

HISTORY

Diving Into Yesterday

by Betty Sadtler



SKIP WOOD

Wilburn Cockrell and Dr. Greg McDonald of the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History discuss the removal of saber cat bones from the site.

spring's wall. This five-foot, four-inch Stone Age hunter had been buried in the fetal position, curled around his beautifully crafted spear thrower called an atlatl.

Weeks later, Cockrell brought up the skull of a saber-toothed tiger with its seven-inch canine tooth, vertebrae, thigh, and cheek bone.

Carbon-dating tests verified the remains were 10,300 years old, proof that humans existed at the same time as the saber-toothed tiger. Until then, textbooks said all Pleistocene animals had become extinct before man arrived.

The find also provided evidence of the earliest intentional burial ever discovered in North America and of the earliest known use of a compound spear thrower in the Western Hemisphere.

Archaeological excavation, even on land, is a painstakingly slow, gritty business. In shallow water, it is dramatically more difficult. At 160 feet, where Cockrell and his colleagues have done a lot of digging, the challenges are even more formidable.

Unlike the clear-water springs of north Florida, the water at Warm Mineral Springs is 17,439 parts per million chloride, sodium, sulfate, magnesium, and other minerals. Supplied by several underground streams of the Florida aquifer, about 19,000,000 gallons surge through the cavern daily and flow out into

A STONE AGE HUNTER, spear poised, stalked a saber-toothed tiger near an ancient water hole from which rose clouds of warm sulfurous mist. The man hurled his coral-tipped weapon, striking the great cat. It lunged at the hunter, raked him with its huge claw. Howling with pain, the bleeding cat dragged itself down the slope of the sinkhole to a ledge overhung by rocks, crawled far back into the crevice to hide and lick its wound—and went to sleep for the last time.

The hunter also died, and his tribesmen buried him, curled around his spear thrower, on the same ledge not far from the crevice under the boulders.

That ancient water hole, located about 12 miles from the place we now know as Venice, Florida, is called Warm Mineral Springs and is one of the most significant

Retrieving Florida's history the hard way—under water.

underwater archaeological sites in the Western Hemisphere.

A number of terrestrial archaeological sites are being worked in Southwest Florida—among them digs at Marco Island, Horr's Island, Useppa, Pine Island, and Manasota Key. But the underwater site at Warm Mineral Springs is unique in the archaeological world because it gives new dimension to the settlement and subsistence patterns of early people.

In 1973, W.A. "Sonny" Cockrell, a state underwater archaeologist, retrieved a well-preserved skeleton of a prehistoric man from a ledge 40 feet down the

