

Unique Alaska Native Pre-History

By LAEL MORGAN

There's a joke in the African bush country that goes, "Send more anthropologists. The last one was delicious!"

Alaskans don't go quite that far but the annual spring migration of anthropologists to dig up one's ancestors is not always received joyfully.

It must be conceded, however, that it was the digging of anthropologists that helped substantiate native land claims. And, currently, scientists are piecing together a fascinating pre-history of Alaskan natives. The only problem is the results of their

labors reads more like a mystery than a history.

"There hasn't been enough archaeology done up here," explains Dr. John P. Cook, Department of Anthropology, University of Alaska. "Material is scarce."

Strangely enough, archaeology is generally carried on in more settled areas, he went on to explain. Alaska's wide open spaces have not attracted many scientists and those who have come find the season limited and the going rough.

The oldest skeleton material

(Continued on page 6)

Native Pre-History . . .

(Continued from page 1)

they've unearthed to date goes only back to 400 B.C. but tools and settlement sites have been discovered that date back 11,000 years.

"The Athabascans cremated their dead. The Eskimos preserved theirs but, on the coast, bone material just doesn't keep well," Cook observed.

A settlement spot at Healy Lake is the oldest site of habitation found to date in Alaska, Dr. Cook reports.

"It was a hunting camp, but whether or not it was Athabaskan, who knows? That long ago it's hard to say. You can't really push linguistics back more than 4,000 years.

"The artifact type was different from anything else. The Healy site spear points are unique so far.

"About 8,000 years ago the climate changed quite a bit. This whole valley was treeless grassland, sort of like the northern prairie. It was probably not as high on caribou. More bison and horse and things like that."

The most unusual Alaskan find, so far, was excavation of an Ipiutak settlement at Point Hope in the early 1940s which produced mysterious traces of an unknown people dating back about 2,000 years.

In reviewing the dig recently, Froelich Rainey called the discovery an enigma, for the settlement was unusually large and its artifacts more imaginative and finely tooled than any others.

Skeletons had been preserved with handsomely carved ivory and jet eyes, nose and mouth pieces. And there were other carving — delicate ivory spirals

that scientists have yet to learn the use of.

"But there is really not any area in the state that outshines any other," Dr. Cook maintains. And there are many untapped areas of the state that should hold clues to its history.

"Within the last 2,000 to 3,000 years you have to say the coastal regions in Eskimo and Aleut areas, but before that there are unusually rich areas in any pass like Anaktuvuk because that's where the caribou funneled through."

Because of safeguards in the Congressional Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities, Cook's department has been called in to check ancient settlement sites at Amchitka before atomic testing and along the route of the proposed Alaskan pipeline.

Both projects have unearthed valuable new data but provided more questions, too.

Other old sites may hold the answers but anthropologists worry that some of these may be carelessly destroyed before scientists ever get a chance to investigate them.

In several areas enterprising villagers have been digging artifacts which they sell to the highest bidders, and much historical material leaves the state.

"It's against the law but that doesn't stop anybody," Dr. Cook observed.

Dr. Cook is happy to report he has some native people studying anthropology this year.

"But not enough. I would like more to come into the program, but I know it's not a practical science."