 150 pounds of alum, then its surface was treated with turpentine and linseed oil. Finally, it was allowed to dry for eight months in an old tool room at the

Adobe.

Rulofson postulated that the mortar washed into Suisun Bay via a flood. Because the particular river route it may have traveled was unknown, the mortar could have been used by any number of Indian tribes. We may never know its true origin, but it is a unique, one-of-a-kind treasure, discovered right here in Solano County.

The ground is littered with articles and fossils from the past. If you should find something you suspect may be of historical value, you are required to comply with the U.S. Antiquities Act by having its historical significance and disposition determined by experts.

In England, a Treasure Trove Law was invoked a few years ago whereby the government paid for finds. As a result of this new law, Britain has had to revise some of its history. Unfettered by government regulations, collectors, dealers, and amateur treasure hunters no longer fearing prosecution are free to make known their discoveries.

I believe this country could benefit from just such a law. Our American heritage would be greatly enriched and our citizens would no longer face prosecution for simply picking up an "artifact" like a square nail or a piece of broken glass as has happened in the recent past.

**Correction** to the article Finding buried, one-of-a-kind treasure published on 8/26/01: I received an e-mail from Ed Powers correcting the date the mammoth bone on Hamburger Hill was found and adding a little information. The date of the find was 1962, not 1862. I think I got my lightning-fast, two-finger typing style tangled up on that and didn't catch it during editing. Ed also informs us that the find was made where the McDonald's restaurant is located today. It was found while he was having a cut made in the side of the hill.

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