

## A Calusa Birthday Wish

I had spotted the postcard during one of my searches for Florida postcards on ebay. The asking price of \$75 was a lot of money, and I wondered what kind of card could be so expensive. It was a printed postcard with a picture of Mickey Mouse. Mickey was extending a birthday wish to the recipient, with an invitation to attend the neighborhood movie theater in Miami Shores. The date was October 18, 1940 and it was addressed to “Jimmy Shafer”. I recognized the name. I knew Jimmy as Jim, an artifact collector, who had dug numerous sites across south Florida having gathered a large collection of historic artifacts in the process.

Jim loved old bottles and became an expert on old glass and Spanish artifacts, publishing several articles on these objects. Jim Shaffer had once told avocational archaeologist Wes Coleman that all he wanted was the “top six inches”, just the historic artifacts that were buried in those top six inches of black dirt middens that dotted the Everglades. Jim offered to help Wes and his diggers by removing the overburden of historic objects covering the prehistoric levels below and in return Jim would keep the “historic trash” which meant the trade beads, buttons, and other artifacts of precious metal.

I had met Jim only a few times before his death. He was a blue collar kind of guy, a crane operator, a chain smoker, and very smart. Our meetings always were cordial and he was anxious to be helpful providing me with photos of the artifacts he had found and sharing his recollections of the sites he had dug. He was particularly excited about his extensive excavations of Madden’s Hammock, a large island in the eastern Everglades, where he had found glass beads and Seminole artifacts.

The Blue Hill Mound was different. Jim was uneasy talking about that mound. I thought he had gone too far digging a burial mound. It wasn’t illegal when he did his digging in the mid 1970’s, and although I believe he told me that he avoided burial mounds; this mound got dug with gusto yielding human skulls, glass beads, and an engraved silver tablet. He may have been only a peripheral player in that event, and there should be no doubt that some of Jim’s knowledge, collections, and photographs got passed on, now reposing in the Historical Museum of Southern Florida; but something about that mound’s destruction haunted me. It had been one of South Florida’s most pristine prehistoric mounds located on Horrs Island, near Marco, but when the first silver bead was caught within a treasure hunter’s screen, it was like a California gold rush. A small nucleus of collectors soon leveled the 15 foot high mound, scattering the broken human bones and only collecting the skulls and any artifacts of interest.

The diggers, those who are still alive, are now scattered to the far ends of the country. Jim died at age 56 in 1991 of lung cancer. I met at least two of the others; one moved to Virginia, and the other still lives in South Florida. Jim had his share of bad luck: a tough divorce and even once turning up in the sights of the law when one of his trade deals provided him with several Indian pots; mortuary vessels that had been stolen from the Kolomoki Museum in Georgia. I doubt that he had anything to do with their theft, but Dr. Sears, the archaeologist who had led the Kolomoki dig, who was at that time a

professor at Florida Atlantic University, got wind of the pots. One night he led police and a detective from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation to Jim's house with a search warrant. Jim was cooperative and all of the pots he had were returned to the State of Georgia.

A little over thirty years had passed from Mickey's invitation to the destruction of the Blue Hill Mound. For me, that post card is an affidavit of boyhood innocence; a birthday wish from Mickey to a tow haired boy turning five, who had yet to make the choices that all of us must make about where our heart and destiny will take us in life. It seemed a long way from the air conditioned Rosetta Theater for a Saturday matinee to the dank deep holes burrowed into a sand burial mound, but its peculiar how things travel through the cosmos; some things are really never lost. Postcards and skulls don't seem to stay put-moving through that peculiar space that separates birth and death.

It is a Frankenstein fantasy when archaeologists and collectors resurrect the dead objects of the world, giving them an unintended second life. We have reclaimed coke bottles, Disney watches, comic books, arrowheads, and pot sherds that were never intended to be immortalized nor displayed on collector shelves and in museums. When a pottery sherd is more than just a broken pot and becomes a conversation about cultural typology we should marvel at that leap. Perhaps, the distance between Mickey Mouse and Calusa graves is not so far after all.

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