



The team is searching for artifacts such as the one shown here on North Island in the mouth of St. Michael's Bay.

Field notes

The first in a series on an archaeological dig in St. Michael's Bay

by Marianne Stopp

After a long day of searching for artifacts, an archaeologist replaces their trowel with a pencil and writes field notes. Field notes are a record of everything done that day, and a key source of information long after the excavation is over and memory has begun to play its tricks. This column will be our weekly field note to readers, giving news of our archaeological dig on North Island at the mouth of St. Michael's Bay, Labrador, during the month of July.

The site consists of the remains of two ancient Inuit sod houses that were found in 1991 by the author. (Some of you may even remember the 1991 and 1992 surveys, when a small group of archaeologists visited the harbours and islands between Cape Charles and Sandwich Bay in a small Cartwright-built lapstrake boat driven by "Captain" Fred Parly.) We've returned to North Island as part of a five-year project that seeks to learn more about Labrador Inuit presence in southern Labrador, and will eventually make these results available to both academic and community-based audiences.

This is the second year of the project. Last summer we excavated sod houses on Great Caribou Island in St. Lewis Inlet that dated to the late 1700s. After two weeks of comfortable beds and wonderful meals at Battle Harbour, we left luxury behind and, with the help of River Guardian Wayne Russell, moved base camp to the rather desolate mouth of St. Michael's Bay. We arrived hungry in the dark, with the wind up, and it was a relief to find good friends Art and Eva Luther waiting for us. But our fire died again and again that night, the Coleman stove didn't flicker, and supper was a chewy mix of slightly warm freeze-dried food. I remember winds howling all night, quite sure that the spirits of North Island were sending us a warning shot across the bows.

Our stay on North Island

turned out to be remarkable – such a beautiful spot – and the spirits of the place must have warmed to us quickly. The sod houses date to a period nearly a century earlier than those on Great Caribou, to a time when the nearest Europeans were the French in the Strait of Belle Isle. The food bones recovered from the garbage area tell us that the Inuit families here ate ringed seals and bullbirds (dovekies), suggesting a winter presence, but also mussel shells, cod fish, and harp seals, which also point to late autumn and/or late spring settlement. The artefacts are an interesting mix of Inuit bone and stone items alongside early European unglazed ceramics and a fish hook or two.

What will this season bring? Well, we look forward to telling you. For more information about the project see our webpage, "Understanding the Past to Build the Future" at www.mun.ca/lab-metis/. The other researchers of our multi-disciplinary team include anthropologist John Kennedy, who is examining early merchant records relating to the coast; Greg Mitchell, researcher-at-large with the Labrador Metis Nation; anthropologist and educator Evelyn Plaise, who will be developing curriculum and other materials for use in communities; another archaeologist, Lisa Rankin; who is working in Sandwich Bay; religious historian Hans Rollmann, who is examining early church records; and well known Labrador genealogist Patty Way.

What should you do if you think you've found an archaeological artifact? Important information is lost at this early stage if you continue moving dirt and looking for more. Help preserve Canada's ancient history and call the Provincial Archaeology Office right away at 1-709-729-0870.

(Marianne Stopp is an archaeologist and historian at the National Historic Sites Directorate, Parks Canada)