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Digging up History

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Digging up history

Michael Maguire '09 wields a machete and hacks at the dense undergrowth, cutting away brush to get a clear look at the ground. "I never knew that dirt could be so interesting," he says as he swings the machete. "I never knew that there could be so many interesting aspects to a forest."

Maguire is hoping his painstaking search will yield a clue about the site of a camp where Chinese immigrants lived during the late 19th and early 20th centuries on Parrett Mountain near Newberg. He, along with four Linfield College students and adjunct professors of anthropology Cameron M. Smith and William Cornett, spent four weeks this summer searching for evidence of the camp's location.

They ducked branches and crawled along the ground, brushing away the mat of pine and fir needles that covered the soil, searching for bits of glass, pottery, nails or other artifacts. The work can be grueling. Heat, rain, bugs and even a patch of poison oak didn't stop these budding archaeologists from their search. Although they didn't find China Camp's exact location, they learned an enormous amount about a profession that excites them.

Pinpointing the site of the archaeology field school was one of the challenges facing the instructors and the team. Little has been written about the Chinese people who lived in Oregon, yet in the 1850s or 1860s, there were 7,000 Asians in the state. Crystal Dawn Smith Rilee, the last of the Parrett family to be born on the mountain, wrote of walking by China Camp on her way to school in the early 1900s and watching the people eat with chopsticks. However, changes in the landscape from logging and agriculture make the site difficult to locate.

Smith and Cornett, along with Linfield students, conducted some preliminary tests and surveys on the farm last fall, choosing the site for the field school based on what scant information they could gather.

"This is a learning experience for the students," Cornett said. "Because this is an archaeology field school, we need to give the students the information and skills so they can become professionals. Students are learning how to use the compass to set up transects, how to plot sites, how to draw a floor map of an excavation unit and how to differentiate among soil types."

Working in an 800-square-meter area and using compasses and markers, students learned how to divide the site into transects two meters wide by 30 meters long. Armed with machetes, compasses and notebooks, they learned how to clean the forest floor, describe the soil and map the type, age and location of the trees. Along the way, they occasionally found a small artifact.

Both Cornett and Smith were puzzled that they didn't find more artifacts buried in the hillside, with the exception of a broken piece of green glass that they speculate may have come from a jug. If they were in the correct location, they would have found bits of glass, pottery, perhaps some tin pans or fire-cracked rocks, Smith said.

Cameron M. Smith, adjunct professor of anthropology, and Tresa Cordero take a closer look at material from the forest floor during an archaeology field school at Parrett Mountain Farm near Newberg. Cordero, who traveled from Ashland to take the four-week course, and Craig Geffre '11, far right, were surveying sections of an 800-square-meter site, searching for artifacts and evidence of a camp used by Chinese immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th century. **Above right:** Cameron M. Smith holds a small piece of glass, the only artifact that was found in the survey area.



William Cornett and Cameron M. Smith returned to Parrett Mountain this fall after the vegetation changed to survey the site. They will return next summer with more Linfield students to continue their search.

"Archaeology can tell the story of people who are not well known to the historical record," Smith said. "It's the story about common people who made up most of the population."

The archaeology field school was held under the auspices of Linfield College, Portland State University and the Crystal Dawn Smith Rilee Foundation. Parrett Mountain Farm, a living history farm managed by the foundation, retains 418 of the original 650 acres settled by the Parrett family in 1853. Rilee, who died in 2006 at age 91, established the foundation to preserve her family's property from development while giving people an appreciation of what drew early settlers to the area and how they survived. The foundation is developing a turn-of-the-century Oregon farm with exhibits, demonstrations, tours, agriculture, forestry and a museum. The archaeological field school and investigation is part of the efforts to assess the cultural resources of the land holdings.



Craig Geffre '11, center, scoops dirt into a screen that Jade Severson '11 will sift through, looking for bits of glass or other debris. William Cornett, adjunct professor of anthropology, right, offers advice and instruction on the proper way to scrape dirt away from artifacts they found in the plot and how to carefully uncover items they have found. The archaeology field school is designed to give students the understanding and skills that are needed to work on other digs.

“Learning there’s nothing here is just as important because we can rule this area out,” Smith said. “Archaeology identifies what people leave, and there’s little here.”

However, there is evidence that China Camp existed, even if the site wasn’t located this year. Two of the structures were moved in the 1950s to the site of the main farm and were used as a tool shed. Hatchet marks, indicating the logs were hand-hewn, are clearly visible.

“We have learned some things, and we now know some of the right questions to ask and what to look for,” Smith said. “We know that at least two of the structures were picked up and moved here physically, so we don’t need to find timbers or stumps of timbers.”

Craig Geffre '11 kneels at the edge of one two-foot by two-foot plot and with his trowel, scrapes about a quarter of an inch of soil from the surface. He dumps the dirt into a screen positioned over a wheelbarrow and Jade Severson '11 shakes the screen, looking for bits of glass or other debris. So far, in this unit, they have found a crumpled colander, a metal lid and a Dad’s Old Fashioned Root Beer bottle they estimate to be from the mid-20th century.

Severson is learning as much about people as about

dirt, she says with a laugh. But she is questioning what she previously thought about archaeology and the idea of reconstructing someone’s past based on what is left behind.

“Is that ethical?” she asks. “It bothers me. I have problems with some of the ethnographic aspects of anthropology and thought archaeology was a little more pristine in terms of judging people. I want to pursue this, even though I’m a little ambivalent. I’m interested in the philosophical aspects of archaeology. Is it ethical to try to reconstruct someone else’s past?”

The field school was almost a magical experience for Maguire, the place where he realized he finally had found a job he thinks he could enjoy the rest of his life.

“Not only do I like what I’m doing, I’m good at it and it’s the kind of environment I want to be in,” he said. “We are working on this one idea, trying to find this Chinese immigrant village.”

But it goes even deeper, he said. It is looking at what humans are like at a very basic level and a reminder that humans are very innovative.

“We are uncovering the past and seeing it through our own eyes,” he said. “You begin to think about things in a much different way.”

— *Mardi Mileham*