

Microblades: Keys to the mysterious past



Richard Pettigrew, excavation director, finds microblades in the sift. Below, Megan Monson sifts earth for more microblades. They have been digging since June 14.

There's no Lost Ark of the Covenant to be found in the Camas Valley of southwestern Oregon. But there are microblades.

Microblades are tiny elongated pieces of obsidian or other hard stones that ancient peoples set into grooves in wood to make tools for scraping or stabbing.

The origins of the microblades being dug up at the Standley site in the Camas Valley, some 30 miles west of Roseburg, are something of a scientific mystery.

On a visit to the site, the Emerald discovered that attempting to solve that mystery requires a great deal of meticulous, monotonous and decidedly unglamorous work.

"Excavating a site is destroying it," says Richard Pettigrew, director of the Standley excavation. "It's like taking a house apart and making blueprints." Pettigrew is a research associate at the Museum of Anthropology and the highway archaeologist at the University.

The excavation of the site was triggered by impending highway construc-

tion. When the state highway department builds roads with federal financial help — as in this case — it must make sure that important archaeological sites are explored before their construction begins. Pettigrew, by taking a sampling of the area, had previously determined this was such a site.

Pettigrew's 22-member team of archaeologists, students and Native Americans, plans to excavate 25 percent of the crucial area the new road will cover. Five percent of the area that will be covered by new landscaping will also be excavated. Under a contract based on a strict budget, funds for the dig are paid to the University by the state highway department.

In the field, Pettigrew resembles Indiana Jones, at least in terms of dress. The clothes are khaki. A kind of straw safari-type hat shades his stubby face.

But Pettigrew and his team fight disorder, not Nazis. Ground squirrels have tunneled through the site, moving objects from level to level. Cows have fallen into excavations at night.

Above all, however, there is the threat of disorder posed by the digging itself.

The team has been digging since June 14. When the Emerald visited the site early this month there were 11 two-meter square holes, or units, in various stages of excavation.

Each day, two-person teams excavate about four inches in their units.

Workers don't usually make their finds in the units. When one worker takes a shovelful of dirt, he or she dumps it a bucket which is emptied into nested screens hung in a sling from a wooden frame. The second team member swings the screens and dirt to filter the material through one-fourth inch and eighth-inch wire mesh.

For the untrained, the first look into a screen filled with dirt is as exciting as it sounds. But when an expert like Pettigrew starts shaking a sifter and picking through pebbles and other debris, things come alive. As the dust settles, anyone would feel a thrill or two of anticipation.

Suddenly, Pettigrew pulls out some tiny flakes of what he identifies as obsidian, a mineral not native to the Camas Valley. Someone must have traded for the obsidian in the Cas-

ades, Pettigrew theorizes. Obsidian blades are as sharp as the finest steel, although not as long lasting, he says as he carefully slips the flakes into a plastic bag.

"The size of an object is no measure of its importance," he pronounces. Then he asks for the quadrant where the flakes came from and begins to fill in a label on the bag. "State catalogue number... quadrant designation... strata... Level 3, that's down 10 centimeters... elevation, between 98.70-60... date... initials of excavator... mesh of screen."

When all this is done, Pettigrew has the exact three-dimensional location of the flakes. Another piece has been added to the puzzle, another figure has been added to the blueprint.

Out of the same unit earlier in the day came a microblade core — a stone used by the inhabitants of the site to chip microblades. Pettigrew explains that microblades haven't been found before in the southwest part of the state and that they are usually associated with Arctic cultures of Asian origin.

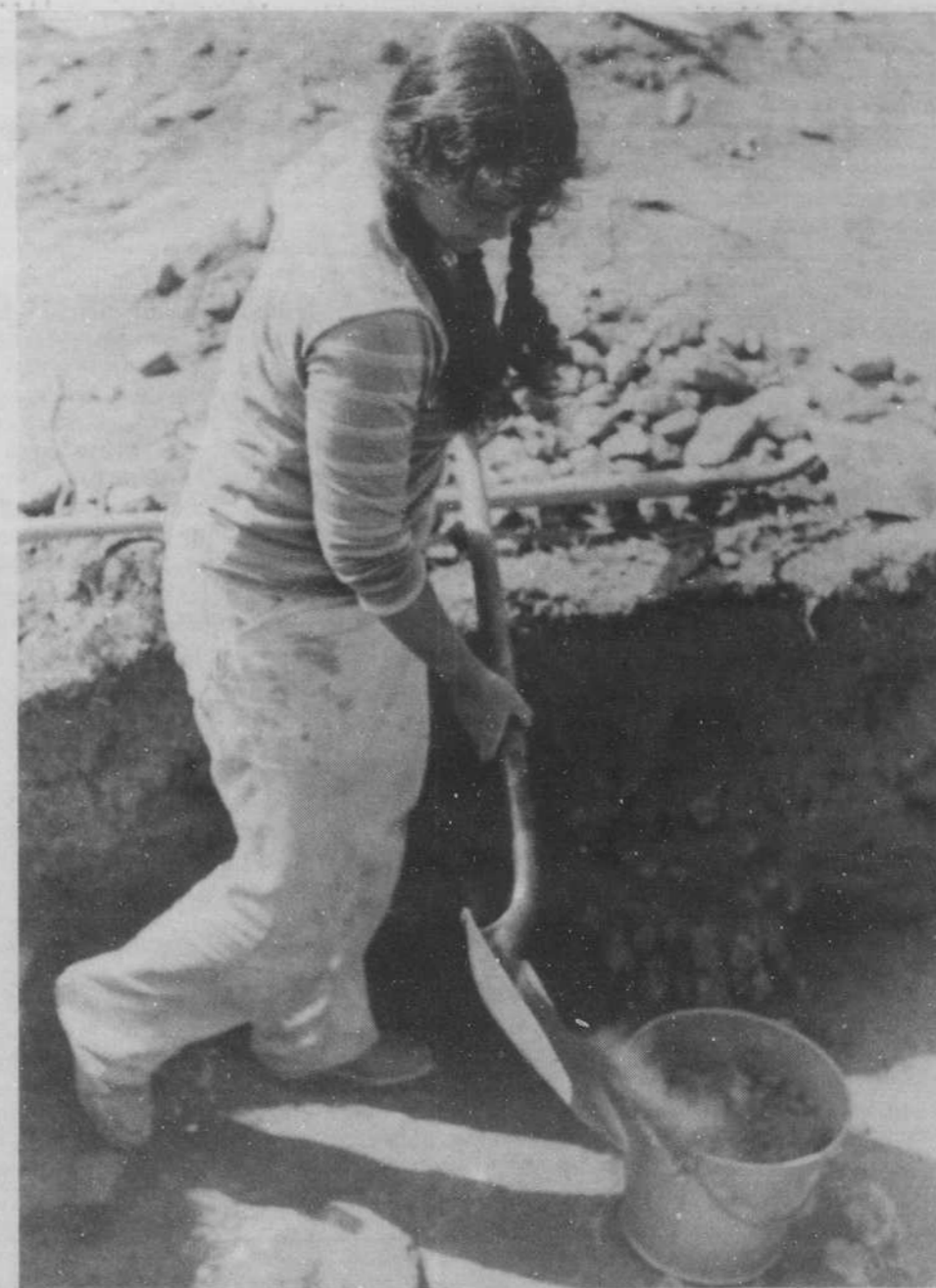
There are so many finds to be made at the Standley site because at one time the area, when it was much flatter than it is now, was an ideal campsite, says anthropology student Tom Connolly, 28. Because the Camas microblades come from the upper levels of the units, they seem to be of more recent vintage than those in the Arctic, he speculates. The technology for making the blades is also different from the Arctic variety, he adds.

"It's exciting when you're finding things, but a test pit where you're not finding anything — that can be boring," says Cheri Vitez, 27, a worker in another unit. A holder of an anthropology degree from the University, she says that "people don't realize how physically hard this is."

The workers, camping out in the playground of the Camas school and using its showers and dining room, are up each morning Monday through Saturday at 6 a.m. They breakfast at 7 a.m., then head for the site in four pick-ups and two station wagons by 7:50 a.m. Quitting time is between 4 and 4:30 p.m.

After dinner, the workers drink beer around the campfire, play cards, write letters, watch the sun go down. Camp life is comfortable but isolated, it's easy to lose track of the outside world. News of events like Hinckley going free comes in via letters or visitors. Going to sleep at 9 p.m. after a day of digging and sifting is easy.

Megan Monson, a University undergraduate, calls the work "mentally straining, you have to do everything perfect." Besides cataloging objects, the workers map each level of a unit and profile and photograph all the



Margaret Chodos carefully digs, preparing dirt for sifting.

walls. They chop out 20-centimeter square block samples and send them back to the lab. Charcoal from campfires is saved and used for dating — so far, it looks as if the oldest objects from the site are 2,000 years old, plus or minus about 100 years. This would seem to confirm a recent theory that migration to the area began much earlier than previously thought.

For three of the team members — who perhaps are descendants of those migrants — there is more to the dig than determining ages or fitting together the pieces of a puzzle.

"On our own initiative, we decided to hire some Native Americans," says Pettigrew. They were selected on the same basis as the other workers, but there was no requirement of previous experience, he adds.

"This is a first for the University," Pettigrew says with pride.

Three members of the Cow Creek tribe were hired, with one having previous archaeological experience.

"I applied because I wanted to learn more about my people," says Linda

Jackson, 22, a Native American artist new to archaeology. She had found microblades before, but hadn't been aware of their significance.

"I feel real good about what's happening here," says another Native American, Mike O'Dell, cultural resource consultant for the University's Natural History Museum. "But I wouldn't want to bother (the site) if it wasn't going to be destroyed."

An experienced digger self-trained in the art of arrowhead and blade making, O'Dell says he thinks of the valley as a spiritual place where he can bring his children.

The non-Native Americans have respect for the area, he notes. Yet besides feeling reverence, for a Native American like himself there's a spiritual here.

Native Americans have been losing their culture, comments Jackson. "We need to start understanding a lot more."

Story by William Kogut
Photos by Mark Pynes

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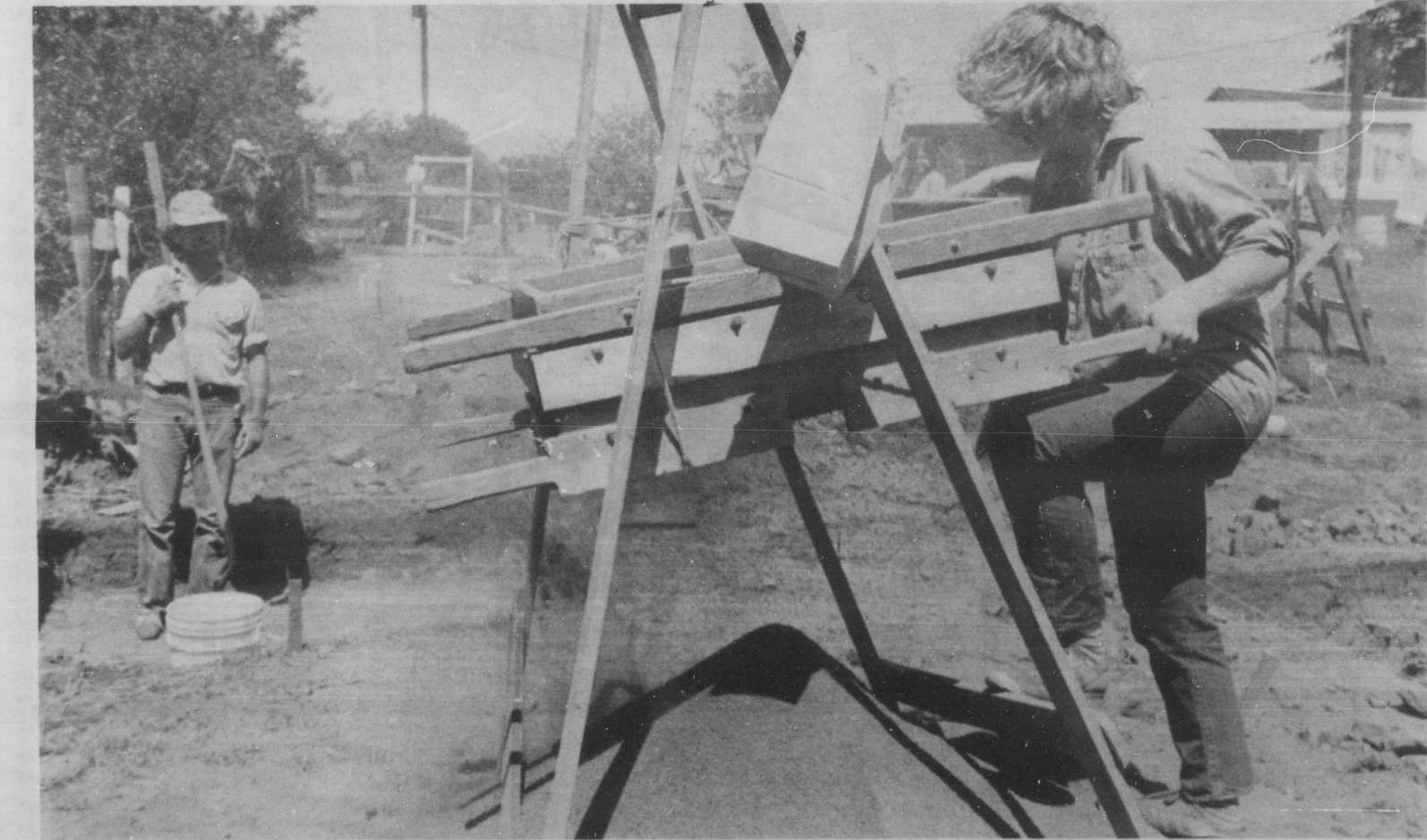
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It has been used for years successfully in Western Europe. At this time the cervical cap is not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Studies are being done to determine its current effectiveness and safety.

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