

RAIN PUMMELS THE vast tracts of cornfields near Gary Nelson's home in tiny Birmingham, Iowa.

The blurred flat fields roll on as far as the eye can see, fields girded by hidden creeks that Nelson experiences in a far different way than do the farmers and townspeople around here: through the eyes of the prehistoric Sauk and Fox Indians who inhabited these lands for millennia.

In 35 years as an artifact hunter, Nelson has found upwards of 4,000 arrowheads, 200 axes, and 10 "Holy Grail pieces," as he calls them, including rare Clovis spear tips and a woolly mammoth tooth, items for which collectors will pay thousands. Some of Nelson's items date back 13,500 years.

No digging is involved; all pieces are picked up from the ground or found in creeks.

Standing at his kitchen table, Nelson tells me he receives messages in his dreams from long-gone hunters directing him to find their tools and weapons. Based on what I've seen so far, there may be more here than meets the eye.

"There's power in the artifacts," he says with reverence. "You can feel it when you touch this stuff."

Over the years, Nelson has poured over most of the fields and streams in Van Buren County, nearly always finding booty. In June 2008, when the rivers flooded and brought the banks up, he found 175 arrowheads in a single day. "I've hunted most everything out of here," he says. "I've deleted all these fields."

He keeps most of the valuable pieces, selling a few arrowheads here and there out of his roadside thrift shop next door.

At 53, Gary Nelson's face can glow like an excitable boy's—albeit a stubble-cheeked one—recounting tales of discovery, which gush out, wind this way and that, meander and surge in unexpected directions, covering decades and thousands of miles of footsteps through a county of just 500 square miles.

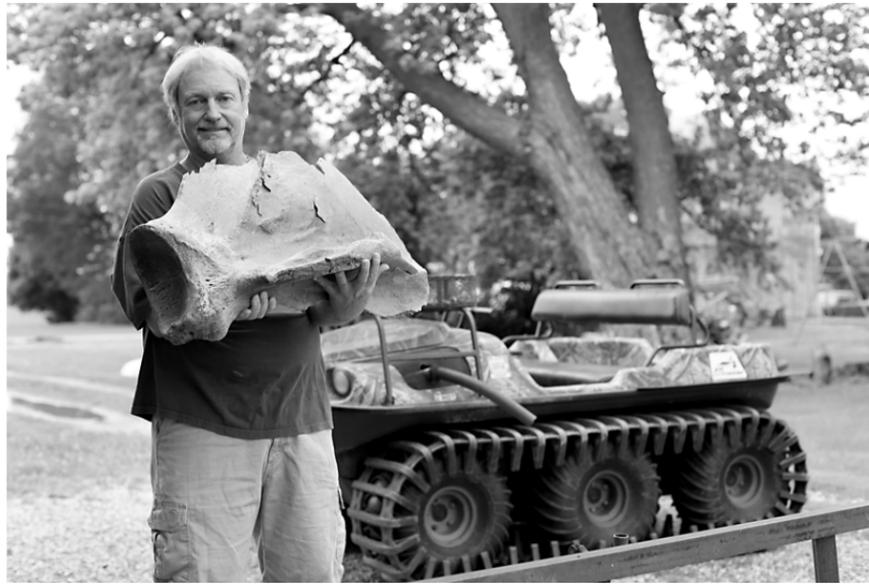
But the wear and tear of stalking treasures through the years has taken its toll. "I've got the body of a 98-year-old," Nelson says, and recent experience may bear him out.

A few days ago, as he was prepping for this interview, laying out his display cases of mounted arrowheads and *Prehistoric American* magazines laid open to pages about his finds (including one pictorial of a prize 4,000-year-old Keokuk slant groove axe), his anxious excitement got the best of him. He felt a painful pinching at his chest. A dash over to Van Buren County Hospital revealed a heart murmur. "When I bring this stuff out it really amps me up," he explains. (Nelson says he has since gotten a clean bill of health.)

Arrowhead Man

Gary Nelson Trolls Fields & Streams for Long-Buried Relics

BY WARREN GOLDIE



Gary Nelson, holding the rare woolly mammoth scapula he found, uses a six-wheel amphibious craft to scout new discoveries.

Nelson's new loft-style apartment, which he designed, is just a stone's throw from Birmingham's lone traffic signal. The town is one square mile and has a population of 441.

The spacious room, with its vaulted ceilings built of knotty pine by local Amish, has the woodsy feel of a lodge. Walls and tables overflow with Nelson's varied passions. There's a mounted deer head, a Pleistocene-period musk ox skull, a woolly mammoth scapula, several African masks, a shark's jaw, a mounted three-foot-long Asian Carp, a ceremonial Amazon rainforest alligator hat, and,



Gary Nelson wears his Amazonian rainforest alligator hat.

oddly, a replica Stradivarius violin. At the top of a spiral staircase, in the upper loft, is

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an igloo that Nelson made out of hog panels. Inside is a mattress.

Every item comes with a stem-winder and Nelson tells them all, seamlessly switching gears even in mid-sentence. "When I first saw *that*, it was either a mammoth tooth or a Walmart tennis shoe," he says, delivering a line that may have been used more than a few times.

Up near the ceiling is a basketball backboard and hoop. It's hard to imagine Nelson shooting free throws in here. "I just like it," he shrugs. End of story. Nelson's uniqueness dominates every inch of the fascinating man-cave, which could pass for a small museum, or maybe Indiana Jones's den.

Gary Nelson grew up in Fairfield, 12 miles north, moving with his family to Van Buren County when he was 11. Watching his dad skip arrowheads across a local pond spawned Nelson's lifelong obsession. His first hunt took him through fields of waist-high soybeans and into

rocky washouts where he scooped up arrowheads and axe heads right off the ground. "I ran back and showed them to my dad," he recalls, with excitement in his voice, as if it had happened yesterday.

After a revelatory dream, which may reveal an artifact's exact location, Nelson will load his Argo six-wheel amphibious craft on the flat-bed and head out on the hunt. "I'll find them just like they appeared to me," he says. Often he videotapes the river walks, uploading the POV footage along with commentary to his YouTube channel.

Right now, he's gripping a massive woolly mammoth scapula when his face brightens suddenly. "I know why I got the heart palpitations," he says. Every event hides a deeper truth. It's just a matter of finding it. This one is about his close friend Rob Taylor, who died tragically of a heart attack the next day. Nelson says the close friendship had extended the ailment to him.

Maybe so. You never know. Personally, I'm caught up in the implications of a day that begins with a dream-time dialogue with a 4,000-year-old Indian and ends up on the web.

To Gary Nelson, it makes perfect sense. This Iowa existence of his, this life he's created as a house painter who often works six-day weeks, topped by that one precious adventure day at the end—this man whose days could have been routine and predictable—expands out to richly different places and times.

Like the old Iowa in which Chief Keokuk and his men tracked prey, Nelson has found discovery and bounty. When he's not hunting, or working, or making wine or riding motorcycles, he may be divining the meaning of the notches along a Gorget pendant, those minute tally marks spaced exactly 1/16th of an inch apart, whose purpose continues to stump archeologists. (The answer came in a dream: "It's a calendar.")

Gazing out at these fields, Nelson travels back in time to a prairie on which painted men stealthily tracked massive animals, a place strikingly at odds with what the rest of us see here: an endless, uniform tabletop of industrial corn and soybean farms.

We can only hope he will be able to tamp down his excitement to manageable—and healthier—levels, for more Holy Grail finds may be waiting out there. "I want to find the claw of a three-toed sloth," Nelson says with hunger in his eyes. "The ultimate would be a woolly mammoth shoulder blade with a Clovis point stuck in it."

I nod, feeling that strong desire. And perhaps he'll get them. Maybe the location will announce itself in the wee hours one morning as a whisper from the hunter who felled its owner. After spending time with Gary Nelson, I could believe it. □

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