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## Ancient history of Vancouver's first peoples

The city's history predates its 1886 founding, with a native midden dating back 9,000 years

BY KIM PEMBERTON, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 5, 2011 BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT

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Vancouver may be celebrating its 125th birthday, but there's another birthday that could be celebrated in the city dating back 9,000 years.

The oldest known residents of Vancouver are the Musqueam First Nations, who also happen to have the only reserve that falls within the city's boundaries, adjacent to the wealthy enclave known as Southlands.

The Musqueam residential area centres around the Musqueam midden, also known as the Great Fraser midden — a mound of shells, animal bones and other refuse indicating human settlement dates back 9,000 years.

As 74-year-old Musqueam elder Larry Grant explains, that "brings us back to the last ice age" for occupation on their still unceded territory.

"In my mother's words we've been here all the time," says Grant, who was interviewed at his family's home on the Musqueam Band reserve, just a stone's throw away from the archeological site.

The ancient deposit, near the mouth of the Fraser River estuary, also contained evidence of a fire pit, cedar weaving and textiles as well as animal and fish bones. It was discovered in the 1970s when the Greater Vancouver Regional District was putting in a sewer line. A backhoe operator lifted up a shovel full of artifacts, Grant said, and stopped work immediately. He called the Musqueam Band, who brought in University of B.C. anthropologists to help them research the material.

"It was an amazing find. Today, it's listed in an exhibit called *Under the Delta* at the Musqueam office and the UBC Museum of Anthropology. We have fragments of bone carvings, fragments of instruments like combs and what appears to be blanket pins and a laughing face bone carving 2-1/2 to 3 inches (8.5 to 10 cm) long. It's a man's face smiling," he says.

Archeologists are still discovering new artifacts every summer, Grant says, and it's been surprising to see just how far the original village site extended, moving from the tidal flat towards higher ground. Archeologists estimate anywhere from 20,000 to 60,000 inhabitants lived there, but after contact in the 1700s — and especially around the turn of the 20th century — the community's numbers dwindled to an astonishing 97 people.

"The stories I heard was there were three waves of smallpox, then the Spanish flu from the First World War. Some of our people had gone to war and, with our proximity to Vancouver, soldiers came back and people contracted the illness. Because people lived in big houses if one had it, it was very easy to spread," he says, explaining there could have been as many as 100 people living together in a long house.

Today, there are approximately 1,300 Musqueam people — a far cry from the thousands who once lived in the area.

Although much has been lost over the years, including the near extinction of their language, the Musqueam are working hard to maintain their culture. Those efforts include ensuring their stories are passed down between the generations.

Grant recalls a favourite story his great uncle used to tell him as a boy, about how the Fraser River once teemed with salmon to the point it was all you could see when looking out over the water.

"We have the largest salmon-bearing river in the world. In 2010, 35 million sockeye returned and in the previous 25 years it had been dwindling to the point they were approaching extinction. But so many salmon returning used to be an annual occurrence. Not just once in 25 years. It was occurring each year.

"My great uncle told me you could literally walk across the salmon on their backs in the river," he says. "There were always so many salmon coming home. With that, why would you want to move?"

Deer, elk, bear and smaller mammals were also plentiful, Grant says. And while white settlers took over control, dictating when and where Musqueam people could fish and hunt, recent generations still made their living off the land.

"My grandfather would go out and fish every day until the season ended then switch over to ducks. There were thousands of ducks here. But because the wetlands have been destroyed for real estate our people are having difficulty hunting now. You can't shoot ducks with YVR (Vancouver International Airport) and urbanization, but we still hunt in very restricted areas," he says.

And while Vancouver prepares to celebrate its 125-year history, Grant says that, with all respect, he hopes the history of the first people living on these lands is not forgotten.

"The public has to be able to accept the First Nations people are still here even though Canada's assimilation policies existed from the late 1800s until the 1970s. We shouldn't be considered an afterthought — a footnote in history. Our contributions here are largely never spoken of but are huge."

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