

New dig may verify old report

When Herald staff writer Martin Merzer reported on May 28 that archaeologists and students have been working since 1983 in hope of finding in a Florida West Coast sinkhole what may be the earliest evidence of human habitation in North America, a dim light in my memory intensified.

Where did I see it, I asked myself, was it 1896 or 1897? I combed through my precious collection of original pages of Miami's first newspaper — The Miami Metropolis — seeking to link what Merzer reported and what struck in my memory.

Eventually I found what I was looking for; in fact, I found a second article that seemed a direct link.

Merzer reported the sinkhole site to be near Port Charlotte, about halfway between Fort Myers and Sarasota. It is there that University of Miami archaeologist John Gifford and students have been sifting through artifacts that date back 10,000 or



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12,000 years and 7,000-year-old human bones. If human implements dating 10,000 years are present, there must have been people to make and use them, Floridians far earlier than the bones already uncovered — and which, if found, would be the earliest human remains found on this continent.

Florida history is rife with speculation. As an example, I often have read claims that the biblical Noah's Ark was built somewhere up near Tallahassee, because it's one of the few places in the world where gopher wood is found; the Middle East isn't one. Then there are the many tales of pirate treasure buried along the Southeast Florida coast, none of which ever has been uncovered.

In early 1897, two articles appeared in The Metropolis that would stimulate not only Gifford but also might excite the imagination of Miami Heat basketball coach Pat Riley.

In January 1897, under the headline *Some Prehistoric Floridians*, The Metropolis reported a claim by David Landow, identified as being engaged in the dry-goods business in pioneer Miami, that the year before, while participating in a Smithsonian Institute archaeological expedition near Marco Island, skeletons were found. They showed, he said, "that the people who inhabited that section of Florida were from 12 to 15 feet in height and must have averaged 450 to 600 pounds if of ordinary build."

Landow provided the newspaper with a letter from the leader of the expedition, Frank Hamilton Kushing of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology, dated April 30, 1896, in which Kushing thanks Landow for his participation. The letter makes no mention of specific discoveries.

WATSON'S TALL MYSTERY

You might be tempted to chalk up the colossal-man allegation to a heavy night with a likker pot on the part of Landow, but there was another article in The Metropolis a month later, in February 1897.

"There is a farmer, Capt. E. J. Watson, over on the Chatham River near Fort Myers, who is using human bodies for fertilizer," it read. "He is cultivating 18 acres, which has been under cultivation for 28 years, and during that time no fertilizer has been used except human bodies.... The human bodies which furnish him fertilizer are nearly all eight feet in height and the owners are supposed to have met death in a race war centuries ago, leaving their bodies to enrich the ground, upon and in which human skeletons lie very thick."

The Chatham River, identified in the February story but not on contemporary maps, was off Ponce de Leon Bay and the Thousand Islands, very close to the Marco dig discussed in the January story. While the ongoing dig north of Fort Myers is about 75 to 100 miles away, it is close enough.

Most likely, the stories of giant people are just another highly exaggerated Florida tale. But one cannot be certain. The answer to this made-for-journalism intrigue may lie in that sinkhole near Port Charlotte.

Keep digging, guys and gals, Pat Riley's standing by breathlessly!