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Archaeologist William Iseminger has spent his professional lifetime pursuing the mysteries of Illinois' Cahokia Mounds.

By SUSAN LUDMER-GLIEBE

Unearthing Prehistoric Secrets

Egypt has its great pyramids at Giza; Mexico's Chichen Itza rises from the limestone plain of the Yucatan; and the United States has . . . the Cahokia Mounds in Collinsville, Illinois. Come again? Cahokia? If you have never heard of them, that is too bad and shame on you, because Cahokia is North America's greatest, most monumental, prehistoric archaeological complex.

"Cahokia is an awesome site, massive and mysterious," says William Robert Iseminger, a 1967 University of Oklahoma graduate in anthropology.

Iseminger, 61, is an archaeologist and the assistant site manager of the 2,200-acre complex, which includes remains of residences, remnants of walls, stockades and sun calendars—and most impressively, 70 of the original 120 earthworks, dominated by Monks Mound, the largest single prehistoric earthen construction in the New World. A modern interpretive center puts it all in perspective for visitors.

Cahokia's beginnings stretch back more than 1,000 years, when the inhabitants of the low-lying and extremely fertile area surrounding the Mississippi River started forming into more settled groups. With the development of an extensive corn-and-squash based agricultural system, a prehistoric settlement grew into a city—perhaps the first such urban conglomerate north of Mexico—and developed over time into a regional entity for other communities in the surrounding area.

Cahokia was the earliest large center of what modern archaeologists call the Mississippian culture. The mounds that define the city were built of the most prosaic of materials: dirt. Using stone, wood or shell tools, the digging left depressions called borrow pits, which can still be seen on the site today. It is estimated that 50 billion cubic feet of earth were moved for mound construction.

Material artifacts found at the site—copper from Lake Superior, shells from the Gulf and Atlantic coasts and semi-precious minerals from the Midwest—all point to Cahokia's extensive influence as a trading city, enhanced by its proximity to the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri and Illinois rivers. At its height, it is theorized, somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people lived here. By the 13th century the city was in decline; by

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the beginning of the 15th, it was almost certainly abandoned.

Iseminger's association with Cahokia began in 1968 when he worked as a field crew member excavating the stockade wall, a bastioned fortification that enclosed the central portion of the site. His interest in archaeology, however, had begun much earlier, as a young boy.

"My uncle was an artifact collector," recalls Iseminger. "When my family visited him, he would often take us kids out to the cornfields of McLean County (Illinois) to find arrowheads." By high school Iseminger knew what he wanted to be when he grew up: an archaeologist.

Over the decades Iseminger has enjoyed his share of dirt-on-the-hands excavating, but for the last 15 years, his professional attention has been primarily oriented to museum-related work. He has overseen interpretive programs, trained guides, designed and developed exhibits, along with writing hundreds of papers and, by his own account, giving thousands of talks and lectures.

Because Cahokia is so large and time and monies so constrained, the site will, most certainly, never be totally excavated. Even so, with each new dig (and non-invasive techniques as well) come new discoveries, new lines of questioning and often a surprise or two. In the early '70s excavations at the very unimpressive-looking mound #72 unearthed the remains of 280 people—some headless and handless, perhaps indicating some kind of ritual death.

The find included a very impressive burial of a man in his 40s—perhaps a chief—lying on a bird-shaped platform of 20,000 marine shell beads with various grave goods. These artifacts included stone discoids used in native games, tens of thousands of pieces of unprocessed mica from the Appalachians used for making ornaments, and two caches of more than 800 newly made arrow points, with one cache's points all pointing to the northwest and second group all pointing to the southeast.

Some of the chert arrowheads from the latter cache came from that direction, from eastern Oklahoma. Such finds are not the only examples of a relationship between the two prehistoric cultural areas. Pottery, shell ornaments and small figurines also have connected eastern Oklahoma and southwestern Illinois. Sounding a bit like a sports announcer trying to sound neutral describing a Sooner vs. Illini football game, Iseminger mentions the findings of some contemporary researchers that may indicate that, contrary to prior theories, Oklahoma's own rich prehistory may have been influenced by Cahokia rather than the other way around.

"For decades what we call the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex was thought to have its origins in the Southeast, including the remarkable and rich Spiro site in eastern Oklahoma (which was excavated by OU during the '30s and '40s) and moved up into the Cahokia area later," notes Iseminger. "However, recent studies in the Cahokia area have forced us to re-examine the direction of some of those links as the dates from here for certain artistic styles and materials are earlier than those

AT LEFT: This Bill Iseminger painting of the Cahokia site, as it would have looked circa AD 1150-1200, from an aerial perspective, shows the Monks Mound at center overlooking the Grand Plaza and the Twin Mounds with the stockade (palisade) wall surrounding the central ceremonial precinct.

INSET: After many years in the field at Cahokia Mounds, assistant site manager Bill Iseminger, shown at the doors to the Interpretive Center, moved to museum-related work—overseeing educational programs, training guides, designing and developing exhibits, writing and lecturing.



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Cahokia's Monks Mound is the largest prehistoric earthwork in the Americas, containing 22 million cubic feet of earth, covering more than 14 acres and rising in several terraces to a height of 100 feet.

in the south." Of course not all archaeologists see it that way.

In summer 2004, after being away from the field for too long, Iseminger helped lead an Earthwatch Institute team of volunteers and professionals, once again exploring the stockade. Much has been learned about the stockade in the 40 years since it was first located, appearing as white streaks on aerial photographs that were made in the 1920s and '30s. Evenly spaced guard towers have been located and indicate that one of the functions of the palisade may have been defensive in nature. The Earthwatch expedition's goal was to examine the area where one of the walls appears to turn west going behind Monks Mound and eventually to determine the full extent of the wall around the central ceremonial precinct.

"The importance of defining this enclosure," explains Iseminger, "relates to the social and political conditions under which it was constructed." Finding the footprint of a stockade may not sound that exciting, but then again this was no ordinary protective wooden wall. "This palisade had a circumference of nearly two miles," he says, explaining that it enclosed the most important and prominent public space of the entire site: Monks Mound and the 40-acre Grand Plaza and 17 other mounds.

Some of what the team found there can be read as a cautionary tale that may very well have relevance today. "I have done estimates that show that up to 20,000 logs—each 12 to 15 feet in length—were needed for the stockade," says Iseminger, adding that the wall probably was built not once but at least four times between AD 1175 and AD 1275. "Each time the stockade was constructed, the builders would have needed conservatively 130,000 man-hours to fell, trim, debark, transport and place the

posts in excavated trenches. This would have had a tremendous impact on the local forest resources, including the flora and fauna living in the forest."

In summer 2005 Iseminger again will be leading an Earthwatch crew at Cahokia as they continue to pursue the route of the stockade, working from mid-June to the end of July. Iseminger adds that visitors are always welcome to view the excavations in progress. (More information is available at www.cahokiamounds.com.)

Twenty-three years ago Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site was designated a World Heritage Site, in a league with such monumentally significant sites as the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal in India and the pyramids in Egypt. There is no mistaking the emotion Iseminger feels at having spent his professional life working at a site so important in the history of mankind, at being able to stand on the summit of the terraced Monks Mound, which rises 100 feet from the plaza floor and commands a fine view of the mighty Mississippi and the sprawl of St. Louis just a few miles to the west. Here the Cahokia chiefs performed ceremonies and consulted with the spirit world a thousand years ago.

"I probably have climbed this mound several thousand times during the thirty-three years I have worked here," says Iseminger. "But I still feel a sense of awe each time I reach the summit, look at the impressive views Cahokia's leaders had of their domain and also image the tremendous effort involved in building this powerful edifice, one basket load of dirt at a time." 

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