

DIGGING UP THE PAST

Archaeologist at Lewis and Clark National Historical Park works to preserve local history

Story and photos by
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Wearing her National Park Service uniform, Rachel Stokeld unloads the government pickup and lugs equipment down a gravel road: pruning shears, shovel, trowel, bucket, sifting screen, clip board and a GPS navigator to show her precisely where she is, which is four feet into Lewis and Clark National Historical Park and not on private farmland. The park service calls the location the East Netul site; it is near the Lewis and Clark River and upstream from Netul Landing.

Then comes the glamorous part of the job. She takes the shovel and measuring tape out, checks the GPS and the paperwork, a plan that has been submitted to and approved by the Oregon State Historical Preservation Office. Then she begins digging a hole. Not just any hole, she explains as she measures its diameter, “A 40-centimeter shovel probe to a minimum of 50 centimeters depth.” That is, a hole about 16 inches across and 20 inches or more deep.

Stokeld is digging at the base of a dike that was built in the first half of the 20th century to create pasture. Salmon habitat restoration has been going on for several years in this area, and the park is exploring opportunities for more restoration projects within its boundaries. Stokeld’s excavations are one in a series of



important preliminary steps the park must take to determine if the restoration design moves ahead.

She digs to a depth of about 10 centimeters or 4 inches, places the dirt on the sifting screen, and then shakes the screen. She breaks up dirt clods with the trowel and watches carefully for any sign of a cultural resource.

“A cultural resource is anything relating to human activities,” Stokeld says. “It might be a Native American village site or artifacts from European exploration or early settlement. It might be a place for spiritual or other cultural practices.”

Or there might be nothing. That’s why Stokeld is out here sifting dirt. She’s the cultural resources specialist for the park. “Cultural resources protection is a fundamental part of the National Parks mission,” she says.

One day she might be looking for evidence of a site found

in old documents or oral histories. Another day you’ll find her working in the museum, or consulting with Native American tribes, or answering a local resident’s question about an artifact he’s found. She’s usually working behind the scenes, but she has also taught workshops for teachers about how to use park resources to teach history.

“Today I’m working ahead of the initial steps for a proposed salmon restoration project to see if it is compliant with cultural resource protection laws,” she says. It’s her job to determine if any resources exist and, “if the next preliminary steps should move ahead or be modified or abandoned.”

Stokeld came to her current position after experience as an archaeologist in Portugal

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and three U.S. states. Her first work in this park was over a decade ago, on a field excavation at Middle Village/Station Camp near Chinook. She then began volunteering at Fort Clatsop as a museum technician, cataloging and processing artifacts. That became

a seasonal position while she worked on her master’s degree in anthropology. “I’ve just finished defending my thesis,” she says, “and now I’m transitioning to a position as a full-time cultural resources specialist.”

Archaeology isn’t as

thrilling as depicted on the big screen. It involves attention to detail, persistence, knowledge of laws governing the work, and, of course, digging. Stokeld is digging up, preserving and organizing our history. And it’s a good thing she is, because we live atop so much.



Above: Rachel Stokeld is the cultural resources specialist for Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. **Left:** Rachel Stokeld excavates a hole in the park to see if a proposed salmon restoration project is compliant with cultural resource protection laws.

Below: Rachel Stokeld sifts through dirt from an excavation hole, searching for any sign of a cultural resource.