

FROM FILES

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article contains many incorrect statements, data, etc.

Faked photos were used - when I discovered Regel & Marx setting up the staged shots, I demanded that they stop and told Marx not to use them. WJF

# OLDEST AMERICAN FOUND

Diving in the black waters of a Florida sinkhole is more dangerous than swimming with sharks in the ocean and many divers have lost their lives in recent years.

BY BOB MARX



Sonny Cockrell holding a 9,000 year old skull.

**S**ince the beginning of recorded history, no legend has so captivated the imagination of mankind as the Fountain of Youth—a fountain or spring whose waters could miraculously restore health and youth to whomever bathed in them. Many historians over the years have concluded that Warm Mineral Springs, a freshwater spring near Venice, Florida, was in fact this fountain. 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, when there was a land bridge across the Bering Strait. The land bridge was later submerged when the glaciers melted and the sea level rose. Indisputable archeological evidence indicates that early man 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 at a much earlier date. Recently, a scraper made of caribou bone was discovered in Canada's Yukon Territory and dated by the Carbon 14 process as being 27,000 years old. Since the scraper had been washed out of a river bed and couldn't be checked in situ, where it had lain, against surrounding geological evidence, and because there is a possibility that the ancient bone may have been found by an Indian at a later date and fashioned into a tool, conservative archeologists do not accept this find as

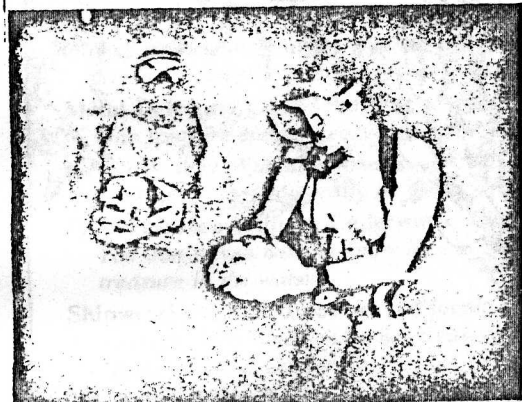
proof of man's earlier presence in the western hemisphere.

It was generally believed that man did not reach Florida until about 3,500 years ago, but we now have evidence 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. They lived in competition with a fearsome array of creatures: mammoths, mastadons, giant ground sloths, and saber-toothed tigers. Those early men depended on the meat of these beasts for food in an era long before the dawn of agriculture.

This revolutionary new knowledge about early man 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-archaeologist 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 has been diving 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 some of the limestone sinkholes in the state, of which there are an estimated 5,000.



Sonny Cockrell holding a 10,000 year old artifact.



Two divers surfacing with two 10,000 year old skulls.

On his first dive in Warm Mineral Springs, Royal was astonished to find that there were large stalactites hanging from the roofs of many of the submerged caves — an indication that at one time they were above water. Digging in the sediment of a cave 45 feet below the surface, he discovered several human skeletons and a large number of bones from animals which have been extinct since the last Ice Age. Excited by his find, Royal contacted a local geologist and together they studied the caves and determined that the stalactites had been formed between 11,000 and 20,000 years ago. Royal then turned the bones over to an anthropologist, but both the bones and the scientist disappeared and Royal had to start all over again.

During the following months he unearthed a number of spearheads, two bone needles, various animal bones which had been worked into tools, and the remains of five more human skeletons. Elated, Royal wrote to numerous experts but had no favorable replies. Finally, an archeologist from the University of Florida paid him a visit, and after a rather cursory visual inspection, pronounced that the artifacts and bones were only 500 years old. He told Royal that he was a fool to entertain the notion that man had lived in Florida during the last Ice Age. Royal continued undaunted, but nobody would listen to the man who began to be known as "that crazy diver."

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 the filming was in progress, they discovered another human skeleton — with a complete skull containing the brain. The high hydrogen sulfide content and the 87 degree water in Warm Mineral Springs means there is no oxygen below a depth of 12 feet, which 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. Previous to this find, the oldest extant brain was less than 2,000 years old, so this discovery created a great deal of excitement in the scientific community. However, instead of recognition from the academic establishment, Royal was 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 at about 8,000 B.C., but no one — at least not the experts whose opinion counted — would believe it.

Anyone else would have thrown in the towel at that point, but not Bill Royal. He would have to wait many more years before the experts would admit his evi-

dence and revise their account of American pre-history. Unable to convince qualified archeologists to work in the spring, Royal spent more than 5,000 hours exploring the spring on his own from its upper levels down to the bottom of 230 feet. Instead of bringing the bones and artifacts to the surface, he left them *in situ*, hoping that eventually he would be able to convince an archeologist to examine them. Keeping amateur sport divers away was not easy, and several times his sites were plundered at night.

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, and on a number of occasions I have had the unpleasant job of bringing up the bodies. Most of the accidents occurred when the diver lost his way exploring deep caves in the inky black sinkholes and ran out of air.

The indomitable Royal has had several brushes with death in Warm Mineral Springs and walks with a limp as a result of a near fatal case of the dreaded bends. At the bottom of the sinkhole 230 feet down is the entrance to 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 every day. On previous dives Royal had rigged a safety line from the entrance to the tunnel to another line rising to the surface. On the day of his fateful dive he was exploring the tunnel when the safety line he was holding came untied. 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. 20 feet off the bottom his foot snagged in the broken line, holding him for precious seconds until he was able to free himself. Normally he would have made stops at 30 feet and ten feet to decompress, but on this dive he was completely out of air. By the time he broke the surface he was in severe pain and suffering from the bends. The fast action of his wife and friends saved his life. They rushed him to the nearest recompression chamber in Fort Lauderdale where 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 intruders and bit Royal on his right arm. Rather than get medical attention for his badly lacerated arm, Royal let the reputed healing qualities of the spring water cure him. Even so, Royal's arm still bears the scars of this encounter.

Thousands of persons, many from Europe, have come in ill health, on crutches and in wheel chairs to Warm Mineral Springs for the past six decades. They bathe in the warm waters and

*faked*

many have been cured of arthritis, rheumatism, and other kindred ailments, so perhaps there's something to the legend of the Fountain of Youth after all.

In March of 1971, after Royal's discoveries were brought to the attention of Florida politicians, Carl Clausen, then the underwater archaeologist 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 about 10,300 years old. This should have brought an end to Royal's frustrated quest for acceptance. However, Clausen requested the find be kept quiet and promised to return in a few months to 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 although he had recovered artifacts and bones from that site, none of them had been more than 5,000 years old. Furthermore, scores of sport divers had already recovered a number of artifacts from Little Salt Springs so that it was far from being an undisturbed site. After two months of hard work, Clausen discovered that Royal was right; nothing they found was more than 5,000 years old.

About a year and a half later Clausen was replaced by Dr. Wilburn "Sonny" Cockrell. Unlike Clausen, he was hesitant about working in Warm Mineral Springs since many scientists still considered 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 the artifacts. Most of the samples dated from between 10,000 and 12,000 years. Cockrell reasoned that although it was conceivable that bones and artifacts could have been planted in the spring, certainly hundreds of tons of sediment and deep layers of extinct vegetation could not have been. Cockrell was convinced he had the opportunity of a lifetime.

Cockrell's hunch paid off. Near the entrance of a cave, and quite close to the spot where Royal had found the skull and brain, the archaeologist discovered a neat pile of large stalactites which appeared to have been arranged by man. Digging around the perimeter of the pile

tance of several other qualified scientists.

In February of 1973 Cockrell initiated a careful and meticulous excavation of the burial site with the help of Dr. R. J. Ruppe, 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 had to be removed from the pile of stalactites. Using 55 gallon fuel drums filled with air, they were able to lift the first two stones without difficulty. However, as the third rock was being lifted, the air suddenly escaped from one of the drums and the boulder careened down through the inky water and landed just inches away from one of the divers. The rest of the excavation went well, and the bones and complete skull of a man dating from 12,000 years ago were recovered.

Last October, I was invited to spend a few days with Royal and Cockrell. While collecting pollen samples in the burial area, Cockrell found an atlatl — a simple but effective implement that enabled early men to hurl their spears from a relatively safe distance with enough force to pierce the tough hides of their quarries. Such tools were known to have



Diver fanning away mud which covered this 9,000 year old skull.

*faked*

been in use in Asia as long ago as 8,000 B.C., but this carved shell atlatl is the oldest artifact ever found in association with human remains in America.

Cockrell's and Royal's work is far from completed, but they have already revised the history of early man in the western hemisphere and proved that Stone Age man did indeed live in Florida at least 12,000 years ago. Who knows what future excavations may contribute to the sketchy outline of prehistoric man's existence. □

