

UP FRONT



MEADOWCROFT

By David Scofield, Director,
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40 Years of Archaeology at the Meadowcroft Rockshelter

The dangers of texting while driving are well known, but what about reading a book while driving? Meadowcroft founder Albert Miller did it all the time. Granted his mode of transportation had four legs instead of four wheels, but it would seem that reading a book on horseback presents only a slightly diminished hazard.

As a boy growing up on his grandfather's farm, Albert was charged with tending the horses kept several miles from home on rented land. With an active mind and time to kill in the saddle, he read accounts of the Western Pennsylvania frontier and daydreamed about the native people who had hunted the land he called Bancroft farm.

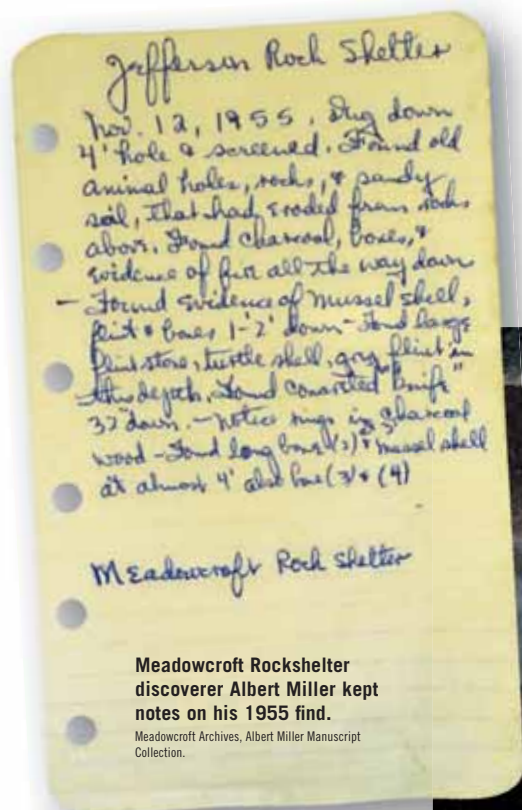
Albert's curiosity about Indians was further piqued when other boys, showing up at school with arrowheads in their pockets, invited him to join them in the hunt for more. His satisfaction was impossible to contain when he found one of these flint treasures by the spring on his own farm and declared the family's source of water to be an "Indian spring." This tangible link to prehistory, now in Albert's pocket, created a lifelong thirst for more knowledge about the first Americans.

At the midpoint of his life Albert made another discovery on his farm. However, this discovery would not only surpass anything imagined by a schoolboy with a cache of artifacts in his pocket, but it would eventually exceed the expectations of highly trained archaeologists. Now armed with half a lifetime of study, Albert suspected that the sandstone overhang he had known since childhood formed a rock shelter, which was most likely used as a campsite by prehistoric people. On November 12, 1955, he tested his hypothesis

after encountering a freshly dug groundhog hole beneath the rock ledge. Sifting through the detritus excavated by the marmot, Albert found his evidence: burnt bone, flint flakes, and an intact flint knife. These artifacts, just an annoyance to the rodent, were conclusive evidence that native people used the site centuries earlier. Fearing that news about Indian artifacts would certainly bring looters to the site, Albert quietly sought a professional archaeologist to investigate. His search lasted nearly 18 years.

Four decades have passed since professional archaeological study was initiated at Meadowcroft. The first field school excavation, under the purview of the University of Pittsburgh, began on June 15, 1973, at the direction of the newest addition to the anthropology faculty: 28-year-old archaeologist Dr. James Adovasio. The field schools continued for six consecutive years followed by intermittent excavations in the following decades, with the most recent work taking place in August 2011. Approximately one-third of the site remains undisturbed and will be excavated in the future as warranted by advances in technology and field methodology.

Significant contributions have been made to the field of archaeology through the work at the Meadowcroft Rockshelter since the first trench was opened at the site 40 years ago.



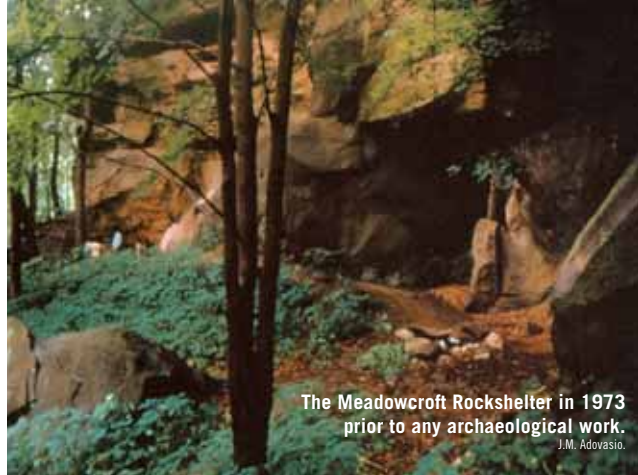
Meadowcroft Rockshelter
discoverer Albert Miller kept
notes on his 1955 find.

Meadowcroft Archives, Albert Miller Manuscript
Collection.



A view of the Meadowcroft Rockshelter
excavation during the 1973 field school.

J.M. Adovasio.



The Meadowcroft Rockshelter in 1973 prior to any archaeological work.
J.M. Adovasio.



The initial excavation trench laid out in 1973 at the Meadowcroft Rockshelter.
J.M. Adovasio.

As described in the 2005 National Historic Landmark nomination:¹

Meadowcroft Rockshelter demonstrates that humans have been in the Americas since at least 16,000 B.P.,² increasing the known period of human occupation of the New World by approximately 25 percent.³

It has provided one of the longest, if not the actual longest, stratified sequence of cultures in the United States. It has provided information about the earliest migrants into the eastern United States and evidence for some of the earliest domesticated crops in the northeastern United States....⁴

Meadowcroft Rockshelter was one of the first archaeological project sites to have an on-site computer link used to track site data as they were being produced.⁵

Meadowcroft was also one of the first archaeological sites in the northeastern United States that truly employed an interdisciplinary approach to its excavations and analyses.⁶

Beyond the field work, Meadowcroft Rockshelter and the debate it caused in the archaeological community, has resulted in a set of criteria used by the profession to identify Pre-Clovis sites.⁷

Today this world-renowned archaeological site is accessible to the public as the centerpiece of Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village. It is here that we tell the story of how 40 years of archaeology have contributed to a greater understanding of the people living in Western Pennsylvania over the past 16,000 years.

¹ The Meadowcroft Rockshelter was designated a National Historic Landmark on April 5, 2005, by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior. The full nomination may be viewed online at: <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/78002480.pdf>

² B.P. signifies "Before Present" as the time scale used in archaeology. Using this convention, the present is defined as the year 1950 and relates to the advent of radiocarbon dating.

³ Mark McConaughy, "Meadowcroft Rockshelter," National Historic Landmark Nomination, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service (April 2005), 16.

⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁷ Ibid.



Smithsonian Connection

This wristwatch and pressurized bubble-shaped helmet were worn by astronaut Jim Lovell, Jr., during the Apollo 8 mission in December 1968 and are featured in *1968: The Year That Rocked America*. The three-ring booklet is a checklist of tasks used by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders in his capacity as Lunar Module Pilot. Artifacts related to America's space endeavors can be found in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum.

