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Alan & Linda

Cathy, Nancy, Tom, Mari-Jo, Rachel & Robin

Cultural Treasure

Indian Hill is a historical and precious wonder

BY JENNIFER STROMBERG
Staff Writer

Consider 50 foot hills in Florida. It's hard to imagine, but on Marco Island, the wonders never cease. Indian Hill, known to some as the "Heights," stands 51 feet above sea level and is the highest point in Southwest Florida. It is located on the southeast side of the island off Caxambas Drive.

Although some of the neighboring land swells have been excavated by archeologists, Indian Hill has never been unearthed using scientific measures, and there are varied interpretations as to its geological formation and subsistence.

Despite these varied views, most archeologists and historians agree that all of the topographical masses were once the center of the Calusa Indian life and cultural beacons for early Marco Island pioneers.

Creation of a Community

Betsy Perdichizzi, President of the Marco Island Historical Society, describes these hills as

"Indian made mounds, layered with busycon and oyster shells that were 'purified' with ashes."

Perdichizzi said these mounds took years to build, and that when a Calusa Indian Chief died, they would burn his home down and build over it.

Cathy Kirk, niece of Marco Island hero Tommie Barfield, said the mound is a natural sand dune that her husband Bud was instrumental in researching.

Bud initially dug into several of the mounds in Caxambas, the area where Indian Hill sits, and brought archeologists to the island in the late 1960's.

Historian and Archeologist John Beriault of Naples agreed with both beliefs and said the mound was created by natural forces and manmade efforts.

Beriault explained the base of the mound was a natural formation dating back 25,000 years, precipitated by the rise and fall of the sea level from glaciation.

Paleo-Indians, ancestors of the Calusa Indians, hunted and gathered throughout America, and traveled to Florida about 12,000

years ago.

He said the Calusa Indians gravitated to the natural sand dunes and built higher mounds on top of them with shells, pottery, bones, and other debris.

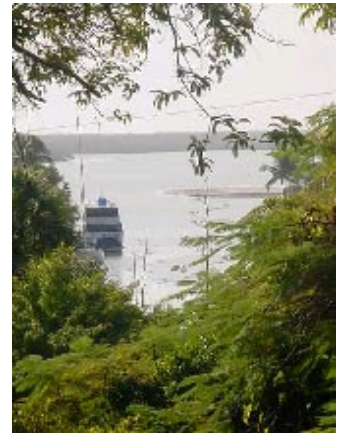
In the Marco Island Chamber of Commerce book, "Marco Island Culture and History," Michael Coleman writes that the Calusa built these heaps to help protect themselves from storms.

Coleman said the Calusa believed Marco was sacred because destructive hurricanes seemed to pass it by, a blessing from the Gods.

He argued that these sacred hills also functioned as homes and sacrificial sites for the tribe, the crux of Calusa religious life.

In "The Evolution of the Calusa," Dr. Randolph J. Widmer, Archeologist and Anthropologist wrote, "The first inhabitants of Marco Island came about 5000 years ago during the 'Pre-Glades 1 Early Period... also known as the Middle Archaic period.'"

Several of their descendants evolved and formed various tribes, including the Calusa.



Beriault explained there have been many digs on the Island led by eminent archeologists, including Frank Hamilton Cushing whose findings are scattered among the Smithsonian Institute and other museums throughout the world.

Indian Hill & The "Heights"

During the early 1900's, these mounds, including Indian Hill, were part of a bustling community called Caxambas, an area settled by several prominent figures essential to Marco Island's development.

"The Heights Hotel was an interesting seat of culture for Marco settlers because it was a magnet for people, a focal point of Marco history," Beriault said.

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