

# TSE-WHIT-ZEN

## BURIALS AT THE PORT ANGELES SITE NOW NUMBER IN THE HUNDREDS

By Heather Fawcett

Archaeologists are calling it the most significant site the Western Washington region has seen since Ozette.

Excavations continue on a burial site of the Elwha tribe in Port Angeles, Washington, located across the strait from Victoria, where archaeologists have recently made startling discoveries. As of July, over 150 complete skeletons and 200 partial remains had been unearthed, along with numerous artifacts, a longhouse and at least two other cedar structures. The findings present evidence for the existence of the ancient Elwha Klallam village of Tse-whit-zen, which radiocarbon dating has suggested could be more than 1,700 years old. The Lower Elwha Klallam tribe still inhabited the site until the 1930s, when the government relocated them to their current reservation.

The burial ground was re-discovered in the summer of last year when construction of a dockyard began on the banks of the Elwha River. The development had already been pushed back one year by the initial discovery of twelve burials and is likely to be pushed back further by these new findings to give archaeologists time to excavate the remains.

The unearthing of the twelve burials last summer triggered strong emotion from both construction workers and the Elwha, due in large part to the state of these initially discovered burials. It seems clear that in 1915 they were previously dug up during the construction of a lumber mill, and the remains of the eleven adults and one child were found in a severely jumbled state since the mill constructors used the cemetery soils and remains as backfill for pipe trenches. Though the burials were tragically desecrated during construction — a discovery that Port Angeles City Council officials greeted with “shame and sorrow” — below these disturbed layers there were archaeological materials and remains still left intact.

Surveys were carried out on the site grounds before construction work was undertaken last summer, and with many Elwha tribal members feeling certain of the historical richness of the area, possibilities of archaeological discoveries were high. Yet, amazingly, nothing was initially found during the tests, and construction continued until the discovery of a shell midden.

Construction officials say that the dockyard is essential to Port Angeles' transportation system, as it would be where the building and repair of pontoons would be undertaken to replace the old, worn ones in the Hood Canal Bridge. Officials also claim that it is not possible that the dockyard could be built at another site, as they say this location is the only one suitable for the construction of floating pontoons. Therefore, the Elwha Klallam tribe complied several months ago with a request to rebury their ancestors in another location — only twelve had then been discovered at the time. The Washington state government agreed to pay mitigation money to the tribe to purchase new land for the reburials. The tribe is now considering the purchase of land adjacent to the graving dock site, and is also hoping to find funding to create an interpretive centre to house the artifacts.

The Tse-whit-zen site is being excavated by 26 archaeologists from Larson Anthropological Archaeological Services Ltd. (LAAS) and ten Elwha tribe members. The planned excavation period of four months would have been completed on July 23, but Lynn Larson, the principal investigator, told media that this was no longer the case in light of recent findings.

So far, along with the remains of over 300 individuals, a rich array of artifacts and features has been unearthed. Among these are stone tools such as an obsidian point, rectangular chunks of flat stone, and disks made out of beach cobbles. LAAS archaeologists believe these were

likely used in fish and animal processing. Also discovered were deer bone items, such as tools made from deer leg bones, which include measurement gauges, needles, harpoons, and hide-working tools. Storage pits, hearths, and soils show clear evidence of burning, which probably resulted from the cooking and drying of fish and shellfish.

The findings of a longhouse and two other housing structures are also important, as these could possibly turn out to be some of the oldest houses ever unearthed in the region. Archaeologists, though, cautioned that their dates have yet to be confirmed. Other July finds, also made of cedar, included the sticks from racks used to dry fish. Etched rocks have also been found which are likely evidence of ceremonial and funerary traditions.

Another interesting finding is the skeletal remains of a non-Native person. The individual was buried among and in the same fashion as the other Native remains, and had probably married into the tribe. The burial is between 75- and 100-years old.

Amidst these new and remarkable discoveries, many Elwha people are undoubtedly regretting their agreement half a year ago to mitigate rather than preserve the site. The Lower Elwha tribal chairwoman, Frances Charles, has expressed to the Washington media her regret at having to relocate the evidence of her people's history. As long as excavations continue, it is likely that even more evidence will continue to be unearthed at this extraordinary ancient village site.

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