Finder of the Forgotten and the Unfindable

Kenneth W. Mulder
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By KENNETH W. MULDER

Born in Oklahoma of Apache Indian lineage, Don "Curley" Gray looks like an Indian, acts like an Indian, and if needed, could live like an Indian.

He could survive anywhere in Florida with his uncanny ability to understand and commune with nature. He has a thorough knowledge and love of Florida’s plant and animal life, birds and fish species. He applies his "logical reasoning" approach in

INDIAN TOOLS AND WEAPONS UNCOVERED

(1) Paleo stone spear; (2) Paleo flint axe head; (3) Bone tools; (4) Shell pendent; (5) Bone Whistle; (6) Decorative pendant; (7) Duck head pendant; (8) Spider web pendant; (9) Sharks tooth; (10) Shell hammer; (11) Flint scraper; (12) Flint axe; (13) Flint knife; (14) Spear point; (15) Stone hammer; (16) Stone hammer; and (17) Stone flresher. All recovered from Tampa Bay near Terra Ceia, 1980-81.

--GRAY COLLECTION
his fervent search for Indian artifacts. His interest in finding and collecting artifacts spans over forty years and his current collection contains unique and museum-quality pieces, many of which have never been shared or photographed.

He can survey the terrain, notice the slightest rise and tell you exactly where an ancient village site is located. Put him out on the bank of any river, stream, spring, lake, pond or swamp and he will search for hours. He will scratch around in the dirt, shell or riverbank with his ever-present broom stick (which has a hook on one end and a fork at the other to catch rattlesnakes). He usually comes up with a projectile point or trinket made by an aboriginal, or a carved amulet, pendant, bead or tool.

He remembers where every item was found and is in the process of cataloging his collection which he keeps at his home on the Hillsborough River, shared with his wife, Ethel, and three faithful watch dogs.

**TREE OF LIFE AMULETS**
Badges of high authority-very rare: (1) Stone; (2) Copper; (3) Human bone; (4) Silver, (5) Silver; (6) Wood, (7) Stone; (8) Stone; (9) Stone; and (10) Stone.

-Gray Collection
Mr. Gray has no formal training in the sciences of archaeology, ethnology or anthropology; however, many scholars and professors have come to view and admire his collection and discuss artifacts. He continually studies Florida history books and articles on the subjects of Indian cultures and artifacts. Recently he purchased a video camera and has taped many of his excursions in his quest for village sites in and around Tampa Bay. Tampans Fred Wolf, Tony Pizzo, artist-photographer Gene Packwood and myself can attest to this man's unique approach and his ability to find treasures of antiquity. Historian-writer Hampton Dunn has included pictures of several of Mr. Gray's artifacts in his books on Florida history.

Sixteenth century Spanish documents, maps and historical writings of "La Florida" referred to the central gulf coast as the "Costa de Caracoles", the Coast of the Shells. The Costa de Caracoles were the villages of the Caloosa and Timucuan Indians, tribes who were similar in looks and customs, but were frequently at war and spoke different dialects according to Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda who was shipwrecked off the gulf coast in 1545 and spent seventeen years with the aboriginals. His Memoirs written in 1562-63 gives us the first reference to these early Florida people. At that time, hundreds of shell mound lined the gulf coast from the Turner River (Chokoloskee) to Cedar Key.

Historians of early Florida believe that contact with Spanish explorers - Juan Ponce de Leon in 1513, Panfilo, de Narvaez and Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca in 1528, Hernando de Soto in 1539, and Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1565 - spread disease and epidemics of chicken pox, diphtheria and measles, together with rape, murder and slavery, reduced the aboriginal population by an estimated 40% in the first 20 years of contact.

The last of the Timucuans and Caloosas were captured in raids by the English from Georgia and the Carolinas and transported north as slaves. The Spanish took many of them to the Caribbean when they ceded Florida to the English in 1763. Some remaining blended in with the tribes moving south and the run-away African slaves that moved into Florida in the late 1770s and became the Seminoles. No Timucuan or Caloosa culture existed after 1800.

WON'T DESTROY SITES

Gone are the aboriginal songs, chants and the rhythm of dancing feet; leather and wood face masks; games, rituals and the medicine cures of the shamans. What is left of their history can be found in museums, in private collections such as Curley Gray's, and along the gulf coast and rivers where these people lived for many centuries.

Curley Gray, one of Florida's foremost avocational archaeologists and collectors of aboriginal relics and artifacts, has been exploring the shell mounds and adjoining village sites of the Florida Indians for the past 40 years. One of his methods of searching is to walk the shoreline at low tide after extreme high tides or storms have occurred which change the character of the beach. He carefully walks the tide line and usually finds shell, stone or bone artifacts. He refers to these items as "shore finds". He has found many items of flint in and around the groves in the Lake Thonotosassa area (where he has open permission from property owners to walk the areas after heavy rains and grove disking). Mr. Gray
has also dived and explored many of central Florida's rivers and springs, finding shell and stone artifacts under water. Hurricanes, high tides and boat traffic continually dislodge or uncover many items and his collection includes many “under water” artifacts.

I have never known Mr. Gray to "pot hole" or destroy any site, although he has visited many sites where this had previously occurred. Mounds have been desecrated and tons of shell have been hauled away to be used for fill and road beds. The entire mound, formerly located at Shaw's Point6 on the south side of the mouth of the Manatee River, lies in the road beds in downtown Bradenton. The foundation of the University of Tampa is from the shell mound which was at the mouth of the Alafia and Bull Frog Creek, destroyed in the late 1890s.

WEEDON'S ISLAND MOUNDS

Many sites are inaccessible to both avocational and professional archaeologists.

INDIAN JEWELRY AND SHAMAN TOOLS

(1) Pestle and Bowl; (2) Pottery Bowl; (3) Bead; (4) Medicine Probe (Shaman’s tool); (5) Bone Pin; (6) Brass Bells; (7) Typical Pendants; (8) Shell Gorget; (9) Conch Dagger; (10) Gold and Mica Spanish Beads; and (11) Spanish Silver Coin.

-GRAY COLLECTION
The Florida’s Light and Power plant on the west end of the Gandy Bridge is built on top of one of the largest mounds in Florida known as Weedon’s Island mound. The very large mound at Phillippi Point is part of the 18 acre Phillippi Park owned by Pinellas County. The Terra Ceia mound was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Karl Bickel; in 1949 they deeded it to the state of Florida for preservation.

Mr. Gray's collection consists of thousands of projectile points, amulets, ear spools, art objects, beads, pottery, scrapers, knives, fish hooks, hammers and other tools gathered from around Florida. Shell tools and objects made from conch, clam and scallop shells are his most treasured pieces. His collection also includes four carved stone heads, three tobacco pipes (shaped as a frog, duck and fish), and two tube pipes, all ingeniously carved with intricate design and found around Tampa Bay. These artifacts afford us a journey into the past of Tampa Bay's early history and tell silent stories of what the aboriginal made with his hands out of the only materials available to him.

Mr. Gray's collection also includes ten "Tree of Life" amulets pictured; five stone, one copper, one human bone, two silver, one wood. Since this photograph was made, he has found two more - one of shell and one of clay. The Florida Anthropology Society uses the Tree of Life as their emblem and their entire Spring 1984 edition of "The Florida Anthropologist" featured the Tree of Life (referred to as tablets) from public and private collections from around Florida. They included 50 known to them and only three from Zone 2 (the Tampa Bay region), two of silver and one of copper. Mr. Gray's collection of Tree of Life amulets was not included since this is the first time they have been shared with the public.

**INDIANS LIKED TAMPA BAY**

Spanish artifacts are very rare, but he has several coins, pottery (glazed inside and out), gold and mica beads, colored glass trade beads, and one small cannon found while diving in the Alafia River in 1950.

Curley Gray has shared his interest in Indian artifacts throughout his life. When the Nature's Classroom museum was active in Sulphur Springs, he frequently accompanied students on field trips to ancient Indian village sites and talked with them about the probable life styles of the aboriginal tribes. He shared many of his artifacts with the members of the Tampa Historical Society at a general meeting in 1980. A portion of his collection was shown in a portable display trailer on the Downtown Tampa Mall when it opened in 1982, a very popular attraction. Presently, he is building several portable display cabinets to be placed in bank and hotel lobbies so many more people will be able to see and appreciate the priceless history of this area.

Recent finds in Titusville and the Perrine area south of Miami have been carbon dated as over 10,000 years old. It's hard to say how old the items in Mr. Gray's collection are, but they are part of our heritage and he is proud to be a trustee of these ancient finds.

"Why did the Indians settle around Tampa Bay?", I asked him. His answer, based on his "logical reasoning", was the mild climate and the food supply. The original Paleo came to Florida in advance of the Ice Age; very little artifacts are left from their years here. But from these people came others who found a food supply in the shell fish of the area that didn't run away when they tried to catch it; clams, oysters, conchs, scallops, blue and stone crabs. This meant that a
village being near the coast or bay, allowed small children and older people to walk out into the water and get something to eat anytime they wanted it. Fish were abundant and easy to catch or trap; ducks and other water fowl were plentiful. There was also a bountiful supply of fresh game (turkey, squirrels and deer), alligators, eel, turtle and snake, as well as wild plants (cabbage palm and the koontie palm from which they made flour for breads).

With little disease and ample food supply, the people of the 28 villages 11 around Tampa Bay had found nature’s paradise.

There are no known ancestors of these historic people, but in collections such as Curley Gray’s, we find evidence of their lives which give us information concerning where and how they lived.

If you are ever invited to join Mr. Gray on one of his searches, grab your boots, sunglasses and go along. It is a thrill just to be there when he discovers an item and his uncanny ability to find these treasures makes him an unforgettable artifact hunter.

NOTES

1 Florence Fritz, Unknown Florida, 1948
2 Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, Memoirs 1562.
4 Karl Bickel, The Mangrove Coast, 1942.
5 Karl H. Grismer, Tampa, 1950.
6 Karl Bickel, The Mangrove Coast, 1942.
7 The Florida Anthropologist, Volume 37 Number 1, Spring 1984.
8 Emma Lila Fundaburk and Mary Douglass Foreman, Sun Circles and Human Hands, 1957.
10 WTVT, Channel 13, Tampa, February 8, 1987.
11 Karl H. Grismer, Tampa, 1950.