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Anthropological dig aims to shed light on Edmonton’s early industrial period

Edmonton – The booming skyscrapers going up in downtown Edmonton reflect a modern, dynamic city. But, at one time Edmonton was a series of shanty towns that sprung up in various areas including the river valley.

Starting July 4, Dr. Katie Biitner, from MacEwan University’s Department of Anthropology will be joined by a team of anthropology students who are tasked with surveying and excavating the Mill Creek site where the Vogel’s Meatpacking plant stood. They’ll be joined by Haeden Stewart, a fourth-year PhD student from the University of Chicago whose research is focused on the early settler industrial period in western-Canada, including Edmonton.

“The students will be tasked not with just excavating and analyzing but also setting up their own research project to contribute to Haeden’s broader PhD thesis,” says Biitner. “The students will be learning how to excavate a site and how to analyze the materials that are recovered.”

Stewart first started learning about the ravine’s history after his mother moved to Edmonton about 10 years ago. He’s particularly interested in the number of shanty towns that sprung up in the city; one of them was directly downstream from the site of Vogel’s Meatpacking plant. Because the shanty towns weren’t connected to any garbage system, he expects to find remnants of waste that can be analyzed for clues as to what people who lived there ate and how they organized their time.

To dig in the river valley, the group had to get permission from the city and the province, and had to prove that the project won’t be environmentally destructive. Stewart said there is potential for root systems in the ravine to be destroyed, he won’t be taking down any plants or trees and plans to leave the area the way it was found.

The team is planning on hosting a public archaeology day on July 29 where they will be inviting the public to visit the site.

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