

A CHUNK OF HISTORY

A Pinellas utilities worker plucks fossils from a Redington Shores construction site.

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: SHEILA MULLANE ESTRADA

Date: Jun 28, 2009

Start Page: 3

Section: NEIGHBORHOOD TIMES

Document Text

What started as a routine day in May for Alphonso Riley turned out to be a journey 18,000 years into the past.

Riley, 31, a Pinellas County Utilities Department worker, was inspecting a construction site in Redington Shores before installing an electric meter for a new house at 208 Sydney Lane.

"I saw this dark, strangely shaped rock on the ground. When I picked it up, I was pretty sure it was a fossil," Riley said.

Then he saw even more objects that looked like fossils, as well.

He picked them up, wrapped them in a cloth, and took them back to the office to show to Randy Bellomo, nicknamed "the bone man" by his co-workers.

Bellomo, a utility department engineering specialist who holds a doctorate in prehistoric anthropology, confirmed the rocks were fossils.

He gave Riley a list of experts he knew in Florida who might be able to help identify what kind of animals the fossils originally were.

Riley took pictures of the fossils and sent them to Richard C. Hulbert Jr., the collection manager for the Division of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville.

According to Hulbert, the largest of the fossils once was the toe bone of a prehistoric horse living in Florida, probably during the Pleistocene epoch.

Other fossils included one that was part of the shell of a giant armadillo that lived in Florida during the last Ice Age.

"The site is probably late Pleistocene in age, about 12 to 18,000 years old," Hulbert wrote to Riley.

Hulbert told Riley it would be impossible to determine the exact age of his fossils without recovering additional fossil samples and studying the undisturbed geology of the fossil site.

That raises one big problem. Riley found his fossils sitting on top of recently disturbed fill material dredged up years ago to widen the barrier island. Until just a few years ago, the fill land was the site of a trailer park - now a large complex of condominiums, town homes and houses.

"We'll probably never know where the fossils originally came from," Riley said.

One of the county's largest fossil discoveries was made in the 1920s at Seminole Fields near Clearwater. The Seminole Fields site has since been determined to be 28,000 to 30,000 years old.

More recently, teeth and bones from 12 species, including giant sloths, camels, turtles with shells 5- to 6-feet long, saber-toothed cats, horses and giant armadillos the size of Volkswagen Beetles were discovered in 2007 at Boca Ciega

Millennium Park in Seminole.

Two other Pleistocene sites have been discovered on Florida's east coast, in Vero Beach and Melbourne.

Meanwhile, Riley is keeping his fossils and says he is "definitely keeping my eyes out" in hopes of finding more.

What started as a routine day in May for Alphonso Riley turned out to be a journey 18,000 years into the past.

Riley, 31, a Pinellas County Utilities Department worker, was inspecting a construction site in Redington Shores before installing an electric meter for a new house at 208 Sydney Lane.

"I saw this dark, strangely shaped rock on the ground. When I picked it up, I was pretty sure it was a fossil," Riley said.

Then he saw even more objects that looked like fossils, as well.

He picked them up, wrapped them in a cloth, and took them back to the office to show to Randy Bellomo, nicknamed "the bone man" by his co-workers.

Bellomo, a utility department engineering specialist who holds a doctorate in prehistoric anthropology, confirmed the rocks were fossils.

He gave Riley a list of experts he knew in Florida who might be able to help identify what kind of animals the fossils originally were.

Riley took pictures of the fossils and sent them to Richard C. Hulbert Jr., the collection manager for the Division of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville.

According to Hulbert, the largest of the fossils once was the toe bone of a prehistoric horse living in Florida, probably during the Pleistocene epoch.

Other fossils included one that was part of the shell of a giant armadillo that lived in Florida during the last Ice Age.

"The site is probably late Pleistocene in age, about 12 to 18,000 years old," Hulbert wrote to Riley.

Hulbert told Riley it would be impossible to determine the exact age of his fossils without recovering additional fossil samples and studying the undisturbed geology of the fossil site.

That raises one big problem. Riley found his fossils sitting on top of recently disturbed fill material dredged up years ago to widen the barrier island. Until just a few years ago, the fill land was the site of a trailer park - now a large complex of condominiums, town homes and houses.

"We'll probably never know where the fossils originally came from," Riley said.

One of the county's largest fossil discoveries was made in the 1920s at Seminole Fields near Clearwater. The Seminole Fields site has since been determined to be 28,000 to 30,000 years old.

More recently, teeth and bones from 12 species, including giant sloths, camels, turtles with shells 5- to 6-feet long, saber-toothed cats, horses and giant armadillos the size of Volkswagen Beetles were discovered in 2007 at Boca Ciega Millennium Park in Seminole.

Two other Pleistocene sites have been discovered on Florida's east coast, in Vero Beach and Melbourne.

Meanwhile, Riley is keeping his fossils and says he is "definitely keeping my eyes out" in hopes of finding more.

Credit: Times Correspondent

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO, SHEILA MULLANE ESTRADA, Times Correspondent: Pinellas utilities worker Alphonso Riley examines a fossilized horse's toe bone believed to be from the Pleistocene epoch, or 12,000 to 18,000 years old, that he found among a trove of fossils at a Redington Shores construction site.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

"The site is probably late Pleistocene in age, about 12 to 18,000 years old," [Richard C. Hulbert Jr.] wrote to [Alphonso Riley].

"The site is probably late Pleistocene in age, about 12 to 18,000 years old," Hulbert wrote to Riley.

PHOTO, SHEILA MULLANE ESTRADA, Times Correspondent: Pinellas utilities worker Alphonso Riley examines a fossilized horse's toe bone believed to be from the Pleistocene epoch, or 12,000 to 18,000 years old, that he found among a trove of fossils at a Redington Shores construction site.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.