

Evidence of female presence at Fort Yamhill

Oregon State students continue annual work at important historical site

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Being stationed at Fort Yamhill between 1856 and 1861 was a lonely existence for a Union soldier, says Dr. David Brauner, an Oregon State University anthropology professor who has supervised archaeological excavations at the site since 2004.

"Nobody wrote about these guys," he says while 16 Oregon State students excavate two locations at the fort on Thursday, Aug. 8. "From 1856 to the outbreak of the Civil War, these troops were isolated ... at the end of the supply lines."

However, items long buried that have been unearthed this summer during an annual eight-week field trip for archaeology students have confirmed a much more frequent female presence at the fort than first imagined.

Students unearthed perfume bottles, baleen hair pins, the heel of a woman's shoe, dress buttons and a pendant that indicate women were frequent visitors to the fort. They also found a porcelain marble, indicating that every now and then children might have been present.

"There is so much to learn here," Brauner says. "This is an amazing archaeological site."

Fort Yamhill was constructed in 1856 on a saddle between two hills overlooking the Grand Ronde Valley with a dual purpose – to keep the Native Americans forced on to the Grand Ronde Reservation in check and to also protect the Natives from the continuing influx of white settlers, miners and farmers arriving in Oregon. Approximately 70 soldiers, officers and a surgeon were regularly stationed at the fort.

A row of six whitewashed officer's quarters – four full-sized and two half-sized – sat at the apex of Fort Yamhill, giving officers an unobstructed view of the Grand Ronde Valley to the west, the Yamhill River Valley to the south and any approaching visitors coming from the east.

"The fort had a huge impact on the landscape," says Matt Huerter, park ranger at Fort Yamhill State Heritage Area. "The flag flew 200-foot high and the white buildings all in a row ... you could see the buildings from miles away. For



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Cayla Hill, who is working on her master's degree in historical archaeology at Oregon State University, displays buttons that were recently excavated at Fort Yamhill State Heritage Area on Thursday, Aug. 8. The buttons are from female clothing, indicating that women were present at the fort. Also on display are additional artifacts that have been unearthed this summer.

the Native peoples, it was a constant reminder that their lives had changed forever and they were not in control."

When the fort was decommissioned in 1866, only one of the officer's quarters buildings was preserved, moved down the hill and used as a residence by the property's new owner. All of the other buildings were dismantled or purchased at auction and moved.

Brauner's students this summer have excavated the area behind the commander's house, as well as the foundation of the second house in officer's row, which is half the size of a standard officer's quarters.

Oregon State students have worked for eight weeks, Monday through Friday, carefully scraping off layer and layer of dirt with shovels and jostling the dirt through a wire mesh sifter. They will wrap up their work at Fort Yamhill on Aug. 23.

Their other finds have included a champagne bottle, bulk ink bottle, shards of tea cups and plates, parts of a cast-iron stove and coffee grinder, and many nails. They also found two military uniform buttons

from the Dragoons, the precursors of the cavalry and the earliest soldiers stationed at the fort.

Brauner's theory about the artifacts indicating a female presence at the fort leans toward the second house being used as a place to put up guests, such as fellow Army officers on their way to Fort Hoskins, which was located in King's Valley in Benton County.

"There is not a scratch of evidence that Native women were used as servants," Brauner says, adding that even if Lt. Phil Sheridan had a Native American mistress while he was stationed at the fort, he would not have had her living in officer's quarters.

"They would not have had women who were not their wives here," Brauner says.

From their work since 2004, Oregon State students have found the sandstone foundations for most of the buildings at Fort Yamhill, giv-

ing the Oregon Parks & Recreation Department a definitive layout of the fort circa the middle of the 19th century.

"Archaeology is the first time we have been able to create an accurate map of the fort," Brauner says.

Huerter says that the department hopes to move the surviving officer's quarters building back up the hill and place it in its original location. The building features a bay window facing north, which overlooked the Killimuck Trail, the main trade route between the coast and Willamette Valley used by Native Americans since time immemorial.

"More 'We're in control,'" Huerter says about the fort's commander being able to look out the bay window and see who is coming and going without stepping outside.

Additional plans call for ghost buildings being added and a perimeter fence erected to give visitors a better visual idea of how large the fort was and how imposing it must have been to Natives on the Grand Ronde Reservation.

"This place is in its infancy," Huerter says. "There is so much potential for this to become an amazing heritage site and the archaeology is helping us decide what stories to tell."

Dennis Willey, Willamette District manager for the Parks & Recreation Department, said about \$35,000 is needed to move the commander's house back to its original site. Money for the move is not in the department's current biennial budget and a fundraising effort is beginning.

Brauner says the archaeological work left to do at Fort Yamhill will last beyond his already 38-year career at Oregon State, but that continuing the excavations is important for the history of Fort Yamhill, as well as Oregon and the myriad Tribes moved to the Grand Ronde Reservation in the 1850s.

"Archaeology is the intersection between the past and the modern public. Only two diaries of men who served here survived. Military records can be hit or miss. This is the only way to bring these guys back into the history books," he says.

And the women, too. ■

Youth Education closed between Aug. 12-23

The Tribe's Youth Education Department will be closed between Monday, Aug. 12, and Friday, Aug. 23.

The department will resume programming on Monday, Aug. 26, with a K-12 "last blast" to the beach.

For more information, contact Tiffany Mercier at 503-879-2101. ■

Community members wanted

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde's 477 Employment and Training Program and Land and Culture Department have resources that can be utilized along with community members who have a passion for gardening or want to learn the art of agriculture.

If you are a Grand Ronde Tribal community member and want to be a part of the planning, preparation and cultivation of the Tribal garden and orchard site for next year's planting season, contact Barbara Gibbons at 800-242-8196, ext. 2135, or e-mail barbara.gibbons@grandronde.org. ■

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at the Annual
Contest Powwow!

3rd Weekend in August at the Uyyat Powwow
Grounds on Hebo Rd. in Grand Ronde

We will be hosting an informational booth, so be sure to stop by and find out more about becoming a foster parent!

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For more information contact:
800.242.8196 or 503.879.2039
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