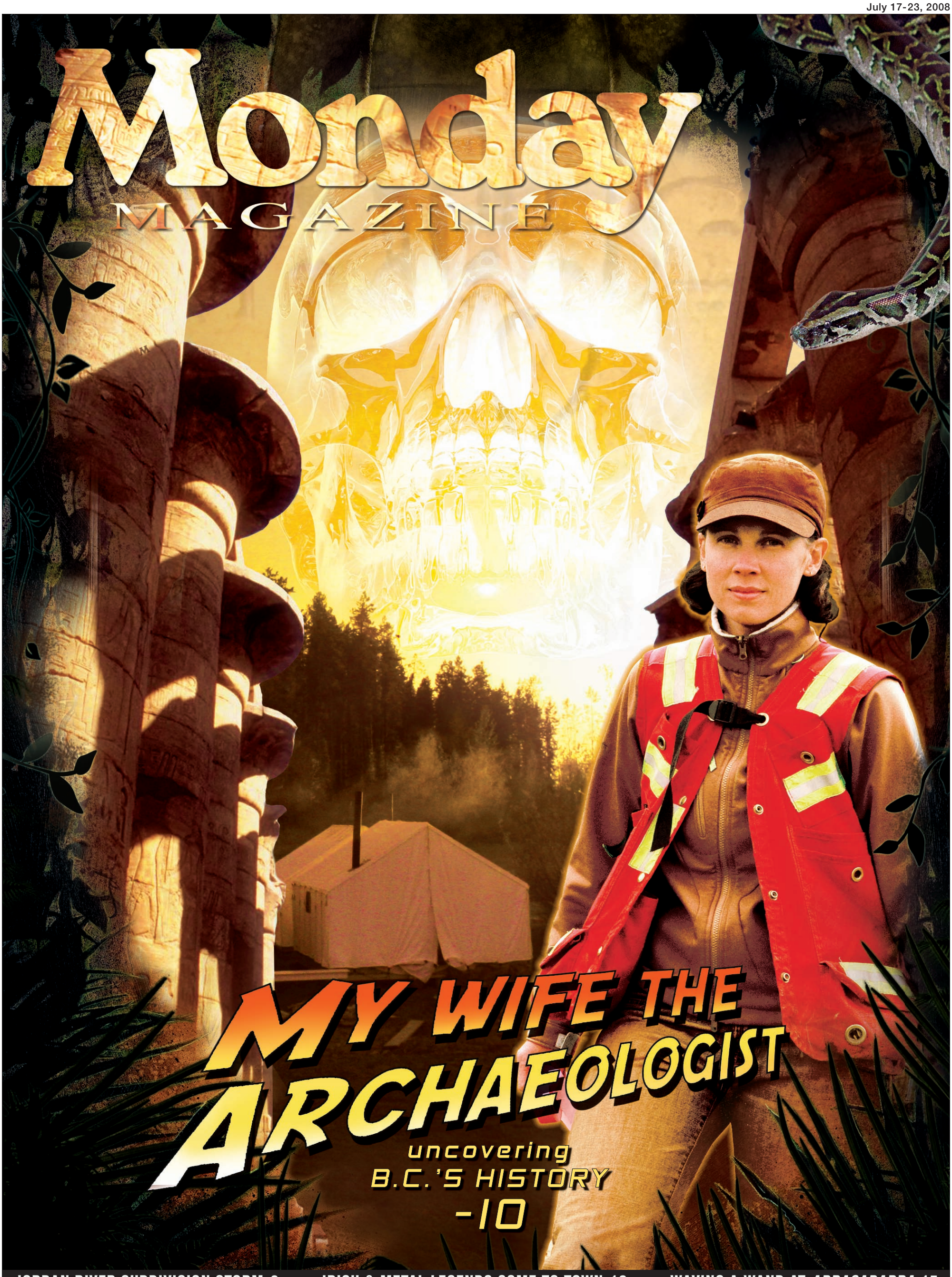
Monday MAGAZINE



MY WIFE THE ARCHAEOLOGIST

uncovering B.C.'S HISTORY -10

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My Wife, the Archaeologist

She's good with a shovel, but that's about the end of the similarities to Indiana Jones

Photos and story by MATT J. SIMMONS

Fellow archaeologists Lenore Thompson and Roger Eldridge (left), with Jo and Amelia at one of her dig sites

"Mummy's going to work on the quad!" our two-year-old daughter Amelia shouts excitedly. She points out the window and blows a raspberry with her lips, imitating the dirty rumbling sound of the ATV's engine.

"That's right, kiddo," I nod and I can't help but grin. An osprey startles out of a tree and flies off into the early-morning sky. The nearby Rocky Mountains are still covered with snow and the sun pierces the thick northern clouds, dancing across the icy turquoise water. What a weird life, I think to myself. Later, as we eat our dinner, we're regaled with epic stories of walking countless kilometres, finding sites and artifacts and encountering wildlife. This is my life as the husband of a B.C. archaeologist. My wife is Jo Brunsden, senior archaeologist at Millennia Research Limited, a Victoria-based archaeological consulting company. She is sent all over the province to work—Haida Gwaii, the Gulf Islands, Fort St. John, Meziadin Junction, Prince Rupert—and our little family always goes with her.

"Bye honey, see you after work. Hope the commute isn't too crazy—and watch out for that tundra rage!"

The constantly changing, and (frankly) challenging, environment isn't always the easiest thing to deal with as a parent. Most kids are submerged in a day-to-day routine and in some ways they thrive on that. Daycare on Mondays and Wednesdays, Grandma's on Tuesdays, swimming lessons and trips to the library on weekends. Our own routines never last for very long, but we take the opportunity when we travel to experience a world that not many get the chance to see. Amelia and I spend most of our days hiking and exploring. I don't know any other two-year-old who knows as much about eagles, bears, moose and whales or trees, trails, shells and fossils; she's become a budding expert on first nations art as well. Arriving in a Haida Gwaii motel room when she was just a bit older than one, Amelia pointed out the sea-wolf print on the wall, excitedly exclaiming, "Puppy!"

We're lucky to have this lifestyle—it's not that common. Thankfully, Millennia Research is very flexible with how we travel as a family, giving us extra time to arrive at a destination or letting us bump up the accommodation so we can all fit.

Of all the places we've been together, this is the most remote. It took us around nine hours to get here, driving north from Mackenzie on rough dirt roads. Not a hundred metres from where I write this in the log-cabin lodge at Fort Graham, a grizzly came out of the bush and into the fringes of the camp. When Amelia and I go out during the day to splash in puddles, make up games or play with the snow and ice on the beaches of Williston Lake, I carry a can of bear spray on my belt or, if I feel the need, there are a couple of camp rifles I can take. This is parenting at its strangest. But, as everyone agrees, the important thing is that our family is together, wherever we go.

Of archaeologists and adventure

Sharing with our daughter the excitement of finding a 10,000 year-old stone artifact makes bringing her along on these trips worthwhile. Archaeology in B.C. is fascinating (so the archaeologists tell me again and again, as if trying to convince themselves they're not just lab-coat, horn-rimmed glasses types) and its significance in working to reconcile first nations relations is considerable. Plus, it's definitely an adventurous profession and it takes place mostly outdoors—one of the main attractions for every archaeologist I know. (As the inimitable Dr. Jones noted in his current cinematic adventure, "A good archaeologist always gets out of the library.")

Obviously, it's not all Indiana Jones out here, but there is a certain amount of cool factor. Mummy rides to work on a burly looking ATV for this project, gets dropped off deep in the bush by helicopter for others and regularly finds ancient artifacts—arrowheads, stone tools of all kinds, dugout canoes and so on. They may not be the golden idols or crystal skulls of the movies, but meticulously crafted obsidian arrowheads that are thousands of years old are just as worthy of awe. And the places where she finds herself (hoping to find untold treasures) are some of this province's most incredibly scenic landscapes.

Here at Fort Graham, however, it does feel somewhat like a scene from an Indiana Jones movie. Outside the lodge, a handful of bush-style canvas tents, wood-stove chimneys puffing smoke out of their roofs, are set up to house the archaeological assistants from the Tsay Keh Dene Nation. A little bush plane sits in a corral off to one side, the dirt runway stretching into the distance. When everyone heads off to work in the morning, someone invariably has a shovel over one shoulder and a shotgun over the other. The dinnertime stories about the day in the field often include tales of epic dust storms sweeping across the beaches, curious bears watching them work and discovering the most incredible and rare artifacts.

In keeping with the Indy parallel, Morley Eldridge, owner of Millennia Research, is accompanied by his archaeologist son, Roger, on our current trip. (Sadly, he doesn't call him "Junior", and there aren't any dramatic tussles with Nazis.) Growing up with archaeology, says the younger Eldridge—himself an archaeology student at UVic—was great, if a little odd at times. "There were lots of weird little things," he explains, flashing me a grin, "like finding rocks in the oven, ready for knapping." (Knapping is the process of making stone tools, practiced by archaeologists in order to better understand the process.) But if it's not a constant heart-pounding, Indy-style adventure, what exactly does archaeology in B.C. entail?

How do they do that?

"It's a lot of walking," says Jo, laughing. She's not kidding—archaeologists are definitely tough. For example, on the forestry side of things, a logging company flags an area they want to cut, which archaeologists then walk, looking for evidence of first nations habitation. This can mean covering thousands of hectares of thick coastal rainforest (or boreal, or sub-alpine, whatever the case may be) on foot. When they find a site—depending on predetermined specifications—they flag the area and buffer around it to ensure preservation.

Consulting archaeologists are hired by anyone who needs an archaeological assessment—developers, forestry companies, private landowners—and their work is supervised by the Archaeology Branch (Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts) who, in turn, are governed by the Heritage Conservation Act. They are brought in to assess the significance and extent of known or potential archaeological sites and to catalogue that information in a number of ways. Consulting, as opposed to, say, academic archaeology, makes up about 90 percent of the province's archaeology.

In B.C., archaeological remains are somewhat subtler than, say, Egypt or Europe, where stone was much more prevalent on the landscape (think pyramids or Stonehenge). Here, often the evidence is in the trees themselves—culturally modified trees, examples of where bark was stripped for various uses including material for weaving—in shell middens (essentially waste piles of discarded shell) or in other subtle remnants of village sites. That's not to say the humans who have continuously occupied this province for over 12,000 years didn't use stone—they did, especially for tools—but just that wood was a more abundant, and therefore easier and more accessible, resource. And wood, of course, is impermanent. Here, if want to see archaeology, you have to know what to look for.

Walking is only part of the job; digging is another. (As the saying goes, archaeologists really do do it in the dirt.) Shovel-testing at potential sites is the kind of archaeology that is easy to picture: dusty, bespectacled, tanned professionals kneel on the ground, trowels in hand, carefully extracting dirt from a fascinating find. But archaeologists are not to be confused with palaeontologists. Archaeologists deal with humans; palaeontologists deal with dinosaurs.

Archaeology, says Jo, is consistently challenging. "A variety of skills are needed to survive in this profession," she explains with a wry smile, and pauses as she thinks. "Like chainsaw and machete skills, organizing-your-crew skills, bear skills, 4x4ing, forestry, map-reading, GPS, geology, botany, anthropology." It's a big list, and while it's obviously very challenging, it offers archaeologists a lot of diversity in their careers. An average day for Jo might consist of a 6 a.m. start, gathering together a crew of archaeologists and first nations assistants, driving out to the work site in a 4x4 truck, then systematically walking through an area, recording on a GPS any evidence of archaeology, writing notes about that

Beyond the Museum

Archaeology in Victoria

Though it's not always obvious, there is archaeology literally everywhere in the city. Willows Beach, Beacon Hill Park, Esquimalt Lagoon, Devonian Park (Metchosin), and Craigflower School House, to name a few, are all home to archaeological sites. Willows and Craigflower both have interpretive signs about first nations history, and Beacon Hill Park is adding an installation to commemorate the cultural heritage of Victoria this fall. These initiatives carry forward the necessary education to ensure Victoria's other sites are preserved for future generations.

And, as Archaeological Society of B.C. president Eric McLay urges, "archaeology in British Columbia is just as much about protecting and understanding 'the past' as it is about respecting first nations culture and people."

—M.J.S.

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evidence and flagging any sites to be revisited. The next day, she might take the crew directly to a significant site they found and dig shovel tests for the day, screening the dirt to uncover artifacts. After all the field work is done, she'll prepare a report, which is then given to the client and submitted to the Archaeology Branch. But, as Jo says, there really isn't an average day in archaeology; it's always changing.

A matter of heritage

Because the province is so vast, the archaeology here is equally vast and diverse. "Archaeology in B.C.," says Millenia's Eldridge, "is as varied as the landscapes and cultures in the province. There are well over a hundred different first nations groups here in B.C.—more than the rest of Canada combined." Unfortunately, this amazing cultural history is often ignored. As Jo says, there seems to be a general lack of education about B.C.'s 12,000 years of history. It's this lack of knowledge, she says, that leads to the inadvertent destruction of sites like, for example, the burial cairns at Beacon Hill Park. Eric McLay, president of the Archaeological Society of B.C. (ASBC) agrees. "For most British Columbians," he says, "archaeology is often less valued for its scientific, cultural and social significance [with more attention paid to] its negative economic costs [and is seen] as a burden on land development—something that needs to be pushed aside, removed or shelved." Organizations like ASBC work to educate the public in a number of ways, and help facilitate programs that work with both first nations and Euro-Canadians. Public education initiatives, like, for example, the sign at Victoria's Willows Beach which describes the archaeological site discovered there, are important not only for the general public, but also for first nations communities. "For many first nations in British Columbia their archaeological heritage is valued not only for what we can learn about the past, but respected for its human significance as ancient places, burial grounds and belongings that connect them with their ancestors, their traditional lands, customs, beliefs and practices," explains McLay.

"From this cultural perspective, archaeology is less about studying sites or objects; it is about respecting 'people'—those that have gone before us and their living descendants today," he continues. "The protection and preservation of first nations' archaeological heritage today, therefore, has important social value towards helping build a new relationship of respect and reconciliation."

Rudy Reimer/Yumks of the Squamish Nation agrees. "First nations communities can benefit from archaeology," he says, "by being acknowledged as [B.C.'s] original inhabitants." Reimer is in his final year of an anthropology PhD at McMaster University, and plans to begin teaching at Simon Fraser University next year. Urbanization and natural resource development, says Reimer, puts pressure on first nations communities to find physical evidence of their long-term settlement in the B.C. landscape. This, he says, is where archaeology makes a difference. And if it's not enough to merely protect these ancient landscapes, the study of first nations history in B.C. means we can better understand "the way people used and managed resources in a sustainable manner for over 10,000 years."

The sentiment echoed by virtually everyone in B.C.'s archaeology community is that there is an incredible wealth of vitally significant information held in these remainders from the past that is rapidly fading as development throughout the province continues. But, as McLay stresses, "archaeology is not just about the past—the facts about what happened long ago. Archaeology is about what we value about the past today."

Millennia Research owner Morley Eldridge holding an artifact found on a site

In the footsteps of the ancestors

I hold the stone arrowhead in my hand, still crusty with the soil from where it was collected, and our daughter climbs into her tired mummy's lap for a hug. Back from the office—our province's great outdoors—Jo is exhausted, but there's a happy, satisfied look on her face. Her clothes are covered with dust and there's dirt under her fingernails. I look down at the exquisite craftsmanship of the thousand-year old tool and instantly feel connected to the past. I'm holding something that someone from long ago made with their hands, perhaps around a fire as someone told stories, and later shot at a moose or a caribou, hunting for food for their family.

This is the kind of archaeology I can relate to, anyone can relate to. It's the tangible connection between now and then that makes archaeology so exciting. And you don't have to be a scientist to appreciate that. **M**

Dig it

What everyone should know about archaeology

Apart from it being illegal to disturb an archaeological site, reporting a site's discovery helps provide further opportunity to learn about the rich cultural heritage of British Columbia. It also ensures the preservation of artifacts, human remains and other cultural resources commonly found at sites throughout the province. First nations communities then have the chance to preserve important traditional sites and maintain the link between community members and their ancestors. Discovery of sites can be reported to the Archaeology Branch. The procedure is detailed on their website (tsa.gov.bc.ca/archaeology).

Actual artifacts are culturally valuable, and often of spiritual significance. If you have a personal collection and wish to have it catalogued—helping to map out the vast first nations heritage—or donated, please contact the archaeology department at the Royal BC Museum. RBCM evaluates potential donations through a Collections Committee, which can be contacted through their main office.

Looking for more information?

- Archaeology Branch: 250-953-3334
- Royal BC Museum: 250-356-7226, rbcm.gov.bc.ca
- Archaeological Society of BC: asbc.bc.ca
- BC Association of Professional Archaeologists: 250-656-4972, bcapca.bc.ca

—M.J.S.