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# Farm field finds lead to archeology digs

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Posted: Wednesday, May 24, 2017 11:18 am

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Members of the Lake Koshkonong Wetland Association learned about early American cultures on the shores of Lake Koshkonong during a recent meeting at the Milton Town Hall.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archeology Professor and Research Lab Director Dr. Robert Jeske told those in attendance he had been studying the late prehistoric culture (A.D. 1000 to 1450) within the Lake Koshkonong region since 1988. Jeske noted that while the regional culture of the time was called Oneota, culture is not the same as a tribe. He defined it more broadly as a lifestyle, determined through study of the artifacts left behind, such as tools, pottery, weapons and housing remnants.

Over the course of his research, Jeske said he has supervised some 188 students in the field and 200 in the laboratory. Students typically work in groups of 20-25 for six weeks each summer in all sorts of weather, with many ultimately publishing their findings as they continue their educations, earning master's and doctoral degrees in the field.



## Students doing fieldwork

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee students dig at an 800-year-old farming village near Lake Koshkonong.

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Area support,

### local sites

Included within an ongoing chain of support, Jeske pointed to work performed by a UW-Milwaukee associate, Dr. Lynn Goldstein, who, in the 1960s, studied Late Woodland (A.D. 500-1100) cultures in the area, as well as Mississippian culture at Aztalan. Further support came through the Wisconsin Historical Society and area landowners, many of whom have found and brought forward artifacts. Properties include the Schmeling, Bussey, T. Kelly and Spike farms, Jeske said.

Some 5 acres of the Crescent Bay Hunt Club have had ongoing fieldwork in recent years, Jeske said, and provide summer access to the clubhouse. Norman Stanley, of Norm's Hideaway, has allowed students to use his showers after fieldwork, he added.

### Crescent Bay and Oneota network

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Describing Crescent Bay as one of seven Oneota sites spread along Lake Koshkonong's northwestern shore, the area, when combined, is called the Lake Koshkonong Oneota Locality, Jeske said. The sites were found next to creeks and wetlands, and in uplands, he added.

Within the locality, an interesting preference was found for savanna habitat, which he defined as areas with open landscapes and scattered trees, ranging from 1-2 per acre, with up to 50 percent canopy cover.

Soils are more characteristic of those found in forested areas rather than prairie, and are easier to cultivate. Members of the Oneota culture raised corn and squash. Of note, Jeske said, savannas must be maintained by burning; without periodic burns, the savanna will convert to forest. It is now clear that the Native Americans used fire to manage their environment, he said.

An unexplained observation, Jeske said, is that although there are other Oneota localities in Wisconsin (La Crosse and Grand River), as well as in the Chicago region, none other than the seven sites on the northwest shore of Lake Koshkonong have been found in a large radius around the areas.

### Findings

Based on the study of over 10,000 shards from Crescent Bay, Jeske said, pottery found in this area is very unusual because it differs from the very plain pots of other Oneota sites. Lower portions of pots show unique patterns made with cord markings while top portions show swirl designs resembling those seen on pots from the St. Louis area and Iowa.

Items found and information learned through study of the Crescent Bay site include:

- Ceramic spindle whorls (used to make thread and then cloth).
- Various stone tools: arrowheads, scrapers, and knives. Blood samples from these tools belonged to deer, bison, elk, dogs and humans.
- Copper artifacts.
- Bone and shell tools.
- Bobcat and wolf teeth used as adornments.
- Galena (a form of lead) used to make white pigment.
- Iron-bearing ore used for red pigment.
- Dietary components, such as corn, squash, wild rice, goosefoot, wild plum, mulberry, black walnut and tobacco (beginning A.D. 1000).
- Bison (beginning A.D. 1200; this is much earlier than previously thought).
- Deer.
- Burials, found inside villages and houses; remains, which were often bundled or flexed; frequent evidence of violence (probably warfare).

### The process

The process often begins with tips about artifacts found by area residents in farm fields, Jeske said. Next, students conduct surveys, which, in an agricultural field setting, might include walking through the area to establish a grid while flagging locations where artifacts, such as a pottery shard or spear point, were found. Flags are marked on a map, and, using GPS coordinates, clusters are identified and selected as study sites

In forested or other areas where the ground has not been disturbed, Jeske said a different process, called a shovel survey, is used. About every 10 meters, he said a hole is dug and the soil is removed and sifted by screen to look for artifacts.

Once a study site is selected, Jeske said excavation begins. The goal is to find artifacts or other evidence that will provide answers to such questions as: When did the people live here? What did they eat? What technology did they use? What sort of social systems did they have? What were their rituals?

Next, 1-meter square holes are dug, and the soil is sifted with a fine mesh to find visible artifacts. Soil samples are also sent to the lab for flotation analysis, a process used to find tiny seeds or artifacts. If more artifacts are found, the hole is enlarged using trowels and all the contents are carefully examined. He said sometimes a backhoe is



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used to remove sediment or obstacles.

Scientists also look for areas of soil discoloration, which can be an indication of ash pits or "garbage dumps." Ash pits often contain such dietary and cultural evidence as fish scales, burned bones, and shells.

In the laboratory, artifacts are examined closely and radiocarbon dating is performed, Jeske said, with all the artifacts of the Lake Koshkonong Oneota culture dating from A.D. 1000 to 1450.

After that time the culture seems to have vanished. There is no definitive evidence of the reason for the disappearance, he said.

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