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LISA GRAY Commentary

Sifting through history

"That's a San Patrice," said Linda Gorski, president of the Houston Archeological Society. Inside a sealed baggie, the small size used for jewelry or drug deals, lay the object of her reverence: a little beige arrowpoint around 10,000 years old — a relic of the Stone Age, among the oldest human artifacts discovered in Harris County. A volunteer had found it the past weekend.

Last winter, the society received 55 truckloads of dirt from Dimond Knoll, an archaeological site near Cypress Creek, now underneath the new section of the Grand Parkway between Interstate 10 and U.S. 290. Since February, the group's volunteers

— mostly retirees, students and families with kids

— have shoveled dirt into shallow boxes with screen bottoms, then sifted each shovelful to see what it concealed. Now, nearing the end of that dirt, the society has amassed three file boxes full of zip-locked artifacts. Many of those ancient finds have to do with hunting: dart tips, spear tips, stone "cherts" and "microflakes" left over from carving. And there's evidence, too, of ancient meals: pottery shards, oyster shells, bison teeth, deer bones, bits of turtle shell. They're tantalizing, those ancient objects. In this part of the world, we're not used to thinking about ancient history or what lies beneath the ground's surface. Coastal-plain Houston has no rock formations, no basements, no bedrock, and sometimes it feels as if the place has no history, either. Our foundations don't actually rest on anything; we just float on the surface.

But those zippered baggies of ancient artifacts, and the volunteers who sifted them, push in the opposite direction. They force you wonder: What was the Stone Age like here, in a place without stone?

Under the Grand Parkway

Normally, archaeological investigations take place at the archeological site itself, not a few miles away, in a cow pasture stocked with longhorns, horses and a white dwarf mule. But this site — officially known as 41HR796 Dimond Knoll — was discovered only because it lay in the way of the Grand Parkway, planned as the outermost of Houston's ring roads.

Like everything else about the Grand Parkway, Dimond Knoll provoked an uproar. Native American tribes demanded that the 10 ancient burials uncovered there be allowed to rest undisturbed. And outside archaeologists complained that the Texas Department of Transportation's excavation — not sifting by hand, but scraping thin layers of dirt and sifting them mechanically — wasn't worthy of such an important site.

"When you scrape, you will find things," University of Houston professor Ken Brown told a Chronicle reporter in November. "But you won't be able to see how they were associated. That is a shame, because we do not know what people were doing 10,000 to 14,000 years ago, and we won't know now."

In the end, the transportation department excavated about 40 percent of the site — roughly four times what it normally would. In a deal worked out with the tribes, the graves were left unexamined, covered with rip-rap and cement; the Grand Parkway now passes over them via a bridge. And to the archaeological society's delight, the department agreed to dispatch much of the site's remaining dirt to a member's ranch.

Out in the pasture, everyone admits, the archaeology is rougher than the methods the Department of Transportation used at the site. The sifting volunteers can't glean information about the geological stratum where an artifact was deposited; that was destroyed when the dirt was dumped into the truck.

But still: The volunteers are finding objects that are 10,000 years old.

Fresh points

In early January, Jason Barrett, an archaeologist who works for the transportation department, was wearing a thick jacket, ski goggles and a goofy Icelandic-knit toboggan. The temperature in the cow pasture that morning was in the low 20s, and even the horses wrapped in their blankets seemed to shiver.

"July and August were worse," Barrett said cheerfully, as he and Gorski rubbed soil through the sifter. "There were mosquitoes, and the dirt baked to the consistency of a sidewalk."

No one seemed to care. In fact, since the project started, the archaeological society's membership has quadrupled,

growing from 35 to 127.

"I got a Charlie rock!" called a volunteer. That was an insider joke, Gorski explained: A Charlie rock is a rock that's not an artifact. In other parts of the world, archaeologists have to take pains to separate stone artifacts from all the regular stones buried alongside them. In Houston, nonartifact rocks are so rare that one volunteer saves them for his rockhound brother, Charlie.

That rarity of "lithic materials," Barrett said, means a lot at Dimond Knoll: All the rocks used for its artifacts had to come from somewhere else. He believes that Dimond Knoll, at the intersection of a land route and water route that leads to the Gulf of Mexico, was a place where people gathered, traveling by canoe or on foot to trade.

Usually, Barrett said, the spearheads, arrowheads and darts that archaeologists find are beat-up, broken and apparently discarded. But here, many points seem fresh — ready to be traded. Barrett suspects that traders hid their remaining inventory at the end of a trading season, so they wouldn't have to haul rock goods back to a place already full of rocks. When those traders didn't return, their inventory caches became the archaeologists' artifacts.

Over the millennia, Barrett believes, the traders' world grew ever more dangerous. The oldest points at Dimond Knoll are made from the highest-quality rocks, imported from places like the Hill Country. Newer ones are more often made from petrified wood, the most common rock-like material in this area, but one whose wood grain resists being shaped. Most likely, Barrett says, that shows that Texas was becoming more populated. More people could mean more hostile tribes between a trader and his customers.

"Oooh!" cooed Barski. She examined a new find: a rock, apparently unshaped by a human hand, but cracked by fire. It was a little mystery: Why had someone brought that rock here from a long way away? Why had it been put in a fire? Was it supposed to keep something hot? She set it aside to be cleaned and discussed later, at one of the society "lab nights" at her house.

Barrett smiled. He enjoys those dinners at Gorski's house, the interaction with all those passionate amateurs.

"It's not that Texas doesn't have lots of archaeological sites," he said. "We do. The problem is that we don't have enough people to study them." lisa.gray@chron.com



Michael Paulsen photos / Houston Chronicle

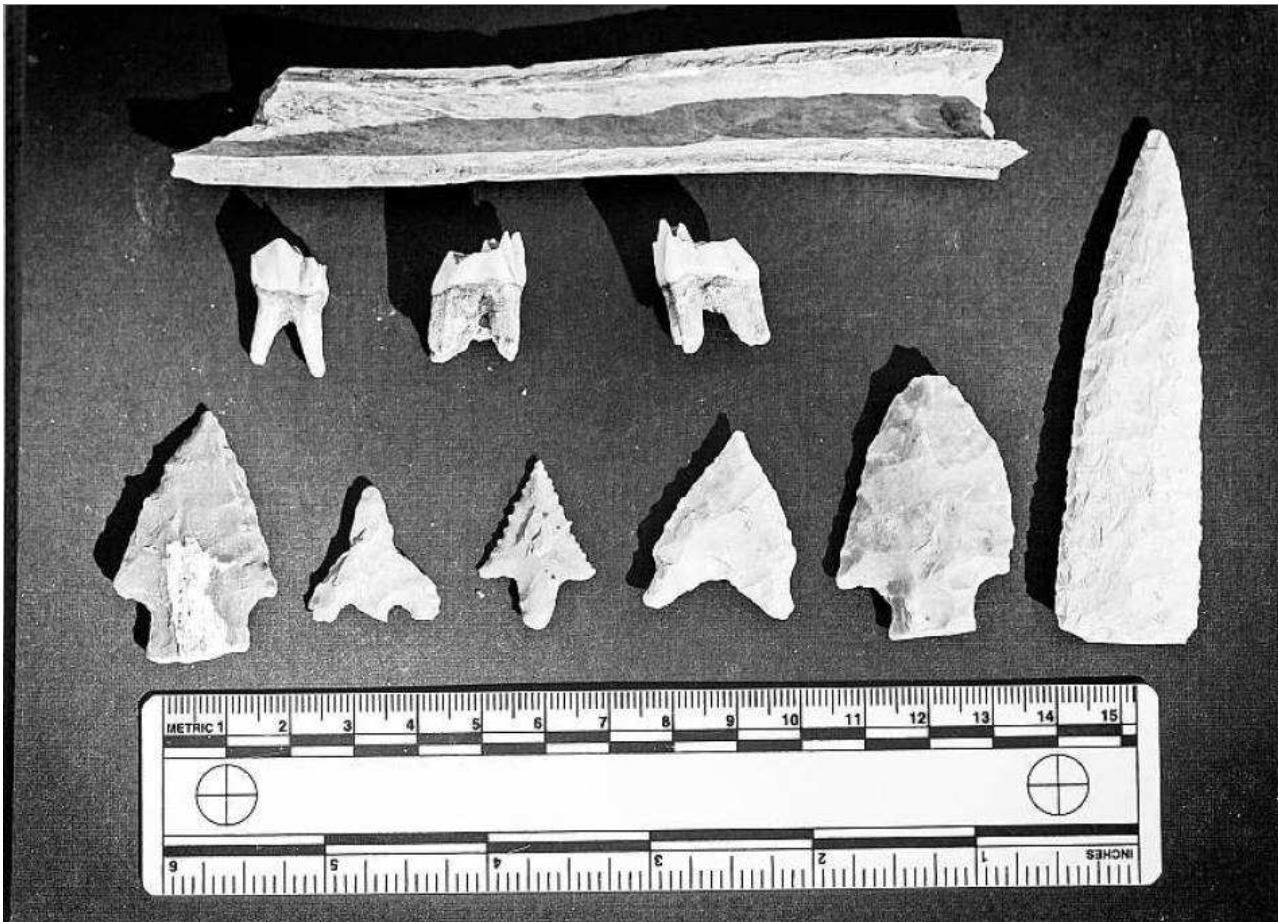
Dimond Knoll

For information about the Houston Archeological Society and its Dimond Knoll screening project, go to txhas.org.



Top: John Rich, right, scoops a load of dirt on a sorting table for Charles Zipprian as volunteers sort through excavated dirt gathered from under the Grand Parkway in Cypress. Above: Linda Gorski holds an ancient Scottsbluff dart point found in the excavated dirt.





Michael Paulsen photos / Houston Chronicle

Ancient artifacts, including dart points, arrowheads, teeth, bones and tools, have been found in the excavated dirt gathered from under the Grand Parkway in Cypress. Hunters and gatherers traded goods more than 10,000 years ago at a creekside mound that's now under the parkway.



John Mancha, from left, Robert Porter and Jim Horner are among the group of volunteers that's sifting through the dirt looking for artifacts.



Volunteers sort through excavated dirt.