Sixty Years Ago: The Discovery of a Lifetime

Most of us would have walked past without notice, but Albert Miller’s keen eyes led him to the discovery of a lifetime. The forest floor was covered with a damp mosaic of fallen leaves, and the autumn air carried a faint babbling from Cross Creek, flowing 40 feet below the rugged cliff face. It was November 12, 1955, and, without realizing it, Albert was about to set off a chain of events that would change the scientific understanding of when the first people arrived on the North American continent.

Albert was the great-great-grandson of George Miller, a Scots-Irish immigrant who had come to America in the late 18th century and purchased land in Washington County. That land became Bancroft Farm and remained in the Miller family for two centuries—until Albert’s death in 1999. “The Cliffs,” as they had been referred to on early maps, were along the north bank of Cross Creek on the southern edge of Bancroft Farm.

An avid outdoorsman, Albert instinctively knew the large rock overhang he was approaching provided shelter from the elements and made a perfect campsite, perhaps as it might have for Indian hunting parties long ago. The sandstone “roof” kept the space underneath it dry and the southern orientation meant it had the maximum benefit from the sun’s warmth. It was also high above the creek and safe from any threat of flood. In the center of the sheltered area, there remained a fire pit still used by the occasional camper. However, what caught Albert’s eye on this day was a groundhog hole set against the back rock wall. His insatiable curiosity lured him over to the hole and he began to investigate. With some avocational experience in archaeology, Albert decided to go home, retrieve his shovel and a screen, and sift through the material he removed from the hole.

A page from Albert’s journal reveals that he dug down to a depth of four feet that day. He found charcoal, as well as pieces of bone, mussel shell, flint, and a turtle shell. At 32 inches deep he found a flint knife blade. This tangible evidence convinced him that the rock shelter was indeed used by native hunters in past centuries. Curiosity once again demanded the shovel, but wisdom prevailed as Albert determined further excavation should be done professionally.

Concerned that word of Indian “relics” would attract looters to the site, Albert was selective about those with whom he shared his discovery. He later wrote, “An archaeological site is like reading a book written long ago. Pot hunters looking for something of monetary value would proceed to destroy these unread pages.” Albert was searching for someone who
would appreciate the book and read every page. It was a long wait. Albert recalled, “The site to me as the years went by was like knowing there was a building loaded with history and collectibles that would eventually be mine, but which I was not permitted to see until a future time—like grandmother’s closed attic that would sometime be yours.”

Thirteen years later, in 1968, two trusted professionals visited the site: Dr. Don Dragoo of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and Dr. Phil Jack of California State College. They showed some interest but neither wanted to conduct an excavation. Another five years passed before a new member of the University of Pittsburgh faculty, Dr. James Adovasio, was in search of a site to conduct a summer field school in archaeology. Dr. Jack pointed Adovasio to the Meadowcroft Rockshelter, and the first professional excavation of the site took place in the summer of 1973.

The following summer, the first radiocarbon dates were processed at the Smithsonian Institution, revealing a human presence at the site for at least 16,000 years. Since the excavation began, over two million objects have been recovered from the site including 20,000 artifacts (objects made or modified by people) and 2.3 million ecofacts (natural objects such as plant and animal remains).

Albert Miller’s curiosity, knowledge, and wisdom were not only responsible for the discovery of the Meadowcroft Rockshelter 60 years ago, but also for preserving the fragile pages of his “unread book.” It was the discovery of a lifetime!