



Students on a previous dig in Pigeon Cove, Sandwich Bay.

Contributed photo

Digging into the Past



Lisa Rankin with her seven-month-old Golden Retriever, Daisy. Danette Dooley Photo

Archeology team Uncovering coastal history

By DANETTE DOOLEY
Special To The Aurora

When a team of researchers from Memorial University head to southern Labrador to camp and dig for artifacts for the summer they'll be bringing a couple of four-legged furry friends with them.

Lisa Rankin is head of Memorial University's archeology department and director of the university's Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER).

Her seven-year-old Labrador Retriever, Corky, has accompanied her team on the archeological digs near the Cartwright area for several years.

This year, Corky will be joined by Rankin's seven-month-old Golden Retriever, Daisy.

Rankin says while the dogs enjoy living on the land, they are also great company for the younger students on her team who are adjusting to working and living outdoors, in a remote area, for months at a time.

Dogs are sensitive to people's emotions, she says. They know when someone may be feeling down, lonely or frustrated.

"A lot of the students are away from home for the first time and they have animals of their own at home

that they're missing. Some adapt to it better than others. And when you're working really long hours, taking a break to play with a dog is great," she says.

Rankin has been working in partnership with the NunatuKavut people since 2005. NunatuKavut is the territory of the southern Inuit people of Labrador.

Her research focuses on Inuit habitation sites in the Sandwich Bay area where she spends summers conducting archaeological digs as part of a five-year multidisciplinary study entitled "Understanding the Past to Build the Future." The study is exploring the history of the Inuit Metis of southern Labrador.

After arriving in Cartwright, the team spends several nights at the Cartwright Hotel and are then taken, by boat, to Sandwich Bay where they camp in tents on the islands for the summer.

"Folks will come and bring us groceries once a week or every 10 days, depending on what the weather is like," Rankin says.

"When we're not working we have lot of bonfires, we roast a lot of wieners, skip rocks on the beach, play a lot of cards, pick bakeapples and blueberries. And the dogs will go swimming with us on hot days."

While enjoying themselves is part of the adventure, the researchers work six days a week collecting and analyzing evidence of Inuit-European

interactions, documenting cultural changes, and – as the title of the study suggests — bringing the history of the Metis into the present day.

When looking for habitation sites, Rankin says, the first thing to look for is fossil changes on the landscape. They photograph and film everything they unearth.

“With Inuit sites (a few hundred years’ old) you’ll normally find big sod humps that are the outlines of their houses that are grassed over and collapsed. When you get to sites that are older than the Inuit, (a few thousand years old) you can’t see any remains of their houses anymore but you do find chips of stone from (the process of) making their tools. And sometimes, if they had tents, you find the big stone outlines where they held the flaps of the tents down.”

The study is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through the Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) program, as well as numerous community partners.

Michelle Davies is a second year student at Memorial. The summer of 2012 was her first year digging in Labrador. However, Davies worked with numerous Inuit artifacts from The Rooms in St. John’s the previous year.

While she says she expected her Labrador experience to involve long hard days at work and a rather isolating island experience, she says she didn’t realize how quickly the days would pass.

“The site was fantastic to excavate and everyone learned a lot about 18th century Inuit life,” she says.

Davies says she’s returning with researchers again this summer because she’s passionate about the people of Cartwright and the gorgeous sunsets.

“I also didn’t realize that people keep in contact through their boats and that we’d have so much company. It was a total joy to hear a boat approaching the island knowing that we’d have visitors, and it was

a great way to get to know the people in town,” she says.

Kyle Crotty is in his final year of an undergraduate degree at Memorial.

He was part of Rankin’s team in 2012 and says he’s looking forward to returning to the Sandwich Bay area again this summer “because of the community, the crew and to totally unplug for six-eight weeks out of the year.”

“This is an amazing experience for anyone who loves living pretty much off the land. I’ve learned a lot from my first field season, including that this is the career path that I want to continue pursuing,” he says.

The researchers made two movies during their time in Labrador. “The People of NunatuKavut” will be shown on Sat., Feb. 9 at the Lawrence O’ Brien Arts Center in Happy Valley-Goose Bay beginning at 2 p.m. A reception will follow.

“The movie is about the arrival of the Inuit in Labrador, their movement into the south and then their meetings with Europeans and the development of the Metis people from there. We also have a couple of children’s books that we’re working on,” Rankin says.

The researchers also recently made placemats for restaurants detailing the cultural history of the Inuit in southern Labrador.

Rankin is pleased with the research and says things go well every year because of the tremendous support her team receives from the local people.

“We’re always getting people dropping us off some fish. And halfway through the season I try to give everybody a weekend in town so that they can have showers, do their laundry and call their parents and other loved ones. I’ve got really nice friends in the Cartwright area who will take the dogs while we do this. I wouldn’t be able to do this without them. So I’d really like to thank the dog lovers of Cartwright.”

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THOSE COLLABORATING ON THE PROJECT

- Lisa Rankin, Memorial University
- (principal investigator)
- Mario Blaser, Memorial University
- John Kennedy, North River, Nova Scotia
- Greg Mitchell, NunatuKavut
- Evelyn Plaice, University of New Brunswick
- Hans Rollmann, Memorial University
- Marianne Stopp, Historical Services Branch, Parks Canada
- Patricia Way, Cartwright, Labrador

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