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## **Archaeologist's grisly research preserves facts buried in mass graves**

Contact: Diane Luckow, Media & PR [Phone removed]; dluckow@sfu.ca

June 01, 2004

Erin Jessee's masters thesis topic is both gruesome and, unfortunately, necessary in an increasingly violent world. An SFU archaeology student, Jessee has attempted to devise a scientific method for unearthing mass graves. "Right now forensic archaeologists and anthropologists are being used internationally to excavate sites, but there isn't a lot of scientific research going into their methods," says Jessee who will receive a master of arts in archaeology at the spring convocation.

Forensic sciences usually deal with a single body, says Jessee, but mass graves with many bodies can alter a gravesite in different ways. "When we are trying to apply standards to the rate of decomposition, for example, having more bodies can either speed up or slow down that process," explains Jessee, who lives in Victoria.

Jessee contends that those studying mass graves often lack an understanding of how much evidence is being lost over time. "Different climates or a different variety of insects can affect what we are actually recovering in a mass grave," she says. "So another reason for doing this type of work is to determine the loss of information - how much and what kind." Jessee became interested in the grisly topic after taking a forensic anthropology course during her undergraduate years. And while she has yet to work on a mass gravesite herself, she was hired by police to work on the excavation of the Port Coquitlam pig farm owned by accused serial murderer Robert Picton.

She has won a Fullbright scholarship usually tenable in the U.S. and is hoping to earn a doctorate and pursue an academic career. - 30 -