The weird alchemy of archaeology

The Northwest Anthropology conference yields some interesting stories about what our waste can teach us

The alchemists said that you could turn shit into gold, and thus archaeology was born.

Our knowledge of the past is continually being advanced by the people who probe into what we threw away or time forgot.

That's one of my take-aways from the first day of the 63rd Annual Northwest Anthropology Conference held at Central Washington University in Ellensburg last week. Each day, conference threads cover topics ranging from talking chimpanzees (a CWU specialty) to the anthropology of the Goth subculture, from the stone knapping skills of prehistoric Northwest hunters to the dining habits of the Union soldiers who manned Oregon's Fort Yamhill.

With multiple threads of 20-minute scholarly presentations, you'd need six clones to take it all in, and more stomachs than a cow to digest it. The first day alone I listened to at least 18 presentations.

I'm sitting here afterwards with the easier task of digesting a fine dinner of fresh seafood from, of all things, Ellensburg's excellent Valley Cafe. But as I ponder, I realize that eating fresh scallops and salmon in Kittitas Valley beef country isn't as odd as it seems. Archaeological evidence tells us that since ancient times seashells were part of the native trade currency throughout the region, and, as I also learned today, fish and shellfish were part of the regular diet of Chinese laborers in Jacksonville, Oregon, during the 19th century. At least, so their antique garbage tells us. Bottom line: Good seafood has been finding its way around Cascadia for a long time, and long before the interstate highway system.

There is much to be learned from disposable societies, which all are, in time. And also from the waste of Mother Nature. I began the morning with a lecture about the nature and source of the various gravels beneath the Columbia River, which together seem to tell a rather incredible story of that body of water, sometimes traveling hundreds of feet higher as alluvial soils build up, sometimes cutting canyons hundreds of feet deep, other times being scoured by massive catastrophic events like the Missoula floods, which pummeled the river bed with "gravel" the size of VW Beetles. If Woody Guthrie had had access to this data, his classic song might have been "Shake, rattle and roll on, Columbia." In any event, the history of a river is apparently written on its bottom.

James Chatters, an archaeologist who played a prominent role in the Kennewick Man controversy, told the story of an archaeological site near Bothell that turned out to be a complete bust. Various "artifacts" discovered there turned out to be nothing more than rocks, except for one ancient arrowhead later dug up. Chatters told how he tried to get something useful out of such an inconsequential find, especially since it was costing taxpayers some $40,000. By checking records of where other lone arrowheads of a similar type had been found, he was able to paint a picture about the landscape and hunting habits of the natives who lived in the area thousands of years ago. This was his attempt to make gold from government waste.

Speaking of waste, Washington State Parks & Recreation archaeologist Daniel Meatte talked about the efforts to precisely locate Lewis & Clark's westernmost camp on their expedition to the Pacific, which is somewhere close to Highway 101 on the road to Ilwaco. Sorting out the archeological evidence for what is called Station Camp is tricky, one reason being that the Corps of Discovery's camp might have been occupied by Chinook Indians after Lewis & Clark vacated the premises, meaning expedition artifacts and trade goods might be mixed with and even underneath native ones.

And, they were only in camp for about 10 days. How much evidence can you leave in such a short time? Plenty, apparently. Meatte told me that one of Lewis & Clark's other campsites was identified by excavating hollows that turned out to be the Corps' latrines. To nail that the 200-year-old poop belonged to the expedition's heroes, an archaeologist tested the ground for mercury, which members were taking as treatment for venereal disease. Sure enough, the old latrines were loaded with it.

And speaking of 19th century bowel movements, at yet another presentation, this by archaeologist Linda Jerofke, we...
Marine and Maritime Archaeologies;
Putting the Coast back in Coastal

Richard M. Hutchings and Megan Caldwell

Researchers are increasingly turning to new marine and maritime archaeologies to enhance their understanding of human-environment interaction. Evidence for this on the Pacific Northwest Coast is the inclusion of such approaches at this year's regional archaeological conferences. For some, the end of April marked the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Canadian Archaeological Association. The 2010 meeting, held in Calgary, included the session Marine and Maritime Archaeologies: Putting the Coast back in Coastal, co-organized by Caldwell and Hutchings. The session was organized around the idea that the practices of marine and maritime archaeology remain fractured and marginalized. As a consequence, these sub-disciplines exist at the boundaries of the mainstream, even in regions where coastal cultures are the primary research focus. Thus, for many areas the coastal archaeological record is represented almost exclusively by terrestrial or dry sites, to the exclusion of intertidal, subtidal, and other aquatic landscapes.

For the session, we invited papers that were working towards bridging the disconnects that exist between 'terrestrial', 'coastal', 'maritime', and 'marine' archaeologies, especially through new research and the use of multidisciplinary and novel approaches. The turnout exceeded expectations, with 21 authors contributing 12 papers, with most representing the Northwest Coast. In addition, George Nicholas and Rudy Reimer, both of Simon Fraser University, acted as formal discussants, providing valuable insight into the matters at hand. Included here are the session paper titles and contributors. Specific details about the conference and the marine and maritime session, including session and paper abstracts, are available online at http://www.ucalgary.ca/CAA2010/. This year's Northwest Anthropology Conference also included a session on Maritime and Near-Shore Archaeology of the Pacific Northwest.