



Students from the University of Calgary department of Archaeology field school have begun the 2011 excavation. This is the fourth year the University has sent students to the Earth Lodge Village.

Shannon LeClair
Photos

Unearthing pieces of history

SHANNON LECLAIR
Times Reporter

Spring is here and once again students from the University of Calgary archaeology field school are digging up the past in Siksika Nation at the Cluny Earth Lodge Village. The Village is located directly west of the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park Interpretive Centre.

"We're working at a site called the Cluny site, which is the only known prehistoric fortified village on the Canadian plains, so it's a very important site," said Dr. Dale Walde Associate Professor for the Department of Archaeology at the University of Calgary.

The site represents a settlement area established around 1740 to 1742, and historical evidence shows the people may have come from the Mandan tribes. Excavations have been done in 1875, 1881, 1911 and the University of Calgary began sending their field school to the site in 2007.

Dr. Brain Kooymann, the head of the department at the time, took the field school out the first time. Walde has been running the field school ever since.

Every year the pits are covered back up, and every year the new students uncover them before beginning with the new excavation. A fair number of the senior students come back and help supervise the junior students and work on their own projects.

Walde said they were always think-

ing there was a palisade wall all the way around the site, but what the latest excavations are suggesting is there are different kinds of structures, and it may be something they have never seen before.

"We don't like to open up a whole bunch of sites, in part because it's very important that you save portions of the site for future investigators," said Walde.

He said they are of course digging up lots of arrowheads, bison bones and lots of dogs. He said if people think of the local culture at the time, which they call the Old Women's Phase, it was probably Blackfoot people. Walde said they don't find a lot of dogs in Blackfoot sites, and in the Cluny site they have found a lot of dog bones, which indicates the people who built the site weren't Blackfoot.

"We see the remains of fortifications. We're finding the remains of the posts that helped make up fortification," said Walde.

"We're exploring the form of the fortification ditch and some of the pits, we're doing a really detailed topographic study there, and we're coming up with a lot of pottery that the people made which is unique to that particular culture."

The students, Walde and Lance Evans, a teacher's assistant, started their excavation on May 12, and will be at the site Monday to Thursday until the end of June. Every year something new and exciting has the chance to emerge and

help piece together bits of history.

"It's a rare privilege that I am able to spend my whole life doing it," said Walde.

"I don't get bored with it at all. That site, because it's unique, it's the only one, every time I go out I find something that I've never seen before, which for at my age is pretty exciting."

The field school is not a mandatory course, though it is recommended, and is often the first real experience the students have in archaeology.

"It's all new, we've never done anything that was real, you're all nervous you're going to screw something up," said Kaelyn Michayluk, a junior student.

Michayluk is interested in Mezzo America, in the basin of Mexico, studying the Aztec and the Mayan.

Gina Carroll has been interested in archaeology since she was five-years-old, and as she grew older she realized there is a wide variety of things to study in the field.

"This is what we're hoping to do so it's good to get the experience," said Ryan Jevons, another junior student.

He intends to do forensic work with the police, and admits it's kind of a jump. Archaeology covers the culture and the region and he said it's important for people to know and understand their history.

"It's messy but it's fun so far," said Adam Brousseau, another junior student.

The students are excited for the experience, and look forward to spending the next few weeks playing in the dirt. The items excavated will be studied further at the university, but the artifacts will eventually make their way back to Blackfoot Crossing. People are invited to head down to the centre and see the excavation taking place.

To find out more about past excavations and what has been found to date go to www.blackfootcrossing.ca/earth-lodgevillage.html.

Week one is intense, but going well

Every week students involved in the archaeological excavation will be submitting their own account as to how things are going. Readers will have an opportunity to follow along as they unearth pieces of history.

Week 1:

RYAN JEVONS

I've always enjoyed Archaeology for a great many reasons. I've always found that the study of ancient cultures and history is enlightening and entertaining, and I have always found ancient relics to be of particular interest. I've encountered ancient objects over the years, such as arrowheads and coins, and have enjoyed researching the history behind the object and learning how and why it was made.

In starting field school, I am finding myself doing that exact thing, but on a far more precise and grandiose scale. I, along with my colleagues, have begun digging and excavating the site and we have already found a variety of objects (charcoal, seashell, hearths, etc) that are helping recreate the population and people who lived there so many years ago.

This week was one of learning the basic methods and practices of archaeology, such as proper trowel technique and how to make the units precise and perfect. For me, it has been a time of great learning and correction. My corners at the start were rounded, my pits were uneven, and my use of the other tools has been shoddy at best.

It has been a start however, and

diving in has been exhilarating. My discoveries so far are bone fragments and bits of charcoal, but just those simple discoveries have made yearn for more, and have actually made me believe that a long weekend may be too long of a weekend to be away from the excavation.

KAELYN MICHAYLUK

The first full week of field school was intense but fantastic. I have never been so happily exhausted in my life! There was certainly a huge learning curve at the beginning with getting used to the trowel and taking measurements accurately and quickly.

After our first day of actual excavation, Dr. Walde told us that the minimum expected, when working in consulting, is three levels a day which seemed incredibly insurmountable! By Thursday though, myself and another member of my team (the Screen Machines) had done four levels in the course of the day, including interruptions for brush clearing.

I had sterile levels that day, meaning no artifacts or features or anything were found, so it was definitely easier to achieve the level mark and also helped me get used to using the trowel correctly. There were a few groups that came to tour the site as well, which is pretty neat since they get excited and interested to see what we are finding. Makes it more exciting for us too! Overall an amazing first week! Lucky, since this was sort of a make or break, whether or not I was on the right career path!

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southpaw.cara@gmail.com

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