

Reconstructing an Early 20th Century Japanese Camp in the Seymour Valley: The 2012 Capilano University Archaeology Field School

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The 2012 Capilano University archaeology field school focussed on excavations at the McKenzie Creek site in the Seymour River Valley, near Vancouver. The site contains considerable evidence that its peak use was around 1920 when it served as a logging camp for Japanese workers. It may have continued to be secretly occupied until 1942.

Background

The site was first identified as a potential Japanese logging camp during survey in 2003 and Capilano University field schools have subsequently spent at least

a week at the site in each of 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010. The camp is unusual insofar as it exhibits elements of a Japanese-style camp not routinely seen in North America, including a bathhouse, considerable evidence of women, and several small residential cabins rather than a typical bunkhouse and mess hall set-up.

Objectives

There were three primary research objectives of the 2012 field season. One was to test the hypothesis that Japanese continued to live at the site until the internment of Japanese in camps away from the coast

in 1942. This hypothesis was developed based on a memoir providing second-hand information that a small group of Japanese lived in secret at an abandoned logging camp in the Seymour Valley until 1942; what appears to be a deliberate attempt to hide a relatively expensive cooking stove (presumably so it wouldn't be looted when

Figure 1. Besides excavation, 2012 field school students visited sites in the Seymour Valley documented by previous field schools, including this early 20th century logging camp. Photo by Mark Galvani.



Figure 2. Numerous industrial artifacts were excavated at the site in 2012, including this sawblade. Photo by author.

they were away); a relatively large number of work boots and personal artifacts that could be explained by the limitations on the amount of things Japanese could take to internment camps; and an observation of differential preservation of cans within the site. A second objective was to determine the function of two features at the site – a relatively flat area with a visible component of fragmented shell and a rock feature. A third objective was to get a better sense of the camp layout. Another, although not primary, objective was to monitor sites previously recorded in the study area (i.e., the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve).

Results

Five areas of the site were excavated: a cabin area, a small midden, a workshop area, the flat area with shell, and the rock feature. Not unexpectedly, the cabin area revealed artifacts associated with residential living, including parts of a stove, buttons, and medicine bottles. The midden area included a variety of items related to food and drink, such as fragments of cans, bottles, and dishes. The workshop area revealed industrial artifacts, including a saw blade.

The flat area with shell had been subjected to test excavations in previous seasons, but the results were inconclusive. It is hypothesized that the area, measuring about 4m x 4m was a garden, with the shell being added to raise the pH. One 2 x 2 m excavation unit was excavated and sediment analysis undertaken. Results show the pH to be higher than the control samples taken elsewhere in and near the site. Dozens of nails were found during excavations of the feature but no other artifacts. Seeds were recovered, but they are yet to be identified. The tentative interpretation is that the feature is a garden. The nails may have been some kind of structure within the garden or perhaps added to the soil to alter the mineral content.

The rock feature was excavated in its entirety. The feature consisted of four rock walls approximately 60 cm high and making a square a little bit less than 2 m on each side. The area within the walls was filled with sediment. The feature is on the periphery of the site, alongside what was likely the main wooden road running through the site, and also alongside a creek. Excavations revealed that near the top of the feature, beneath the littermat, there were once wooden planks laid

horizontally, presumably forming a floor. Some nails were found including one visible in a disintegrating plank. Below that were layers of fine sediments and gravel. Besides nails, the only artifacts recovered from the rock feature were two pieces of twisted and interlocking wire and four small pieces of green glass. The tentative interpretation of this feature is that it was a small gazebo-like structure, perhaps a shrine. The green glass may have been part of a lantern held by the twisted wire.

Discussion

One hundred and fifteen artifacts were catalogued from the McKenzie Creek site in 2012, bringing the total for the site to 793 (only artifacts with diagnostic information are catalogued; excluding hundreds or more nails, fragments of glass and ceramics, and unidentified metal). Analysis of the artifacts, including dating, is in its very preliminary stages, so it is not yet clear whether the artifact collection supports the hypothesis that the site continued to be occupied up until 1942. The hypothesis that the relatively flat area is a garden is tentatively supported (awaiting identification of seeds). Excavations did enhance the understanding of camp



Figure 3. Excavation of this rock feature suggests it may have been a gazebo-like structure, perhaps a shrine. Photo by author.

layout, identifying for example the length of a cabin wall (about 10 feet) and adding to the number of structures at the site (at least a dozen).

Public Education

As usual, an important component of the field school included public education. Visitors to the site were an almost daily occurrence, and included professional archaeologists, anthropologists, other academics interested in B.C. history, and members of the public. The instructor and field school students introduced several hundred members of the public to the project by participating in public events in Lynn Headwaters Regional Park and the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve. One student blogged the project, which

can be found at <http://archaeologyfield-school2012.blogspot.ca/>. Over the seven weeks of the project, the blog had more than 3,000 hits from 20 countries, including Argentina, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Russia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Zimbabwe. The project director posted a contribution about the project to the 'Day of Archaeology 2012' web site (<http://www.dayofarchaeology.com/archaeology-of-a-japanese-camp-in-western-canada/>), joining several hundred other archaeologists around the world blogging their activities on June 29, 2012.

The Crew

The project was directed by Bob Muckle. Physical geographer Cheryl Schreder oversaw the work on soils analysis in the field and the lab. Student archaeologists included Jasmin Sykes, Sarah McKenny, Alexis Forsyth, Ryan Pugh, Rebecca McKenzie, Willow Hunt-Scott, Andrew McManus, Mark Galvani, Evan Guiton, Lindsay Flynn, Spencer Mulder, Meghan Walley, Dini Stamatopoulos, Kitty Mork, and Nathan Laronde.

Bob Muckle has been practicing, teaching, and writing about archaeology since the Palaeocene. His day job is teaching archaeology at Capilano University in North Vancouver and directing the field school.
