

Archaeologist Robert Mazrim has been digging in Sangamon County and downstate Illinois dirt for about a decade. There's so much to uncover, he said, he's recruited dozens of volunteers to help him. On Friday, July 19, he's going one step further. He's opening a museum showcasing artifacts he's uncovered that date back to 1780.

The Sangamo Archaeological Center (SAC), 107 Governor Oglesby Street in Elkhart, focuses on frontier life in the Sangamon Valley from 1780 to 1840, with some items dating as "new" as 1859. But SAC is more than a museum. It is an archaeological base from which excavations and research are conducted for clients as far away as New Orleans and even a Staffordshire crockery expert in England. The museum portion of SAC—the Prairie Archaeological Museum—is a collection of frontier-era artifacts displayed to the public. Cynthia Hinton, proprietor of Bluestem Bake Shop, also located within SAC, and an SAC gift shop offering archaeological publications and other merchandise, help support the SAC.

Mazrim, who lives in rural Menard County, is employed as a consultant for the Illinois

archaeological sites, excavate them before road construction. Most archaeologists at sites are there because they're being paid by state or federal governments to salvage those sites. That's what Mazrim does for a living.

"That's my day job," he said. "When they hit a historic site—usually pre-Civil War is what they focus on in Illinois—they call me. We come up with a plan, and study the soil and disturbances and the artifacts. Then we document the activities that were evident at the site, we document the debris left behind, and I write a report. The public is out of the loop."

Last fall, ITARP and Mazrim excavated the discovery of eighteenth-century French activity in Peoria. "That's an example of the state law at work. They had to move part of Adams Street. We had to go in and figure out what kind of archaeology might be in the way, and in the process we found remains of a French house that dated back to the 1780s."

Perhaps surprisingly, laws that apply to

10,000 years of pre-history—human habitation before white settlers—in Illinois. American settlers are right at the brink at the end of that span. We didn't arrive in this part of Illinois until after the War of 1812."

"The State of Illinois can't dig all archaeological sites," he adds. "You have to choose. If you dug every artifact, you'd be swallowed, and the budget would be as big as NASA's."

But even laws that are meant to protect sites came too late for some. "The entire French part of St. Louis, which was a 1760s French town, was removed when they built

the Gateway Arch. It all went to a landfill somewhere. If they were building the arch today, archaeologists would have gone in first. To date, we have not found one piece of eighteenth century French St. Louis," he said. "There is still plenty of that kind of construction going on. The only way to deliver attention to sites that are not surveyed by law, before construction begins, is by doing what

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DIGGING IT UP

Robert Mazrim's new museum in Elkhart looks after central Illinois history

by Job Conger

Transportation Archaeological Research Program (ITARP), which excavates and records archaeological sites that are located on state and federal construction projects. In 1993, Mazrim, thirty-five, began coordinating volunteer archaeological outings on his free time. And he started accumulating artifacts that will be revealed to the public for the first time. Until about eight months ago, when Mazrim began moving his items into the current facility, his artifacts were warehoused at various private locations.

"We came to Elkhart because it's right on the interstate," Mazrim said. "We're about fifteen minutes from Springfield, about twenty-five minutes from New Salem."

"Archaeology done in the state of Illinois is salvage based, paid for by federal and state funding to mitigate damage to archaeological finds in federally funded construction projects," he said. "If you're building a highway, for example, the law says you have to look for

ITARP do not apply to ordinary citizens and their private property. Mazrim explained, "If you owned a half-acre piece of land in the former French district of downtown Peoria and you wanted to build a swimming pool, you

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start to dig and discover the foundation of a French house and a cellar full of eighteenth century French artifacts. You can bring a bulldozer in and clear it all out, put your swimming pool in, and there is no law protecting that site. The only restriction is that you, as a private landowner, are not allowed to disturb human remains."

Archaeological sites are not rare. But most are on private property and there-

fore aren't protected by the law. "When you think about it, it would be hard to legislate otherwise," Mazrim said. "You can't pass a law that says you can't dig on your own property. It's impractical. There is not a large army of archaeologists out there, ready to go in whenever somebody finds a site. We have

Sangamo Archaeological Center is doing today. This is where we come in."

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Mazrim said that he began to witness the destruction of many historical sites about ten years ago.

"There was no statutory mandate to prevent it. The early settlement of Springfield stretched all along Spring Creek. That's exactly where all the development is going on right now. They're blasting frontier sites left and right. I found a way to get to know people—avocational archaeologists, weekend professionals, even backhoe operators with sharp eyes—willing to go out to sites, obtain owners' permission, and investigate. A lot of times owners aren't interested in cooperating and we can't do anything about it."

Mazrim noted that any one artifact is of limited scientific value. "It's the assemblage of artifacts in a historical context that provides the value. It doesn't do me any good if you come to me and say, 'We built this swimming pool, but here's this really nifty bottle I



Above: This display of kitchen items is typical of what is found from a site of a frontier home that was lived in during the 1830s. Throughout the museum, materials from locations all over central Illinois are showcased. Left: The American crockery display shows crockery made by local potters dating back to the 1820s. Photo by Job Conger.



found.”

According to Mazrim, no artifact at the SAC was taken from a state- or federally-funded excavation.

During the frontier era the mass production of products became more commonplace. Technologies and materials were quickly

improving then; as a result, today's archaeologist can easily date certain items down to the decade.

“Refined ceramics are extremely datable,” Mazrim said. “They were so fashionable and changed designs so frequently—about every five years—we can date things in the 1820s

and 1830s within five years.”

Though ceramics, cutlery, metal cups, and glass bottles are in abundance, conspicuous, perhaps, is the absence of firearms. “If we fully excavated a site that was occupied for ten years in the 1830s, we would be lucky to find three to six musket balls. There may also be small chips of flint, used to fire the weapons. Guns, from the archaeological standpoint of the farms themselves, which is mostly what we see, are not an important part of what we're finding. In Wisconsin, the amount of lead balls and flints on a site quadruples because they were closer to the fur trade up north. So much meat in frontier Illinois was domesticated—pigs, chickens, and cattle—that guns were usually placed on racks above the doorway and used perhaps for the occasional deer.”

Most everything in the museum would have been familiar to a resident of New Salem.

Mazrim is reluctant to mention any specific artifact that belongs to SAC's collection. Among the crockery, glass, and iron, as well as leatherwork such as shoes, Mazrim said “What is special to one archaeologist might not be special to another.”

“What we're hoping tourists will find here is the archaeological equivalent of the recon-

structed houses at New Salem, only none of this is reconstructed. Nothing here is from New Salem, but some is from nearby Petersburg from the same period.”

The Sangamo Archaeological Center conducts research investigations beyond collecting artifacts for the museum. Dozens of volunteers have helped over the years, although there is no formal roster at this time. The center is also looking for additional volunteer help.

During the fall of 2001 Mazrim excavated the area around the Reverend John Berry house, built in 1825 near New Salem.

“It was probably every bit as fancy as the Elijah Iles House. It was converted into a barn with additional structures around it, and it has been there in dilapidated form since. The owner preserved segments of the walls of the house and offered them to the state of Illinois. We, the center, spent two days of concentrated excavation nearby to see if it really

was what historians said. We discovered that Reverend Berry had in fact built a home in 1825, but he also built a simpler log cabin here in 1823. This was all done with private funding.” The fruits of that visit and other labors are on display at the museum.

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Robert Mazrim, standing in front of the Sangamo Archaeological Center in downtown Elkhart. Photo by Job Conger.

Under the Prairie Museum isn't just a small-town collection. Compared with other museums in Illinois, its collection is unique.

"I don't think they have any frontier-era materials on display at the Illinois State Museum," Mazrim said. "Pre-history is very well represented at places like Cahokia Mounds and Dixon Mounds. You can get a wonderful crash course on 10,000 years of pre-history at those museums. Principal places to interpret frontier life are at places like New Salem. There you get the above-ground picture and the stories. The residues of the people who lived there and elsewhere on the frontier are what we have here. As far as archaeology and material culture, you can't see that anywhere else in the state."

The many hundreds of artifacts sometimes found at an individual site must be washed, labeled, tabulated, sorted, bagged, boxed, and stored indefinitely. What the public sees on display at Under the Prairie Frontier Archaeological Museum pales in comparison to the thousands of smaller pieces, which historically are just as important to researchers.

"There will be clues in small pieces that are invaluable to specialist researchers who are far more focused than we are here," Mazrim said. These materials are stored in the basement.

Archaeology requires money, Mazrim said. He's hoping there's a sufficient amount of public interest in local archaeology to fund the SAC.

"We hope they will pay an admission price to see what we have on display. That, plus the gift and bakeshop, we hope will keep our research alive. Otherwise, some day when a backhoe operator calls with the news that he's hit some 1820s artifacts, I'm going to have to tell him I can't help."

Conversely, "We are always willing to help people identify artifacts they bring in," Mazrim said. "If someone is doing construction, we will be happy to go out and look at the site. We will try to find money for excavating if it's available." Anyone interested in a concentrated course in frontier-era architecture can get one at SAC, Mazrim said.

Mazrim's book, *Now Quite Out of Society: Archaeology in Frontier Illinois*, published by University of Illinois Press at Urbana-Champaign, shares a large part of the story

revealed in his museum's displays and more. Included is the story of Edwards Trace, a three hundred-year-old trail used before pioneers started at Plymouth Rock and headed west, a trail which is roughly paralleled by Route 66 between Divernon and Elkhart. The book will be for sale at the SAC gift shop.

Looking ahead, Mazrim hopes to host educational seminars at the center. "We finally have the brick-and-mortar facil-

ity for this, but we need to be opened and established before we begin to plan in detail. A series of publications under center auspices, tours of Elkhart Hill, and festivals also are in the works.

"One of our main efforts is to educate construction equipment operators who see plenty of archaeology. I know backhoe operators who today can identify some types of pre-1860 material at first glance. I'm hoping landowners will learn that our people are not going to shut down private construction projects, it's not going to cost them any money, and that they will cooperate.

"This is a collaborative effort. It doesn't take an archaeology professor to say, 'Hey, we need to do this.' We've had family, friends, and people from the community pitching in," Mazrim said. "The community here has been wonderful." ♦

To get to the Sangamo Archaeological Center take I-55 north from Springfield to Exit 115 to Elkhart. The SAC is located in downtown Elkhart at 107 Governor Oglesby Street.

Hours are, tentatively, Wednesday to Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and on Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$3 for adults. Children six and younger are free.

Those interested in volunteering at the SAC can call it at 217-947-2522.

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The heart of Elkhart

Small Logan County town home of interesting archaeological museum

Outside, the streets and sidewalks were radiating a heat unlike anything we have experienced all summer. The door in front of me was dark and revealed little about what to expect inside. Across the street a group of older men had gathered, leaning back in their chairs, taking refuge in the shadows of the buildings. Just watching the small town "goings on," I expect — though there were few signs of activity in the stifling heat.

I was already running late, so I pushed the door open with a huff and walked into the pleasant clatter of the Bluestem Bake Shop. I was greeted with pleasantries. Everyone wanted to talk about the weather, while I peered into the glass bakery case admiring the assortment of muffins, tarts, Danish and cakes. Distracted, I nodded my head in agreement with the flow of conversation.

Eventually a young woman asked if I needed assistance. I gave up the goodies in front of me and what I had really



come for was to visit the adjoining museum.

When I had first entered I thought perhaps it had already closed for the day. The doorway was dark, and I didn't get my hopes up. But I was in luck. The girl took my \$3 admission and pointed to the doorway without any explanation. I grabbed a museum flyer and stepped through.

My eyes were still squinting from the August sunshine, and I took a moment to blink into the darkness. It was a strange darkness. Out of time. Darkness like you



Behind this dark doorway belies the Under the Prairie Frontier Archaeological Museum. It features pre-civil war artifacts, including items from local excavated sites.

For more information

Under the Prairie
109 Governor Oglesby Street
P.O. Box 199
Elkhart, Illinois 62634

The Bluestem Bake Shop
located at the Under the Frontier Archaeological Prairie Museum
217-947-2222
Wednesday - Sunday 9-4.
Lunch is served 11 - 2.
The bake shop serves up homemade lunch and desserts. Salads, sandwiches, soups, and potato and cheese

pie, with quiche served on Sundays makes up the menu.

Directions

Follow I-72 east to I-55. Travel I-55 north to exit 115. Turn right toward Elkhart and follow the blue tourist signs to the business district. Street parking is available on Governor Oglesby Street. The Gillet Farm entrance (private entrance) is located at the far end of this street, turn left and follow this road around a curve to the cemetery entrance.

would find around a campfire, in a candlelit room, or outdoors by a lantern. Finally, my eyes adjusted and I found myself standing in a short hallway with the sound of crickets around me.

The Under the Prairie Frontier Archaeological Museum is located in

Elkhart, Illinois. It offers a simple and comprehensive presentation of pre-civil war artifacts that reflect the life of the settlers who lived during the late 1700s and early 1800s. It claims to be the

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ELKHART: Home to interesting archaeological museum

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largest such museum in the Midwest, in fact. It's one of those pleasant surprises you find when you take the time to get off the interstate and look around.

The museum exhibits include findings from local excavated sites. These findings are significant and demonstrate the pioneer period of the Midwest, including the historic New Salem and Clayville sites. Some exhibits are from farther afield and reflect the trade influence.

Luxury items from France and England are prevalent. I was amazed at the unusual collection of teaware, pottery, cutlery and tools. Many of the artifacts were household items once discarded and then retrieved when the building was removed for development.

If you are not familiar with the tiny town of Elkhart, you may have noticed an unusual rise or hill located about 15 miles north of Springfield just east of I-55. Elkhart Hill, the remains of a glacial deposit, is

unique terrain for this area so noted for flat, fertile farm ground. Edward's Trace, a trail that once connected the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River, once cut across this hill.

While you're in town, you should also check out Elkhart Cemetery, home to the St. John the Baptist Chapel. The Gothic Revival chapel was built in 1890 and is said to be the only privately owned and operated church in the state. Candlelight services are scheduled during the Christmas Holiday season and

tours are available by appointment through Miss Jessie's Art Gallery in downtown Elkhart.

Miss Jessie's Art Gallery is located next to the museum. The owner, Mr. Ransom, has an inside edge on local history and a wonderful sense of humor. Ask him to share his story about Illinois' oldest landfill. Well, I asked for it ... it's your turn!

Shelley Roy is a freelance writer and photographer who regularly contributes travel and fitness stories.