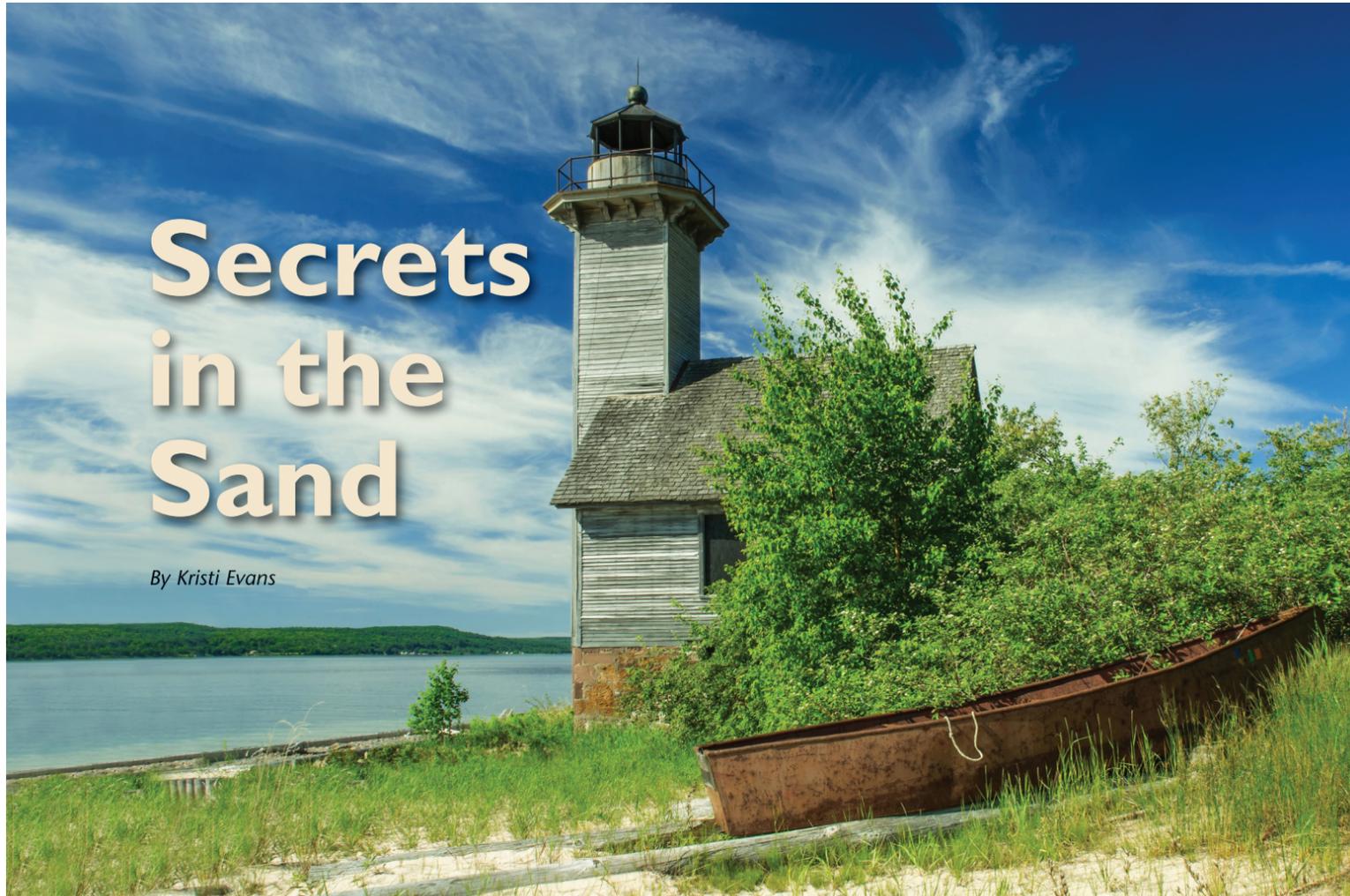


# Secrets in the Sand

By Kristi Evans



Grand Island, which spans about eight miles long and three miles wide, is the largest island on the south shore of Lake Superior. Those traveling east on M-28 catch a glimpse of it just before the road curves to the right and descends into Munising. Others enjoy a close-up view, taking a passenger ferry or personal watercraft to Williams Landing and traversing the National Recreation Area on foot, bike or by tour bus. Students led by **James Skibo '82 BS** explore it with a more intense focus. They pore through excavated soil in search of artifacts that will help to interpret the island's history.

Initiated in 2001, the Grand Island Archaeological Research Project is a cooperative effort between Illinois State University, where Skibo is a professor of anthropology, and the Hiawatha National Forest. It involves a month-long field school each summer that draws students from ISU, NMU and elsewhere. Skibo directs the project with Forest Service Archeologist Eric Drake.

"Very little archaeological work had been done on

Superior's south shore," says Skibo. "It's difficult to find sites in heavily wooded areas and challenging on the island because there were mostly hunters and gatherers who moved around and didn't leave good traces that can be easily interpreted. More than 200 prehistoric and historic sites have been identified and we've excavated about five so far. We use a shovel testing technique invented by [retired NMU professor] Marla Buckmaster that is now used all over the world."



Jim Skibo, right, with Forest Service Archeologist Eric Drake

Shovel testing involves digging small holes at close intervals to look for artifacts. Some of the items unearthed during the field school include pottery fragments and debitage—sharp-edged waste material left behind when someone crafts a stone tool from quartzite. A technique Skibo pioneered that extracts and analyzes fatty acid residue on pots can determine what was cooking in them. He says all of these artifacts provide clues as to who lived where, what activities they engaged in, what they ate and where they got their resources.

Grand Island has been occupied since 2000 BC. The

Anishnabeg (Ojibwe) took advantage of its protective harbor and set up seasonal campsites to collect acorns, harvest spawning fish in the shallows and hunt deer, moose, bear and other wildlife. Sporadic visits from trappers and missionaries followed. The first permanent Euro-American settler arrived in 1841, when Abraham Williams opened a trading post and lived there with his family until his death three decades later.

William Mather, president of Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company, then purchased the island as a natural reserve. He oversaw construction of a six-bedroom lodge and a few private cabins, many of which remain standing. Ownership of Grand Island transferred to the U.S. Forest Service around 1990.

As an NMU student, Skibo attended a field school directed by Buckmaster at the Scott Point site east of Manistique on the Lake Michigan shoreline. He tries to recreate the positive experience for the dozen students who work on Grand Island each summer.

"I thought it was important to set it up as a camp where you live near the site you're excavating," explains Skibo, a 1996 recipient of NMU's Outstanding Young Alumni Award. "We stay at the primitive but comfortable Mather Lodge and we're totally immersed 16 hours a day, six days a week, between the field work and archaeology talks at night. It's intense, but students say it gives them a better feel for what it was like for those who lived on the island so many years ago and it's the best learning experience they've ever had. Undergraduates work on data for their senior thesis projects and graduate students use the material for their MA research. Just attending the field school, however, qualifies them for low-level archaeology jobs. I've even had two couples who met at the field school and subsequently married."

**Andrew Mallo '11 BA** participated in a youth archaeology workshop at Grand Island while in high school in Marquette, attended Skibo's field school as an NMU student and will return this summer as an ISU

graduate student.

"One of my favorite parts is gathering around the campfire at night and just talking with Dr. Skibo and Eric Drake about archaeology," Mallo says. "You can sense how excited they are about it, even after doing it for as



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long as they have. Their enthusiasm and expertise motivated me and others to continue on and pursue it as a career. It's amazing to realize that every time you put a shovel in the ground, you have the potential to find something that will rewrite history. I find it interesting to try to figure out early peoples' adaptations to a new territory."

Skibo says, "I have been doing the field project since 2001 and every year, except maybe one or two, I have had an NMU student. This year Konrad and Julian Grochocki will be attending, along with MA student Jess Haglund." Past students include Jamie Ganzel, Pat Riley, Ryan Brown, Joy Karbon-Bolinger and Jenni Brown, to name a few.

This year's field school will continue excavations of sites on the western side of the island dating from the Archaic through Woodland periods (2000 BC—AD 1200). Visitors to Grand Island are invited to watch the team at work.

Skibo established ISU's partnership with Hiawatha National Forest after making frequent return visits to his hometown of Alpha, near Crystal Falls, when his father became ill and passed away.

"I thought, I've been spending so much time in the U.P., why don't I do a project there? An old NMU friend of mine, John Franzen, was an HNF archaeologist and said the Forest Service had obtained Grand Island and was looking for university partnerships to do research. I was there with a team the following year. I look at this project as a tribute to my father, in some respects, and as a way of giving back to a region I have a strong personal connection with." ■