

Beltrami County's Three Island Park aims for national historic register

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PORT HOPE TOWNSHIP, Beltrami County, Minn. — Roughly 1,000 years ago, someone buried a pot into the ground at what is now Three Island Park, likely planning to return to the fishing site the following year.

An archeological investigation done three years ago unearthed that fish pot nearly complete, still containing layers of fish bone inside.

“When people ask me about the most impressive thing we found, I often use the pot (as an example),” said Michelle Terrell, anthropologist at Two Pines Resource Group in Shafer, Minn.

Those who lived during that time often buried items at locations to which they planned to return so they didn't have to carry all of their belongings with them.

The pot was recovered along with 1,702 artifacts (materials made by humans) and 2,737 faunal remains (remains of animals) at the site in Three Island Park north of Bemidji.

Terrell said Two Pines conducts 15-20 archeological investigations a year, but the lightly wooded site at Three Island Park stood out from the beginning.

“It's a very important site,” she said.

The finds at the park are now driving an effort to list it on the National Register of Historic Places. The state review board of the Minnesota Historical Society considered the site March 27 for the Register and gave it a positive recommendation.

It now will go for federal review, but that is viewed as more of a formality.

“It's certainly a significant site,” said David Mather, National Register archeologist with the State Historic Preservation Office in Minnesota.

Mather commended Beltrami County and its parks department for taking the initiative to list the site on the Register.

More often, he said, a site is deemed eligible for listing but the process is not continued.

Of Minnesota's 1,598 sites listed on the Register, just 115 are archeological sites, or 7 percent, he said.

"It's very disproportionate," Mather said. "I'm hoping in my career to increase that number. We're never going to catch up with the buildings, and that's fine, but part of the reason (we can increase the number of archeological sites) is that we now have a means to have nominations like Three Island Park done."

Tax credits and grants have long been available for the preservation of historic buildings, he said, but thanks to the state's Legacy amendment, through its cultural heritage fund, there now are grants available to assist in the costs of archeological investigations and the Register-nomination process.

"The Legacy amendment provides a means through grants and such for local historical societies and, in this case, county parks, to get funding to hire an archeologist to do the excavation and research and write the nomination," Mather said. "From an archeological perspective, it's been a total game-changer for Minnesota archeology."

Beltrami County acquired the Three Island Park land in 1967 when Minnesota deeded the land to the county to be used exclusively for parks and recreation.

The archeological site was uncovered as the county prepared for planned park improvements. A grant from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources funded environmental reviews for wetlands and archeology.

The county soon realized there was an archeological site there. It then obtained Legacy grants to do Phase 1 and Phase 2 investigations — done by Terrell's team — to thoroughly examine the area.

"It's a site that has not been disturbed," said John Winter, recreation resource manager for Beltrami County. "It's probably one of the most unusual."

Terrell's team dated artifacts back as far as the Early Woodland Period (1000 B.C. to 400 A.D.) and Late Woodland Period (1100 to 1750 A.D.), although its strongest association was with the Blackduck-Kathio Complex (600 to 1100 A.D.).

"Characteristics are indicative of Early-Middle Blackduck ceramics," she wrote. "Those fish remains recovered from the interior of the 'fish pot' that could be identified include remnants

from northern/muskellunge and white sucker. ... The remains present suggest that fish were harvested at this site during the spring spawning.”

Winter said the people who lived during those times were highly nomadic and probably came to this area once a year for the fishing.

“They would harvest the fish here and then, after the harvest, they would move onto another location, probably one that had better game,” Winter said.

Since they were always on the move, they would bury items in the ground so they wouldn’t have to carry them, he explained

Beltrami County has installed two interpretive signs near the site. One discusses the history of American Indian fishing in the Turtle River and the other details the different pottery types that were found near Turtle River and Three Island Lake.

Mather said he would like other Minnesota communities to follow Beltrami County’s lead.

“In Minnesota, we have an amazing archeological record, but for the most part, it’s not visible,” he said, noting that the state doesn’t boast pyramids or pueblos that visitors can see. “It takes a little more interpretation.”

Beltrami County not only preserved the site by doing erosion control, but it welcomed the public with signs, he said.

“Archeologists around the state are certainly excited about this,” he said of Legacy funds. “I’m hoping that more county parks, county historical societies, local museums will step up and take advantage of this funding.”

Further, he hopes that the public will be invited to get involved in discovering Minnesota’s historical past, perhaps by taking part in an archeological dig or through interactive programs.

“I think that’s some of the best outreach that we can do in terms of connecting with the public,” he said. “I’m often surprised that a lot of the public doesn’t even know that archeologically exists here. They see it on the Discovery Channel and it seems like a long ways away. But we’ve got some really archeology in Minnesota.”