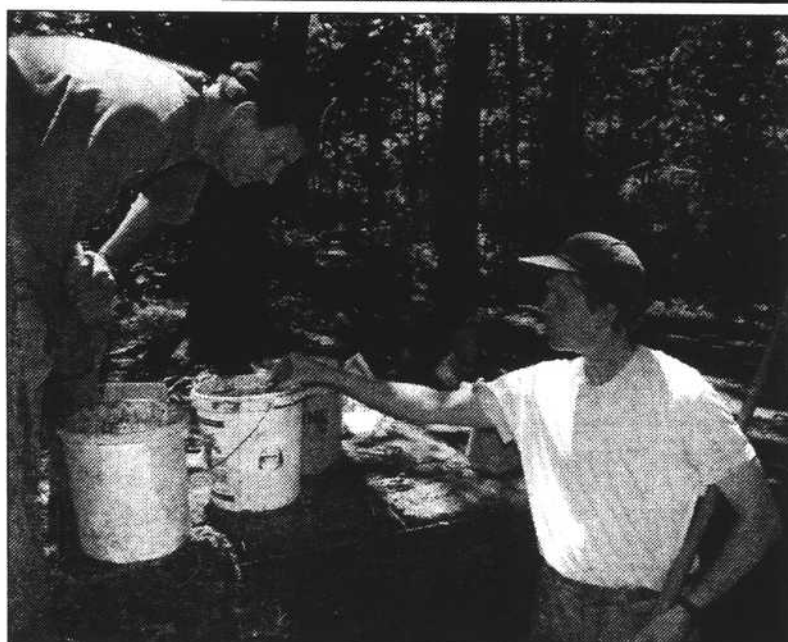




KATRINA NGUYEN-KILSH and Ian Samsom, both volunteers from the Missouri River Ecology Institution, sift through dirt Tuesday afternoon. The grates separate out the artifacts.

DARREN IVY/DN



ERIC KALDAHL SHOWS Fontanelle Forest Ranger Mark Dietz some artifacts he recently removed from the trench he's standing in. The group began excavating the current mound last week.

DARREN IVY/DN

Dig helps students uncover education

BY TOM FOSTER
Staff Reporter

Deep in the Fontanelle Forest, just south of Omaha in Bellevue, a group of young men and women sit in a circle around a depression in the earth.

Shovels, trowels and assorted hand tools litter the soil around them. Above, a patchwork of plastic tarps provides shade. Hanging from a nearby tree, a radio hums in the background.

These University of Nebraska-Lincoln students are taking a break

from excavating one of 54 similar sites in the forest, home to the Nebraska phase people who lived in the Missouri River valley from 1000-1400.

The students are part of the UNL Summer Field School in Archaeology, an eight week session that gives them nine credit hours and invaluable experience for future studies.

Field School

"Field school is where we teach you all the basic methods of the trade," said Eric Kaldahl, director of the program. Kaldahl, who is finishing his doctorate in anthropology at the University of Arizona, is a Bellevue native and graduate of UNL.

"I've always wanted to come back here," he said. "This is where my research interests lie."

This year, eight undergraduate students are joining Kaldahl in Bellevue. Two graduate assistants help him run the field school.

Michael Chidley, one of the assistants, said the group begins work at 7:00 every morning. For the next eight hours, students dig in carefully measured squares, sift through the dirt for artifacts, sort the artifacts and periodically map the area.

From 3:00 to 5:00 in the afternoon, the group heads back to the lab to wash artifacts and check them in. And several nights a week, they have lectures or class in the evening. They sleep in nearby cabins and rise early again to continue working.

The busy schedule doesn't seem to bother these students, though.

"They're real troopers," Kaldahl said. "They've been working through the rain and the mud and the heat."

"Some of the work is tedious, and sometimes when it's hot, you just want to lay down and stop," said Melissa Kruse, a sophomore anthropology major. "But mostly this is fun."

"Every little thing you find is exciting," she said. "It all ties together and fits into the bigger picture. We're trying to understand what (the Nebraska phase) did day to day, how they lived."

Kruse said she hoped the project would educate the community about the area's significance and spark an interest in archaeology.

One of the two sites being excavated this summer is close enough to the main park entrance that visitors can watch the process and learn. Many children's groups visit the site.

And student volunteers from the Missouri River Ecology Institute also learn about the dig while lending a hand with the work.

Ian Sansom of Omaha, 14, is one of those volunteers. He spent the day sifting through buckets of mud. Hunched over a wooden box with a one-fourth inch wire mesh bottom, Sansom said one bucket took 30 minutes to sift.

Nearby, Katie Cooksley dug a trench by evenly clearing several centimeters of dirt at a time. Occasionally, she hefted several buckets of dirt over to Sansom to be sifted through.

Cooksley, who will be a UNL freshman this fall, said she had long been interested in this kind of work.

"I've wanted to be an archaeologist since I was 8 years old," she said.

Early Nebraskans

While digging, Cooksley explained that her trench would uncover the boundaries of a lodge. A change in the soil color indicates where the building materials decomposed, thus outlining the 1,000-year-old home, she said.

Kaldahl said the lodges typically housed six or more people, probably members of a single family. The homes were partially underground, with large beams supporting a roof of smaller branches, grass and mud.

He said one house would be occupied for 10-15 years before decomposing, ripe with vermin. The family then built a new home, usually very near the old one.

Kaldahl said it was unclear how many of the homes in Fontanelle Forest were rebuilt from the same family or how many existed at the same time. He said the excavation could shed light on the family and community life of the Nebraska phase.

Because each home was abandoned for a newer model, the excavation rarely uncovers whole artifacts, Kaldahl said. The people took their belongings with them when they moved.

Holding a six-inch triangular

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