

Dig it: Archaeologists scour Woodstock '69 concert field

June 21 2018, by Michael Hill



In this June 14, 2018 photo, members of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University work at the site of the 1969 original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. Information from the dig will help a museum plan interpretive walking routes in time for the concert's 50th anniversary next year. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

Archaeologists scouring the grassy hillside famously trampled during the 1969 Woodstock music festival carefully sifted through the dirt from a

time of peace, love, protest and good vibes.

Perhaps they would find an old peace symbol? Or a strand of hippie beads? Or Jimi Hendrix's guitar pick?

The five-day excavation did reveal some non-mind blowing artifacts: parts of old aluminum can pull tabs, bits of broken bottle glass. But the main mission of Binghamton University's Public Archaeology Facility was to help map out more exactly where The Who, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Janis Joplin and Joe Cocker wowed the crowds 49 years ago.

"The overall point of this investigation is to kind of define the stage space," said project director Josh Anderson, kneeling beside a hole that showed evidence of a fence that kept 400,000 fans from the stage area.

"We can use this as a reference point," Anderson said. "People can stand on that and look up at the hill and say, 'Oh, this is where the performers were. Jimi Hendrix stood here and played his guitar at 8:30 in the morning.'"

Aging baby boomers might blanch at the thought of archaeologists combing over the place that literally lent its name to their generation—as if it was a Civil War battle site. But Max Yasgur's old farm about 80 miles (128 kilometers) north of New York City is already on the National Register of Historic Places. And the hillside has been preserved since the late '90s by a not-for-profit that runs an adjacent '60s-themed museum (complete with a psychedelic bus).



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, Paul Brown, of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, sifts through dirt for artifacts at the site of the original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. Information from the dig will help a museum plan interpretive walking routes in time for the concert's 50th anniversary next year. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

"This is a significant historic site in American culture, one of the few peaceful events that gets commemorated from the 1960s," said Wade Lawrence, director of The Museum at Bethel Woods. He said the archaeologists' work will help the museum plan interpretive walking routes in time for the concert's 50th anniversary next year.

Lawrence said aerial shots taken during the August weekend can't be relied upon to show the exact location of the '69 stage and light and speaker towers.

On-site data helps, though the bottom of the hillside was re-graded in the

late '90s to accommodate a temporary stage for anniversary performances. The spot of the original stage is under a layer of compacted fill.



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, Josh Anderson, of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, photographs an excavation at the site of the original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. Information from the dig will help a museum plan interpretive walking routes in time for the concert's 50th anniversary next year. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

But archaeologists think they've found the spot where a chain-link fence on the side of the stage area met the wooden "Peace Fence" that ran in front of the stage. Now they can match concert photos to a specific spot in the field. That could help them estimate where the corners of the stage were 49 years ago.

During the dig, archaeologists rolled back meter squares of the long

green grass and carefully scraped away inches of dirt as they searched for clues about the long-ago layout.

"It's some science. It's some guesswork," said archaeologist Paul Brown as he worked a square. "You hope that you get lucky."



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, Paul Brown, of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, displays a pop top recovered from a dig at the site of the original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. The five-day dig didn't exactly yield a mind-blowing haul: a couple of beer pull tabs and bits of broken bottle glass. They were more interested in defining the original stage where such acts as Jimi Hendrix and Santana performed. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

What artifacts they did find along the way will be analyzed and mapped for depth and location. Anderson said obsolete artifacts like the pull tab parts are useful since they suggest where the surface level was at the

time of the concert.

Lawrence said the archaeologists' report also will be used as museum officials consider restoring the grades in the area of the original stage. The museum is weighing any change to the site carefully, given its significance to so many.

A stream of visitors on a recent sunny day visited the corner of the field with a big metal plaque commemorating the concert. Some made peace signs as they smiled for pictures, others paused quietly to gaze at the grassy expanse.

"There's just something about this place that—and I'm not the only one—that draws people here," 67-year-old Woodstock veteran Charles Maloney said as he stood by the plaque. "I mean, this area here could have 200 people. And you can still hear the silence."



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, collected artifacts from a dig are recorded

at the site of the original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. The main mission of Binghamton University's Public Archaeology Facility was to help map out more exactly where The Who, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Janis Joplin and Joe Cocker wowed the crowds 49 years ago. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, Paul Brown, of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, measures a dig at the site of the original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. The main mission of Binghamton University's Public Archaeology Facility is to help map out more exactly where The Who, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Janis Joplin and Joe Cocker wowed the crowds 49 years ago. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)



In this June 14, 2018 photo, Wade Lawrence, right, museum director and senior curator at The Museum at Bethel Woods, looks at artifacts recovered from a dig at the site of the original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. Edgar Alarcon of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University looks on at left. "This is a significant historic site in American culture, one of the few peaceful events that gets commemorated from the 1960s," said Lawrence. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, Jesse Pagels, left, and Edgar Alarcon, of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, start a new dig at the site of the original Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. Information from the dig will help a museum plan interpretive walking routes in time for the concert's 50th anniversary next year. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, visitors to the Museum at Bethel Woods, watch a video of the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. Aging baby boomers might blanch at the thought of archaeologists combing over the place that literally lent its name to their generation, as if it was a Civil War battle site. But Max Yasgur's old farm about 80 miles north of New York City is already on the National Register of Historic Places. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)



In this Thursday, June 14, 2018 photo, visitors to the Museum at Bethel Woods, view exhibits of the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in Bethel, N.Y. "This is a significant historic site in American culture, one of the few peaceful events that gets commemorated from the 1960s," said Wade Lawrence, director of The Museum at Bethel Woods. He said the archeologists' work will help the museum plan interpretive walking routes in time for the concert's 50th anniversary next year. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)



In this August 16, 1969 file aerial photo, music fans at the original Woodstock Music and Arts Festival are packed around the stage, at bottom, in Bethel, N.Y. Archaeologists from New York's Binghamton University are trying to find the exact location of the stage and light and speaker towers and say aerial shots taken nearly 50 years ago can't be relied upon to help them, because the bottom of the hillside was re-graded in the late '90s to accommodate a temporary stage for anniversary performances, and the spot of the original stage is under a layer of compacted fill. (AP Photo/Marty Lederhandler, File)

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