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PCC Students Dig Deep into the History of a Forgotten People

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-Courtesy Photo

Pasadena City College students have been given a unique opportunity to advance research on a group of people that no one seems quite sure where they came from, nor, upon their disappearance 800 years ago, just where they went. These forgotten people, previously ignored by anthropologists and archaeologists, belong to the Fremont Culture, which is believed to have existed from 700 A.D. to around 1250 A.D. in a broad region from the eastern Colorado Plateau to the California Sierras. Information on the Fremont has taken on new urgency as a result of an archaeological dig carried out as part PCC's Social Sciences Division and its courses in Anthropology.

Over the last several years, Anthropology students at PCC have gotten out of the classroom to

an open field in Southwestern Utah where students, under the direction of a trained archaeologist, seek answers into the murky past of the Fremont.

Students, after taking courses in Anthropology at the college, become eligible to join an archaeological field excavation in Milford, Utah, under the watchful and knowledgeable eye of archaeologist, and adjunct professor of Anthropology, Mari Pritchard Parker.

Parker, who has 25 years of experience as a contract archaeologist serving as a cultural resource specialist with both private and government agencies, leads the field study program.

In 2000, Parker acquired 31 acres of farm land in the tiny town of Milford, Utah, adding 12 acres later. Her interest was piqued after noticing mounds indicating possible human activity. Her keen eye spotted fragments of ancient artifacts that her training recognized as having been left by the Fremont. A chance meeting of a PCC Anthropology professor at the PCC flea market, led to the development of a field study program at the community college.

Parker says the field study work has allowed students to go beyond mere books about early inhabitants of the American continent to experiencing, hands-on, what they left behind. Through the process of digging into soil about three feet in depth carefully monitored by straight-walled one-meter test pits, the Fremont People, one of the most mysterious groups that occupied much of the Southwest are now confirmed to have inhabited Parker's Utah property.

The Fremont were nomadic hunter-gatherers who stopped long enough in the Milford region to dig pit-houses, maintain fire pits, and leave behind evidence of their day-to-day existence. So far, thousands of items have been uncovered at the site including pot sherds, buttons, basket weaving awls and arrowheads.

"The students have located pottery, the corn grinding tools known as manos and metates, and other items used by these migrating people who stopped here to farm, hunt and even trade," Parker says.

Research into the Fremont has been notably weak. What is known is that the pre-historic Fremont existed roughly between 700 A.D and 1250 A.D. leaving behind unique trademarks such as a one-rod basketry style, moccasins with animal-bone heels, figurines that appear to be depictions of humans, and gray thin-walled pottery. While noted for their pit-houses, Parker says her students have discovered adobe that may be now-melted walls some by-gone era, possibly Fremont. The Fremont disappeared at the same time as the Anasazi, an ancient people that also populated the Four Corner's (where Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada statelines converge) sometime around 1250 A.D., very close to the Milford site. What happened to them remains a mystery, but research at the dig site is peeling away the Fremont story bit by bit. It is this story that student's seek at the site.

Parker established the Milford Archaeological Research Institute, a 501(c)(3) non-profit to formalize the training needed for amateur or professional archaeologists. Under her leadership,

students learn survey techniques, excavation and screening, mapping, field-site photography and laboratory methods. Completion of the training is rewarded with the receipt of an Occupational Skills Certificate issued by Pasadena City College. The result of this training some times ends in an entry level job with a contract archeological firm; however, most students enjoy the experience, learning and growing through training in the skills they learn in the process.

“It takes intellectual curiosity and incorporates live-learning in a rural environment,” Parker remarked.

As for Milford, it is a small town located about 30 miles west of the intersection of highways 15 and 70, an agricultural and mining center. The field school sessions, which are shared with Fresno City College students in a participating program, lasts 10 days with the students camping on the rich soil and grasses on Parker’s land. A typical day starts at 7 a.m. with the digging of one-meter test pits. Those finding artifacts follow a precise protocol: a notebook listing to accurately describe the location and depth of the object, identify what they have found, deposit the item in a well-marked paper bag (which will later be scrutinized in a lab setting to confirm the identification) and finally, filing a full report. At noon, work is stopped for lunch. The afternoon takes the group to visit a museum, or to hear from experts in the field, such as Jeanne Benning, a noted flintknapper, and sometimes to visit mines in the area to explore the various minerals such as obsidian that were used by the Fremont Culture in making arrowheads. Evenings are spent, just as the Fremont people most likely did in ancient times, around a fire pit.

Students engaged in this program are providing the archaeological field with important information. Dr. Lauren Arenson, Professor of Anthropology at Pasadena City College, says, “These students are doing groundbreaking research which has led some to find entry level jobs as a result of the field and the academic experience,” she notes. She mentions the skills they obtain-which can be helpful in many careers, such as writing research papers, recording accurate lab notes, and other skills that are part of standard archaeological techniques. Then, too, there is the exposure to a vaguely known cultural and pride the students find in being associated with the research.

Friendships developed during field programs often runs deep. Professor Arenson said that some of that friendship has spilled into Milford. The small rural community (a population of around 1,000) has welcomed the students with open arms.

“Milford is an incredibly small town and the town has been supportive.”

One of the first years the site was opened, the town asked students to ride in their 4th of July parade. Now, they are a regular part each year,” Arenson says.

Recognizing that many Community College students may not have the financial ability to afford a 10-day trip to Utah, Parker raises funds through her research institute, the Milford Archaeological Research Institute. The cost of the 2-Unit class, charged by PCC, is \$62. Costs of

transportation, food and supplies must be borne by students, an amount that Parker estimates to be about \$400 for the 10-day session.

At the present time, scholarships are awarded through the Institute. The PCC Foundation has offered grants for the Institute to obtain equipment needed to operate the dig site, but funding students to participate remains a challenge. "The PCC Foundation has been very generous, but additional assistance for the students is always welcome," Parker stated.

This year's field study sessions will be held June 20 to June 30 and July 2 to July 14. Applications for course study and field study sessions are currently being accepted.

Information about the Milford Archaeological Research Institute and the dig site can be obtained by visiting the institute's website, www.mariarchaeology.com or calling (213) 309-8854. Donation levels are available in a range from \$25 to \$500.

Information on Social Science classes, including Anthropology at Pasadena City College is available through the department, or at the website webcms.pasadena.edu.

