

## Lives Are Changed When ...

# Historians Go into the Field

John Lutz (UVic) and Keith Thor Carlson (USask)

History and “field schools” are not often associated with each other. Nor is it common for students to report that their history course changed their lives, or for faculty to report that a particular class is a linchpin in sustaining their research momentum. But since 1998, an unusual history field school has taken place every second spring with the Stó:lō that is “transforming” the lives of students, enriching the scholarship of faculty, and generating meaningful historical research and analysis for First Nations people. The Stó:lō [pronounced Stah-low] are the aboriginal people of the lower Fraser River watershed (from Vancouver, B.C. eastward to the Fraser Canyon beyond Yale). The Ethnohistory Field School offers ten graduate students a cultural immersion and introduction to archival research methods common in history along with interviewing and participant observation methods common in ethnography.

Students board the first week of the one-month field experience with Stó:lō families while they attend half-day seminars and cultural orientation tours. In most years they have spent the next three weeks living in a longhouse, heated only by fires, but with the convenience of a modern kitchen and showers just outside the door. So it is also an intense social experiment in collective living under challenging circumstances.

One of the highlights of the month is the orientation to Stó:lō territory by Albert (Sonny) McHalsie who takes them by boat,

*The boat ferry to the Stó:lō community of Scowlitz, Field School 2013 /  
La traverse pour se rendre à la communauté Stó:lō de Scowlitz,  
école de terrain 2013*

road, and trail along the Fraser River to visit ancient village and historic settlement sites, and important spiritual sites where the oral histories of the Stó:lō are embodied in the rocks, caves, waterfalls and mountains that line the river canyon and valley. For his work sharing with university students and faculty, Sonny (more formally known as Naxaxalhts'i) holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Victoria.

The students' research projects are designed in consultation between the faculty and the staff at the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre along with knowledge keepers from the Stó:lō communities. Over the years they have included community histories; analysis of change and continuity in cultural practices and ceremonies; cultural heritage mapping; studies of hereditary names and property; biographies of past and present leaders and knowledge keepers; social histories of museum artefacts; indigenous labour history; and Aboriginal political history. After a month in “the field” the students spend another month finishing their research projects at their home institutions.

Beyond the knowledge gained and shared through community-engaged research, many students have followed their faculty supervisors in building life-long relationships with their Stó:lō host families. During the field school students are often taken to fish camps along the Fraser where salmon are netted and wind dried, to wedding or funeral feasts and First Salmon Ceremonies, to pow-wow dancing and drum making, to sweat lodges, to burnings for ancestral spirits or repatriation and honouring





*Chehalis First Salmon Cere Crop  
Field School, 2013 /  
École de terrain 2013, Chehalis  
First Salmon Cere Crop*

ceremonies, and sometimes to sacred spirit ceremonies. Often students are invited to join families in berry picking, “pulling” cedar bark, fishing for sturgeon, and back yard barbeques. Many students return two years later to present their research in the Stó:lō organized “People of the River” conference where researchers are invited to share their work with community members. To finish the course, the students and faculty host a Stó:lō-inspired potlatch and ‘thank-you feast’ for the 80-100 people with whom they have most closely interacted over the month – including knowledge keepers who were interviewed, Stó:lō staff, and host families.



The field school had its origins when the Stó:lō Nation (representing 18 of the 26 First Nations along the lower Fraser watershed) invited the history department at the University of Victoria to partner with them to study historical research questions. The Stó:lō were getting valuable research results from anthropology and archaeological field schools and wanted to try adapting the field school model to deal with historical research questions which needed a different kind of expertise.

The first field school with seven students was co-taught by University of Victoria historian John Lutz and Keith Carlson, then historian on staff with Stó:lō Nation. Lutz and Carlson have co-taught the course ever since. Over the history of the field school Carlson has become a professor at the University of Saskatchewan and since 2003 the field school has been a joint

offering of the two universities, joined in most years by graduate students from other universities and disciplines. Between field schools, faculty return regularly and partner with the Stó:lō on research projects – most recently on a project to create a Virtual Museum of Scowlitz (one of the Stó:lō communities).

The reverberations of the field school have spread across the country. Over the history of the field school 65 research papers have been prepared as well as a special issue of a the journal *Research Review*, and many projects were turned into plates in the award-winning *Sto:lo Coast Salish Historical Atlas*. A dozen completed Master’s theses and two PhD dissertation and more in progress draw directly from the field school experience. Two of the field school alumni are now themselves university professors and one, Liam Haggarty, has started a next-generation ethnohistory field school at Calgary’s Mount Royal University, while the other, Andrée Boiselle places law students in internships with First Nations at Osgoode Law School in Toronto. In addition, Carlson now offers a second ethnohistory/archaeology fieldschool with Dana Lapofsky from SFU in partnership with the Tla’amin (Sliammon) First Nation. Many of the research papers and theses from the Stó:lō field school are available from the website, [www.ethnohist.ca](http://www.ethnohist.ca) along with a gallery of images from the more recent course offerings.

The Ethnohistory Field School represents community-engaged scholarship at its best. The relationships are not only professional and personal between faculty/students and Stó:lō staff/knowledge keepers, they are also institutional. Both universities provide generous financial support to sustain what remains North America’s only humanities-based ethnohistory graduate field school, and the Stó:lō provide not only in-kind support and access to one of Canada’s largest tribal archives and oral history repositories, but introduction and cultural guidance for community-based research.

The next Ethnohistory Field School with the Stó:lō is scheduled for spring 2015 and interested students are encouraged to look at the website and contact the instructors.