



Unearthing a Metis home

by Matthew Beaudoin

Sod houses have been the focus of archaeological research in Labrador for a long time. They are easy to find and contain a wealth of knowledge about how people lived and were used by many different cultures. This style of house is Inuit in origin, consisting of a stone, bone or wood sub-structure with sods piled on top for insulation. Since it was well adapted to the winter climate in Labrador it was soon adopted by European settlers, Newfoundland fishermen and Labrador Metis families, which has lead to one of the major problems of sod house research in Labrador: It is virtual-

ly impossible to identify who built and owned a certain house just by studying what is visible on the surface of the ground, but now an attempt is being made to overcome this stumbling block.

While archaeology often attempts to study the distant past and relate it to the present, a project led by Dr. Lisa Rankin of Memorial University is using the more recent past to bridge the gap between today and the distant past. She is currently trying to develop an archaeological understanding of how people were living in southern Labrador during the 19th Century and

through the use of ethnographic data, genealogies, oral histories and written records archaeologists are often able to determine who owned the house before beginning excavation.

During the summer of 2007 I lead a crew that excavated a known Labrador Metis sod house at North River, near the community of Cartwright. This structure is very prominent on the landscape as the inside of the house measures over 40 square meters. The sod walls are almost two meters thick in places and stand one meter above the ground.

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history and culture

The excavation of a sod house is exciting enough on its own as an archaeological collection, but knowing who the probable owner was makes it even more interesting. This one was believed to have been built by Charles Williams, from England, during the 19th Century, and may have been used as late as the start of the 20th Century by his son, James Williams. Further intrigue is added by the fact that Charles is supposed to have married a local woman, Mary, and she was most likely of Inuit or Metis descent. This would make this house one of the earliest recorded Labrador Metis sod winter houses.

While the analysis is ongoing, the house already appears different than other known Inuit and European structures. It is much larger than most, and has what appears to be a wooden floor, which is rare for the period. The sub-structure appears to have been predominantly made of wood held together with wrought iron nails and with sod piled along the walls and possibly on the roof.



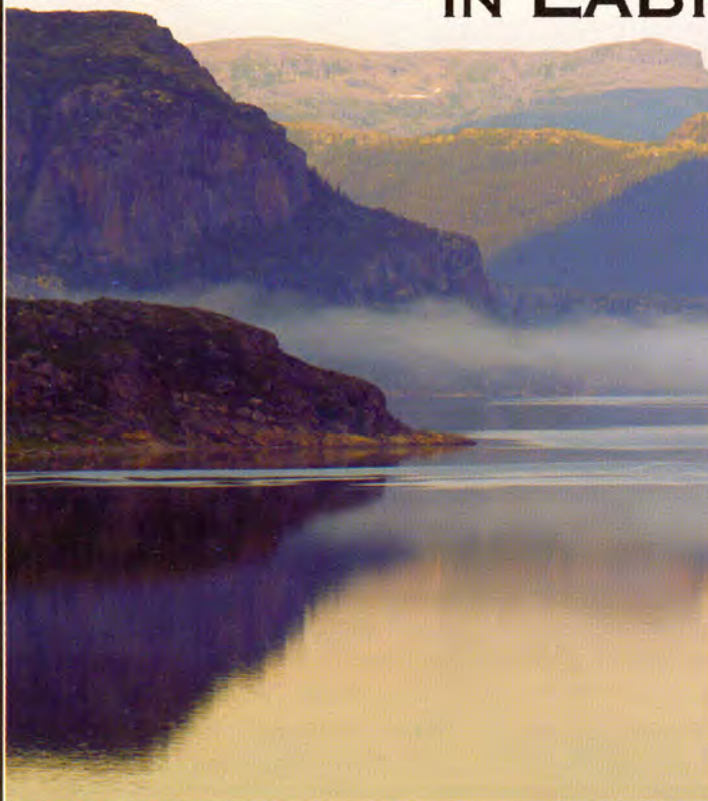
Clay tobacco pipes recovered from the site this past summer. Opposite: Team member Susan Arsenault excavating.

Window glass was recovered, as was a stone stove platform in the middle of the house.

Due to the size and style of construction it is evident that the creation of this

house involved a large amount of energy, time and resources, and would have been an important part of the inhabitant's daily life for a significant portion of the year.

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history and culture

Now that this house has been excavated and many interesting artifacts found, many people have been asking me “What does all of this mean?”

The wide variety of historic artifacts found will become the first collection of Labrador Metis artifacts recovered through archaeology in the province. This will allow us to compare known European and Inuit artifacts and collections with the Labrador Metis collection to define the differences between the cultures.

This first Labrador Metis collection will contain ceramics, hundreds of clay smoking pipes, glass shards, British style gunflints, hundreds of glass beads, cutlery, coins, animal bones and a large number of other artifacts. An initial count suggests that over 3,000 pieces were recovered this summer alone.

While at first glance many of these artifacts may seem inconsequential and insignificant, the large variety of domestic artifacts, and where they were found within the house, will allow researchers to get a good snapshot of how an early Labrador Metis family lived during the 1800s.

Now that this house has been excavated and many interesting artifacts found, many people have been asking me “What does all of this mean?” Archaeologically identifying and defining a culture or time period very often makes future research into that culture or period much easier. Defining a culture will often bring it to the forefront of current research, which can stimulate discussion and generate new ideas among researchers who would not have known about them otherwise or considered applying different theories or methods to the area.

In southern Labrador there is another effect related to sod house research. Research has often been hampered



The site after excavation. More than 3,000 artifacts were recovered, including ceramics, hundreds of clay smoking pipes, glass shards, British style gunflints, hundreds of glass beads, cutlery, coins, animal bones, etc.

because the cultural affiliations of the huge number of sod houses identified over the years are mostly unknown. Not knowing if a sod house was occupied by Inuit, Europeans or Labrador Metis has made it difficult for researchers to answer questions related to the period of

occupation, the cultural connections and the activities of these structures. With the identification and definition of a Labrador Metis sod house it will now be easier for researchers to target these structures for their research.

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on the land

Academic researchers are not the only group that has an interest in and will benefit from this research. During my time in Labrador, both during the past summer and in previous years, I encountered many different groups of people and communities that are all immensely proud of their heritage and culture. Many people have a very intimate connection with their past and ancestors, and display a tremendous knowledge and interest in their history that continues to amaze me to this day. In talking to local residents of North River and Cartwright I discovered that there were still people alive today who vividly remember those who lived in the sod house that I excavated and were able to offer a valuable insight into their daily lives.

Despite this house having been lived in more than a century in the past, people living today still understand how the owners lived. This is a great opportunity. In showing the artifacts and discussing with local people what I saw in the




Cutlery found at the site.

archaeology, I learned many details that may have remained unknown to me about the artifacts, how the house was used and how people lived during the

19th Century. I learned that this knowledge about a time that has changed in so many ways is still important for people today. †

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