

ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

SFU Excavates in Chehalis Territory, Summer 2007

Morgan Ritchie

This past summer, the Simon Fraser University (SFU) Field School had the opportunity to conduct archaeological investigations in Chehalis traditional territory on the Harrison River. During this time, the students were exposed to a wide range of archaeological and cultural experiences. When the sixteen students were not surveying through the dense vegetation, making total station maps, excavating house features or doing laboratory work, they were participating in community dinners, hosting outreaches, giving tours, taking tours, learning traditional crafts and transcribing ethnographic documents.

The field school participated in two distinct Master's research projects led by SFU graduate students Chris Springer and Morgan Ritchie and supervised by Dr. Dana Lepofsky. Both projects are part of the larger Fraser Valley Project focusing on the nature of identity and social interaction among ancient communities in the lower Fraser River watershed. The 2007 SFU field school on the Harrison River marks the final year of the Fraser Valley Project. Efforts were shifted to Harrison River in part because it provides a broader context in which to understand interaction in the Fraser Valley Region. Settlements along the Harrison have the added benefit of relatively low development impact compared with the Fraser Valley.

Morgan Ritchie's MA thesis is a regional survey of a four-kilometer stretch of the Harrison River between Morris Creek and Wiloughby Point just south of the Chehalis River's confluence with the Harrison. This stretch of river was



Figure 1. Excavation at the Lhawathet pithouse site last summer (Photo by Morgan Ritchie).

reported ethnographically to be the heartland of the Chehalis people as evidenced by the ubiquitous settlements and intensive use-areas along the shoreline and on mid-river islands. The proposed research was to map and excavate eight of these settlements. However, due to exceptionally high water levels and time constraints, it was necessary to change strategies. The field school ultimately spent the majority of the summer mapping and excavating the site of *Hiqelem*, the only settlement not inundated by the high river. The high water also significantly increased the local mosquito population, which was an added

“enjoyment” for everyone. *Hiqelem* is of specific interest to Morgan's research because pithouses and plankhouses are found in close association in the settlement; a major component of the Fraser Valley Project is to trace shifting social identity using data from house structures. Research objectives driving this project were twofold: firstly, to determine the internal arrangement and composition of settlements on the Harrison River and secondly, to examine the relationship of each settlement to the physical and cultural landscape.

Work at *Hiqelem* was successful,

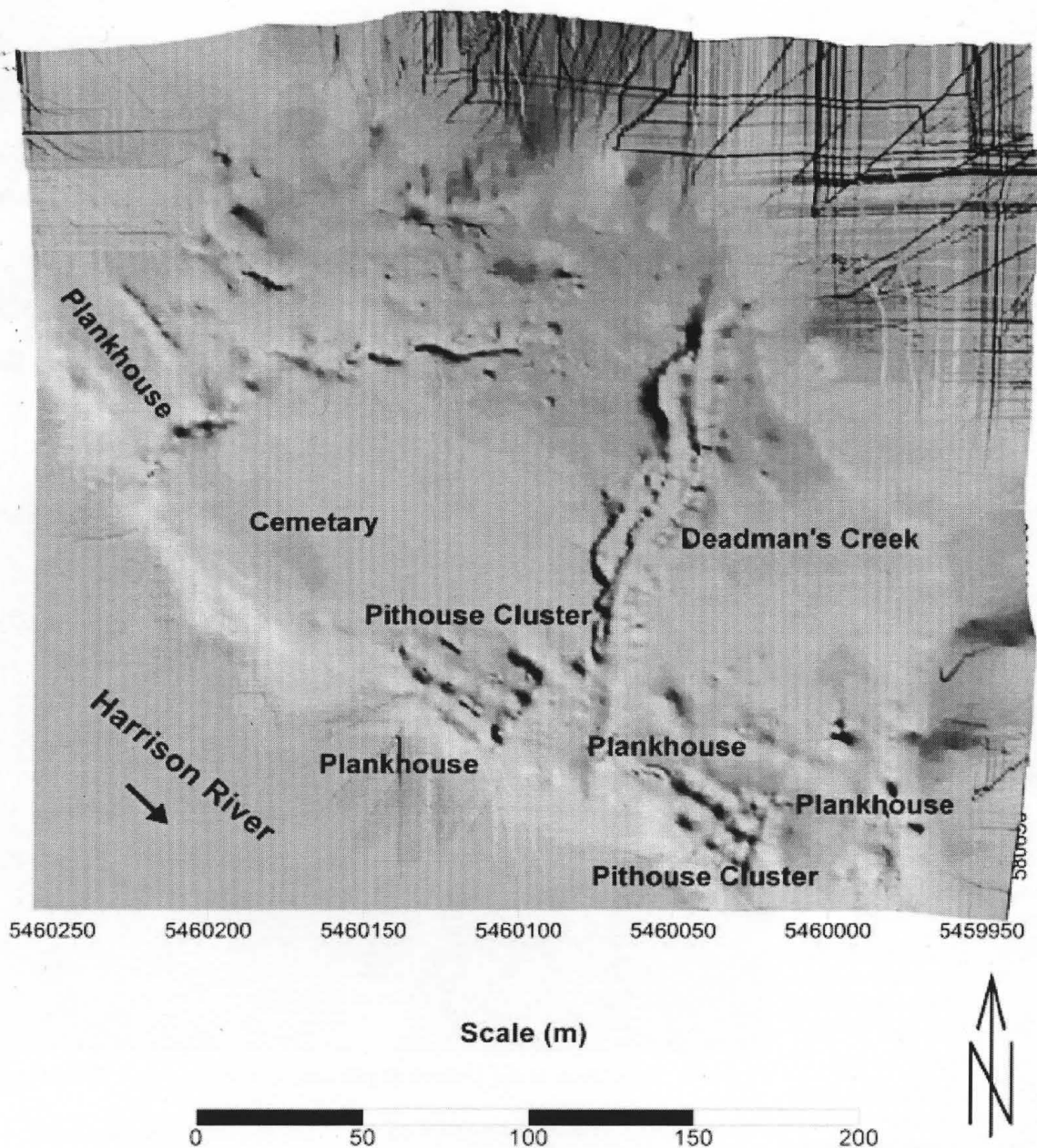


Figure 2. Map of Hiqelem showing the extensively utilized and modified landform where the SFU field school spent the majority of the summer.

culminating in a very detailed site map (Figure 2), and the collection of data from eight house remains — four pithouses and four plankhouses. Data collected from the house features includes flotation samples to analyze floral and faunal remains, charcoal samples for radiocarbon dating and notes regarding stratigraphy. *Hiqelem* was a difficult introduction to excavation because the house foundations have been elevated by fire cracked rock (FCR) over thousands of years and the deposits tended

to be homogenous. Fortunately, the goal of the project was not to evaluate structural details, but to extract samples from small test units. Deposits also tended to be very deep, but a little ingenuity and a lot of flexibility allowed students and in some especially difficult circumstances, Dana, to extract the desired samples. After a full two-week shift at Hiqelem, many of the students enjoyed returning to assist Chris in his excavation of a pithouse composed entirely of easy-to-trowel river sands

which were excavated in much larger, 2 x 2 meter units.

The pithouse site is located on the grounds of the Lhawathet Lalem Healing Centre on the east bank of the Chehalis River. A converted barn behind the main building at Lhawathet acted as the base camp for the field school. The beds, showers, and fully appointed kitchen were much appreciated by the students, particularly during the wetter days. The building also made some preliminary lab work possible

while in the field. This particular site was chosen in part because the Chehalis Band wanted it excavated and because previous testing of the pithouse verified the presence of cultural deposits in the feature demonstrating the site's potential for research.

The main goal guiding the excavation component of Chris' Master's research was the collection of sufficient data to facilitate an examination of how cultural identity and household organization are associated with the form and contents of a pithouse. Accordingly, the excavation strategy for the field school was to map the depression and the surrounding area (Figure 1); open a large contiguous area of the pithouse; map and document all features associated with house design such as post holes, internal bench, hearth(s) and other structural elements; collect artifacts and flotation samples from all cultural deposits; and collect radiocarbon samples.

In brief, the excavation revealed three main occupations each showing distinctive house styles with a major shift occurring during the most recent use of the site. The initial structure (ST1) was built on the ground surface with only a minor excavation of a circular shaped central basin where the hearth was situated. The house was not a typical in-ground structure; rather it was built up against a low bank which gave the house a natural rim on its east edge. Structure 2 (ST2) was built directly on top of ST1 following a similar circular plan and the same hearth position was utilized. During this period of use the semi-subterranean pattern of building began to take shape. We have inferred from the stratigraphy that when the spot was being prepared by the ST2 builders, sand was piled around the edges which created a rim that, combined with the natural rim along the east edge, encircled the entire house. Post holes and charred planks uncovered during excavation show that there were multiple fires and rebuilding or maintenance events associated with both structures. After ST2 was finally abandoned, a large flood deposited approximately 30 cm of fine laminated sands and silts. Structure 3 (ST3), the most recent phase of occupation, was built on top of these flood deposits but slightly offset from first two houses. Interestingly, this most recent occupation represented a shift not only in layout but also house form

and possibly site function. In contrast to the first two circular structures which had centrally located hearths, the more recent house was rectilinear and the positions of the five hearths shifted over time. The artifact assemblage of ST1 is also dramatically different than in the two earlier structures in that the later structure has a much higher number of hammerstones and FCR.

High water table and frequent mosquito assaults aside, the field school was a great success and an invaluable learning experience for everyone involved. The Harrison watershed is a particularly beautiful area of southwestern BC and a wonderful place to live and work for two months. The various experiences the students had in research based archaeology combined with participation in Chehalis community events made for a memorable summer.

Morgan Ritchie is currently working on his Masters degree at SFU.

Acknowledgments

We'd like to thank the Chehalis Indian Band for hosting our large group and being so involved in our research. We are especially grateful to Chief Willie Charlie, Gordon Mohs and James Leon who made this field school possible and took time from their busy schedules to share stories and knowledge with us. Thanks also to SFU staff Shannon Wood and Heather Robertson who organized the logistics.

Joint Working Group on First Nation Heritage Conservation

**Don Bain &
Maureen Grant,
UBCIC**

The First Nations Leadership Council and British Columbia have recently announced the establishment of a Joint Working Group on First Nation Heritage Conservation in the spirit of the New Relationship and Transformative Change Accord.

The current Heritage Conservation Act, R.S.B.C 1996, Chapter 187 and its associated provincial management regime does not adequately address Aboriginal Title and Rights, nor reconcile the needs and interests of First Nations as it relates to the protection of their culture and heritage in British Columbia.

The purposes of the Joint Working Group on First Nation Heritage Conservation are to identify First Nations' issues and concerns, develop options and make recommendations to: 1) create a meaningful role for First Nations in provincial heritage conservation; 2) improve the protection and conservation of First Nations archaeological heritage sites, cultural property and ancient human remains; and 3) create new mechanisms to protect sacred sites and spiritual areas in British Columbia.

The First Nation Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

For information bulletins see:
www.fns.bc.ca;
www.bcafn.ca; and
www.ubcic.bc.ca