

Bones give clues to settlers' lives

Identities, causes of death unknown for the remains of 13 excavated last year at SCSU

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Be good to your bones. A hundred years from now, they could tell your story. Or at least pieces of it.

The names and causes of death for 13 settlers excavated at St. Cloud State University last year remain a mystery. But the stain and polish on one man's upper jaw shows he chewed tobacco, and the worn joints of a

middle-aged woman indicate she was a hard worker.

A crew of students working under assistant history professor Richard Rothaus, and observed by archaeologist Randy Peterson, unearthed 26 graves from the site of the new learning resource center in January 1999.

Assistant anthropology professor Debra Gold has worked for the past four months study-

ing the remains, which date back to the mid-1800s. She recently presented her findings at a College of Social Sciences symposium.

With the aid of a group of St. Cloud State seniors, Gold learned the sex and estimated ages for each of the bodies. She found six complete adult skeletons — four males, two females — and four skeletons of infants or children.

"The other three were grave shafts with a small number of adult bones," Gold said. "Those were probably cases where the

coffin was moved."

The findings, released Thursday, offer a glimpse into lifestyles of the period.

The signs of osteoarthritis in one woman, for example, indicate "she did a lot of heavy, difficult work," said the 33-year-old professor, who arrived at St. Cloud State in August.

"It shows us very clearly that life was much more difficult then, and that the likelihood of dying in the age that we would consider a relatively young adult, was quite high at that time," she said.

The age of death for the adults varied from a man in his early 20s to a man, at least 55, but possibly in his 70s.

It's difficult to determine changes in human skeleton after 55, Gold said, adding "the changes (in the bones) are no longer distinctive."

One of the women died in her late 30s or early 40s, and another died in her 40s.

Not all settlers were young, and they weren't all men.

"I think this really dispels some of the myths we have about pioneer days in St. Cloud,"

she said.

Like the elderly, the children's bones reveal little. The sex of the children — all younger than 3 or 4 — are unknown, Gold said.

With no signs of accidents or unusual broken bones, the settlers may have died from an infectious disease.

"We don't know who they are or what they died of," Gold said.

She will finish her analysis by the end of May and present a report to the state archaeologist. A decision then will be made on a proper time and place to rebury the bodies.