

# RESEARCH VIEW

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## ANTHROPOLOGY



## Hunting Montana History

UM archaeologists explore two intriguing sites

Deep in Western Montana's mountains, UM researchers are uncovering secrets that history books rarely hint at.

Outside the town of Plains in a steep canyon are Asian-style terraces, where Chinese immigrants are believed to have grown fresh produce to sell in 1800s mining camps. In another Western Montana mountain range sit remnants of a mining community that belie the Wild West image of such a place.

"When we do archeology, we're often criticized for it being an expensive way to conduct history," says Kelly Dixon, an assistant professor of anthropology at UM. "But a lot of people are marginalized in history books, and archaeology is the solution to addressing

those people.”

Dixon is internationally known for her ongoing work at the famed Donner Party campsite in California, where she co-leads a team of experts who are trying to reconstruct four months during the winter of 1846-47, when half the party lost their lives — and the remainder may have resorted to cannibalism to survive.

But she is also excited about two projects closer to home, both because she finds them fascinating and because of the heavy involvement of UM students.

At the Montana ghost town of Coloma, doctoral student Mark Timmons is sewing together field research, oral histories and old photos to reconstruct the history of a mining town where libraries were almost as prevalent as saloons, and children, not prostitutes, were the most common sight on the streets.

Outside Plains another Ph.D. student, Christopher Merritt, seeks to uncover the mystery of expertly constructed dry-laid stone terraces on a mountainside in the Lolo National Forest.

At both sites, summer field schools will involve many more students from the University, which has partnered with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to conduct the research.

“What we’re doing now is creating a series of research projects the students can take on as their own to learn how a large research team operates,” Dixon says. “Yes, we’re doing research and filling in gaps in Western history, but the research is being done by students who are very skilled. Ideally, they will publish papers, learn field work and take ownership of research on two projects that are significant to this region’s cultural history.”



**Graduate students Molly Swords and Shannon Vihlene record the front elevations of a Coloma cabin.**

Hundreds of thousands of Chinese people came to the American West during the Gold Rush era, many to seek their fortunes, some to escape China’s poverty. That many of them met with bigotry, violence and death is known. That thousands of them helped build America’s railroad system also is known.

But what happened in the Plains area? Local lore has it that as the railroad blasted its way through the mountains there, hundreds of Chinese workers were killed. Did that send the Chinese survivors into the forest, looking to escape the alleged bloodshed and searching for new ways to survive in a strange and sometimes harsh land?

“The general consensus is the terraces must be Chinese,” Dixon says. “They were known for terraced agriculture in China’s mountain environments and likely migrated similar techniques to the West.”

But there is no documentation to be found of either deliberate violence or accidental death among Chinese railroad workers in the Plains area — just a mention in a 1924 Plainsman newspaper article that 6,000 Chinese immigrants were used on railroad

construction.

“Without further documentary evidence, we’re stuck with the local lore that the Chinese built the terraces to escape harsh treatment,” Dixon says. “This is a wonderful opportunity to work on a potential Chinese site in a rural area, as opposed to Chinatowns.”

The terraces are “exquisite,” Dixon says, so much so that some have called them “the Machu Picchu of Western Montana,” referring to the well-preserved pre-Columbian Inca ruin, circa 1440, located nearly 8,000 feet above sea level on a mountainside in Peru.

Merritt will help oversee excavation at the site this summer in what could be the first of several seasons of work. They will find what they find, of course, but many things could turn up to indicate Chinese people did indeed build the terraces.



**The terraces near Plains after vegetation was cleared**

“There are a lot of products that came in Chinese-made containers, such as soy sauce or bean paste,” Dixon says. “You may find evidence of Chinese utilitarian brownware, which held such products, which is quite distinct from European- and American-made wares.”

Pieces of Chinese-style rice bowls or a meat cleaver with Chinese symbols also are among the types of artifacts used to identify Chinese sites and that could help Merritt confirm the local belief that the Chinese built the terraces. From soil samples taken last year, when Merritt and company mapped the area, corn pollen was found, indicating one of the crops grown there.

Early excavation provided no artifacts, but UM’s researchers expect to uncover some when they work on a cabin site farther down the gulch where Chinese farmers may have lived.

The terraces are the only site of their kind known in Montana. Dixon says Merritt recently submitted a grant proposal to National Geographic for his dissertation work at the terrace site.

Montana ghost towns, of course, aren’t nearly so rare.

But when you consider the stereotype of a frontier-era mining community, the Coloma project takes on a unique edge.

Compare it to the better known — and better preserved — Garnet, Timmons says.

“Garnet had 13 saloons, three brothels full of prostitutes and no library or reading rooms,” he says. “Coloma had three bars, three prostitutes, homes with reading rooms and a 400-volume library.”

Archaeology largely gets UM’s researchers to that point.

"Now, we put on our anthropologist hats," Dixon says, "and Coloma becomes the anti-Wild West town, a place to raise a family." She calls it "the lost city of log cabins."

Along with Jennifer Ogborne, an adjunct UM researcher from the College of William & Mary who is homing in on the food that the miners and their families ate, Timmons has his focus as well.

"Traditionally, mining communities were not multi-gendered," he says. "I'm looking at the effect of gender on community in Victorian society."



**Christopher Merritt (standing) and his team excavate near a terrace.**

Multi-room cabins, as opposed to boarding houses, indicate the presence of families in Coloma, while gender-specific artifacts — teacups, fancy silverware, wallpaper — suggest that "women were (expected) to bring some of the trappings of culture and civility with them when their husbands came West," Timmons says.

Coloma becomes a challenge because the mine there re-opened from the 1930s to the 1950s, and the last occupant didn't leave until 1960. But most of the artifacts Ogborne and Timmons are looking for are buried deeper than the rusty tin cans left from that era.

"The 1890s are not that far away," Timmons says. "We've talked to the granddaughter of one of the founders, and gotten a lot of second- and third-generational stories. We have pictures from the 1960s when a lot of the buildings were still standing. A teacher, Hilma Hansen, left six to eight pages of written notes on the history of the town, and talked about things like a shopkeeper named Wild Bill who played the banjo, and the twice-a-year dances the community held to raise money to pay the school teacher's salary. There's a lot of meat to put on the artifacts we find."

The town site covers 150 acres, which contain 150 archaeological features, from the footprints of cabins and a town dump to a cemetery and mine shafts. Now, to one of the coolest parts of the Coloma project: electronic preservation.

"We're going to create a virtual ghost town that you'll be able to navigate from your computer," Dixon says. "We're going to record every building, record the artifacts we find at each. We'll have architectural renditions of the buildings — 3-D renditions that will allow you to look in the building from different angles. You'll be able to click and see historic photos. It's quite an undertaking."

What's left of the town may all but disappear within the next 10 years. "Sadly, we've gotten heavy snowpack that is starting to collapse what's left even further," Dixon says.

But this summer, 10 to 20 students will join Ogborne and Timmons to continue field work at Coloma. Four to six more will join Merritt at the smaller and more fragile Chinese terrace site. History will not be made. It will be discovered — by UM students who literally will dig into the state's past.

"It's a quintessential historical period of the American West," Dixon says, "and Montana

is full of gems. We're so fortunate that the BLM and Forest Service want to partner with us and that we can give our students ownership in these projects."

— *By Vince Devlin*