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Campbell Ave. dig unearths Tucson's past

By Dan Sorenson

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The endless chug, roar and bang of construction wipes out the Tucson of old. But, once in a while, it also turns the clock back to a time long before any modern resident's memory.

Working on her knees in a windblown, bare dirt lot next to a trailer park and across the street from the former Tucson General Hospital, Karen Russo gently scrapes the floor and walls of a shallow trench with a tiny metal trowel. Her eyes constantly scan the seemingly unremarkable, hard, tan earth for signs of the human past.

Each day, thousands of people on their way to and from the Foothills zoom by in fancy cars, unaware of the little Hohokam village where people were eking out a meager existence 1100 years ago. It's known as the CNN Camp Bell Site, the initials of Clayton N. Niles, the developer whose company is footing the bill for the work by Old Pueblo Archaeology Center.

"I can almost feel their presence here," Russo says of the Hohokam who were thought to have inhabited this site more than 1,000 years ago.

She's a volunteer on Old Pueblo Archaeology Center's dig on this former residential lot, one that suddenly has a lot more commercial value than it did just a couple of years ago. With the rebuilding of the old Tucson General as a cancer treatment center, this lot has a promising commercial future.

In the meantime, the archaeology professionals say it's helping volunteers learn more about Tucson's history, and furthering a public interest in the science of archaeology.

The professional archaeologists supervising the volunteers working on this site suspect that Russo's hole in the ground may be a "bell-shaped pit," a shallow circular depression with the edges undercut. Maybe these bell-shaped pits were used for storing food, but that's just a guess, says Courtney Rose, Old Pueblo Archaeology's program manager, an archaeologist with a doctorate.

Out here in the dirt, it's hard to tell the pros and those with the big degrees from the amateurs. Working on hands and knees in the dirt has a leveling effect.

A retired New Jersey businesswoman who moved here five years ago, Russo soon started volunteering with Old Pueblo. Mostly, she worked in the office, working on the nonprofit's fundraising programs. But she relished the time she got out of the office to work in the dirt and uncover the clues to the way

if you go

What: Public tours of Old Pueblo Archaeology's CNN Camp Bell Hohokam ruin dig.

Where: 3883 N. Campbell Ave.

When: Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

More information:
<http://oldpueblo.org>

Did you know ...

The Camp Bell Hohokam pit house site contains at least three Hohokam pit house ruins, thought to date back to between A.D. 750 and A.D. 1450.

Exploratory trenches end at the property lines, but suggest a much larger Hohokam community that might extend into the adjoining modern neighborhood near North Campbell Avenue and East Allen Road.

Unearthed artifacts, including colored glass, at the site also suggest modern occupation of the land since around 1900.

Archaeologists say there are still questions about the use of some artifacts found at Hohokam sites, including "doughnuts," carefully formed stone rings a few inches in diameter. A great deal of work went into the precisely made stone rings, but their purpose

people lived in and around what is now Tucson so long ago.

She says she wanted to "find out what their lives were like."

Some days, Russo says she goes away without having found anything.

Busted. But like a gambler, she always has hope.

"But, always, the next trowel, you never know."

She's already made a find on this site, "a beautiful hearth," a circular plaster spot in one of the pit houses found here.

Rose came across this Hohokam community ruins when she was doing a mandatory site assessment several years ago, required as the property changed hands and was being readied for development.

She says she was just checking the ground, not even digging, when she found the evidence — about 20 pottery shards and 10 stone flakes produced by someone making tools — on a rear corner of the lot.

That discovery bumped the assessment job to the next level, in which a skilled backhoe operator digs some shallow trenches. That, says Rose, revealed the profile of some pit houses and triggered a dig.

Karen Fuglie, another retiree, but from Minnesota, is here on her first dig, brought in by a friend with a long-standing digging addiction.

Working on another trench, toward the back of the lot, she strikes it "rich" early Friday morning on her first dig. It's a pot shard, a 2-inch rectangular piece with a painted black line on it that emerged as she brushed away the softer surrounding dirt.

Then she and her digging partner, Marie O'Donnell of Chicago, find some charcoal.

Rose, who circulates around the site consulting with other staffers and chatting with the volunteers, says Niles generously agreed to let Old Pueblo use the dig as a training site. She said it's a great opportunity for the public, both volunteers and those who take Old Pueblo's free public tours.

"We needed a public site," Rose said. "We give them (volunteers) a lesson on what we do. Our crew leaders are all experienced archaeologists. No one is left alone."

Allen Dart, Old Pueblo's director, said it was a more generous act than it might at first seem because volunteers don't save money on a dig — they work more slowly than pros and must be supervised. But he said it is a great opportunity for Old Pueblo to do its public outreach work.

And that's just fine with Russo.

"This is my passion," says Russo, "... kind of like a hobby dream come true."

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Archaeology Awareness Month

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• *Contact reporter Dan Sorenson at 573-4185 or dsorenson@azstarnet.com.*

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