

R.G. MATSON:

THREE DECADES OF B.C. ARCHAEOLOGY

Interview by Shauna Janz

After more than thirty years dedicated to Northwest Coast archaeology, R.G. Matson retires as a Professor from the University of British Columbia (UBC) Department of Anthropology and Sociology. Dr. Matson conducted several signature excavations on major sites along the coast, including Glenrose, Crescent Beach, Beach Grove, and Shingle Point. He also investigated sites in the interior of B.C., such as the Mouth of Chilcotin and Eagle Lake, in addition to research in the southwest with the Cedar Mesa project in Utah, among other research projects. On several occasions, he has lectured before the ASBC. We look forward to his upcoming work on the Athapaskan migrations and other future works.

Shauna Janz sat down with R.G. for an interview about his research, background, and the state of B.C. archaeology

I would like to begin by asking what led you to archaeology?

I was always interested in archaeology and when I was quite young I had quite a romantic notion of it, but in 1958 my mother brought home from the local library a revised edition of John Graham Douglas Clark's *Archaeology in Society*. The kind of archaeology that he expressed in it I realized was the kind of thing that I would like to do. It was a very environmental, what we would now call a ecological-materialistic perspective, but still connected with ongoing concerns in society. So from that point on, I knew that is what I wanted to do. However, I did not know whether I could, so I had a backup idea of doing physical chemistry. I had a brother who was six years older than I, who went on to get a Ph.D. in that area, and I figured I could do at least as well as he did.

What was your educational background?

I went to University of California at Riverside, which at that time was a very small campus of about 1000 to 1500 undergraduates, and there was an archaeologist there, Kowta, who was one of the first archaeologists who introduced me in detail to archaeology. Prior to that, a friend who ended up

getting a Ph.D. in archaeology as well, Kent Hudson, and I visited Malcolm Rogers at the San Diego Museum of Man, who was really the first archaeologist that I dealt with, and who was very kind to both of us. At that time, two people who became very well known in archaeology, Claude Warren and D.L. True, were excavating at a site that Roger's had originally created in the 1930's, the Harris Site on the San Dieguito River. However, he warned me away, telling me that he did not like what Warren and True were doing. After I graduated from Riverside, I went to the University of California Davis, and D.L. True was my de facto supervisor, so I always thought that was a nice irony.

What did you do your Ph.D. work in?

At Davis I was actually scheduled to work in Chile, where I had passed my exam, to work with True who had spent several seasons there. But, funding did not come through for that, so my backup work was actually to do work in Northwestern Arizona, which was a project that Dave Thomas and I had been working on, applying Binford's idea on settlement pattern research and doing regional survey work. Dave Thomas did his in the center of Nevada, and I worked on his project, and then I did mine, starting

the same summer in Northwestern Arizona on the edge of the Great Basin, in which Dave also worked on my project.

When did you arrive at University of British Columbia and what brought you here?

The first job I got was in 1970 at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, and I was there for two years. At that time that institution was struggling, so I looked for a job elsewhere. However, while I was there, I connected up with Bill Lipe and, while he was on sabbatical at the museum in Northern Arizona, we got connected together and developed the Cedar Mesa project at Southeastern Utah, which has been one of my focuses of research. Bill spent most of his career at the Washington State University, although at that time he was a member of the Department at SUNY-Binghamton. Bill was going to move from Binghamton to the Museum of Northern Arizona as assistant director at the time I was looking for a job. I got an interview at Binghamton, and was assured that I would be getting a forthcoming job offer. I was then interviewed at UBC. I had actually talked to David Aberle the previous year about a possible job up here, and the person who effectively ended up hiring me at UBC was

Richard Pearson, who was a good friend of Bill Lipe's; they were both graduate students at Yale together. I presume that a strong letter of recommendation from Bill Lipe to Pearson is probably one of the reasons that I did get this very nice job at UBC.

So, could one say you arrived at UBC during the initial development of Northwest Coast Archaeology?

Not really. Carl Borden had done a lot of work, along with Don Mitchell, Roy Carlson, Phil Hobler, and James Hester. I think what you could say is that the culture history stage was sort of completed and moving on to more anthropological archaeology or processual archaeology, which was just beginning. This was the stage that I

arrived, and with my background I was able to push those aspects forward.

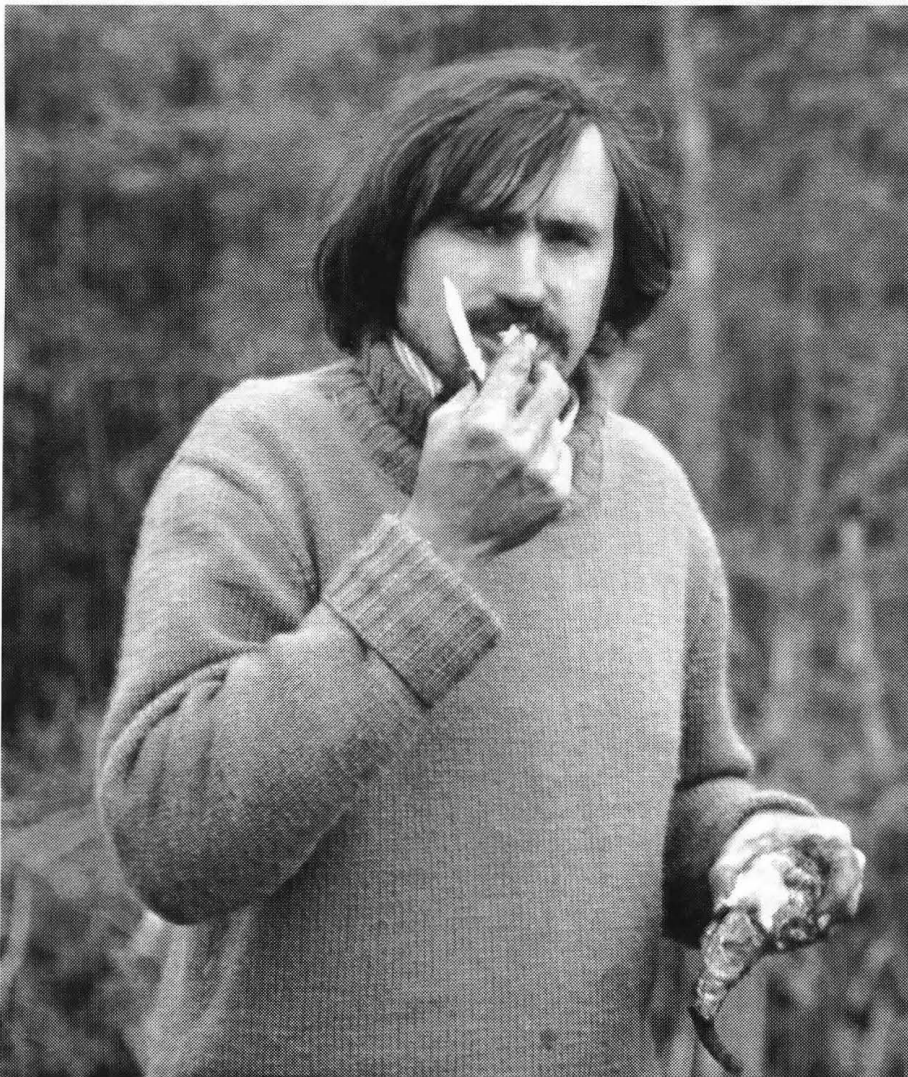
What type of investigations did you feel needed to be pursued at this time, and what type of questions needed to be answered?

It was a little bit like necessity being the mother of invention. When I arrived with my glamorous experience in the Southwest, even though I was not trained in the Southwest, I think there were questions about whether I would be committed to doing B.C. Archaeology. Richard Pearson very neatly set up an opportunity for me, saying that there was work that had been done at Glenrose which needed to be supported, but the granting agency deadline was about six weeks away. This was said with the clear message

being that if I was going to be committed to B.C. Archaeology I would apply and get money to support it right then. I sort of jumped in then as to justify further work done at the Glenrose Cannery site. But actually, it was very easy, there were a lot of questions that were important. The basic framework had been established for the Coast — although we still have problems in the Interior — and, just going beyond the cultural history, the regional framework was wide open. With my background, looking at diet and subsistence and the whole question of when the stored salmon economy came into being, which was obviously something that really had not been investigated, I was able to get that research started right there with Glenrose by getting people to look at different aspects like fish; for instance, I brought in Rick Casteel to analyze column samples. This started off the project, which continued to be a focus of my interests for coastal archaeology for thirty years.

Along with the Glenrose Cannery site, what other research areas did you focus on throughout your career?

After Glenrose, I did work in the interior, but to continue on the coastal, I did work at Beach Grove in 1980, and then at Crescent Beach in 1989-90, and then work on Shingle point in 1995-96 — so those were my major coastal investigations. At the same time, I advised students doing other important work. I wrote a grant application that funded the very important work that Leonard Ham did in 1976, and his excellent dissertation that resulted from that in 1983. Those were the major projects that I was responsible for, though there were other people doing other work: Gay Frederick's dissertation, which was on the Hesquiat area of the Vancouver Island, was a very important piece of work that I helped her on with the dissertation while she was a graduate student here at UBC. I would like to also mention that Greg Monks, under my direction, did important work at Deep Bay on the other side of Vancouver Island. My coastal projects



R.G. Matson eating balsam root, roasted in an experimental fire-pit at Eagle Lake, July 1979. Photographed by Martin Magne; photo courtesy of the Laboratory of Archaeology, UBC.

from Glenrose, through to the work at Crescent Beach, was mainly focusing on the adaptations of Northwest Coast people and the development of the stored salmon economy. The Shingle Point [project] was more involved in looking at household archaeology, though it has some very interesting aspects about adaptation involved in it as well.

In the interior, the basic issue that I was focusing on in the long range was being able to identify Athapaskans in the archaeological record as a step to being able to understand the famous migration down into Oregon and California and, of course, the Navajos and the Apaches into the Southwest. To do so, I first did this project in 1974 at the mouth of [the] Chilcotin, which was the first regional survey to be done in the interior, using the techniques I had developed earlier. This was the first real settlement project done for what we now call the PPT, Plateau Pithouse Tradition. David Pokotylo's work applied a similar kind of procedure to do his very important work at Hat Creek, where he was the first one to fully investigate and be able to identify the whole root-roasting complex archaeologically, as well as do important settlement patterns, and, of course, his important contributions in lithic analysis. His best student was Marty Magne, who then helped me with a project that developed out of this attempt to identify the Athapaskans, the Eagle Lake Project, which we actually spent four seasons on: 1979, 1983, 1984, and 1985. The method we used was what I called the Parallel Direct Historical Approach, a parallel investigation, parallel with the Mouth of Chilcotin [project], but in an area that the Athapaskans had migrated into, with the basic idea that having these parallel sequences you could see when the place of migration occurred by seeing where it varied from the first one. I think we were able to identify the Athapaskans quite successfully, and I just spent three days in court over the land claim implications of this. That was my main interior project.

All of this being said, what do you consider your major contribution to our current understanding of Northwest Coast Archaeology?

I think it is the discovery of when the stored salmon economy occurred approximately 3,500 to 3,000 years ago. There is a full sweep of data that shows that this happened at this time at Crescent Beach. We used techniques that Leonard Ham had developed, in which we were able to peel off layers, so it was pretty clear when it was occurring, the seasonality of the levels, and so on. Now, that does not mean that stored salmon were not used beforehand — they certainly were — but Crescent Beach is the area that shows a big change in the economy occurring at that time, and that, of course, is the traditional beginning of the Locarno Beach [Phase]. We also did investigations showing that, at a number of Locarno Beach sites, there is also evidence for a stored salmon economy. As far as I can tell, we do not have good evidence of it any earlier. I think this is particularly reliable because when I went in the field to do that work, I did not think that the economy actually occurred until later in the Marpole, so this was one of those times that the evidence was so strong that one just could not continue their previous belief.

Let's say, within the next ten to twenty years, the Northwest Coast text were to be rewritten: what aspects of our current knowledge and understanding do you predict may change?

One thing, I think that the work Kitty Bernick and Dale Croes have done on perishables — putting people back into the past, and tracing out the development of ethnic groups — is something that has tremendous potential. We will not only be talking about such issues as adaptations, but also about their links, at least in the last couple thousand years, to existing Northwest Coast groups. At the same time, with all the land claims and everything, this is going to be something that will be very hotly debated and I do not look for a very

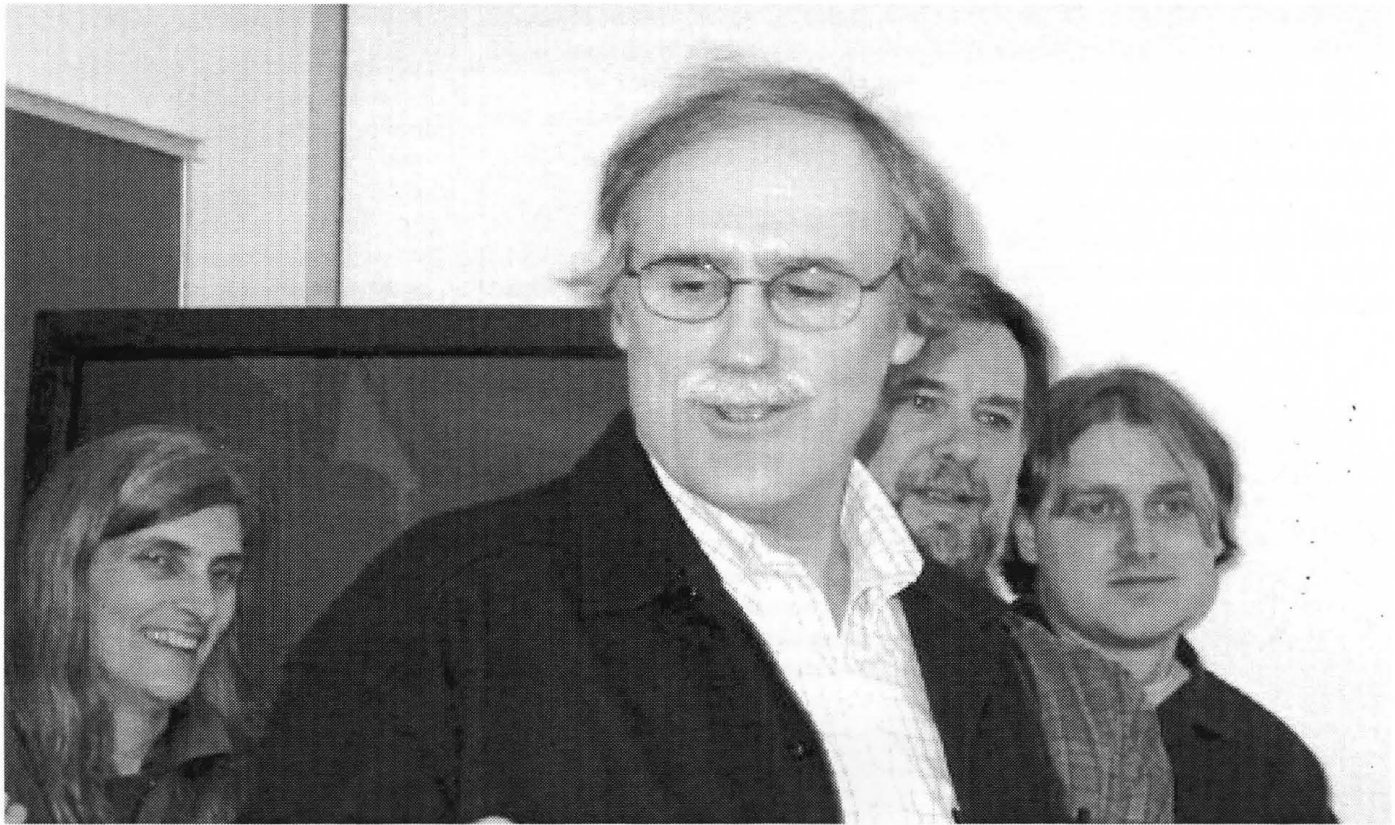
evenly distributed future with that.

The other thing that I think we will find out is the variability in all of these developments. I suggested that stored salmon economy occurred in a number of places on the central and northern coast, between 3000 to 3500 years ago. Terry Clark's work suggests that on southern Vancouver Island, this probably did not occur until 1200 years ago. Similarly, we see complex cultures being well established by Marpole times up and down the coast, although some still argue for earlier, for which I do not think the evidence we have is convincing. However, I do think we will find just as Terry Clark's work has shown, that there is going to be a lot of variability. To globalize these events as occurring all over the Northwest Coast is now being shown to be incorrect in detail, so we will develop a much finer picture.

Also, by globalizing, we tend to think that complexity occurred, with big houses, with the oldest ones being from Gary Coupland's work, in which I was his supervisor, at the Paul Mason site dated at 3,200 years ago. It is assumed that everyone had big houses since then, but I think there is more evidence that there were probably a lot of fluctuations: times when lots of people had big houses and maybe lots of times when they did not. We do not have good information for those fluctuations, but, as we get more detailed information, we then may be able to understand these dynamics and what causes them in a way that we do not have a glimpse at now.

At this present point, do you believe B.C. Archaeology is at a healthy state in regards to aspects such as funding, graduate programs, and new generation scholars?

No. I think it is clear that North American Archaeology in general had its peak success, interest, and funding from about 1965 to 1985, and I do not think it is really any different in B.C., although it was really just starting to get going in 1965. The last twenty years have been static and depressing. The focus of archaeology has, of



R.G. Matson teaching his last class. Ganged up on by students, faculty, and staff bearing Pepsi on ice and cake with a trowel to cut it, R.G. paused in his lecture to attend to the subsistence needs of all present. Left to right: Sue Rowley, R.G. Matson, David Pokotylo and Bill Angelbeck. Photographed by Patricia Ormerod; photo courtesy of the Laboratory of Archaeology, UBC.

course, gone to the consultants to meeting legal requirements, and the link between that and research questions is unclear. The high tension involved in archaeological pursuits — in land claims, environment, that fact that anthropology is no longer a big deal, the fact that archaeology is no longer a big deal in universities, our general positioning in archaeology and our position in society at large — are all weaker than they were twenty years ago. Now, things may turn around, I do not think things are bad or horrible, but I think it is clear that at present there is not the opportunity, there is not the funding, and there is not the flexibility to focus in on important anthropological questions about the past.

What are your future archaeology plans?

Jeff Jennings once said, "It ain't done until it's published," and like many archaeologists, I have many projects, even some of the ones I have talked

about, that have not really been fully published, I have long reports that are turgid things that need to be reworked into publication. I hope that Marty Magne and I will get the Eagle Lake material published — we have a manuscript that is under review at the University of Arizona Press now. I have a two or three smaller projects that I hope to complete in the next two or three years. These are things that I have not been able to make any progress on in the last 15 years with the various demands of being a university professor/archaeologist. I do not have any definite plans to do more fieldwork, but I do expect that I will be involved at least in a minor way in fieldwork both here in B.C and in the Southwest in the next ten years.

Is there anything else you would like to add? Any advice or words of wisdom for the upcoming generation of archaeologists?

No words of wisdom, but the most exciting time that I had in my career

was with the Southwestern Anthropological Research Group (SARG), in the early 1970's, in the Southwest. At one time I had tried to get something similar established here in B.C., because I think this is the way that real progress is made. When you have a dozen or so people that meet together once or twice a year for a period of time and who have agreed to look at certain issues, this is when you come to understand the limits of your ideas and you come to understand the nature of the evidence out there, and what other people are thinking about these ideas. It is a kind of interaction, though it can be high tension, that leads to great rewards. It is a type of thing that you cannot find in this day of short meeting papers and short conferences. Even when you go to a fancy conference that is organized like this and produces a book, these instances are "one-off's." Something like SARG, where you are going to be meeting every year or maybe twice a year, leads to evolutionary changes

that are really important. A book manuscript that Tim Kohler and I are editing at this point, that will be a tribute to Bill Lipe, has a chapter in it by Jim Judge, a well-known Southwestern archaeologist who is also a member of SARG. He too, points to SARG, and claims that in his career, this was very important and suggests that this kind of cooperative egalitarian research group is a way to solve many important efforts. So, I guess if I have regrets, it would be that we were unable to get that kind of group underway. As my generation retires, there is a new generation in the works, and maybe they will see it fit to develop something of that nature.

Working in B.C. and the Southwest has made me a much better archaeologist in both areas, it is amazing how many things come up that cause you to question assumptions that are held, not just by yourself, but by everybody in one area, and that because of your intensive experience in a very different area, you know are simply wrong. It really gives you an insight that you will not have or get in any other way. I think that most of my important insights that have developed this way have been from my work in B.C. going to the Southwest. This is very interesting when you realize that the Southwest is a much more glamorous area. There are a lot more archaeologists working there than in Canada, and you would expect that the important inferences would go in the opposite direction. Although some have, from my experience, most have actually gone the other way.

All in all, I have just been so incredibly fortunate and lucky.

Shauna Janz graduated from UBC in May, 2004 with a double major in Anthropology and Psychology. She worked as the student Collections Assistant in the Laboratory of Archaeology during her final year and participated in two archaeological excavations: Shingle Point in 2003, and China in 2004. She is taking a year off to work and travel the globe before returning to academia for a graduate degree in archaeology.

R. G. MATSON: SELECTION OF MAJOR PUBLISHED WORKS

Books

- 2003 *Emerging from the Mist: Studies in Northwest Coast Culture History* (with G. Coupland and Q. Mackie as Jr. Editors). 380+xiii. UBC Press, Vancouver.
- 1995 *The Prehistory of the Northwest Coast* (with G. Coupland as Jr. Co-author). 364 + xvii. Academic Press, San Diego.
- 1994 *Anasazi Origins: Recent Research on the Basketmaker II* (Co-Edited with K. Dohm). Special Issue of *Kiva*
- 1991 *The Origins of Southwestern Agriculture*. 356 +xv. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- 1976 *The Glenrose Cannery Site*. 318+xi. National Museum of Man, Mercury Series.
- Archaeological Survey of Canada Paper no. 52, Ottawa.

Book Chapters

- 2003 The Spread of Maize Agriculture in the U.S. Southwest. In *Examining the Farming/Dispersal Hypothesis*, Ed. by P. Bellwood and C. Renfrew, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge, pp. 341-356.
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- 1992 The Evolution of the Northwest Coast Economy. In *Research in Economic Anthropology Supp. 6, Long-Term Subsistence Change in Prehistoric North America*, ed. by D. Croes, R. Hawkins and

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- 1983 Intensification and the development of Cultural Complexity: The Northwest versus the Northeast Coast. In *The Evolution of Maritime Cultures on the Northeast and Northwest Coasts of America*. Ed. by R. Nash, Publication No. 11, pp. 125-148. Dept. of Archaeology, Simon Fraser University.
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- 1971 Human Settlement and Resources in the Cedar Mesa Area, S.E. Utah. In *The Distribution of Prehistoric Population Aggregates*, ed. by G. Gumerman, pp. 125-152. Prescott College Anthropological Reports, No. 1, Prescott, Arizona.

Journal Articles

- 1994 Anomalous Basketmaker II sites on Cedar Mesa: Not so Anomalous after all. *Kiva* 60(2):219-237.
- 1994 Carbon and Nitrogen Isotopic Evidence for Basketmaker II Diet at Cedar Mesa Utah. (With B. Chisholm as Sr. Author) *Kiva* 60(2):239-255.
- 1991 Basketmaker II Subsistence: Carbon Isotope and other Dietary Indicators from Cedar Mesa, Utah. (With B. Chisholm as Jr. Co-author). *American Antiquity* 56:444-456.
- 1988 Adaptational Continuities and Occupational Discontinuities: The Anasazi on Cedar Mesa, Utah (with W.D. Lipe and W. Haase as Jr. Co-author s). *Journal of Field Archaeology* 15:245-264
- 1974 Clustering and Scaling of Gulf of Georgia Sites. *Syesis* 7:101-114.
- 1974 Site Relationships at Quebrada Tarapaca, Chile: A Comparison of Clustering and Scaling Techniques (with D.L. True as Jr. Co-author). *American Antiquity* 39:51-75.
- 1970 Cluster Analysis and Multidimensional Scaling of Archaeological Sites in Northern Chile (with D.L. True as Sr. Co-author). *Science* 169:1201-1203.