

Cinnabar mysteries unearthed

By BETSY COHEN of the Missoulian

A handful of ancient photos, some odd depressions in the ground and a line of interesting rocks poking from the earth were the only clues guiding a team of University of Montana archaeologists and anthropologists on the hunt for the once-famous, now-vanished Montana town of Cinnabar.

As of last summer, little evidence existed to tell the story of the first gateway to Yellowstone National Park.

It was here, at the turn of the 20th century, that Easterners traveled by train, resting in the spacious Cinnabar Hotel on the north edge of the park before taking a stagecoach into the heart of Yellowstone's splendor. A warm meal, a hot shower, and a post office were among the genteel luxuries tourists enjoyed in the otherwise untamed and dramatic landscape.

So famous was this tourist hot spot that President Theodore Roosevelt came for a visit, and for a time in 1902, his high-profile visit transformed the Cinnabar Hotel into a temporary White House.

When the Northern Pacific Railroad extended its line to the town of Gardiner and built a new train depot, just a few miles south of Cinnabar in 1903, it marked the beginning of the end for the park's first gateway town.

Eventually the bustling spot was abandoned altogether, and Cinnabar was consumed by time and collapsed into the earth, where it rested until UM anthropology professor Doug MacDonald and his students came to visit last summer.

Working in collaboration with Yellowstone National Park's archaeologists, MacDonald and his team set out to find Cinnabar and any other evidence of its existence.

For five weeks they plotted and probed, exploring a 700-acre area.

They found what they were looking for - and a whole lot more.

The crew unearthed a stout, 5-foot-deep mortared wall, which was very likely the foundation of the Cinnabar Hotel, MacDonald said. Newspaper clippings, a Northern Pacific railroad sign, revolver bullets, dishes and the sole of a cowboy boot were also found - and enough artifacts to recommend the site be listed with the National Register of Historic Places.

Even more interesting was the discovery of several camping sites used by prehistoric Native Americans.

One of the sites, which MacDonald estimates to be about 1,600 years old, turned up evidence of fire pits that offered clues to what was eaten and how long the hunters lived in the area.

Initial analysis shows the Indians ate a variety of small animals and a lot of deer, MacDonald said.

"The animals were processed wholly because the bones were really small and charred up," he said. "It looks like they were living there for a few weeks at a time, and I'm not surprised.

"It's along the Yellowstone River. It's a really nice spot, and interestingly, there is no evidence of bison."

Sharp, thin pieces of obsidian were the tools of the day, and the type of rock and other evidence indicates the early hunters traveled in southwest Montana and into Idaho, rather than into Wyoming, MacDonald said.

The summer archaeology field school was so successful, MacDonald said he looks forward to returning with students this coming summer and hopes the discoveries are the beginning of a long collaboration between UM and Yellowstone National Park.

"In these days of modern development, we are losing historic places more and more, and many are not being excavated," MacDonald said. "Archaeology can tell us a lot about the type of people who were living here and how they were living here."

Digging up the past will tell us more about where Indian tribes lived, where they traveled and with whom they were trading, he said.

"Last season was a start," MacDonald said. "There's a lot more work to do."

Funding for the research project was bolstered by an \$8,000 grant provided to the National Park Service, which received the funding from the Rocky Mountain Cooperative Ecosystem Unit.

The agreement is mutually beneficial for UM and the park, MacDonald said, and he's eager to further develop the relationship.

"Federal funding for the national park system has been cut dramatically, and we can help out by providing Yellowstone with cultural resource management," he said. "The experience helps them out, and they allow us to come in and excavate some pretty interesting sites."

"I'm looking forward to going back, and hopefully this is the start of a long relationship between the University of Montana's Department of Anthropology and Yellowstone National Park."