

BY ROBERT MARX

An amateur archeologist, working 230 feet under water in a treacherous sinkhole, has discovered skeletons which prove that men lived in sub-arctic Florida in the age of the woolly mammoth

AMERICA'S 12,000- YEAR-OLD MAN

Since the beginning of recorded history no legend has so captivated the imagination of mankind as that of the Fountain of Youth—a fountain or spring whose waters would miraculously restore health and youth to whoever bathed in them. Best known of the searchers for the fabled fountain was the Spaniard, Ponce de Leon, and many historians conclude that Warm Mineral Springs, a fresh water spring or sinkhole near Venice, Florida, was his goal. Ironically, it is in the sulphurous waters of this spring that the oldest known human skeletal remains in the Western Hemisphere have recently been found.

Very little is known about primitive man in this hemisphere; it is believed that nomadic hunters crossed over from Asia during the last Ice Age, probably around 15,000 years ago, before the land bridge across the Bering Strait was submerged by melting glaciers and a rising sea level. From indisputable archeological evidence it appears that Early Man had migrated southward and was living in areas of New Mexico and Texas about 11,000 years ago. However, some scholars contend that man arrived in North America much earlier, basing their theories on rather controversial archeological evidence.

Prior to the recent discoveries made in Warm Mineral Springs it was well believed that man did not reach Florida until about 3,500 years ago, but we now know that Stone Age men were living in caves in Florida as early as 12,000 years ago, eking out a miserable existence in a climate similar to that of Minnesota today.

The revolutionary new knowledge about Early Man, which evidence in the Springs has yielded, came to light chiefly because of the determination and devotion of a single man. Colonel Bill Royal has fought against great odds for 15 years to prove that man lived in Florida during the last Ice Age. This persistent citizen-archeologist grew up near the sea and has been skin diving most of his 69 years. During the 22 years he was an Air Force pilot he traveled extensively and dove all over the world. His interest in history and archeology was kindled in 1955 when he discovered a number of ancient shipwrecks off Turkey in the Mediterranean. After retirement in 1958, he settled near Venice, Florida, and began diving in many of the limestone sinkholes, of which there are an estimated 5,000 in the state.

On his first dive in Warm Mineral Springs, Royal was astonished to find that there were large stalactites hanging from the roof of many of the

submerged caves, an indication that at one time they were above water. Digging in the sediment of a cave 43 feet below the surface, he discovered several human skeletons and a large number of bones of animals which were extinct since the last Ice Age. Royal, very excited by his find, contacted a geologist who studied the caves and determined that the stalactites had been formed between 11,000 and 20,000 years ago. He then turned over the bones to an anthropologist, but both bones and scientist disappeared. Royal had to start all over.

During the following months he unearthed from the sediment in several caves a number of spearheads, two bone needles, various animal bones which had been worked into tools, and the remains of five more human skeletons. Finally, an archeologist from the University of Florida paid him a visit, and, after a cursory visual inspection, pronounced the artifacts and bones to be 500 years old.

During the summer of 1959, Chet Huntley sent an NBC television crew down to film Royal at work in the Spring. Dr. Eugenie Clark, a well-known marine biologist who specializes in shark studies, was diving with him, and while filming was in process they discovered another human skeleton. This one had a complete skull containing the brain. The high hydrogen sulfide content of the 87-degree water in Warm Mineral Springs means that there is no oxygen below 12 feet, and this anaerobic condition accounts for the remarkable preservation of the brain and other organic material found. Carbon-14 dating revealed that the skull and brain were about 10,000 years old. The oldest extant brain previous to this find was less than 2,000 years old, so this discovery created a great deal of excitement in the scientific community.

However, instead of receiving a note of gratitude from the academic establishment, they were accused of carrying off a hoax. One expert stated that Royal had found the skull in the Old World, planted it in the Spring and faked its discovery for the sake of the television program being filmed. Here was sound evidence that man was in Florida about 8,000 B.C., but no one—at least not the experts whose opinion counted—would believe it. Royal was stunned.

Anyone else would have thrown in the sponge at that point, but not Bill Royal, although he would have to wait many more years before the experts admitted his evidence and revised the account of American prehistory. Feeling that until he could convince a qualified archeologist to work in the Springs he was batting his head against a stone wall, Royal

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spent more than 5,000 hours exploring the Spring on his own, from its upper levels down to the bottom at 230 feet. Instead of bringing bones and artifacts to the surface, he left them *in situ*, hoping eventually he could convince an archeologist to examine them. Keeping amateur sport divers away was not easy, and several times his sites were plundered.

Diving in sinkholes and caves is one of the most dangerous kinds of diving and should never be attempted by the inexperienced. In the past decade at least 400 divers have perished in sinkholes; I have had the unpleasant job of bringing up the bodies of a number of these victims. Most of the accidents occurred when a diver lost his way exploring deep caves in the inky sinkholes and ran out of air. The indomitable Royal has had several brushes with death in Warm Mineral Springs, and walks with a limp resulting from a near fatal case of the dreaded bends. At the bottom of the sinkhole, at 230 feet, is the entrance of a large tunnel which hydrographers have measured to a depth of 3,000 feet, and through which nine million gallons of water flow into the Spring daily. On previous dives Royal had explored the entrance of the tunnel and rigged a safety line connecting it to another line rising to the surface. On the day of the fateful dive he got lost in the tunnel. The safety line he was holding parted and he was holding the end and going deeper into the tunnel. Although he had a strong light, visibility was nil because of the sediment stirred up by his swimming. By the time he managed to find his way out of the tunnel, his air supply was exhausted and he sped frantically for the surface. Twenty feet off the bottom his foot became snagged in the broken line, holding him for precious seconds, until he freed himself. Normally he would make a stop at 30 feet and another at 10 feet to decompress, but on this dive he had no air left. By the time he reached the surface with bursting lungs, he was in severe pain and suffering from the bends. Fast action by his wife and friends saved his life. They rushed him to the nearest decompression chamber in Fort Lauderdale, and he recovered fairly well.

On another dive Royal ran into a living remnant of the prehistoric past:

a six-foot alligator. The gator didn't take too kindly to being dragged from his solitary lair and bit deeply into Royal's right arm, which still bears the scars of this encounter. Rather than get medical attention for his badly lacerated arm, Royal depended on the reputed healing qualities of the spring water to cure him.

In March of 1971, after Royal's discoveries had been brought to the attention of Florida's politicians, Carl Clausen, then the underwater archeologist for the state, was sent to the spring to dive with Royal. Clausen was skeptical at the outset and told Royal so. He spent a week excavating an undisturbed section of the floor of one of the caves and discovered several human bones beneath seven feet of sediment which were dated as being 10,300 years old. This should certainly have brought an end to Royal's frustrated quest for acceptance. Here was a qualified archeologist finding the oldest human bones in North America. However, at Clausen's request the find was kept quiet; he promised to return and undertake further excavation on a larger scale.

Several months later Clausen did indeed return with a large team and plenty of equipment, but to Royal's great surprise, announced that he would work in Little Salt Springs, a sinkhole three miles from Warm Mineral Springs. Royal had already explored this sinkhole and recovered artifacts, human and animal bones—none of which were more than 5,000 years old. Furthermore, scores of sport divers had recovered untold numbers of artifacts so that it was far from being an undisturbed site. After two months of hard work and the expenditure of a lot of money, Clausen discovered that Royal was right; nothing they found was more than 5,000 years old.

A year and a half later Clausen was replaced as State Underwater Archeologist by Dr. Wilburn "Sonny" Cockrell. Unlike Clausen, whose specialty was shipwrecks, Cockrell's chief interest was in early man in North America. Like Clausen, he was hesitant about working in Warm Mineral Springs, since many scientists still labeled Royal a crackpot. Cockrell approached the project in a professional way and, rather than collecting bone fragments or artifacts on his first dives, he carefully gathered sediment and pollen samples surrounding these items. Most of the samples dated between 10,000 and 12,000 years old. Cockrell realized that it was conceivable that bones and artifacts could have been planted in the spring, but certainly not

hundreds of tons of sediment and deep layers of extinct vegetation. Thus, Cockrell was convinced he had the opportunity of a lifetime.

Soon, his hunch paid off. Near the entrance of a cave and quite close to the spot where Royal had found the skull and brain, the archeologist discovered a neat pile of large stalactites which appeared to have been arranged by man. Digging around the perimeter of the pile he located a number of human bones and concluded it was a burial pile. Aware of the important implications if the bones proved to be as old as the sediment and pollen samples he had collected, he prudently enlisted the assistance of several other qualified scientists.

In February of 1973, Cockrell initiated a careful and meticulous excavation of the burial with the help of Dr. H. J. Huppe, an underwater archeologist from Arizona State University, and Dr. C. Vance Haynes, a geologist from Southern Methodist University. Before they could begin excavation, three large rocks, weighing a total of seven tons, which had fallen from the roof of the cave and lay on top of the stalactites, had to be moved. Using 55-gallon fuel drums filled with air, the first two stones were lifted without difficulty. However, as the third rock, weighing four tons, was lifted, the air suddenly escaped from one of the drums and the boulder careened down through the inky water and landed inches away from one of the divers.

The rest of the excavation went well and the bones and complete skull of a man were recovered. They were dated at 12,000 years old, which makes them the oldest human remains found in the Western Hemisphere.

Lack of funds hampered Cockrell in continuing his work in the springs until last October, at which time I was invited to spend a few days with him. While collecting pollen samples in the burial area, Cockrell found an *atlatl*, a spear thrower hook, a simple but effective implement that enabled a man to hurl his spear from a relatively safe distance, yet with enough force to pierce the tough hide of his quarry. Such tools were known to be used in Asia as long ago as 8,000 B.C., but had not been thought to be in use at such an early date in this hemisphere.

Cockrell's and Royal's work is far from completed, but they have already revised the history of early man in the Western Hemisphere. ■

Colonel Bill Royal and Dr. Wilburn "Sonny" Cockrell, with their assistants, surface after an arduous dive for artifacts and fossils in Warm Mineral Springs, Florida.