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## SIFTING THROUGH THE PAST

By SARA FOLEY, Staff Writer



**ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY:** Horizon Environmental Services archaeologist Reign Clark, the leader of a team of archaeologists surveying the Cherokee County site of the proposed Lake Columbia. (Staff Photos By David Branch)

NEW SUMMERFIELD - Margaret Hightower gave up hope that Lake Columbia would ever be built years ago. She went to the first meeting that announced plans to build the lake then named Lake Eastex, in 1978.

Her enthusiasm for the project located just a few miles from her home hasn't faded, but the repeated delays and uncertainties that followed made her unsure whether she'd ever see it happen.

"There was a time that nothing was said or done about it; it was like a dead thing," she said. "We sure hope it will come through."

Plans for the long-anticipated lake sprung into action last week, as archaeologists began the monthlong process of surveying the land for artifacts. The work is part of the first phase of an environmental impact study required by federal law before the lake can be built.

Lake Columbia, renamed in 2003 for the space shuttle that broke apart over East Texas, will be a 10,000-acre lake. It will help supply water for Smith, Cherokee, Rusk, Angelina and Nacogdoches counties. It runs along the Mud Creek flood plain and would stretch 14 miles long from southern Smith County into Cherokee County. Eight archaeologists from Horizon Environmental Services, an Austin-based company specializing in assessing archaeological remnants, will work on the land for the next month or more.

The archaeologists believe the land that will one day be under water was occupied thousands of years before by Caddo Indians.

In the first week of work, the archaeologists already found some evidence of Caddo Indians - arrowheads, shreds of pottery, chip stone tools and ground stone tools - that confirms their theories.

Most of the artifacts will probably be from after 800 A.D., when the Caddos settled in East Texas and developed complex societies, Horizon project manager Jesse Owens said.

There are some surprises, though. On Tuesday, the archaeologists found an arrowhead dating back to 3,000 to 4,000 B.C. Judging by its size and style, it was used by hunters and gatherers who lived on the land, Owens said.

Finding the artifacts, however, doesn't happen quickly.

Two teams of four archaeologists work at two sites a day from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., digging "sample spot" holes every 30 meters or so. Some sites, where the ground is elevated, are labeled "high-probability" areas. The ground above the flood plain is more likely to have preserved remnants of prehistoric life, so it's usually there that they concentrate their efforts.

Sometimes only a few inches of soft ground, where artifacts might be preserved, exist before the ground turns into hard, thick clay.

"If it's clay, it pretty much means it was here before 10,000 B.C.," Owens said. "Most archaeologists don't believe humans were in North America that early."

But the days full of digging can be frustrating, especially when the team is in one of the high-probability areas.

"I just really felt like something was going to happen today," Diamond Capanday, one of the archaeologists digging, said. Her hours of work turned up flakes of rocks but no stone tools - the equivalent of finding sawdust and no woodwork, Owens said.

The archaeologists' work can only go on as long as the weather is clear, which is one reason the project could stretch into April. If the team finds large amounts of significant artifacts, instead of just the typical tools they expect to find, a full excavation could be ordered.

If that happens, the high-probability areas will likely be dug up entirely. Then, the archaeologists might be able to see outlines of houses, burial sites or trash piles that can reveal even more about Caddo life, Owens said.

"We have no idea what we'll find, really," Owens said. "This area has never been examined. This portion of Mud Creek has never been

studied."

The Caddos, most of whom now live in Oklahoma, have been talking with the Army Corps of Engineers, the group that authorized the environmental impact study, about the project. Later, they could decide if they want to keep whatever artifacts are found.

The Angelina and Neches River Authority, the organization that planned the lake from the beginning, is still working to contact the rest of the property owners in the area. The landowners must grant permission before their property can be studied, but ANRA general manager Kenneth Reneau said so far, that hasn't been a problem. "That Mud Creek bottom is very braided through there; it's very wet," he said. "People have known for years that it doesn't take a lot of rain to flood that bottomland. The lake has been planned for years, so there's a few houses that will be impacted, but not very many."

Reneau, who has worked on the project since 2000, said he's eager for construction to begin.

First an environmental assessment of the land, an analysis of water source alternatives and an evaluation of socioeconomic effects must be done.

If all goes as Reneau expects, the construction will begin in 2008 and finish by 2011.

### **Lake Columbia: A Timeline**

1978

The Angelina and Neches River Authority begins planning for a reservoir on Mud Creek.

1984

An engineering study is performed for a water-rights permit.

1985

A Texas water-rights permit is issued for municipal and industrial use.

1991

The Lake Eastex Regional Water Supply planning study is completed.

2000

A 404 permit application is submitted to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

2001

Texas Senate Bill 1600 passes, extending the state permit for the lake.

2002

Lake Eastex is included as a water strategy in the State Water Plan, which recommends its legislative designation as "unique reservoir site."

2003

- Final report for Lake Eastex Planning Study completed. The report reviews and updates information from other studies, evaluating instream flows, habitat and engineering design.
- Texas Senate Bill 1362 passes, designating the area a "unique reservoir site" and changing the reservoir's name to Lake Columbia, after the space shuttle that broke apart over East Texas. It also directs the Texas Water Development Board to loan ANRA state funds for the project.

2004

- The Corps of Engineers decides an environmental impact study must be performed.

- ANRA applies for a \$10 million TWDB loan to cover the study, survey, appraisal and land acquisition for the lake project.
- The Corps of Engineers approves the river authority's selection of a contractor for the environmental impact study.

2005

- A downstream impact analysis, reviewing the hydraulic and hydrologic effects below the Lake Columbia dam, is completed.
- Work begins on environmental impact study

2006

An archaeological field survey begins.

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