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Archeologists For Hire

By Michael McQuillan

Not all archeologists ply their trade at universities.

Burnaby's David Maxwell has the enviable job of traveling all over North America and working for one of the largest archeological firms in the United States.

Like a university-based archeologist, the focus at a site is to uncover items, document and learn about people who lived in an area thousands of years ago. But one of the biggest difference between those who work for universities and the private sector are the resources available, said Maxwell.

He works for Statistical Research, which employs more than 130 people, that includes about 30 individuals with PhDs behind their last names.

"That's more than most universities by considerable degree, no pun intended," said Maxwell, who heads up the Pacific Northwest office for the Arizona-based company. Archeological consulting is a growing field with governments and companies becoming more sensitive to First Nations and early history. As a result, more laws have been created requiring sites to be either preserved or the artifacts excavated and the site documented.

Archeology used to be largely the work of universities, but that has changed also.

"One of the reasons this business is so big in the United States and becoming bigger in Canada is that it's very difficult to put any pressure on anyone at a university setting to finish something by withholding their payment. If you're a professor you're drawing your salary from somewhere else," he said.

"It's a little bit different with someone in private enterprise and this is their sole source of income. When we say we'll have it next week, we'll really have it next week."

Another reason private archeological consulting has grown is just the sheer volume of archeological work that must be done in the U.S. That workload far outstrips the resources in universities, explained Maxwell.

Unfortunately there's currently not as much need for Statistical Research's services in Canada.

"Our laws are not as encompassing," said Maxwell. "There's no federal law for this kind of stuff in Canada, whereas in the U.S. you have the federal regulations that require anything that's done on federal land has to go through this kind of compliance."

In Canada, much of the work done is on a much smaller scale.

Not all of the company's work involves excavating sites. Often they recommend against that.

"Most companies choose not to excavate. Instead, they'll locate elsewhere. For example, it's far cheaper for a pipeline company to build around an archeological site that to have it excavated, which can sometimes take years," he said.

"That's usually the kind of compromise we usually try to get. Usually everyone is happy with that kind of outcome," said Maxwell.

But there are times when a company or government has no choice but to excavate a site.

"If you're putting up a dam that's going to flood an entire valley then there's no way to preserve things that will be covered by 50 feet of water."

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