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NORTH PORT CHARLOTTE, Fla. -- Private enterprise joined forces with government in a unique agreement which has resulted in a rare archaeological find in North Port Charlotte on Florida's southwest coast.

General Development Corporation provided access to Little Salt Springs on company-owned land, company personnel and a research grant and security fence totaling \$12,000, while the Florida Department of State contributed marine archaeologists and other experts. The result was the recovery of an archaeologist's bonanza of human and other animal skeletal remains, perfectly preserved prehistoric plants, and tools used by early man in Florida before the days of the Egyptian pyramids. This has prompted experts to predict that this may be "the most important find of its type in this hemisphere."

Florida Secretary of State Richard (Dick) Stone expressed appreciation for "the responsible, conscientious efforts of General Development Corporation to assist the State of Florida in gaining more information about our history and heritage," and he predicted that "all Floridians, including our school children" will benefit from the cooperative effort.

When the project was proposed, State officials found General Development not only willing but anxious to assist. "The Company was pleased to have the opportunity to put into action the established policy of preserving and protecting any areas of ecological importance on General Development property," said the president, Frederick E. Roach.

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According to Roach, the company began its investigation of the Springs in 1970 when it sponsored two trips by a group of Miami sports divers to probe the formation.

Located in southern Sarasota County, Little Salt Springs is almost perfectly circular, approximately 250 feet in diameter and more than 220 feet deep. Based on the divers' verification that numerous skeletal remains lay at various levels beneath the surface, General Development granted Florida State Marine Archaeologist Carl Clausen and a party of his divers access to the spring in March of 1971.

During the past year, Clausen has directed more than a dozen team members in what developed into the largest underwater archaeological work of this kind ever attempted.

Experts believe that the spring has acted as a time capsule, capturing and preserving for centuries evidence of early life in Florida. The material appears to be from several time periods dating back as far as 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, and is the best preserved material yet found in the southeastern United States.

Based on estimates from remains recovered, the bones of 200-300 ancient Indians may still be found in the spring. Further study of the find will provide valuable new data, as the remains represent a cross-section of the base population from which evolved the later Indian tribes of the southeastern United States.

Objects discovered may shed new light on the life of early man. Approximately 35 feet below the present surface, two wooden pins or pegs, approximately 18 inches long, were discovered hammered into the edge of the drop-off into a deeper area of the spring. At a time when the land formation

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was dryer and the water level was much lower, the pegs could have been used to anchor or guide vine ropes so that a man could lower himself into the spring.

Some support for this view comes from another find--a tree stump 25 feet below the present surface of the water. Extremely interesting are several wooden pieces thought to be tools. Such objects seldom survive for over 5,000 years.

Phase I of the Little Salt Springs exploration began with survey work around the site. In the cooperative project, General Development representatives and State divers visited the site in May and recovered a sample of near-perfectly preserved human skeletal material for radiocarbon 14 dating.

Results of the dating process showed the bones to date from 5,220 years ago, or approximately 3200 B.C. Based on this, Clausen speculated that the spring could contain the largest number of best-preserved remains from this time period ever found in the Western Hemisphere!

To preserve the area and protect the site, General Development posted security guards in the area and constructed an eight-foot fence topped with barbed wire around the surface pool. Being careful not to disturb any possible archaeological site near the spring, company crews cut a fence line, assisted by a representative sent by Robert Williams, Director of the State Division of Archives, History and Records Management.

Meanwhile, meetings were completed between company and State officials and the joint agreement was signed for completion of the project.

Phase II began shortly before Thanksgiving, 1971, with a thorough geological and limnological survey. In preparation for the work, General

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Development built and brought to the site a 20 by 20-foot raft to be anchored in the pool. Aiding State Marine Archaeologist Clausen with the work were Dr. H. K. Brooks, professor of geology at the University of Florida, and Dr. Edward Deevey, limnologist with the Florida State Museum, Gainesville.

Second phase work showed that the spring is shaped much like a thick-stemmed wine glass. From its 250-foot diameter at the surface the bottom slopes gently to a depth of 45 feet. There, a hole approximately 75 feet in diameter opens into a near-vertical shaft. At depths of approximately 70 and 90 feet ledges appear, tucked back into the circular wall.

Additional animal bones were found on the 90-foot ledge, including bison, what is either extinct mastadon or mammoth, giant land turtle and ground sloth.

As the shaft continues to drop toward the bottom, it begins to flair as an inverted funnel until at bottom it is about as large as the surface pool. The bottom center is about 215 feet deep. At one corner where the floor continues to drop away, divers have descended to 220 feet and turned back without sighting bottom, going as deep as an upended 25-story building.

To get this information, Dr. Brooks used a sonar-type fathometer device. Shape of the upper basin area was determined by floating the device across the surface on previously surveyed grid lines. To determine the shape of the lower chamber, the fathometer's transducer was hung at a right angle to a vertical pipe lowered from the raft.

Brooks believes this may have been the first time this method has been used for underwater mapping. Geological core samples were also taken on the bottom area.

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Photographs and contour mapping of the upper basin show clear stratification. In the third layer above the limestone base, the second one from the water's surface is "consolidated organic material including leaves, nuthulls, twigs, sticks and small logs, mixed with clay and sand" about a foot or more thick. In this area, divers found "a whole cemetery of human bones." The people ranged in age from 1½ to 35 years. Several skulls, numerous large leg and arm bones were found.

Also collected from this layer were chips from slate spear points of the same type found in sites near Gainesville, which were dated at 3000-4500 B.C. Other finds include ancient plants, worked bone and antler, pierced shells.

Because the water is almost totally free from oxygen, organic material such as palm fronds were preserved. Clausen believes that men lived here during the Late Archaic period. Still hunters, but less nomadic than their predecessors, Paleo men chased the giant (now extinct) beasts of the receding Ice Age.

The great mystery of the springs discovery is why so many human bones? Remains of excrement were found but tests have not yet shown whether they were human. If the hole was a watering hole for game, did the human hunters come there seeking game or because it was a site for some sacred ceremonial rite? Some anthropologists think this is true, but Clausen considers it unlikely among so primitive a people.

As yet unconfirmed is what may prove to be one of the most startling discoveries made. While diving shortly before Thanksgiving, Clausen found a skull containing material which he strongly suspects is preserved brain matter, 5,000 years old! Samples are now undergoing laboratory analysis by a pathologist.

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In addition to the unidentified matter found in the skull, that of a girl about eight years of age, pieces of preserved cartilage spinal discs were also discovered with the skeleton.

Water samples tested by Dr. Deevey and technicians from General Development's Port Charlotte Utilities office showed that the spring contains an extremely constant environment necessary to the preservation of skeletal and plant material. Water measurement showed a water temperature that remains constant to within a one-hundredth of one degree from just below the surface to the bottom. This, Clausen believes, accounts for the astounding degree of preservation of materials in the spring.

Using knowledge gained, Phase III of the study began just before Christmas when a full-scale underwater archaeological research team arrived in North Port Charlotte to set up camp at the site. The team established working areas and placed underwater photographic equipment and an injection dredge used in excavation.

General Development supplied electric generators and water pumps. The Sarasota County Historical Commission aided by securing emergency radio communications with the County sheriff.

The group was joined by Dr. Arnold Kortejarvi, professor of archaeology at Royalton College, Royalton, Vermont, who helped with further land survey work around the site.

To insure diver safety, Robert Friedman, a diving instructor from Miami, served as safety officer for the team. Before entering the water at Little Salt Springs, each diver was given a safety and procedure review in the swimming pool of General Development's Ramada Inn at Port Charlotte. In addition, a highly qualified safety diver accompanied each team of scientists and technicians working in the spring.

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For what is believed to be the first time in underwater archaeology special buoyancy compensating vests were loaned to the divers by Underwater Unlimited of Coral Gables. These vests allowed the divers to perfectly stabilize themselves in the water where they were able to work without actually stepping in or disturbing the deposits.

Also for the first time in underwater archaeology, constant two-way voice communications were maintained during most operations between the archaeologist and the surface. Tape recordings of the diver's verbal descriptions as he worked underwater will insure accuracy of mapping and recording of the exact location of the skeletal material. Aiding in this was Dr. Harry Hollien, head of the Communications Science Laboratory of the University of Florida. The special underwater voice communications equipment was used by Dr. Hollien in a program of diver communications research supported by the U.S. Office of Naval Research. As a result, communications with a previously unknown intelligibility rate of more than 90 per cent were maintained.

Excavation work was done in 2-hour shifts with the divers using an injection dredge. Complete photographic records were made of the remains and artifacts before their removal for laboratory study. Recovery phase of the Little Salt Springs study ended Wednesday, January 12.

Dr. Audrey Sublett, physical anthropologist at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, will conduct a complete laboratory analysis of the skeletal material. Further studies in archaeology, anthropology, geology, limnology, paleontology and other related scientific areas will follow. General Development Corporation will continue giving all possible cooperation.

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Results will not be known until this work is completed, in about one year. But archaeologists assert that this is one of the most important discoveries in the hemisphere.

"Study and analysis of the skeletal material apparently available in Little Salt Springs appears at this point to be absolutely basic to our understanding of both the early and later aboriginal populations of Florida and possibly the whole southeast," said Dr. Clausen.

Expressing his appreciation to General Development Corporation, Secretary of State Richard Stone hailed the cooperative project as a breakthrough in cooperation between private enterprise and government.

"This agreement proves that the State and private enterprise can, and do, work together in these endeavors," he said, "and that the continuing efforts to add to our historical enrichment do not always have to be one step ahead of the bulldozer. All Floridians, including our school children, will benefit from this cooperative effort."

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