

Video: Archaeology

David Rice talking to Laura Phillips

DR: In 1960 the Washington Archaeological Society were focused on the perishable finds. So we were right down at the base of the bank. It was not, however, just on the beach. Because the water levels varied and because the Snoqualmie is subject to a lot of seasonal flooding, coffer dams were built on the side, sometimes using plywood, and a pump was brought to lower the water level. In these excavations I remember we had a distinct post hole, the post was probably nine to 12 inches in diameter, right through the plaited basket which had been flattened through there. Adjacent to that there were about three more large baskets and, uh, they would surmise that this was evidence of a possible fish weir in this neck of the river, and the baskets would have to do of course with the processing and procurement of the fishery. We found a lot of pebbles in that too which had been wrapped with cherry bark. If you found the pebbles you would say they were plain old river rocks. With the willow with the snapped over a loop, and then a cross pattern over the stone, uh you had a net weight that was confirmation of the fishing activity here. Also there was a fishhook, a wooden fishhook that was a very elegant sort of S-shaped form, traditional North Coast.

By facing essentially what was the first wet site that had come to the attention of Washington archaeologists. We didn't know how to treat it. And for ideas, uh it was fortuitous that we had, the fact that Dr. Giddings, later of Brown University, happened to be at the University of Washington giving a lecture. And so he was cornered by Society members and asked the same question you asked, 'How do you approach a wet site?' and, uh, his research work was in the arctic. And of course there you're dealing with permafrost and a lot of preservation problems even more challenging. And uh it's primarily after listening to Dr. Giddings that the society decided to prepare a National Science Foundation grant proposal, which they did, and they submitted this with the idea of securing the funding to look into the problems of what kinds of chemical stabilization is necessary to preserve the perishables, what can we do to get better control working in a wet environment, how, what kinds of specializations are necessary to record features in the wet environment that are being extracted piece at a time, how do you put the composite together. There are several methodological problems that were solved I think in large part by later discoveries of wet sites in the Northwest, examples of which would be the University of Washington highways salvage archaeology program up at Conway when the Interstate 5 went through at a depth of about eight feet in a wet area, they too found huge baskets similar to the baskets found here, and functionally very similar too. Additionally, Dale Croes, working at Washington State University's work out at the Hoko River discovered wet materials, and Dr. Gordy's work at Cape Alava.

LP: And so when you were excavating the basketry you would see it on the surface, and start to kind of spray down, and then how would you stop for the day, and then, cover it up?

DR: If we found basketry, we wouldn't leave it. Uh, so the uh, invariably we would try to recover. But very early on, the problem of dealing with wet materials and stabilizing them once they were removed became apparent. There was one wooden piece, I remember this long, which we recovered, and after two weeks it was half that size, and after a month it had disappeared, it just shriveled up and went away. Basically it was turkey baster kinds of water, to clear the mud once it had been identified with the trowel. Lots of cordage, knots, you know what it is.

Here, it was basically subsistence procurement. And it was a fishing station and so they were basically used to haul fish to and fro, and the uh, equipment necessary for setting the fish weir up. Why it is that these baskets were left, when they were done, is another question. Is it that the water came up? Or was it a flood? Did they discard it? We're not sure. But the place of discard is essentially the site of the fish weir, so I think there's a functional connection of some sort.