

Development leaving history in a box

Economic decision sees sites removed rather than preserved

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

It was a community of 400 or 500, growing crops and spearing fish from the Rouge River, so sure of its security it never built a wooden wall to defend itself.

Six centuries ago, villagers of what is called the Robb site ate corn soup from huge ceramic bowls in what is now southeastern Markham.

They decorated pipes with salamander images and traded as far away as Lake Superior for copper beads.

They were a longhouse people, the Wendat. Today, a new civilization is plucking traces of their past from land across York Region.

In the 1950s, archeologists partially excavated Robb. They removed thousands of artifacts and opened the village's probable burial site, a nearby pit containing bones from 512 people.

The more development goes on, the more we realize just how many of these sites there are.

Decades later, the bones are held by the University of Toronto, but the university lost a collection of items from the village in May when workers at its Scarborough campus threw out boxes of artifacts, mistaking them for trash.

And over the past two years, most of Robb has been removed by teams of archeologists so the land it occupied can be cleared for a subdivision and a town park.

In York Region, such a fate for an Iroquoian village is common. Builders here accept salvage archeology as a normal part of the development process, but still opt to remove sites rather than build around them.

"It's an economic decision," said Martin Cooper, senior archeologist at Archaeological Services Inc., the Toronto firm that handles most of the region's development-driven archeology.

"The more development goes



STAFF PHOTO/SIOERD WITTEVEEN

Toronto Region Conservation Authority teacher Margie Kenedy shows various finds from the Huron village stored at the Boyd Field Centre as students from all over southern Ontario, including York Region

on, the more we realize just how many of these sites there are."

Currently, ASI is excavating three sites in Markham and assessing a fourth so they can be cleared for development, the firm recently refused to excavate another site in the town because it was too busy, Mr. Cooper said.

There's assessment work underway for the company on a Stouffville site found just six weeks ago and on two sites in Vaughan; a third site is being excavated in the city, where almost every concession block opened for development has one or two Iroquoian villages on it, said Mr. Cooper, using a term applied to sites inhabited from 1350 to 1500 AD.

During an assessment a year ago along the upper Humber River in Vaughan, ASI found a site inhabited around 1580 with "contact period" goods — European glass trade beads, iron scrap — which mark it as probably the last village built on the Humber by the Wendat (Huron), who left the area and were nearly wiped out by war during the 17th century.

There has been no decision on whether it's going to be protected or excavated, Mr. Cooper, a Thornhill resident, said this week.

He added ASI consults aboriginal groups on all its excavations,



MARTIN COOPER: Archeologist says development uncovers numerous dig sites.

trying to be open about what it is doing. It also publishes findings on each project, though this takes years of work.

"If all a firm does after each excavation is submit the required list of items recovered to the province, he asked, "What's the difference between doing that and just letting the bulldozers destroy the site?"

ASI dominates the local market, however. It has done archeological master plans of known sites and potential ones for York Region, East Gwillimbury and Richmond Hill. It has investigated routes for the pro-

posed Hwy. 427 extension, rapid transit corridors for the York Region transit project and the Bradford bypass.

The bypass is a road link planned between hwy. 404 and 400, crossing the Holland River at a spot locals say was not only an aboriginal encampment but a military outpost during the War of 1812.

"What we found was a big Middle Woodland (400 BC to 500 AD) site right where it's crossing the river," Mr. Cooper said.

In the low-ceilinged basement of ASI's Bathurst Street offices this week, he tapped shelves of bankers' boxes, 40 to 50 of them, filled with items from the Robb site.

Here, too, were boxed items from the Baker site west of Vaughan's sugar bush, the Murphy-Gouldin site around Gamble Road and Yonge Street in Richmond Hill, the Jarrett-Lahmer site south of Canada's Wonderland and many others.

"Some material, we just don't have a place to put it," Mr. Cooper said.

The 280 boxes accidentally discarded by the university were stored in a steam tunnel because there was no room anywhere else, said Marti Latta, an anthropology

professor in charge of lost collections. "By the time I found out what had happened, it was way too late."

Culture Minister Dave Tsubouchi said after he heard of the Scarborough incident, he asked for provincial artifact repositories to be established.

If possible, aboriginal groups with museums of their own should have the items, he said last week. "Obviously, the best place for them would be there."

But if items must be put into repositories, aboriginal groups should have access to them, the Markham MPP said.

The Ontario Archeological Society, whose members performed the original digs at Robb, lobbied 30 years for such a repository and, if one were established, "it would be the only bright light in this whole awful debacle," said Christine Caroppo, president of the Richmond Hill-based group.

Dr. Latta said a central repository is overdue, since "small museums are packed to the rafters," and many items are stored in private garages or basements. The problem is becoming acute as the archeological community ages, she said.

"People think, 'What will happen to these when I retire?'"

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