

10 November 2009

Now that the Historical Society's archaeology team has wrapped up another season of excavation at the Clunie site, it is a good time for an update on what we found this year. The Clunie site, for those unfamiliar with the project, is a Native American campsite located along the Tittabawassee River within the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, right here in Saginaw County. Based on radiocarbon dates and the types of artifacts we have been finding, we know that there were at least two major time periods during which people visited the site.

The oldest material we have excavated at the Clunie site, both this year and in previous years, comes from the early portion of the Late Woodland Period (approximately AD 500-1000). Evidence from this time period consists of scattered bits of pottery, flakes of chert from making stone tools, fish and mammal bones, and fragments of a bone harpoon. These items suggest that the site was periodically occupied by small groups of people, probably for no more than a few days at a time, as they passed through the area while traveling from one portion of the Saginaw valley to another. During their brief stays at the site, people hunted and fished, manufactured and refurbished stone knives, scrapers, and spear points, and made and used clay pots.

The Clunie site was most frequently occupied in the two centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans in the area, roughly between AD 1400 and 1650. Archaeologists often refer to this as the Late Prehistoric period. Despite the relatively recent timeframe, we have very few sites that date to this period, making the Clunie site an extremely important source of information. Our efforts this year yielded fragments of pottery, arrowheads and other stone tools, beads made from shell and copper, and numerous animal bones. However, our most important finds this year were not artifacts, but rather "features".

Archaeological "features" include such things as storage pits, hearths, trash pits, post molds, wall trenches etc. The features we encountered at the Clunie site this year include a trash pit, a large hearth with evidence for repeated use, and a large, bark-lined pit that served first as a storage facility, later as a hearth, and finally as a trash pit. Several charred tubers (potato-like roots), likely from a water-lily or other aquatic plant, were found near the bottom of the pit. These are almost certainly one of the materials being stored in this prehistoric version of a root cellar. When additional analyses are completed, we expect to learn what, if any, other items were also being stored in this pit.

This year's excavation units have been filled in and the field equipment put away for the winter. Now we begin the careful process of sorting, cataloguing, analyzing, and interpreting the results of our work. Each year, as new data are combined with previous findings, our knowledge and understanding of the past increases. Ultimately, we will piece together a detailed picture of what life was like for those who preceded us in Saginaw Valley.

Jeff Sommer
Curator of Archaeology



Archaeology volunteer, Ken Kosidlo, excavating at the Clunie site.



Partially excavated storage pit with tuber at the Clunie site.



Archaeology volunteers, Shaun Aldrich (standing) and Dave Hamilton, excavating at the Clunie site.