Prehistoric S. Texas comes alive on Web

Popular site's new exhibit looks back 13,500 years.

BY MELISSA LUDWIG
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Archaeologists work hard unlocking the secrets of the past. They dig up artifacts, catalog them and figure out what they mean. Then they stow them in drawers where few people ever see them and write about them in dry academic journals few people ever read.

TexasBiologyHistory.net aims to change all that.

A self-titled virtual museum, the Web site is dusting off the story of prehistoric Texas, wrapping it in a shiny package and presenting it to a global audience. It has easy-to-read narratives, pictures, movies, children's games and lesson plans for teachers, all meticulously compiled using 80 years of research and artifacts from all the state's major archaeological collections, including one at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

"This is the first-class piece," said Steve Tomka, director of the Center for Archaeological Research at UTSA and a contributor to the exhibit. "It's really up-to-date... and represents the state of knowledge from the professional community."

The site was created with little fanfare in 2001 by staff at the University of Texas at Austin's Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory, the state's oldest and largest archaeological collection.

Despite the lack of publicity, the site's popularity grew steadily, especially with teachers, professors, students and history buffs. In 2005, the site logged 1 million virtual visitors, and it is recognized by the National Endowment for the Humanities as one of the nation's top educational Web sites.

All this with a shoestring staff and a wobbly stream of grant money said Susan Whittaker Dial, the Web site's co-editor and a research associate at the laboratory.

"We are always in a funding crisis," Dial said. But that hasn't slowed down Dial or her colleagues.

"Much of what has been dug

Hanukkah festival marked by faith, music

Jugglers and dance music make for a spirited celebration on the river downtown.

BY LISA MARIE GOMEZ
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

They filled seven barges and sang Hanukkah songs such as "I Have a Little Dreidel" and "Oh Hanukkah, Oh Hanukkah" as they waved to people who were eating or strolling along the River Walk on Sunday.

The ninth annual Hanukkah on the River attracted some 800 people, mostly Jewish, to the outdoor Arneson River Theater, where they watched a fire and juggling show and the lighting of the third candle on a giant menorah.

But the highlight that drew their feet was a Jewish Argentinian called Kefan music. Children with bracelets and paper bags wiggled their bodies to the beat, and didn't seem to be watching.

"This is such a beautiful tradition," said Benny Solomon, who was there with her husband, Jam, South Africa, and her daughter, Alex, and son, Houston.

It was their first time in San Antonio and they had their sights set on the Hanukkah celebration after reading about it in the morning paper.

"We just stumbled onto it," Alex said.

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Prehistoric South Texas gracing Web

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For Bexar County residents, some of those stories are close to home.

For example, the new South Texas Plains exhibit features the Richard Beene site, an archaeological treasure trove that sits across from the Toyota plant on the Medina River. It was discovered in 1989 during construction of a reservoir that never was finished.

Because of occasional floods, silt piled up in the river’s flood plain, trapping artifacts in perfect time-ordered layers dating back 15,000 years. Mammoth leg bones, stone dart tips and ax heads, grinding stones, earth ovens and charred animal bones tell the story of a people who hunted and gathered food in the region before the Spaniards arrived and began writing things down.

“Most Texans start Texas history with the Alamo,” said Alston V. Thoms, an anthropology professor at Texas A&M University in College Station who excavated the Richard Beene site and wrote a piece about it for the Web site.

Thoms assigns readings from the site for his graduate and undergraduate classes.

“My students are always amazed that there is such a rich history in Texas,” Thoms said. “They often express disappointment in their grade school and high school education and how woefully little they were informed of Texas’ native past.”

Thoms believes enough educators are now using TexasBeyondHistory.net as a resource that it will have a “measurable effect” on how children perceive archaeology and American Indian ancestors.

One of those educators is Peggy Durack, a librarian at Hobby Middle School in the Northside Independent School District.

“It blows me away every time I see it,” Durack said of the site. Its interactive features keep kids interested, she said.

In the Richard Beene exhibit, for instance, children can watch an animated movie that shows how the Medina River floods, trapping artifacts in layers of dirt. They can also open doors in each dirt layer to see what artifacts were found, as well as artistic renderings of what life was like during that period.

And because Dial and her colleagues have worked closely with the scientific community across Texas, teachers can be sure the information is accurate and up to date, something that can’t be said for many textbooks.

“You have thousands of kids in Texas learning about Texas prehistory,” said Tomika of UTSA. “They can log on and have a virtual classroom at their fingertips.”

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