IT MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE THE FEAST.

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Feasting on the Salish Sea

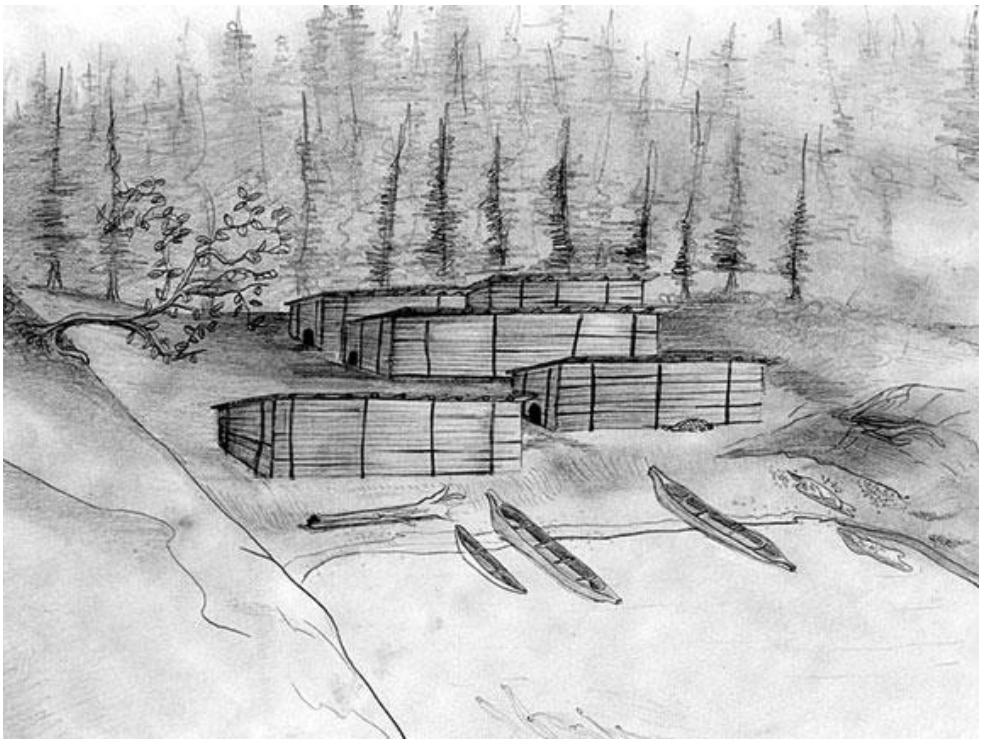
by Tim Steury

No one remembers the host. Or how many guests there were. Or how long it lasted. Or even when it was exactly, though 650 years ago is a good guess. We do, on the other hand, know what they ate—approximately 10,000 sea urchins.

Archaeologist Colin Grier and I are standing at the back corner of what was once a longhouse on the northern tip of Galiano Island at the southern end of the Strait of Georgia in British Columbia.

Archaeologist Colin Grier with a newly uncovered Marpole point. Staff photo

Amidst the clamshells and “fire-altered rock,” a midden offers tantalizing clues about a culture. Staff photo



Drawing of the Dionisio Point village as it may have looked 1,500 years ago. Illustration Neil Miller

Mussels on Galiano Island. Nora Melzer

In 2010, Grier and his crew, intent on another project, had nearly passed on this ancient longhouse. But they decided to quickly dig a test pit, just out of curiosity. And bingo, they landed right in a large hearth full of sea urchin remains.

Trees have once again taken over the site where the plank longhouse sat. The outline of the house, approximately 10 by 40 meters, is clear and ghostly. Such a distinct impression is rare, says Grier. There are probably only five or six sites in the whole region with obvious house depressions.

Based on carbon dating, the house was occupied between 650 and 1,000 years ago. There may have been another house, maybe two more, joining this one, though no one has excavated in search of them. These days, a pedestrian path to the beach leads right across the house floor.

The remains of the sea urchin feast date to around the time the house, for whatever reason, was abandoned. It might well have been its last feast.

In his *Peoples of the Northwest Coast: Their Prehistory and Archaeology*, archaeologist Kenneth Ames ’76 PhD introduces a sweeping examination of a diverse and complex region stretching from northern California to southern Alaska.

Along this 2,000-kilometer coast (as the raven flies, that is; the coast itself, with its thousands of inlets, is much, much longer), the original peoples were extraordinarily diverse. In the mid-nineteenth century, 39 languages in 11 language groups were spoken along the Northwest Coast.

The Coast Salish alone had scores of local groups, all differing in their traditions, histories, and practices. Among them were the Hul’qumi’num, to which the ancient residents of Galiano Island and their presumed descendents, the Penelakuts, belong, even though the Penelakuts’ oral history has no recollection of these specific villages.

Grier, a Canadian who has spent most of his life on the West Coast, has been exploring the vicinity ’s past for the past 15 years. He joined WSU ’s anthropology program in 2007, filling the position in Northwest archaeology held for 50 years by Robert Ackerman and reinvigorating an emphasis on Northwest coastal archaeology established by Richard Daugherty and the Ozette dig on the Olympic Peninsula in the 1960s.

In 1996, Grier and colleagues were working at another site, Shingle Point on Valdes Island. They had boated over to Galiano on a field trip. “I had all these questions for my dissertation about household organization. I needed a site where I could investigate a large household.”

Now we’re standing in what may have been the house’s front yard, he says, where they found lots of refuse and bone points. Maybe it was a work area, suggested by a piece of worked schist or shale with bone tools next to it.

As substantial and large as it was, the longhouse was moveable and adaptable. A log frame was covered with cedar planks and was modular in design, enabling the inhabitants to easily expand or shrink the house according to space needs.

The inhabitants of the longhouse subsisted over the winter on salmon gathered from the Fraser River to the northeast. In the spring, herring would be the first resource to come back. Then sea mammals and plants. Then in summer or late spring, people would move, take the house planks with them, maybe visit relatives in highlands, maybe hunt deer or collect berries. They would re-gather in the fall, living what Northwest Coast archaeologists call the "winter village pattern."

At the time the longhouse was occupied, Grier estimates that the population of the greater Salish Sea area was 70,000 or more. The house here at Dionisio Point sheltered probably 60 people. Villages lined the shore every four or five kilometers. Grier says there were probably 500-1,000 people living within an easy day's paddle.

Ames suggests that the population of the entire Northwest Coast, before the epidemics introduced by Europeans, may have been a million or more.

The important question for Grier, however, is not so much how densely populated the ancient Salish Sea was, but how these people came to settle in households. "Why did these large households come into existence?" he muses.

"I've always been interested in household archaeology. It connects the inside of the house to broader changes, to economic patterns in the region."

Ames, who wrote his dissertation on Ozette, observes in his *Peoples of the Northwest Coast* that indigenous peoples of the region break all the anthropological stereotypes.

The question lurking in many anthropologists' minds is why did our ancestors move from hunting and gathering to a more sedentary life? How did we become settled? And how did that change catapult us toward the kind of societies we live in today?

The long-held answer is that agriculture provided humans the path toward sedentism and complexity, toward a modern culture. People of the Northwest Coast have confounded those traditional assumptions.

"For a long time," says Grier, "the thought was that the path to civilization was through agriculture. Hunter-gatherers were mostly irrelevant, but kind of an interesting side-path."

The evolution of thinking about social and political complexity is suggested by the shift in the scholarly terminology. "Hunter-gatherers," in reference to Northwest Coast people, became "complex hunter-gatherers" and "affluent foragers," reflecting the steadily increasing understanding of the archaeological record.

There are three means of understanding Northwest Coast people: the oral history of the people themselves; ethnography, including the written accounts of early European explorers; and archaeology.

Much of our understanding, gathered through the first two means, is that the culture of Northwest Coast people was based largely on salmon, that salmon was a readily available, abundant resource. Indeed, it is clear from Grier's investigations that the people living on Galiano Island would relocate temporarily to gather salmon from the Fraser River, then return with their winter stores of dried salmon to their base at Dionisio Point. Add to that a

few halibut and herring, maybe a sea lion or two, and the good life was to be had for the taking. Why bother farming?

But further examination and reflection is suggesting that maybe this view, generally supported by evidence produced after European contact and accompanying epidemics, may be only part of the picture.

Indeed, Grier cautions that historic accounts need to be considered in light of archaeological findings. “Loss of population resulting from diseases introduced by Europeans may have shifted long-standing territorial relationships and patterns of movement,” he writes. Although “hunter-gatherers,” no matter how “complex,” have traditionally been thought of as not practicing agriculture, the economic practices of the Northwest Coast peoples were likely more complicated.

Grier’s work points to “a broad and varied suite of resources” rather than a singular focus on salmon at any period.

Not only were the resources broad and varied, they were cultivated.

“What is interesting,” writes Kelly Derr in an email, “is that because native people were not using domesticated crops or recognizable species (with the exception of wild tobacco, *Nicotiana attenuata*), very little attention was given ethnographically to how they managed landscapes for plant food production.”

Derr is a doctoral candidate working with Grier and is the manager of the Dionisio Point excavation. Her dissertation is focused on natives’ use of fire to manage their landscape on nearby Valdes Island.

It has been argued, she continues, that the quick adoption of potato farming by Coast Salish people right after contact is evidence that cultivation practices were already in place.

Derr’s dissertation research concerns “agricultural” practices prior to contact. Actually, she prefers the term “intensive cultivation,” as it avoids the domesticated crop bias of “agriculture.” Of particular interest to Derr is burning as a means of managing the landscape.

“What we are finding,” she writes, “is that people were very much involved in managing and domesticating the land they put into cultivation, but were not focused on genetically domesticating the plant species.”

Derr’s argument is furthered by a number of other Northwest anthropologists, perhaps most actively by Douglas Deur. A collection of essays he edited includes contributions by Ames and others. Deur argues that although Northwest Coast resources were indeed abundant, they were not so readily available that people could just walk out the front door of their plank houses and gather dinner year-round. In order to augment the natural bounty, native people managed the landscape in many ways, particularly necessary given the documented high population densities of the region.

Grier comments, “It seems as though the extensive land/coast modifications that were employed in cultivation (burning camas meadows, carefully managing salinity in tidal-

influenced gardens with midden and earth constructions, building wapato fields akin to rice paddies, etc.) was matched by efforts in other areas too—fish weirs, clam gardens, etc.
“This broad spectrum intensification (rather than just intensifying stored salmon output) seems to better explain much of the data we are accumulating than the salmon storage/intensification=affluence model presented for many decades.”
“And here’s the village,” says Grier.
Much older than the nearby single longhouse, the village remains as the vague outlines of five houses, situated on three terraces carved from the slope about ten meters above the surface of the water.
The floor areas range in size from 200 to 400 square meters.
“House 2, on the lower terrace here, is the one I did in 1997–98 as part of my dissertation.”
Grier was interested in finding out what different families in the house were doing. Family units within larger households had by this time developed specialties. One family specialized in hunting terrestrial mammals, evidenced by deer hunting equipment around one of the hearths. Another specialized in hunting sea mammals.
These specialties, in addition to fishing technology and others, were all part of what was going on in the winter village pattern. As populations increased and larger households formed, other patterns developed. Inequality, for one thing.
The excavation revealed few artifacts, other than a couple of interesting exceptions. The team found a cache of about 5,000 slate beads, which are associated with burial and wealth.
The process of making the beads starts with a sheet of slate or shale, about five millimeters thick. The stone is scored in a checkerboard pattern, maybe halfway through. Holes are drilled in each square. Then the squares are snapped off and strung. The string of beads are rolled on sandstone until the edges are rounded.
The beads are extremely labor-intensive, and, needless to say, a sign of affluence and extravagance.
The archaeologists also found two carved bowls in the shape of a human head. One contained ochre, which is still used as body paint for spiritual protection.
The bowls are made of local sandstone, their motifs and style connecting the village somehow to a religious ideology that emerged first on the Fraser River.
“We start to see status differentiation,” says Grier, referring to labrets made of soapstone. Studs that were worn in the lower lip, labrets and the shaping of a sloping cranium, formed in the infant, were reserved for the nobility, one of three distinct classes along the Northwest Coast (nobility, commoners, and slaves).
The current interest by Grier and others in household archaeology might be traced to Ozette and the spectacular insights offered by its perfectly preserved tools and cultural artifacts.
“Up to Ozette, you really didn’t go out and dig houses,” Grier had noted in an earlier conversation. “You dug shell middens.”

Which is what he's returned to this summer.

Grier and his crew have been excavating a shell midden for the past month. Working with Grier this summer are four WSU anthropology students: Doug Beyers, a senior; Annette Ruzicka, a master's student; Erin Smith, a doctoral student; and Derr.

Also working with them is Maria Eugenia Orejuela, from Colombia and a doctoral candidate at the University of Barcelona. She is studying the relationships of archaeologists with First Nations people, with whom Grier has a particulalry productive one.

Middens, basically the refuse heaps of the past inhabitants, are a major source of information. In order to get a feel for just how significant and telling they can be, go through a bag of your trash at the end of the week. A thousand-year-old midden might not reveal the people 's reading habits so clearly as your trash might. But it certainly indicates diet.

I ask Smith and Derr if they've gained any insight from the summer's dig.

"They ate a lot of fish," says Derr, laughing, noting that a midden, revealing as it is, does not provide quite so dramatic an insight into the culture as does a house excavation.

She jokes about people happening on their site and asking, well, what have you found? Horse clams, she tells them, along with lots of other shells and fish bones. Their eyes glaze over pretty quickly, she says.

In spite of its subtle stories, this midden probably would have been left alone had it not been for the fact that the ocean had finally reached it and threatened to deconstruct its story.

Even though the cove beyond the midden is calm, and the tide low this morning, winter storms have eaten away at the beach over the past decades. Because of increased boat traffic, logging, debris, and rising sea levels due to climate change, says Grier, all coastal sites and the data they hold will ultimately be similarly threatened.

The result, finally, has been the breaching of this ancient midden, its shells and bones being reclaimed by the sea. But what made this midden's disintegration particularly troubling were the human remains. With rising sea level, it is not just clam shells, but cemeteries that are threatened.

Up until about a thousand years ago, Northwest Coast people buried their dead mostly in the middens. And then, for some reason, they stopped.

Clearly, their middens were, indeed, different from our refuse heaps.

Grier believes there was probably another midden nearby belonging to the same settlement. There is not much household refuse in the midden they are excavating, no broken tools and other discards normally found in a household midden.

"This is probably the input part of the throughput system, " says Grier, "a lot of whole clams, resource processing."

Digging a midden is a meticulous process.

Everything in the midden is sifted with a screen, which along with the shovel and trowel is a basic tool of archaeology. The screen has three-millimeter openings. A bucketful of

midden is placed in the screen and then shaken. Everything smaller than the openings falls thro
ugh, mainly soil and sand.
What's left on the surface of the screen is then sorted through. As the midden is excavated, major changes are given a letter. "A" is soil, "B" is shell midden, "C" the sands underneath, and "D" the yellow sands below that. Each layer is further divided into 10-centimeter levels, and everything is recorded, with lots of cross referencing so data are not lost.
And what do they find? As Derr pointed out, lots of clam shells and fish bones. Rockfish, herring, salmon, some halibut.
And lots of dog bones.
And then, every once in a while, an artifact. Derr finds a perfect Marpole-era spear point.
Mid-afternoon, Grier hands me a bead he has just found. I place it on my knee, along with a couple of fish vertebrae, to photograph it. And then, it's gone.
"Colin," I say, "I've lost your bead."
He looks dismayed, and we search the sand around my feet. Nothing. I spend a half hour running the surrounding sand through the screen. Nothing.
"Welcome to archaeology," says Derr. I've been initiated.
The next day, the last afternoon of the dig, I have been put to work on the screen, no longer able to claim journalist's privilege. I have been working for about an hour, throwing out fire-altered rocks and horse clam shells, saving fish vertebrae and dog bones, puzzling over unidentifiable curiosities.
And then, a bead! Everyone cheers.
"I've been redeemed?" I ask hopefully.
"No," says Grier, "you're just back to zero."
As they work, the crew is alternately quiet in their concentration and making jokes and patter.
After 30 days living in a tent and sorting out fish bones and clamshells, the crew is remarkably convivial. I accuse them of putting on a show for me. But no, they are the lucky crew who gets along rather famously.
Grier switches from his concentration on digging to the village.
"Who knows why they abandoned it," he muses. "Basic demographic growth and decline?"
Whatever it was, about 1,300 years ago, what had been an apparently prosperous village of at least five houses and maybe 200 people was abandoned.
"I don't think it was catastrophic," says Grier. At least he has found no such indication.
The people who lived here, like other Coast Salish, married outside the village, but had the option to live in the home village or with a spouse's parents. A couple might go back and forth. It's hard to imagine that eventually all the young people decided to live in a better-located village. Perhaps the village ran up against a labor shortage? Who knows?
These are among the many questions Grier is asking. How are households sustainable? How do they reproduce themselves socially, biologically?

His work here has also added to the understanding of the role of feasting in such cultures. Feasting is considered a critical mechanism “through which individual status is constructed, group solidarity reinforced, and extra-local alliances established and reaffirmed. As such, it is an important social practice in small-scale societies.”

Grier suggests I walk around Stevens Point. So I do, and what I see is just what he had promised, layers of land- and seascape, a couple smaller islands, high mountains to the west on Vancouver Island, a look through the Hul’qumi’num world.

It is these successive layers, this view of these ancient people, as we perch on the rim of their world, upon which he reflects.

“I’ve worked here 15 years,” he says, “and I’m only starting to understand how to phrase some of these questions.”

https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/midden/article/download/15499/6196
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