

Sabre tooth cat remains recovered from Springs

WMS — The discovery of a sabre tooth cat in Warm Mineral Springs, on April 2, and its recovery Wednesday, June 15, may be the first time in North American archaeology that such an animal has been found in the same strata as ancient man, according to W.A. (Sonny) Cockrell, state underwater archaeologist.

They may have existed together, even though they may not have seen each other, Cockrell commented.

The bones of the ancient creature were brought up from the depths of Warm Mineral Springs by Cockrell and Larry Murphy, dive chief and assistant archaeologist. The two men have been working the site during the last few months.

Assisting in the recovery of the remains of the sabre cat were Mike Wheeler, son of Mr. and Mrs. George Wheeler, who was on underwater cable duty; Stefan Roundy, a volunteer worker diving and taking still pictures; Sandy Herron, son of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Herron, acting video technician; and Tom Nielson, part of the ground crew working topside.

Cockrell said he wanted to prove that man and animal were here at the same time. A tree root intermixed in the bones of the sabre cat will be used to date the find. A root found at the 45-50 foot level with the cat would indicate that the water in the sinkhole was below that level in times past. The cat was under an overhang, which ruled out the possibility of the cat falling into the hole.

BROUGHT UP were pieces of the sabre cat skull, including the face, neck, thigh, pelvis or shoulder blade, arm, maxilla with two teeth intact, vertebrae, and a canine (tusk). No lower jaw pieces have been found yet.

The tip of the canine had been broken off, possibly even before the animal died, said Cockrell, but the remaining tip was broken by vandals some time ago, Cockrell noted. These recovered bones will be carbon dated.

Cockrell said there are more bones still beneath the water but additional excavation will be necessary to remove all of it. However, he said he feels there will be enough recovered to reconstruct the animal.

He said the tree root found with the bones of the cat is possibly 12 thousand years old. The find is not a tiger but is a cat, Cockrell said. The canine recovered is knife sharp and, along with a piece of the neck bone, shows that the sabre cat was a massive animal. Cockrell said the cat will date between 11,000 and 18,000 years before present.

THESE ANIMALS were living in Florida during the ice age, Cockrell said. The remains were preserved by the mineralized water in Warm Mineral Spring. The water at the time of the ice age was 90 feet lower than it is now. The glacier melting covered this.

On March 6, 1976, Cockrell made a "significant scientific find" when he carefully uncovered and gently removed in two pieces the mandible (lower jaw) of a human at the 40-45 foot level. The mandible was brought up with nine teeth — four on either side of the jaw and a loose one, while a tenth was lost below, Cockrell said at the time.

The same day a giant ground sloth, which had been located and mapped, yielded its remains. As the ground crew watched via video, Greg McDonald, from the Florida State Museum, carefully removed the bones of what he thought was a young ground sloth.

According to McDonald, the Megalonyx (great claw) originated in South America, migrated some 10,000 years ago to this continent, and was a grass and leaf eater, which roamed the countryside. The sloth was described as a relative of the armadillo and ant eater, because during the course of evolution, the Megalonyx went in two directions, some becoming hairy and others armored.

What seems to prove that the sabre tooth cat, the giant ground sloth, and humans lived at the same time, is the fact that all three were found in the same strata.

MURPHY SAID the cat was larger than the modern lion and had a short tail. He said no one knew what color the animal was because no one had ever seen one, even though junior high school book show Indians hunting the cats. He said the discovery of the sabre tooth cat was probably "the first time in the hemisphere that man has been actually associated with the beast."

Diving for more than one hour the archaeological team proceeded to recover the sabre cat's remains with video taping, recording the entire procedure. Murphy maintained

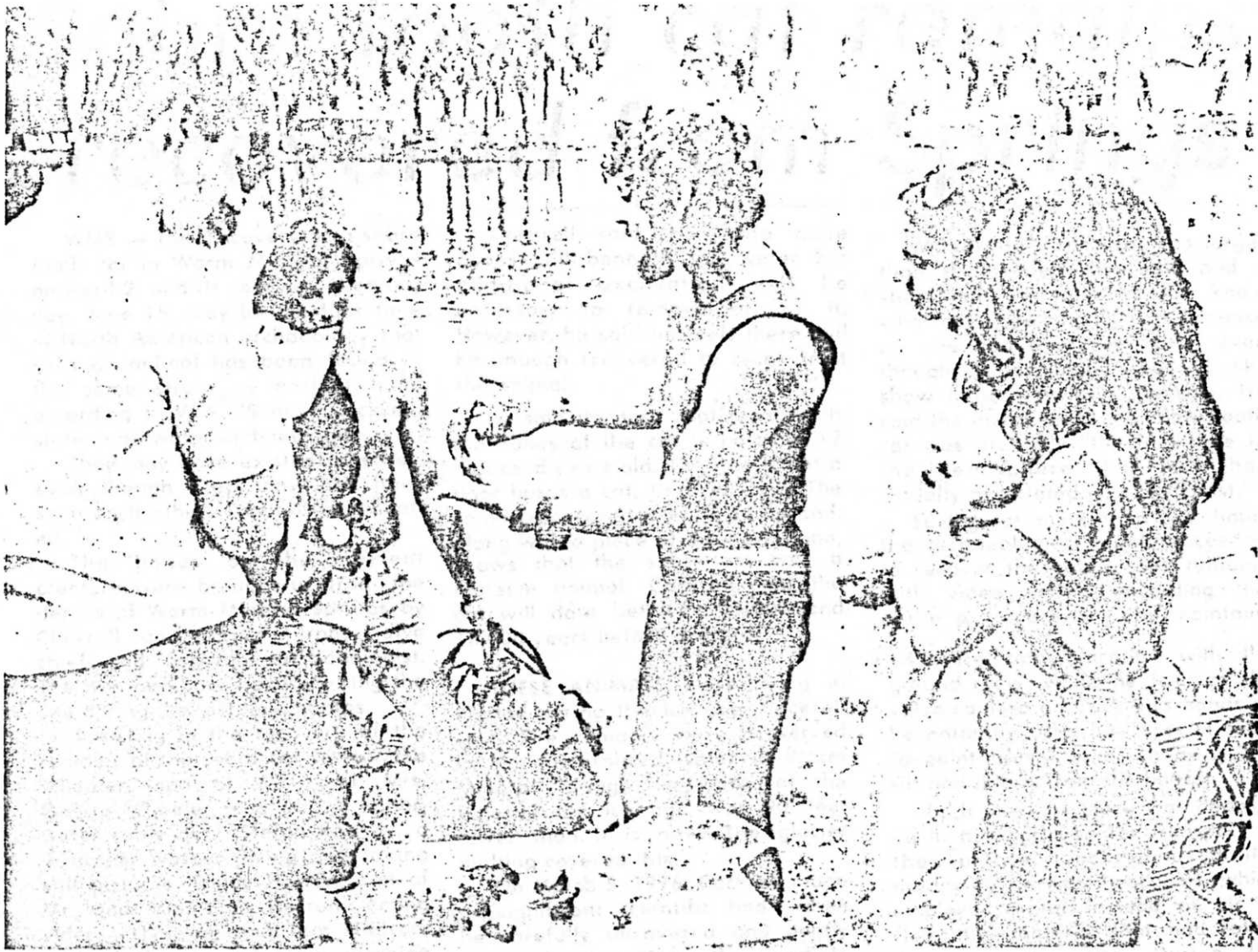
voice communication with the ground crew, while he focused the video camera on Cockrell's hands as he patiently used his "special tool (a paint brush) to brush away the silt and debris from the bones.

Each precious piece was deposited in a dated bag for transport to the surface. Cockrell used the dredge (underwater vacuum), which employs water instead of air to clean the material that had fallen down on the site. During the extraction of the ancient bones, the divers said rocks began tumbling down from above. Cockrell commented that he was not sure but he thought the whole 'mountain' was caving in.

THE TEAM SHOWED the viewer three distinct layers, describing the first layer as the top layer consisting of muck, and water laid sediment; and the second as drift leaf sediment underneath the layered strata. It also contained organic layers in a sandy mix. The third layer contained wood, water laid sediment and muck. This is the layer where the ground sloth, man and sabre cat were found. This last layer was at 40-50 feet deep.

The video camera, operated by Murphy, panned over the various layers, documenting each section and the current find. Cockrell said the cross-dating technique will be used to establish the age of the sabre tooth cat.

continued next page



STATE UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGIST W. A. (Sonny) Cockrell inspects the bones of a sabre tooth cat recovered from Worm Mineral Springs. Looking over the latest finds are Mike Simmons, from

Channel 40; Stefan Roundy, diver; Cockrell; Nancy Smathers, wife of the secretary of state; and an unidentified helper.

Cockrell said he began his work at WMS in 1972 with the benefit of state grants. Many things have been found in the area, not only in the springs, but in ground excavations as well. Evidence of the existence of camels and horses were found, along with human tools in the same layer but different locations. A piece of spear found showed that the early Indian used the spear with a rocket effect, which enabled him to attack animals with heavy coats.

Guests viewing the recovery topside on video were Nancy Smathers, wife of Secretary of State, Bruce Smathers; Paul Shirley, noted lecturer; Mrs. George Wheeler and Mrs. Sam Herron.

Both Cockrell and Murphy have left the Springs project to work at another site on the east coast where a 1715 Spanish shipwreck is located over an animal bone site. The two men will return to the Springs periodically to police the historic site. Cockrell said he hopes to obtain more state funding to allow another concentrated search for the key to unlock the mystery of ancient man.

Cockrell Makes New Finds at Springs Sinkhole

By JIM HALLEY

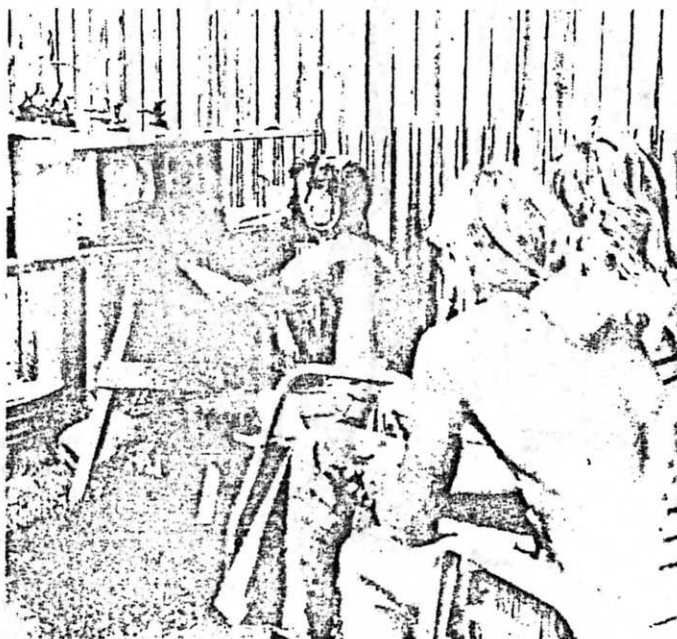
State Archaeologist's working at Warm Mineral Springs sinkhole last week uncovered some exciting new finds including the well-preserved long fang of a saber-toothed cat, bony sections of the cat's face including pieces of jawbone and skull with well-worn teeth still in place, some vertebrae sections of the cat's backbone, and some incredibly preserved pieces of wood and twigs that may date back 12,000 years B.P. (Before Present).

Wilburn A. ("Sonny") Cockrell, state archaeologist and leader of the underwater exploration team working at the Springs these past weeks, said that his discovery possibly marks the first time in North America that remains of a saber-tooth cat, a ground sloth and human beings were ever found in the same pleistocene layer.

Cockrell could not say whether the animals, whose remains he found lying together, were contemporaries of Paleo Indians, or whether the Indians ever saw these animals, but they did exist in the same scientific age, he said.

Cockrell is in charge of the underwater section of the Bureau of Historic Sites and Properties of the Department of State Division of Archives, History and Records. In this capacity he oversees and participates in the exploration of all underwater historical sites in the state of Florida, whether inland or off-shore.

Other members of the team were Larry Murphy, diving supervisor and underwater photographer, Stefan Roundy, a volunteer diver from the Florida Institute of Technology (FIT), Mike Wheeler, who tended the video camera cable for



MONITORING THE underwater excavation by video-tape. Sandy Herron is in contact with diver-camera man Larry Murphy by video-picture and sound. Looking on are Tom Meilsen and Ginger.

the video taping. Sandy Herron, who monitored the video taping, and Tom Neilsen, project assistant and diver.

NEW DATING PROCESS

One of the finds made about two weeks ago was a large section of stalagmite which the team brought to the surface with the help of a flotation bag. Cockrell said that the stalagmite will be subjected to a new dating technique recently developed by scientists Dr. Henry Schwartz, Dr. Peter Thompson and Derrick Ford at McMasters University, Hamilton, Ohio.

Cockrell said he was "quite excited" about what the new dating process might reveal. A stalagmite, he explained, is an incrustation formed on the floor of a cave by limestone in solution falling drop by drop over a long period of time. The presence of stalagmites indicates that the cave floor was above

water when the incrustation was formed.

The stalagmite will be sawed in half lengthwise by Ralph Ewers, director of the Science Museum of Palm Beach county who is an authority on stalagmites and speleothemes (cave growths). He will study the growth rings and try to determine the age, the rate of growth, and the temperature of this area at the time the stalagmite was being formed.

The new method of dating is by the uranium-thorium process. Cave encrustations, like stalagmites and stalactites (the kind that grow down from cave ceilings), usually contain trace amounts of uranium which decay into "daughter products," one of which is thorium, which gives off radiations. Layers of the stone will be dissolved in acid and the proportion of uranium to thorium found will give an indication of the age of the stone.

12,000 YEAR OLD MICE!

Cockrell showed this reporter some fascinating remains of small animal life which he found in the crevices of the stalagmite. For example, while I was looking at it he pointed out the upper jaw of a tiny rodent, probably a mouse of some kind, with all the teeth perfectly in place. Searching just a bit further he found the well-preserved vertebrae (spinal column) of another tiny rodent, indicating that such animals as field mice, and other rodents which are common enough today, were equally as abundant back 12,000 or more years ago.

Greg McDonald of the University of Florida, who worked with Cockrell a year ago, and is recognized as an authority on the saber-toothed cat and ground sloth, holds the belief that these large animals, which were not climbers, probably fell into the sinkhole and died there, Cockrell told me.

The explorations came to an end here Monday for the time being. Secretary of State Bruce Smathers, a navy-trained diver, who visited here two years ago and with his wife, Nancy, dived to the 45 foot level of the Spring, was scheduled to be here Thursday. He was unable to make it, but his wife was here in his stead.

Cockrell said he hopes for more state grants to continue the work at Warm Mineral Springs which he describes as a "priceless asset. It is really a window on the history of man in Florida for the past 11,000 years that we know of. We may even find artifacts that go back 15,000 years. Once this is gone it is gone forever," Cockrell said.

Several state officials who are scuba divers who have visited the springs and dived with Cockrell in addition to Sinathers include former representative Bob Johnson, and Senator Warren Henderson. He said they appreciate the historic and scientific value of Warm Mineral Springs to the state and the nation and were most helpful in getting grants to keep the work going. Representatives Tom Danson and Ted Ewing have visited the site and expressed keen interest in the scientific developments at the Springs.

The phase of the work which ended this week was financed by a grant of \$5000 from the Sarasota County Commission following a



DIVER AND UNDER-WATER PHOTOGRAPHER Larry Murphy comes up after an hour's stint in the depths of the sinkhole.

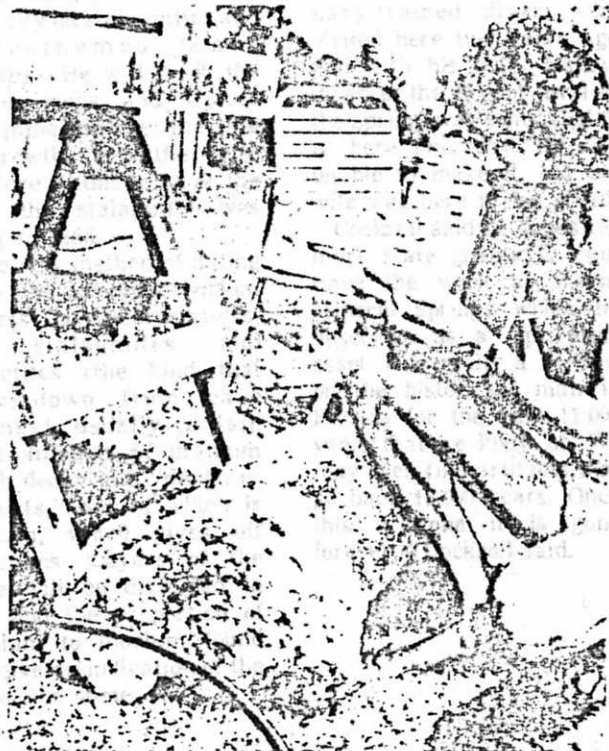
presentation before them by Cockrell earlier this year. County Commissioners John Saba and Larry Rhodes were of great help in getting the grant, the young scientist said.

Another county official who has taken an active part in the preservation of the

Springs' sinkhole is Ms. Dorothy Davis of the Sarasota County historical commission. A scuba diver herself, Ms. Davis has explored the underwater scene with Cockrell and, he said, was instrumental in getting him interested in the Springs.



COCKRELL holds fang of a saber tooth cat, removed the spring last week. Other bones on the table are very well-worn teeth of a probably "old" saber tooth cat and of a leg bone.



STATE UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGIST W.A. "S" Cockrell examines remains of tiny rodents found in t

The North Port News
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