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### Digging for history

Jackson student involved in archeology dig at old dorm

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By Tina Reed

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EAST LANSING -- Taking as much care as if working with ancient ruins, several Michigan State University students are working to unearth the remains of a forgotten dormitory destroyed by a fire and covered for more than a century.

And Christina Reiss is right in the thick of it.

Reiss, a Jackson resident, is among 21 MSU students working on the project in the heart of MSU's campus on the east end of the MSU Museum.

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"You always picture it being out in the middle of nowhere," Reiss said.

With its location, people passing by often peer in through the fence that surrounds the dig to watch the students work, she said.

The building, nicknamed "Saint's Rest" after a popular Christian devotional of the time, burned down in 1876 over a winter break. No one was injured in the fire. The remains of the building, the first dormitory on campus, were later

buried.

As class members precisely measure and dig with shovels, stakes, probes, and brushes, they are looking to unearth secrets about the students who lived there, said Professor Ken Lewis, who is leading the class in the exploration.

The excavations are looking for information that history books won't show and the burnt ruins are a perfect time capsule, Lewis said.

"They are unconcerned about what they left behind, and that tells a story about them," Lewis said. "We have a record that is unbiased."

Lewis has led class excavations in the past but said this is the first time he has performed a dig in such a metropolitan area, which has raised the challenge of digging around sidewalks and historical trees, he said. There is no final exam, Lewis said, but students are graded on how well they work in the field and perform a number of exercises during the project.

The class should finish its exploration July 15, after hosting an open house July 9-10 to show findings to the public. After that, the university plans to rebury the site.

The class has done well so far, finding bits of animal bones used for cooking, pieces of bottles to show what people were drinking or what medicines they were using, Lewis said. In the portion of the excavated building that is believed to be a kitchen are a few large metal bands identified as the outside rings to wooden barrels and a small iron door to a small stove.

The class also has found curtain valences, pieces of melted window glass, and a percussion cap from a gun, Reiss said.

"You get an idea of what early campus life was like," Reiss said. "Was there drinking then? Did they have trouble getting up for class? Did they like their professor?"

Starting each day with a reading from old newspaper clippings and letters still kept in university records has gotten the students to relate to the first students on campus, said Heather Mustonen, 26, a graduate assistant overseeing the project.

One of the letters from a student to his father asked for money, complained of illness, and discussed plans to visit home -- all similar concerns for modern students, Mustonen said.

"You could find this same letter written just a little differently and sent by e-mail," Mustonen said.

Hoisting a bucket full of dirt from a large pit onto a long table, Reiss slid its contents onto a large screen. Her hands, black with century-old ash, expertly sifted through dirt and rocks for small bits of metal, glass, buttons, and coins, all clues to the past.


The work appeared to be tedious, but for Reiss and her classmates, it's suspenseful.

"It's like Christmas," Reiss said. "Removing the dirt is like unwrapping and seeing what's inside."

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