

UA museum's Alaskan archaeological collection

FAIRBANKS—Hidden from public view in warped wooden drawers and drying and cracking in crates in an ancient warehouse is the most extensive Alaskan archaeological collection in the world.

The drawers and crates hold thousands of the standard arrowheads and stone implements which excite mainly professional anthropologists. But, also losing the battle with time are invaluable ivory carvings, a Russian stockade and even Ben Eielson's airplane.

For 14 months, the curator of the University of Alaska Museum's archaeological collection, Jim Dixon, has been struggling to raise the money

and find the time to bring order to mountains of specimens. He estimates it could take as long as 20 years to get the collections "under control."

The UA Museum's Alaskan archaeological collection, Dixon said, is a thousand times larger than the Alaska collections in the huge American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Institution.

However, only a tiny fragment of the collection is on display in the museum's showcases. Dixon said those displays are 10 years old and represent a very limited selection of specimens from Point Hope and St. Lawrence Island Eskimos. Interior specimens are absent.

Dixon said the museum officials are anxious to update the display and make it representative of the many sections and ethnic groups of Alaska. But the improvements are contingent on passage of a bond issue for a larger museum.

A new larger museum is in a proposed university bond package before the legislature. If the legislature and administration approve, the construction proposal will go before voters in November.

Something of an artifact itself, the university museum is the oldest building still standing on campus. Built as a gymnasium, it lacks adequate space and proper facilities for a museum operation. Much worse, the fire marshall has called the building a fire trap.

Some 1,300 cubic feet of archaeological materials are stored in wooden cases and cardboard boxes in the museum. Dixon, touring the rows of wooden drawers in a dim hall, points out many are warped and no longer even open. A flood, when old plumbing broke, last year caused the problem.

In addition to the stacks within the museum, two warehouses supplement the storage space. Dixon avoids reporting the location of the warehouses, or describing them, for fear of vandalism.

Another large concern is the inadequate temperature and humidity controls in the museum and the warehouses. Such controls are needed for preservation of the artifacts. Dixon points out the warehouses undergo temperature changes of 150 degrees Fahrenheit each year.

An historic Russian stockade and Ben Eielson's airplane are at the mercy of the merciless temperature fluctuations, along with the fragile artifacts in the warehouses.

In one building, log hewn by the early Russian settlers in Alaska are piled. Dixon said the logs could be reassembled for display if space were available.

The airplane could also be pulled from the shelter where it rests, pathetically wingless and surrounded by crates and moose antlers.

Those crates contain thousands of artifacts, many with no records to identify them. According to Dixon, a number of misfortunes collided to leave the huge collection with almost no organization.

The lack of a curator until recently to oversee the operation is probably primary among these. However, some fault is also with the specimen collectors. Dixon said many investigators collected with great care, but made no provision for the preservation of the artifacts.

Many times the museum was named as a repository for artifacts by investigators seeking state and federal permits for excavations. But the museum was not notified. Boxes of materials would be left at the museum doorstep, but no funds were left for storage cabinets or personnel to handle the collection.

However, the picture is not entirely grim. Agreements have been reached with the state and federal agencies insuring the museum will be notified when it is named a repository. This should force some consideration of the curating expense of the new artifacts.

Most encouraging of all is the progress Dixon is making with the cataloging of materials. He is using the Smithsonian's system of storing data for retrieval in a computer. The hope is to allow the statewide university system use of the museum.

Dixon has one remote terminal now installed in the museum and he is converting Smithsonian programs to be compatible with the UA computer. He envisions remote terminals around the state to aid with anthropological research.

It is difficult to conceive of the magnitude of the task facing

Dixon. He is scratching the surface in compiling seven bound volumes of records and they cover only about two years of collecting.

Within the crates scattered in the museum and warehouses are at least 50 years of archaeological digging. The university's collection was begun with the vast contributions of Otto Geist.

Alaska is still the center of much anthropological investigation, since it is believed to hold the key to man's migration to the North American Continent, via the Bering Land Bridge. Dixon is currently working on a project aimed at reconstructing the geography and environment of the former land connection between Asia and North America.

The season here is short, but anthropologists are making significant finds. Dixon said artifacts possibly as old as 14,000 years have been unearthed by Dr. Roger Powers and Charles Holmes at the Dry Creek Site located near the town of Healy.

There is even a significant archaeological site on the UA campus. Dixon said specimens similar to those found in Mongolia were discovered here in the 1930's. He said it is still possible to find artifacts such as arrowheads on the UA campus.

As spring unlocks the archaeological treasures for a few months, Dixon and others are looking forward to an active season. At the same time, spring is bringing tourists in unprecedented numbers to view their finds at the museum.

But neither the visitors nor the residents will see even a fraction of the wealth of discoveries stored in the museum. And unless better facilities are built in the near future, Dixon fears many will be lost.

"Archaeological materials are nonrenewable resources," Dixon said.

He explained that as time passes, natural processes and human activity increasingly destroy the clues to man's past.