

Gentlemen,

The cultural resources staff of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe has called my attention to the story that ran in your newspapers yesterday and today concerning Dennis Rachunok's prospecting for historic and prehistoric artifacts along the north shore of Lake Coeur d'Alene, near historic Fort Sherman. The Tribe was especially concerned at the reference to arrowhead collecting, as the area in question has been used by them for millennia.

As I'm sure you know, Fort Sherman itself is an important archaeological property in Idaho's territorial and state history. Although its term of use was brief, bracketed by the 1878 Bannock campaign and the Spanish-American War of 1898, the garrison there served to monitor the international border, protect railroad and telegraph crews, and impose martial law on northern Idaho civilians during labor disputes. Few of the original 52 structures of the fort still stand, but as Mr. Rachunok has discovered, a rich record of artifacts and smaller items of material culture dating to the period remains on the site. If these artifacts were properly recovered and recorded, they would probably inform on a wide range of topics, ranging from parade ground flooding to the material culture and off-duty pastimes of the post-Civil War infantry.

Unfortunately, Idaho is one of the last states in the country without laws protecting its historic heritage. Under these circumstances, an educated and informed citizenry is the best protection available for our fragile past. Mr. Rachunok's activities are not illegal, but they are damaging and diminishing our collective sense of ourselves as a people, where we've been, and where we might be going.

However, steps can be taken. Since the campus of North Idaho College is located on the site of Fort Sherman, and since the college offers an associate of arts degree in anthropology, with coursework in Native Peoples and archaeology and prehistory, an opportunity seems to be available for the appropriate documentation, recording, and -- where appropriate -- recovery of artifacts relating to the fort and the region's native peoples. Under professional supervision, the artifacts could be properly mapped, recovered, analyzed, used in exhibits and museum displays, and ultimately curated in an accredited repository.

These artifacts represent the common heritage of the people of the city of Coeur d'Alene, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, and indeed, Idahoans and Americans generally. From a commercial perspective wider than mere personal gain, they also have economic potential, not as ebay transactions but as part of the growing heritage and tourism industry in northern Idaho.

Can the editorial and academic voices of northern Idaho join this conversation?

Sincerely,

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