

Natives urge protection for aboriginal sites

York Region developers not interested in ancient remains, says archeologist

The second of a two-part series on York Region's aboriginal heritage.

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Imagine your grandparents are dead and you are eating at Swiss Chalet. You glance over at a couple nearby and recognize the jewelry your grandmother was buried with and your grandfather's gold watch.

That's how David "Grey Eagle" Sanford, a Mohawk from Toronto, describes the way aboriginal people feel about archeologists who remove artifacts and "stick them in museums where other people have to pay to look at them."

As development continues in York Region, more and more aboriginal sites are being disturbed.

Leaving them undisturbed for future generations should be important to all of us, Mr. Sanford said recently.

"It's a greater feeling when you are there and you can see history all over the ground."

Archeology in York Region is often salvage work done on a tight schedule.

"The last thing (developers) want to hear is to hear some archeologist say, 'We're going to hold you back a season,'" said Jo Holden, executive director of the Richmond Hill-based Ontario Archeological Society.

"They're going to say, 'No, you've got six weeks to get it done.'"

The society is excavating a Wendat (Huron) village on some land the Town of Richmond Hill bought from a developer.

The 15th-century McGaw site was supposed to be covered in new homes but "was determined to be so significant it couldn't be just salvage-excavated," said the society's field director, Rob Pihl.

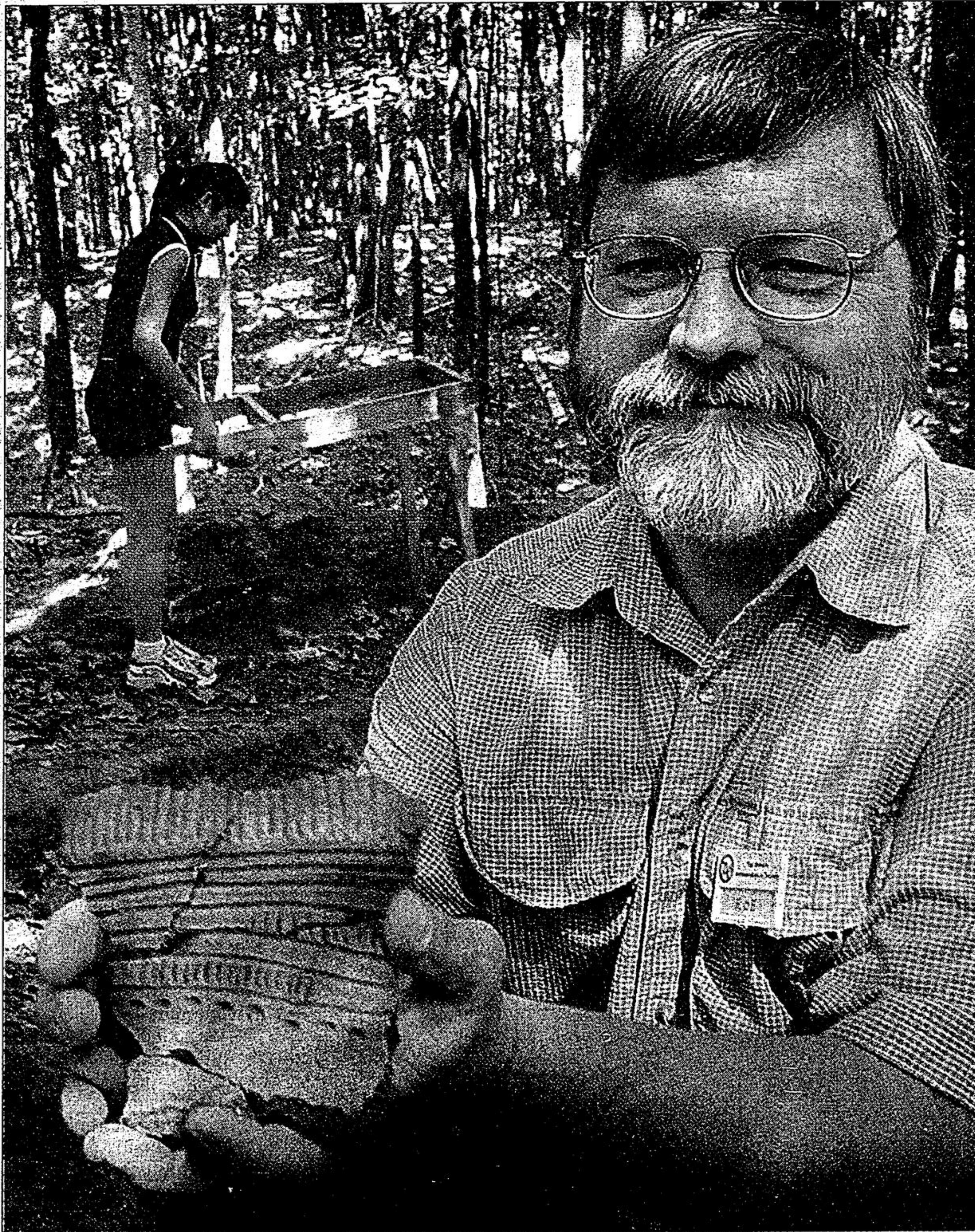
Donna Reznick, an OAS interpretive guide from Richmond Hill, said there is much to learn at the site, where Mr. Pihl believes about 400 people lived in as many as 10 longhouses.

The society supervises digging at McGaw by public school students in the spring and fall, and offers a summer excavation program for interested adults.

"You have to know where you came from to know where you're going," Ms. Reznick suggested.

"I personally think it's important we know what went on, on the land we're taking over."

There are hundreds of known archeological sites in the region, inhabited for thousands of years and part of an aboriginal trade



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Rob Pihl of the York Region-based Ontario Archeological Society holds up an assembled artifact discovered at a Richmond Hill dig this summer. Behind him, student Norangie Carballo sifts for more items.

route called the Carrying Place trail.

Although provincial law now protects aboriginal artifacts, many local sites have been stripped ahead of development and many were destroyed without any investigation.

Some towns have lists of their known sites, but some do not.

One of these is Whitchurch-

Stouffville, where recently a property owner clearing brush discovered what may be a village site on an old portage corridor between the Holland and Rouge rivers, said Mark Carroll, a town councillor.

"We're relying on property owners and developers to identify these things."

If human remains are found, archeologists tend to contact the

nearest First Nation with apparent kinship to the bones.

Often remains are left in place or moved and reburied, said Mr. Pihl, a senior archeologist at Archeological Services Inc.

Still, suspicions remain that unmarked aboriginal graves are being quietly destroyed.

Last year, ASI found material deposited on a Scarborough prop-

erty had human remains in it.

"That can happen. That can be an option a builder or a developer will take, get rid of the evidence," Mr. Pihl acknowledged.

The Chippewas of Georgina Island believe they have many ancestral graves scattered around Lake Simcoe, said Andrew Big Canoe.

Mr. Big Canoe is a band councillor who has warned the Ontario government a proposed road link between Hwys. 404 and 400 is "going to go over some of our burial grounds" in Holland Landing.

Like other aboriginal groups with history in the region, the Chippewa are growing more interested in protecting their past.

"The more we dig into our history and look through the paperwork, the more we're finding out," Mr. Big Canoe said.

There are calls to establish a Native Canadian cultural centre on the Rouge — "a new Ganatsekwyagon," named for a Seneca village that once stood on the river.

Driven from Southern Ontario three centuries ago, the Wendat — who believe a spirit stays to protect a body after burial — are again taking an active interest in their centuries of habitation here.

In 1999, they saw bones of hundreds of their ancestors reburied at Sainte Marie Among the Hurons, a Wendat village recreated in Midland, Ont.

But the bones of the Fairty Ossuary, a burial pit in Markham which yielded up the remains of 512 human beings in the late 1950s, have not been reburied.

After being studied, they were handed decades ago to the University of Toronto, which still has them.

The Wendat are patiently waiting for a reburial, according to Rebekah Tanner, a woman of Wendat heritage from Schenectady, N.Y.

"We just want the right to worship at the places where our ancestors are buried. And not have any more of them dug up," she said.

Looking for links?

Here are some websites that can provide more on York Region's aboriginal heritage:

• www.wendake.com; the home page of the Huron Wendat Nation in Wendake, Que.

• www.newcreditfirstnation.com; home page of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.

• <http://aboriginalcollections.ic.gc.ca/simcoe/community/georgina/>; for a history of the Georgina Island First Nation.

• www.rivemen.ca; a site run by Harvey Kirsch with an extensive record of aboriginal life in the Rouge River system.



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