Archaeologists uncover town's past

BY KENT JACKSON (STAFF WRITER)  Published: July 9, 2012

The grove of trees obscured signs of civilization, but Michael Roller searched anyway.

Soon he and fellow archaeologist Paul Shackel noticed depressions where foundations had settled from houses that once stood at the end of a path off Canal Street in Lattimer.

Roller, a graduate student from the University of Maryland, and students working with him this summer began digging test pits.

Soon they started marking off 5-foot squares with string and scraping into the past.

While sifting the dirt from each layer that they excavated, they found children's marbles, glass shards, pottery chips, buttons and bits from pipes favored by tobacco smokers.

As they dug deeper, they hit the rock foundations of homes built by coal miners as many as 120 years ago.

The houses started collapsing in the 1940s and '50s. Locals remember one standing into the 1960s. Nowadays, people, if they give the grove a second look, would think nothing ever existed there.

Roller knew otherwise because he spent part of last year sorting through archives that retired Hazleton engineer Joseph Michel collected about Lattimer and other coal towns around Hazleton.

In Michel's records, Roller found maps showing the location of houses north of Canal Street, named for a ditch that once carried water for washing coal.

Contrasted with the evenly spaced homes to the south in the main section of Lattimer, the homes north of Canal Street were scattered haphazardly.

The archaeologists found indications that the homes had changed over the years. Homes drawn on successive maps took slightly different shapes. While digging, they found nails of different sorts and manufacture. Roller and Shackel theorized that miners often repaired or enlarged their homes, perhaps from scavenged materials.

"They were built by inhabitants, maybe with the help of the company. Maybe not," Shackel said.

Coal companies like the Lattimer Coal Co., which began with the formation of the village in 1869, commonly sold blocks of land for miners to build on.

In Lattimer, miners of Italian descent settled south of the main road. The miners who lived north of Canal Street where the excavators worked were Eastern European, Shackel said.

A professor and chairman of anthropology at the University of Maryland, Shackel led a dig in 2010 at a site in Lattimer where sheriff's deputies shot to death striking miners participating in a labor march on Sept. 10, 1897. Outcry over the massacre won sympathy for the United Mine Workers and other laborers who wanted to organize nationwide.

Roller helped with the digging at the massacre site in 2010 and decided to make Lattimer the topic of his thesis.

In his research, Roller concentrates not on the massacre but on development of the village afterward.

While combing through Michel's archives, Roller found records from approximately 2,400 men who worked for Pardee Coal.

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People can search the database to find copies of records of their relatives.

Then "they can tell us more information about their ancestors," Roller said.

Personal history

Bev Hendricks wonders about the people who used to live in Lattimer now that she is helping to excavate the lost village.

An undergraduate at Bloomsburg University who lives in Shamokin, Hendricks is among the students who joined the six-week field school that Roller and Shackel based at Lattimer. In their rented house in Hazleton, the kitchen doubles as a laboratory.

At the dig, neighbors who run a catering business served them lunch. Two dogs, Thor and Myley, belonging to the owner of the property being excavated, visit most afternoons.

Willie Vitz and his wife, Michelle, bought the land to add to the yard of their house on Canal Street two years ago without knowing about its historical significance.

"I had an idea there were buildings there. I had no idea what they were for," said Vitz, who has been talking to the archaeologists since then. "I learn a lot about these guys - mining conditions, how the workers worked. My father's father died in the mines. They actually got me the death records."
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Vitz's grandfather, Joe Vitz, died in a Glen Lyon mine when his father, also named Joe, was 2.

Likewise, Hendricks said digging at Lattimer put her in tune with her descendants, including a great-grandfather who belonged to the secret society of Irish miners - the Molly Maguires - that used guerrilla tactics against mine owners.

Excavators with the training that Hendricks and other students gained this summer can work on archaeological digs led by college researchers. They also find jobs investigating sites for historic objects before construction projects begin and work for government agencies like the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Hendricks wanted to specialize in cultural anthropology of religions, but the work in Lattimer and thoughts about her grandfather led her to consider a career that merges archaeology and union history.

"Does the current population realize what they're losing when unions lose their power?" she said.

While holding a square screen full of soil that she was sifting, Hendricks recalled the thrill of unearthing her first artifact, an ordinary nail.

Her enthusiasm continued when she found more interesting items such as a doorknob with a smooth, brown coating.

"I'd just love to know how many people touched that, turned the handle that this sat on," Hendricks said while the knob rested on the upturned palm of her gloved hand. "Were their hands dirty? Were they miners? Were they wives going out for their husbands? Were they kids going out to play? It makes you look at the past a lot differently."

Overall view

Archaeologists tend to home in on small objects - the doorknobs and baubles that they unearth - but at Lattimer, Roller said he wants to appreciate how the features of the land shaped the lives of the people who lived there.

A culm bank separated the Italian section from the Eastern European enclave, Roller said. Ice houses dug into the sides of the bank still release cool air when he walks by.

Each family would have had an outhouse or privy. A map shows them 105 feet from the homes. The archaeologists haven't found any, but hope to. Families used outhouses as hiding places so they can be a source of curiosities for archaeologists.

Archaeologists haven't yet found the well or wells that supplied the village.

One of their excavations, however, uncovered a rough dirt bottom beneath the topsoil.

Shackel said the plot was a garden made uneven by shovels.

A roughly circular patch of different-colored soil within the garden might be where a post once stood to prop up tomatoes or beans, or a fence that penned in domestic animals or kept out wild ones.

Mining families planted gardens on most of their yard.

To get a better idea of what they raised, Shackel plans to send soil samples to a specialized laboratory.

The lab will place the soil into a barrel with circulating water. As the soil sinks, the seeds and pollen grains will float to the top for technicians to analyze, he said.

A few feet from one of the square excavation units, families built up the ground by dumping ashes from their coal stoves.

The student excavators also found a thin layer of ash, an indication of fire, inches below the surface but above the foundation of a home. Perhaps the house burned. Perhaps it collapsed and the ruins burned later.

"The settlement was close by the mines. There would have been lots of noise and dust," Roller said as huge trucks operating on the upturned palm of her gloved hand. "Were their hands dirty? Were they miners? Were they wives going out for their husbands? Were they kids going out to play? It makes you look at the past a lot differently."

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