

BY ROBERT MARX

An amateur archeologist, working 230 feet under water in a treacherous sinkhole, has discovered skeletons which prove that men lived in sub-arctic Florida in the age of the woolly mammoth

AMERICA'S 12,000- YEAR-OLD MAN

Since the beginning of recorded history no legend has so captivated the imagination of mankind as that of the Fountain of Youth—a fountain or spring whose waters would miraculously restore health and youth to whoever bathed in them. Best known of the searchers for the fabled fountain was the Spaniard, Ponce de Leon, and many historians conclude that Warm Mineral Springs, a fresh water spring or sinkhole near Venice, Florida, was his goal. Ironically, it is in the sulphurous waters of this spring that the oldest known human skeletal remains in the Western Hemisphere have recently been found.

Very little is known about primitive man in this hemisphere; it is believed that nomadic hunters crossed over from Asia during the last Ice Age, probably around 15,000 years ago, before the land bridge across the Bering Strait was submerged by melting glaciers and a rising sea level. From indisputable archeological evidence it appears that Early Man had migrated southward and was living in areas of New Mexico and Texas about 11,000 years ago. However, some scholars contend that man arrived in North America much earlier, basing their theories on rather controversial archeological evidence.

Prior to the recent discoveries made in Warm Mineral Springs it was well believed that man did not reach Florida until about 3,500 years ago, but we now know that Stone Age men were living in caves in Florida as early as 12,000 years ago, eking out a miserable existence in a climate similar to that of Minnesota today.

The revolutionary new knowledge about Early Man, which evidence in the Springs has yielded, came to light chiefly because of the determination and devotion of a single man. Colonel Bill Royal has fought against great odds for 15 years to prove that man lived in Florida during the last Ice Age. This persistent citizen-archeologist grew up near the sea and has been skin diving most of his 69 years. During the 22 years he was an Air Force pilot he traveled extensively and dove all over the world. His interest in history and archeology was kindled in 1955 when he discovered a number of ancient shipwrecks off Turkey in the Mediterranean. After retirement in 1958, he settled near Venice, Florida, and began diving in many of the limestone sinkholes, of which there are an estimated 5,000 in the state.

On his first dive in Warm Mineral Springs, Royal was astonished to find that there were large stalactites hanging from the roof of many of the

submerged caves, an indication that at one time they were above water. Digging in the sediment of a cave 43 feet below the surface, he discovered several human skeletons and a large number of bones of animals which were extinct since the last Ice Age. Royal, very excited by his find, contacted a geologist who studied the caves and determined that the stalactites had been formed between 11,000 and 20,000 years ago. He then turned over the bones to an anthropologist, but both bones and scientist disappeared. Royal had to start all over.

During the following months he unearched from the sediment in several caves a number of spearheads, two bone needles, various animal bones which had been worked into tools, and the remains of five more human skeletons. Finally, an archeologist from the University of Florida paid him a visit, and, after a cursory visual inspection, pronounced the artifacts and bones to be 500 years old.

During the summer of 1959, Chet Huntley sent an NBC television crew down to film Royal at work in the Spring. Dr. Eugenie Clark, a well-known marine biologist who specializes in shark studies, was diving with him, and while filming was in process they discovered another human skeleton. This one had a complete skull containing the brain. The high hydrogen sulfide content of the 87-degree water in Warm Mineral Springs means that there is no oxygen below 12 feet, and this anaerobic condition accounts for the remarkable preservation of the brain and other organic material found. Carbon-14 dating revealed that the skull and brain were about 10,000 years old. The oldest extant brain previous to this find was less than 2,000 years old, so this discovery created a great deal of excitement in the scientific community.

However, instead of receiving a note of gratitude from the academic establishment, they were accused of carrying off a hoax. One expert stated that Royal had found the skull in the Old World, planted it in the Spring and faked its discovery for the sake of the television program being filmed. Here was sound evidence that man was in Florida about 8,000 B.C., but no one—at least not the experts whose opinion counted—would believe it. Royal was stunned.

Anyone else would have thrown in the sponge at that point, but not Bill Royal, although he would have to wait many more years before the experts admitted his evidence and revised the account of American prehistory. Feeling that until he could convince a qualified archeologist to work in the Springs he was batting his head against a stone wall, Royal

