

Ancient Harvest

By Jeff Nagel - Surrey North Delta Leader - June 20, 2008



Millennia-old wapato, unearthed during recent road work, are aboriginal potatoes.

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A 3,600-year-old native village site uncovered during road work for the new Golden Ears Bridge is being hailed as a globally significant find that suggests aboriginal people here were Canada's first recorded farmers.

The ancient discovery has electrified archaeologists who say it may help reverse long-held notions of pre-contact natives as hunter-gatherers who didn't actively garden or otherwise manage the landscape.

It also shines a new spotlight on the accelerating loss of First Nations heritage sites in the Lower Mainland to make way for new highways, bridges and development.

The site was found more than a year ago but has been kept quiet throughout a 10-month excavation that wrapped up this spring.

And it will soon be paved over.

The Abernethy connector is being built through the ancient village to link the Golden Ears Bridge to Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows.

But rather than oppose the road work, the local Katzie First Nation headed up the dig themselves.

The band's development corporation signed on to excavate any sites found during bridge construction.

The multi-million-dollar deal gave band members job training in archaeology and more control in saving their own heritage if anything significant was found.

Nobody was more stunned than Katzie First Nation chief negotiator Debbie Miller when Katzie workers began to unearth scores of artifacts and implements in the middle of the road right-of-way.

"Every day you could see bucket after bucket and say, 'Look, look, look,'" she recalled.

"There are hundreds of thousands of pieces – everything from stone to wood."

They've found what are believed to be house structures, cookery, arrow points, digging sticks – in short, all the evidence of human habitation.

But it is the wapato or Indian potato – a root vegetable that would have been grown in the Pitt polder mud and cooked as a source of starch – that has generated the most excitement.

The tubers were found almost perfectly preserved in a rare "wet site" where water kept them submerged and ensured they never rotted, along with basket fragments, braided rope and other artifacts that don't normally survive centuries let alone millennia.

The wapato were found atop a layer of carefully placed charred rocks built over a spring-fed gravel area.

Researchers believe it's an intentional wapato garden – the rocks were intended to help spread the water evenly and to keep the plant from rooting deeply, making it easier to harvest and potentially boosting yields.

"It has global importance," said SFU associate professor of archaeology Dana Lepofsky, who rates it as possibly the Lower Mainland's most significant find to date.

Until now, the oldest evidence found of gardening in B.C. dated to between 300 and 400 years ago on the central coast, where aboriginal people tended clover and silverweed in the intertidal zone. Researchers suspected the Katzie had grown wapato at least that long because of stories from the band's oral history.

But the discovery of the Katzie wapato, radiocarbon dated to 3,600 years ago, becomes the oldest example so far of horticulture in B.C. and Canada.

"In the Pacific Northwest, there is nothing even remotely this old," Lepofsky said.

Tribes in warmer parts of southeastern North America had begun growing seeds like sunflower, quinoa and maize as early as 5,000 years ago.

But they didn't plant root vegetables.

“There’s really nothing comparable in North America,” said Lepofsky.

It sheds light on a mystery that has puzzled scientists: how did coastal aboriginal people – thought to be reliant on hunting, fishing and gathering – develop such large and complex societies associated more with agrarian civilizations?

It now appears, Lepofsky said, that the people here did garden and actively change their landscape, not simply harvest what grew naturally.

In a land where rivers wriggled with salmon, veggies might seem unimportant.

But Lepofsky believes the humble wapato was actually a hot commodity.

Analysis of aboriginal bones shows every member of coastal society – rich or poor, men or women, slaves or children – got plenty of protein from fish.

“Salmon was in such abundance, protein was not a problem,” Lepofsky said. “I think carbs were in much higher demand. That’s the reason why wapato was traded by the Katzie up and down the Fraser Valley.”

Europeans who first arrived here didn’t recognize aboriginal gardens because they weren’t neatly tended plots with fences.

Instead, the newcomers saw virgin wilderness that wasn’t being used.

“It was ‘wasted’ and up for grabs,” Lepofsky said. “That philosophy was fundamental of the move to put First Nations on reserves.”

She said there are “huge implications” today, as evidence mounts that aboriginal people did manage the land and resources. Resource managers ordered to return an area to a “wild” state may have to think harder about what “wilderness” is.

For archaeologists, the new discovery is exceptional.

For the Katzie, working side-by-side to remove tools their ancestors once held and the vegetables they intended to eat, the dig has been an emotional journey into the past.

“It was overwhelming,” says the Katzie’s Debbie Miller.

The site was divided into a grid of squares and material was painstakingly excavated down in layers about 20 centimetres at a time.

Two-thirds of the 90 employees on the job at its peak were Katzie band members.

The arrangement flows from a 2004 benefits agreement the Katzie signed with TransLink, in which the band pledged to cooperate in exchange for a \$1.8-million payment and promises of band employment and business opportunities.

More money has flowed from the bridge-building consortium, the Golden Crossing Constructors Joint Venture, for the actual archaeological work by the Katzie Development Corporation.

Acutely aware of their responsibility to deliver, Miller bristles when initially asked if the find could delay completion of the bridge.

That won't happen, she insists. And indeed, TransLink's now projects the bridge will be finished by next June, ahead of schedule.

Despite months of fieldwork, just five per cent of the site was actually excavated.

But under B.C. law, that's considered sufficient to constitute a representative snapshot.

Now that the dig is over, the bridge builders have obtained a site alteration permit, allowing road crews to rapidly excavate the rest of the site with heavy equipment – with monitoring in case more artifacts emerge.

Preload will follow and then paving. Then, in mid-2009, the first motorists to cross the Golden Ears Bridge will unknowingly roll over the ancient site.

“That's the way this thing works,” Miller says. “The site gets altered so significantly it no longer exists. The proponent builds its project and moves forward.”

She speaks in precise, clinical terms about the business arrangement and the rules on how much of a site gets the feather duster treatment and how much can be attacked with big yellow machines.

How does she keep her chin up through a process that will obliterate such an historic site?

“I hate the whole thing,” Miller confesses. “I am so saddened and disillusioned that something that could be our equivalent to the Sphinx or the Pyramids or Stonehenge in this province gets to be just picked up and set aside.”

Had the band known in advance the road would go over such a site, Miller said, it's possible they would have fought to change the route.

But ultimately, the Katzie gave their word and are living by it.

“No, I'm not happy. But my business is to make sure we do a professional quality job. I can tell you one thing, we have done that.”

The challenge doesn't end now that what could be recovered has been dug up, bagged and itemized.

Researchers will want access to the artifacts indefinitely.

And the Katzie aren't yet sure how they'll store it all properly, along with the several thousand other pieces already in their possession.

“This just exponentially increases our responsibility,” Miller said. “Many of the wet site pieces will need to be curated. We don't have the ability to do that.”

Neither the bridge builders nor TransLink are required to contribute to the ongoing cost of curating found artifacts.

“It’s just a monumental task we’re going through.”

SFU’s Dana Lepofsky doesn’t fault the Katzie for the choice they made.

She says the Katzie archaeology team did a “phenomenal” job excavating the site.

But having to scramble so a bridge can open on time isn’t the same as if the site had become a long-term research project.

Lepofsky’s preference is clear.

“In my perfect world, the site would have been either left entirely or excavated slowly over 30 years with huge public involvement and turned into a place people could visit forever – in the way it would have happened almost anywhere else in the western world.

“France, Japan – you pick the country – a site like this would have been preserved,” she said. “To me it should have been non-negotiable. It should have been turned into a heritage landscape for all people and all generations.”

Road work crews have now begun final removal of the site, according to officials at the Golden Ears Bridge project office. The excavation is to be finished by mid-July.

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