

Walsh: Cherry Hill native digs being an archaeologist

Written by Jim Walsh Courier-Post May 12

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IF YOU GO

• Ilene Grossman-Bailey will present an overview of Cherry Hill archaeological sites Tuesday at 7 p.m. in the township library, 1100 North Kings Highway. Speakers also will discuss South Jersey sites when the Archaeological Society of New Jersey meets Saturday from 11 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. at Croft Farm, 100 Bortons Mill Road, Cherry Hill. Both events are free.

Ilene Grossman-Bailey digs up dirt on people for a living.

But she's no muckraker. Instead, the Cherry Hill native is an archaeologist, who sifts through soil for clues to the past.

Now, most of us know archaeology through the movies, with dashing practitioners like Indiana Jones and dig sites regularly overrun by manic mummies.

Surprisingly, that adventurous image is not quite accurate.

"Once you try it, you realize you have to want it. It's really hard work," says Grossman-Bailey, who this week will be offering insights into South Jersey's archaeology at two events in Cherry Hill.

She notes Hollywood glosses over the less glamorous side of her science.

"The interesting part is not seeing someone sitting at their computer," she says. "When you come back with a truckload of artifacts, somebody has to wash it, figure out what it is and write reports. There's taking photos, drawing pictures. It's pretty substantial."

But except for the scorpions and death traps, isn't fieldwork fun?

"It is hard and hot and buggy," she says. "Sometimes the sun beats down on you, and sometimes it's freezing."

And yet here's the surprising part: Grossman-Bailey loves it.

"I'm one of those strange people who always wanted to be an archaeologist," notes the 54-year-old. She's now a senior archaeologist at a Middlesex County firm that provides "cultural resource management services."

"You're always looking for something new," she explains. "It's kind of like being a detective. You never know what you'll find."

Archaeology in New Jersey gets a boost from local, state and federal measures that seek to protect cultural relics in advance of construction or roadwork projects.

"What we're trying to find is a piece of history that may be forgotten," says Grossman-Bailey, a Morrisville, Pa., resident who leads the Archaeological Society of New Jersey.

To do that, a researcher might wield a shovel, a trowel or a backhoe to get down to the level of earlier civilizations.

"You're being really careful to pick up all the clues," observes Grossman-Bailey, noting dig sites are typically kept secret to protect their contents from souvenir hunters. "You're really trying to pull in different pieces of information. In themselves they might be inconsequential, but when you get a lot of items, you get a picture of a people."

Often, it's a blurry picture. A Native American site, for instance, typically yields only fragments of what fell

centuries ago — like remnants of stone tools and broken antlers.

On a good day, you might find “projectile points,” an archaeologist’s term for arrowheads.

“Sometimes we’re lucky enough to find Native American ceramics,” says Grossman-Bailey. “They weren’t glazed or hot-fired, so they don’t usually survive.”

A career highlight came on a dig in France that turned up some old axes and other tools. And by that, I mean really old.

“We found artifacts that dated to 300,000 years ago,” says Grossman-Bailey, adding that people are believed to have lived in our state for only about 15,000 years.

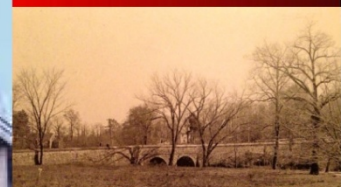
“Although I love New Jersey artifacts, nothing has come close to that,” she says of the French find. “Plus, the food was really amazing.”

Jim Walsh’s column runs Mondays. Reach him at jwalsh@gannett.com or (856) 486-2646.

Cherry Hill: *Looking Below the Surface*



Browning Farm ca. 1875



Kings Hwy. bridge,
Evans Grist Mill ca. 1909



Ilene Grossman-Bailey, Ph.D.
Archaeological Society of New Jersey

Presentation to Cherry Hill Township

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