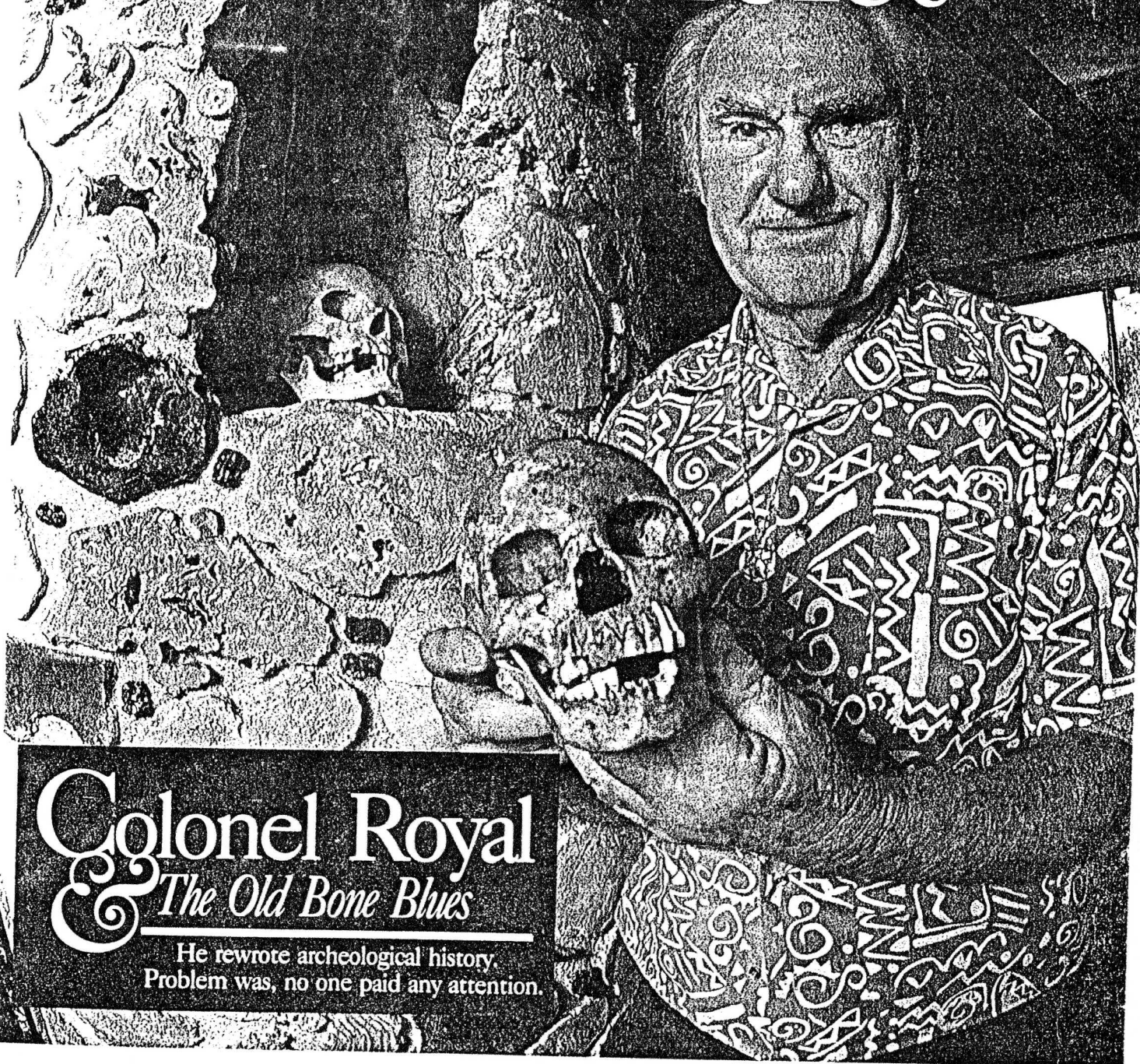


Florida



Colonel Royal & *The Old Bone Blues*

He rewrote archeological history.
Problem was, no one paid any attention.

Would you buy a lost continent from this man?

William Royal told tales of Ice Age bones in a Florida spring, and the archeologists scoffed. Will he prove them wrong again with word of Atlantis off the Florida coast?

The spear-thrower squatted at the sulfur spring, cupping the warm, brownish water in his hands, drinking deeply. Steam spiraled from the water and disappeared against the walls of clay and limestone that rose some 50 feet above the spring. The work that cold, star-filled night was the burial of the spear-thrower's father. A silent, shuffling ceremony marked by song, a dirge-like grieving chant that touched on further places and distant times.

The father was laid far back in one of the dark and narrow caves that honeycombed the walls. A crude robe of matted fur covered him; his tools and spear points were laid beside him.

Rocks that grew like plants hung from the ceiling. These were knocked down and jammed against the cave opening. The Great Cat would not crush or scatter the bones of the spear-thrower's father.

The Great Cat, saber-tooth era, now only a few fossilized bones, lives in a shoebox, packed neatly away in a small round house that is set in a jumbled patch of palmetto scrub.

Birdseed is scattered across a lawn of sand spurs. Squirrels nibble on the crusts of old breakfast muffins. It seems a friendly place, hardly home to an adrenalin-addicted adventurer, hardly headquarters to a bandit archeologist.

The colonel comes to the door, snorting and blowing a little, and presents, somewhat formally, his credentials.

The proper salutation here is Lt. Col. William Robert Royal, USAF, Ret. Then comes a roll call of adventures. Pilot, underwater explorer, shark rider, gator wrestler, amateur archeologist, engineer, free-lance psychic, storyteller, husband, father and . . . well, whatever the colonel might think up next.

The first thought is that we have here a man who is

wonderfully over-credentialed — even for 83 years of age.

From the Bosphorus Straits to Pacific atolls, there just isn't much the colonel has missed in this life — and it requires considerable sifting of things to narrow him to one crowded chapter.

One hardly knows where to begin. One need not worry about that. The colonel is pleased to lead the way. His passion for almost three decades is an easy walk from his home — a journey back 10,000 years or more.

Peeling aside the 6 a.m. fog banks along the way, you can listen to stories about runaway horses and carriages in Detroit. It seems the colonel, in his youth, single-handedly corralled a score of them. Or if that sounds dated, there are hairy World War II tales of delivering B17s and B25s to various airfields around a globe that seemed afire in the early 1940s. There is a bizarre story of him riding the back of a 12-foot lemon shark in the Gulf of Mexico, waving to startled boaters as the shark breaks the surface of the water, trying to unload the colonel. That tale, and many others, is in an autobiography he co-authored, *The Man Who Rides Sharks*.

However, if you want *passionate* discussion, mention old bones. The colonel will take a back seat to no one when it comes to old-bone stories. In fact, for almost every old bone he has, and he has thousands, there is a little story — and one very big story that knits them all together.

Rambling through a bleak subdivision off U.S. Highway 41 just south of Venice, on your way to the source of these old-bone stories, you will notice the colonel waddles a little, a shuffling ducklike walk. We have a huge hunk of adventurer here, 200 or so well-sculpted pounds, but decades of diving — frequently to dangerous depths — have taken their toll. There is marked hearing loss in his right ear. You need to holler up pretty good.

He also suffers, sometimes painfully, from aseptic bone necrosis, a degeneration of the bone tissue. Some years ago he had a hip replaced. The infirmity, however, is more combat medal than handicap. All this is explained and brushed aside. There are no jokes about

his old bones.

"Here we are," says the colonel, pointing grandly to what looks like an old swimming hole, circa 1920. "This may prove to be the most important underwater archeological site in North America."

The view is deceptively calm. An elderly couple, clad in bathing suits and caps from a long-ago era, dog paddle slowly, bobbing up and down in the tepid water, eyes closed. They seem on the verge of falling asleep.

This is Warm Mineral Springs, an hourglass-shaped sinkhole about 80 yards in diameter, set in a little circle of pine and palmetto. There is a modest bathhouse, a tiny gift shop-post office. This is the west-coast branch of Florida's Fountain of Youth, the other being at St. Augustine. Its heavily mineralized waters, always a steamy 87 degrees, caress all manner of arthritic aches and pains.

It is a place especially lovely on frosty mornings, a place to sink into nose deep and watch the rising sun spread its rays across a vast, lonely stretch of pastureland. Steam percolates off the surface of the chocolate-colored water, giving the place an eerie, other-worldly look.

As it turns out, an other-worldly look it richly deserves. In 1973, a nearly complete skeleton of an adult Paleo-Indian male was recovered from a small cave at the 43-foot level of the spring. The best scientific estimate is he was buried there 11,000 years ago, before the water level rose — making this modest little sinkhole the earliest intentional burial site found in North America.

The uniqueness of these spring, similar to several in the state, is that only a few feet below the surface, the waters contain little or no dissolved oxygen. Not much decays or can be disturbed by scavengers. What was in and nearby the spring 10,000 or more years ago, before the waters rose, remains there today, very much intact.

A bonanza of archeological treasures has followed the skeleton discovery. There have been bones of Ice Age mammals, giant ground sloths and human skulls. Deep in the spring, in a layer of clay dated 12,000 years old, the bones of a saber-tooth cat have been found alongside a human jawbone — the best evidence

B Y J O H N M c A L E E N A N



PHOTOS BY GEORGE SKENE

to date the two competed, or at least co-existed, in the Western Hemisphere.

Some say it's the most important underwater archaeological discovery — ever.

The colonel has his own uniqueness here, being the least surprised person in the Western World at these discoveries. You see, he *knew* all that stuff was down there a dozen or so years before it was "officially" found. He was talking archeological treasures while others were suggesting that maybe the colonel had put something funny in his air tanks. He had seen things, touched them — even decorated his fireplace with an old femur or two.

Winter, spring, summer and fall, the spring was a demanding mistress. Trouble was, outside a few loyal friends (none of them archeologists), nobody back then believed the old-bone lode was any kind of treasure at all. The colonel still shakes his head at this severe short-sightedness, this lack of faith.

To get this in the right perspective, we need to rewind the tape to the winter of 1958. The colonel, chilled by the cold waters of the Gulf he had been exploring in his scuba gear, hiked over to Warm Mineral Springs one day, prodded by the same curiosity that has led him to thousands of other dives, dives in places

much less placid than this water-filled hole in the ground.

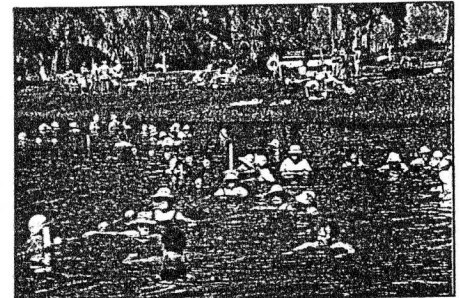
"I had heard all manner of tales about the springs," the colonel says. "The Loch Ness monster, or at least her cousin, might be down there. Pirates had buried a fortune in gold and silver somewhere in its depths. Missing persons had been chained and tossed in there during some strange witching ritual.

"It was both spooky and incredibly alluring — and as far as I could figure out, nobody had ever dived that spring. *Nobody*. That was the most fascinating attraction of all."

Wearing what would now be considered primitive and dangerous scuba equipment, the colonel waded to the dog-paddling bathers and slipped below the surface.

There were the caves and huge cones of stalactites at the 45-foot level. You do not have to be an archeologist or geologist to know that stalactites in these caves meant the water level had been much lower at some point in time, probably several thousands of years ago.

The colonel got a high-octane rush. In a series of early morning solo dives, he probed the caves, always



While William Royal, top, digs for archeological treasure in the runoff from Warm Mineral Springs, vacationers, above, relieve their aches and pains in the heavily mineralized, 87-degree waters.

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COLONEL

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inching his way deeper into the dark waters.

Longtime spa-goers, less adventurous, had always assumed they were paddling above a mysterious, maybe bottomless, sinkhole. They took the waters cautiously, nibbling along the edges. The colonel dove for the heart.

In fact, in all his years, he had never been a nibbler. A non-conformist even in his active time with the Air Force, his off-duty hours were the stuff of *True Life Adventures* feature stories. He-man stuff. Cocktail parties at the Officer's Club did not qualify as a high-risk activity.

When stationed at Johnston Island in the Pacific, the ocean was his playground. On one foray, he speared a 7-foot, 2-inch moray eel. At the time, this was just shy of a spearfishing record. He volunteered for underwater demolition projects, helping dynamite coral heads to clear shipping channels.

He dove the Mediterranean, seeking out the shark-infested waters near the ancient Turkish coastal city of Antalya. He would later write that those were disappointing dives because the sharks were "skittish and unapproachable."

The spring was just another chapter. At first there were huge baskets of stalactites, mixed with an assortment of uncatalogued bones, to spread across the tiny sandy beach.

The colonel's conclusion, unfettered by scientific examination or knowledge, was that many thousands of years ago, when the earth's ocean levels were much lower, Early Man had camped at the base of this small spring, as a foraging resident-hunter. Above him were a series of ledges and caves. These would eventually be flooded as the water level rose another 100 feet.

The colonel's calls and letters to archeologists at the time were met with unrestrained indifference.

At one point, he established a long-distance phone and letter link with what seemed a legitimate researcher at a prestigious Midwestern university. This

researcher praised the colonel's work, offering encouragement and financial support.

Something in the tone of the letters triggered suspicion with one of the colonel's friends. A quick check showed he had been talking and corresponding for several weeks with a night watchman at the university. Lots of letterheads around, but no degrees.

The truth is, as the '60s were on the horizon, most archeologists were of the opinion there was not much worth studying under Florida's waters. Storms and currents would have destroyed, or certainly altered, anything important. There also was no easy way to conduct a methodical (read traditional) archeological dig.

So nobody bothered about, or paid attention to, a plain-spoken Air Force lieutenant colonel who continued to emerge walrus-like from the depths of the spring, blowing and snorting, and waving these old bones in the air like so many popsicle sticks.

"It was a damn frustrating time," says the colonel. "I *knew* I had found some-

thing that would turn archeological thinking around. If I was right, and I was pretty sure I was, then previous estimates of earliest man in Florida, most of them in the conservative 4,000- to 5,000-year range, were way off target."

The colonel did not have money for the expensive carbon-14 dating process, but he was betting he was finding bones, human bones, in the 10,000-year range. If he didn't have his own chapter, he'd at least have a long footnote in future archeological textbooks.

Among the hundreds of letters sent by the colonel and friends, letters seeking support, or at the very least, encouragement, for his back-yard project, was one that arrived on the desk of a TV producer. This was NBC in the Chet Huntley years, and the network was the first to take the bait. A camera crew arrived to check out and film the colonel's story. If it looked good, it might get on TV. Chet would narrate.

If nothing else, this meant all the colonel's theories would not end up atop

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COLONEL

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some night watchman's locker.

As luck would have it, the colonel was much too lucky that summer day in 1959. Everyone is assembled at the spring. The colonel and an NBC cameraman are at the 45-foot depth. There is great hope *something* old will be found. Borrow a paragraph or two from his own book, let him tell how it went.

"The lights and camera were on me while I was working. Slowly I excavated up the slope, fanning the sediments ... then I began to find loosely packed leaves. Removing these, I uncovered the dome of a human cranium. When I had it partially exposed, the camera ran out of film.

"We went up as excited as children. 'I can't believe it,' I said. 'I think we'll have a whole skull.' The camera was reloaded and back down we went. Slowly and carefully I fanned away the sediment. I knew many skeptics would see this excavation and wanted to be sure it was all on film. Finally, I uncovered the whole thing. It was complete ... even the jawbone in place.

"I carefully lifted the skull, then turned it on its side to inspect the base. Leaves and sediment were imbedded in the foramen magnum, the hole through which the spinal cord attaches to the brain. I started for the surface with it, gently brushing the leaves and silt from the base. Then I noticed something peculiar at the base and touched it. It felt like a soft and slimy soap.

"I reached into the hole, pulled out some of this material and looked closely as it tumbled from the skull. It was pieces of brain! I couldn't believe my eyes. It simply couldn't be ... not in a skull this old!"

It was true. It was also too good to be true. The colonel wrote:

"The scientific community, when confronted with this evidence, was sure we had perpetuated a hoax in front of the TV cameras. I had hoped the filming would persuade professional archeologists to become interested. The event created just the opposite response. Even NBC decided not to show the film until we received a carbon dating from a charred log sample found in the same sediment."

The colonel and his friends received a dating on that log three months later, estimating it was close to 10,000 years old. To get a carbon dating on the skull would mean destroying it, so samples of skeletal material found adjacent to the skull were sent for testing instead. These were dated at between 7,100 and 7,500 years old. This was not the figure the colonel had hoped for, but carbon-14 datings on bones are not considered as accurate as datings from organic material.

The spring's anaerobic water was responsible for the unusual preservation of the brain. The colonel and a friend submitted a paper on the skull, which was published in 1960 by *American Antiquities*. The TV film was eventually shown, but the find did not provoke any serious archeological study. The skull was eventually sent to the University of Arizona, where it is still on display.

The colonel, seemingly on the verge of recognition for important archeological discoveries, found himself instead branded as a fast-talking huckster for the spa at Warm Mineral Springs.

Did he bronze his old black flippers over this terrible affront? No more so than he would have stopped chasing sharks if one had turned around and bitten him.

The colonel, never needing too much encouragement for this sort of thing, continued diving, exploring other ledges, other caves deeper in the spring. Nearing the bottom, at about the 150-foot level, he began a tentative exploration of a huge cone of debris that descends to the floor of the spring — nearly 230 feet below the surface. At the top of this debris cone, an old beach chair. At the bottom ... ah, the discoveries would most certainly be sweet.

There were serendipities on almost every dive. More skulls were found and literally baskets of bones ... cave bear bones, saber-toothed tiger bones, ground sloth bones, human bones. The colonel, obviously a man of great optimism, left these intact, *in situ*, as the experts would want, in case a wandering archeologist might *fall* into the spring one sunny day.

Warm Mineral Springs continued to pump out a couple of

million gallons of 87-degree water every day. The health seekers came, still nibbling along the edges.

Eventually the colonel concluded, in something of a huff, that straight-laced, stuffy academic types would never admit *anything* at the spring was important unless they said it was — or found it themselves. He waved goodbye, at least for a while. A consultant's job on a missile-engineering project took him out of retirement and sent him to New Mexico.

More than a decade passed before anyone began a serious archeological study of Warm Mineral Springs. During that period, hundreds of curious scuba divers began to explore both this site and similar springs the colonel had bumped into a few miles away, a place known as Little Salt Springs.

The shallow caves and ledges, untouched for thousands of years at both springs, were plundered. Wagonloads of bones, certainly a few skulls, some left *in situ* by the colonel, probably wound up decorating the top of the TV.

In the early 1970s, the colonel retired from the Air Force a second and final time and returned to build his home in the sparse development that flanks the spring. At the same time, a young and ambitious scientist, Florida State University graduate Wilburn (Sonny) Cockrell, had been named the state's first official underwater archeologist.

A happy pairing, you might think, but it turned out to be a sour relationship.

Cockrell, invited by both the colonel and local officials to explore the spring, immediately recognized it as holding a wealth of archeological treasures. In 1973, it was Cockrell whose picture was distributed around the world when he bubbled up from the spring cradling the skull of an 11,000-year-old Paleo-Indian.

The colonel? Well, he was likened to many New World explorers. He had discovered something important, but then he screwed it up by hauling up almost everything he could get his hands on.

The Cockrell/colonel personalities did not blend, as is often the case between adventurer and scientist. The colonel was dismissed as little more than a stubborn, cantan-

kerous "pot hunter."

In truth, the fruits of some of this rummaging can be found imbedded in a massive, somewhat bizarre fireplace that is the centerpiece of the colonel's home. He has it fashioned somewhat like a face, with a stalactite nose, skulls that light up at dark, huge tusks and a cross-section of prehistoric tibias, femurs and jawbones of one thing or another. If he could put it on a trailer, it would rate as a dandy tourist attraction.

As the '70s closed out, there were good times and bad times for the colonel. The spring was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Sarasota County officials set up an impressive plaque, noting the archeological finds and saying nice things right up front about Lt. Col. William Royal ... "underwater explorer."

But official recognition of the spring did nothing to ease the colonel's frustration. His irritation focused on Cockrell's patient, sometimes plodding scientific work. "That boy is just wasting good money," the colonel would say, meaning he wasn't seeing any bones. The colonel hasn't changed his mind since then. "Sometimes he's down there for weeks and weeks and nothing to show for it but fossilized alligator dung." The relationship between the two men, never cozy, seems to have slid downhill with the passing years.

Cockrell was never eager to share the stage with a man whose idea of scientific exploration was little more than a show-and-tell exercise. If asked, he will acknowledge the colonel was the first to recognize the importance of the spring. Beyond that, he suggests the colonel concentrate on shark rodeos or something.

Indeed, after carefully examining the spring, Cockrell concluded that vast sections of the muck, peat and clay on various levels had been destroyed, largely through the colonel's undisciplined rummaging.

In fact, the spa owners, heeding counsel that they limit diving to official archeological teams, banned the colonel from bringing his scuba gear to the spring. He would no longer be allowed to dive

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