Yesterday And Today—

Red Ash Isle Yields Rare Indian Mattock

By SHIRLEY DONELLY

There was brought in the other day one of the most unusual Indian artifacts ever found in these parts—an Indian mattock.

This stone implement was a surface find by Russell Lego, curator of the Old Stone House Museum near Cliff Top. While on one of his local archaeological field trips the naturalist came upon this lucky find in the sand of Red Ash Island in New River opposite the old, worked-out Red Ash mine across the river and a few miles downstream from Thurmond.

Red Ash Island is several—32 or 14 acres—in extent. At this point New River forks and swirls about the land that forms this remote island.

The land was known to the Indians of the New River area probably before it was made an island by the river current cutting island and separating the flat section from the foot of the mountain. At that point...

WHILE LEGO and his assistants were touring Red Ash Island for evidences of Indian culture they found nearly a dozen flint arrowheads of various colors.

Some of the ones he brought to my museum look like the kind the Indians of the Ohio country used. They are of various sizes.

But the stone mattock is unusual. It is made of common sandstone and has a poll on one end and the long, flattened cutting end of the other. Between the poll, or pounding end of the implement and the chopping, or cutting edge, is where the forked club was fastened about it and held in place with thongs of buckskin.

RED ASH ISLAND has an extensive burial ground upon it. There were buried some of the bodies of the 49 men and boys who were killed in the Red Ash mine explosion which occurred on March 6, 1900.

Victims of the disaster were not burned to death but were killed by being hurled violently by the force of the explosion. So great was the force of the blast that it piled up mine cars in heaps at the front of the mine entrance. Mules were blown across New River.

Hundreds of people gathered to view the scene of this notable mine disaster, the first such major mine disaster to occur in Fayette County. This was the most direful calamity that had ever befallen the mine industry in West Virginia up to that time.

NEXT TO THE BIG cemetery on Red Ash Island there was a baseball diamond in the early times of the mining town.

There is a legend that some of the soldiers in the army of Gen. Andrew Lewis died on their return from the battle of Point Pleasant and were buried on Red Ash Island. This is most likely apocryphal but it still goes the rounds.

EARLY MINING operations in Fayette and Raleigh counties were opened in the mountains along New River.

Quincentum was the first to do this, back in 1872-73. Next was Nuttalburg in 1873-74. Others were soon to follow. This was true of Red Ash which opened in the 1890's. The reason for the location of these mines was that they were right alongside the C & O railroad, a fact which saved long haulage and much expense.

About all those pioneer mines like Red Ash in Fayette and Royal in Raleigh had to do was dump their coal into railroad cars at the bottom of the mountain. Completion of the C & O through West Virginia on Jan. 29, 1873, opened the way for coal shipments both east and west of the New River mines and the coalfield developments were started.

TODAY IT IS A man-sized job to get to these old, worked-out mines like the Red Ash operation and others like Sewell and Steury or Fire Creek... Auto roads are a thing of the past, into places like these camps, if ever there were any. To reach Red Ash, one has to go down the north side of New River the best way he can usually walking, and talk some fishermen with a boat, if any there are in those dreary outreaches, to set him across the river and bring him back.

In early days along New River, recreational grounds for mining camp people were rareties. Red Ash Island had the only baseball diamond in the whole New River gorge and it had to be reached by boat.