

LATE-PLEISTOCENE HUNTERS moving south through the valleys of extreme southeast Beringia would have seen a distinctive knoll poking above *Cheejil niik* (“Grayling Creek” in the local Upper Tanana language, English Mirror Creek on English maps) at the easternmost extension of the Tanana River drainage in Yukon Territory, Canada. The knoll, a bump along a series of elevated land fingers reaching from the

says archaeologist Norman Alexander Easton, a lecturer on northern studies in the School of Liberal Arts at Yukon College in Whitehorse and the principal investigator of the site. The overlook is known as the West Lobe; the East Lobe is the campsite, whose lower levels have yielded a possible hearth and tools for processing game in association with Pleistocene fauna.

The Little John Site

Rewarding Archaeologists and Yukon Natives

View south from the Little John site toward the Nutzotin Mountains and the St. Elias Range. At the time of occupation at the end of the Pleistocene this broad plain would have been treeless herb-tundra, rich with herds of bison and caribou.

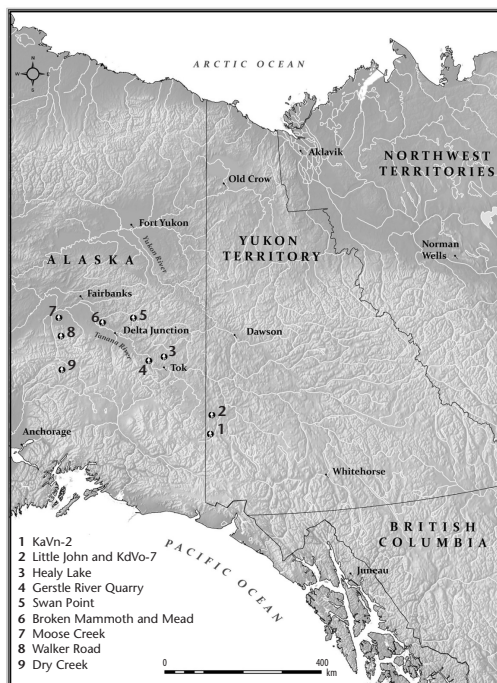


ALL PHOTOS: NORMAN ALEXANDER EASTON

nearby mountains into the valley, offered a bird’s-eye view across a tiny slice of a much broader game-filled corridor through Beringia once known as the Mammoth Steppe. From a southwestern outcrop along this windswept knoll, hunters looking south across the carpet of grass, sage, sedge, and willow would spot bison, wapiti, moose, horse, caribou, and perhaps mammoth flowing along it. At night the watchmen would camp with their families in a depression about 50 m north, sheltered from the wind, and process their freshly killed game.

This tableau is how archaeologists envision the Little John site (KdVo-6) at the sunset of the Ice Age. Lying scarcely two miles east of the Alaskan border, the site encompasses 5,000 m² of well-stratified cultural material that spans 12,000–14,000 years of aboriginal occupations,

The location of the Little John site and related late-Pleistocene sites of the Tanana Valley.



AFTER G. R. MACKAY

Home to hunters through the ages

“What we have here is a site that contains material from yesterday to the first occupants in the region, and it is all in one place,” says Easton. Deep cultural deposits include a number of tear-drop Chindadn bifaces and microblades most closely associated with the Nenana complex of Alaska, but until now not found in Canada. Easton and his colleagues believe the site “quite likely represents the initial occupation of contemporary Canadian geography by late-Pleistocene humanity . . . making it one of the oldest sites in eastern Beringia.”

The Little John site derives its name from a patriarch of the Upper Tanana Athapaskan *Dineh* (people). Like his ancestors and descendants, Little John hunted from the knoll-top location through much of the twentieth century. The site was discovered as part of the Scottie Creek Cultural History Project, a multidisciplinary study of aboriginal occupation along the upper Tanana River basin that Easton began in 1992. Easton launched the project in collaboration with the White River First Nation of Beaver Creek, Yukon, and the Northway, Tetlin, and Tanacross village councils of Alaska, groups that continue to lend financial and logistical support.

Stumbling onto a site unique in Canada

Easton had camped at the knoll on a number of occasions. He knew it was a historical campsite that people still used as a lookout for moose. In view of the fact that the knoll sits within the Alaskan Highway right-of-way, he assumed archaeologists for the highway project, who had scoured the area for potential sites in three previous surveys, had surveyed this one. It was then known as 12-16, named after a nearby highway mile post marker.

In 2002 Easton, accompanied by tribal members and a few of his students, stopped near there while going up-valley to survey and excavate other sites. Heavy rains having washed out several trails, Easton's troop hunkered down to wait for better conditions. Some students, denied the opportunity to practice archaeology, were getting bored, so Easton led them to the lookout "just for a change of scenery." At the suggestion of Upper Tanana tribal elder Joseph Thomas Johnny, Easton's students dug a dozen test pits in the area. To his great surprise they found cultural material in every one. He returned to the site with field school students in 2003, thinking to spend a week there before moving to another site. By the end of the first week, however, students had recovered all manner of wonderful artifacts, including large biface points and blades and components of microblade technology. A long-term project had been launched.

When they came across Chindadn points in the basal loess layers from the site's West Lobe, Easton realized they had found artifacts never before seen in Canada. As a result, he says, "We have been there since."

Cultural material, spanning the continuum from the Ice Age to the present, pops out in their yearly digs: spent shells, bottle fragments, and military materials related to the building of the Alaska Highway surface in historic upper levels; hammerstones and edge-modified flakes from levels dating from the late prehistoric to 1,250 years ago; microblades, burins, small projectile points from levels associated with the Northern Archaic period (2,000–6,000 years ago); bifaces and examples of microblade technology of the Denali complex associated with such fauna as bison, moose, caribou,

hare, and swan from lower levels of both the East and West lobes; teardrop points, large bifaces, blades, scrapers, and burins attributed to the Nenana complex of tools—the first such finds in Canada—from the West Lobe. At the East Lobe, researchers have recovered from loess below paleosols hammerstones, edge-modified flakes, and a flake core directly associated with 14,000-year-old fauna. Site dating has been accomplished principally by AMS (accelerated mass spectrometry) dating of



Chief David Johnny and the 2009 field crew on an exploratory survey of the middle Mirror Creek valley. Chief Johnny and other experienced natives are Easton's guides on surveys of the bush.

bone collagen. So far, however, failure to find material suitable for radiocarbon dating has frustrated researchers' attempts to date the Nenana/Chindadn-complex component of the West Lobe.

A rich menu for hunters

Well-preserved faunal remains found across the site confirm that early hunters enjoyed a varied diet. With about 120 m² of ground uncovered so far, faunal evidence already shows hunters dined on bison, caribou, swan, ptarmigan, squirrel, and hares. Despite the presence of nearby streams, researchers have recovered only one fish vertebra from the site. Easton isn't surprised; fish skeletons, being composed mainly of



◀ An atlatl dart recovered from the basal loess levels associated with Chindadn points.

▼ A stone feature associated with bison bones (circled) and a hammerstone (above circle) in the basal loess, dated to 12,000–14,000 CALYBP.



cartilage, don't preserve well. Moreover, he suspects that stream turbidity caused by glacier melt may have severely reduced the fish population. A suspected mammoth tusk dated 38,160 RCYBP and remains of prehistoric horse, *Equis lambei*, dated 20,660 RCYBP have been found in the area but not on the site, and neither in a cultural context.

Easton's teams have dug to a depth of nearly 4 m on site and noted 42,000-year-old soils. "These are not cultural," Easton explains, "but they are organic paleosols with environmental information, and we intend to go to the bottom." Nevertheless he doesn't expect to find cultural material predating 14,000

CALYBP for the simple reason it hasn't showed up anywhere else in the region.

Precisely how materials recovered at the site's overlook relate to those recovered from the depression (camp area) is a fundamental question whose answer still eludes researchers. Says Easton, "We are conceptualizing that the site's hunters and watchmen gathered at the overlook and then camped up behind the hill about 50 meters away, where they would have been out of the wind." But that piece of the puzzle hasn't been finally determined yet.

Two young Tetlin Tribal members. Camille Sanford (*left*) has a degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Alaska Anchorage. Patricia Young, the Environmental Officer of the Tetlin Tribal Village, has a degree in Archaeology from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Both are graduates of Easton's field program and continue to work with the Culture History project.



Archaeology the hard way: Digging in permafrost

Paraglacial processes, and especially varying depths of permafrost across the site, have complicated Easton's task of establishing stratigraphic correlations for the site. "Sometimes," he says, "we have beautiful stratigraphy, and other times we have a jumbled mess." Particularly slow and arduous is the job of excavating permafrost, which they encounter continually across the site; in some places it's close to the surface, in others it may be at a depth of several meters. What they do is expose it and let it melt. Advanced technological measures for melting permafrost quickly are available, but not on Easton's tight

Mrs. Darlene Northway of Northway Village shows Jodi Crewe and Magili Perreault how to prepare whitefish for smoking. The egg sac is also smoked and stored for a winter treat.



budget. "We are pretty low-tech," he admits. "We put black plastic garbage bags over a unit to increase the thermal insulation, and that helps increase the thawing a little bit." Even here, though, there's a payoff: The permafrost is giving up cultural material, so Easton considers it well worth their while.

Easton is pleased with the overall research results, although he allows that some dates need to be more clearly defined. "We do have a strong, clear period of occupancy at the 10,000- to 12,000-year-old range, and that's as old as it gets in Canada," he says. He concedes, however, that the evidence gets a bit tenta-

tive near the 14,000-year-old mark, but he hopes future work will clarify this.

The Little John site is contributing to a burgeoning database of regional sites that is shedding light on First Americans issues. Finding Chindadn/Nenana and Denali complexes on the same site is a big plus, for it may help answer long-standing questions about the relationship of two distinct toolmaking

traditions that, until now, haven't been found together in Canada. As the database grows, researchers hope to trace more clearly the footprints of the separate cultures through time and space while addressing broader research issues. Until now, Easton and other researchers have been involved in mundane, limited cultural and his-

torical sequencing aimed at finding out who these people were and when they occupied the site. Easton hopes detailed datasets will broaden researchers' goals, perhaps eventually make it possible to define migration routes and discover the subsistence strategies used by these early people as they marched southward through Beringia and into New World prominence. "This site definitely pushes early occupation farther east than previously known," says Easton. For this year's field school he plans to excavate at the 12,000- to 14,000-year-old levels containing faunal remains and renew investigation of the Holocene levels, all with the aim of exploring possible features and refining dates.

Bonding by cooperative efforts

Not only has the Little John site yielded a wealth of scientific information, it has inspired a unique educational program that fosters cross-cultural understanding as field school students interact with Athapaskan First

Nation peoples. Together they work closely with Easton to assemble the pieces of the puzzle that Easton is confident will eventually become a coherent picture of the site. He heartily applauds tribal participation in the project, which is fleshing out a three-dimensional understanding of the *Dineh* and their ancient history. "I couldn't do any of this without their help," he eagerly concedes.

Tunneling into the past at the Little John site is only one facet of Easton's regional research program, which is inseparable from his overall educational mission: To build cross-cultural understanding using as levers ethnography, linguistics

tics, social history, and community involvement and service. For him, this is the heart and soul of the program, itself the culmination of an effort spanning 20 years to build mutual trust and respect with area Indian tribes. Starting with ethnographic work in the 1980s, he advanced to archaeological projects. The first was launched in 1994 when the tribes set aside a long-held taboo and allowed him dig up cultural material at an old village site near the Alaska Highway. Today the tribes are firmly on board with his projects.

“This is the way these programs should work,” says White River First Nation Chief David Johnny, Sr. He recalls that trust and respect for Easton and his programs came slowly, but now their relationship has matured to the point where Easton and his crews are practically one with the tribes.

That’s a far cry from times past when researchers routinely ignored First Nation people. “Usually they didn’t say anything to the First Nation,” Chief Johnny remembers. “They would come in and dig a few holes, make their report, send it to [the government of] Canada. The First Nations were

left out of it. They didn’t have a say. But when Norm came in, he didn’t just jump right in and wander around the country without permission. He started talking with the people, learning the culture, learning the language. After a while the people are comfortable with him and they say ‘okay’ when he is going to dig.” Easton succeeded, according to Chief Johnny, because he explained why he wanted to dig, “why he was bothering our ancestors. . . . He didn’t push himself, he let time flow through.” The next thing you know, he recalls, the people said “go ahead’ so long as you respect our dead people.”

Building lasting friendships

Easton’s field schools cultivate understanding with tribal members by practicing cultural immersion. Students, many from large urban areas in Canada and the United States and consequently unfamiliar with rural life in general and Indian culture in particular, are required to do community service work with tribal members; they help cut firewood for the elderly, go

fishing for them, cook for them, assist in hunting and butchering—not the cleanest of activities. They also document place names and enlarge their linguistic knowledge by working with local speakers of tribal language.

Not that the life of the students is all work: Easton and his crew enthusiastically participate in local community events—horseshoe and baseball tournaments, pig roasts, and Canada Day. From these activities has come an enormous reward in cross-cultural understanding.

Eldred Johnny, grandson of Little John for whom the site is named, displays one of three Chindadn points he has recovered at the site since 2003.



“Once these kids go through this program,” Easton declares, “I can guarantee you they will never put up with any derogatory comments about native peoples.” Moreover, the activities pay off in both directions. Chief Johnny is gratified that the native people, young and old alike, who participate are “contributing to the students’ understanding of the vibrancy



◀ **Easton discusses the Upper Tanana language with Ruth Johnny, a local certified language instructor who works in the primary school teaching both Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone to the youngsters of Beaver Creek.**

▼ **Magili Perreault shares a moment of laughter with Scottie Creek Elder Mrs. Ada Gallon during an ethnographic interview at Big Scottie Creek fish camp.**



and vitality” of the native communities and sending forth ambassadors for their way of life.

A win-win compact for both partners

Chief Johnny has watched Easton’s students evolve in their understanding of native ways. For example, some students didn’t want to get dirty at first. But after working with native people for a while—cooking moose stew, cooking bannock, eating “moose guts,” cutting up the meat—they gained a broader perspective on native culture. He says that “by the end of the summer they were getting dirty quite regularly.”

As a result of the program, Chief Johnny's own people have found a deeper appreciation for their ancestors. He recalls candidly that at first there was very little interest among some of his people. "You know," he says, "Western culture kind of blinds you about your ancestors." Individuals sometimes down-played cultural history while reaching instead for rapid assimilation. But when Easton's crews dug up cultural material and explained it, Chief Johnny's people


Northway History Days at Deadman Lake, August 2009. Several times a year Easton gets together with the Native people of the valley to share food, conversation, and their findings.



found renewed interest in ancient methods and deep appreciation for the skill of their forebears. Some, for example, were surprised to learn that their ancestors were able to "cut up a moose with a little rock." Now he is amused to see a "little tent city" spring up around the archaeologists each year as tribal members enthusiastically participate in every phase of the program and embrace incoming students. Come tea time each day, tribal elders share long-forgotten stories with the students as they sit around a large fire.

Easton is humbled by the gains he and his program have made. Finally, after the years it took for people to become "more comfortable" with him and his agenda, the program has become a two-way street of learning. Former field school students show up years later just to work with tribal members, and many routinely correspond with tribal members they have bonded with. Likewise, many tribal members working on the archaeological projects go on to seek higher education, some in anthropology. "It's a fact," Easton tells us, "that finding old Pleistocene stuff is exciting and wonderful, but in terms of the

educational program, the heart and soul is the social interaction—the archaeology is just a vector for that to happen."

There is no greater measure of the great respect Easton enjoys than that the *Dineh* have offered him one of their highest honors, a gravesite on their land. 

—George Wisner

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Suggested Readings

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Additional publications and manuscripts related to Easton's work on the borderlands can be found at http://dl1.yukoncollege.yk.ca/anth225/N_A_Easton_Publications