

PARK NOTES

N.W.M.P.

The North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) have had a long association with what is now Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. They first camped here during the march west in 1874, and returned in 1887 to establish a small outpost, which operated until 1918. This fact sheet tells the story of the Mounties, and their exciting (and not so exciting) experiences at Writing-on-Stone.

Why They Came

The NWMP force was formed in 1873 to give the Northwest Territories a government presence, to ensure a lawful region for European settlers and to stop the liquor trade which was devastating the First Nations People. In 1874, 275 Mounties spent July and August crossing the prairies towards present-day Alberta. Tired and lost, the men camped at Writing-on-Stone in early September. They stayed for four days, and while here, a number of men viewed the rock art and some carved their names upon the sandstone cliffs. Once rested, they moved north to build Fort Macleod.

The Mounties were warmly received by the First Nations People as well as the scattered settlers, fur traders and missionaries. With the arrival of the Police, many of the illegal traders left the territories. As a result, a lawful frontier was established with relative ease. Anxious to maintain the peaceful nature of the west, the Mounties developed a system of outposts along the Canada/United States border. In 1887, as part of this boundary patrol system, a tent camp was established at Writing-on-Stone.

1887 – 1897: Boredom and Booze

The tent camp was only temporary. In 1889, a cozy two-room log building was built for \$291.90. However, the problems anticipated by the NWMP along this stretch of the border never developed. Rather than tracking smugglers, the men were kept busy with the rather tedious tasks of fighting numerous prairie fires, herding American-owned cattle back across the border, and riding long patrols along the boundary.

During the average week the men at Writing-on-Stone rode more than 700 miles on patrol.

Writing-on-Stone Police Post Timeline of Events

1873

On May 23, the enabling bill for the creation of a police force for the Northwest Territories is given royal assent.

1874

After training all winter, 275 Mounties spend July through August riding across the prairies towards present-day Alberta. In search of whiskey traders, the men camp at Writing-on-Stone in early September, and build Fort Macleod in October.

1887

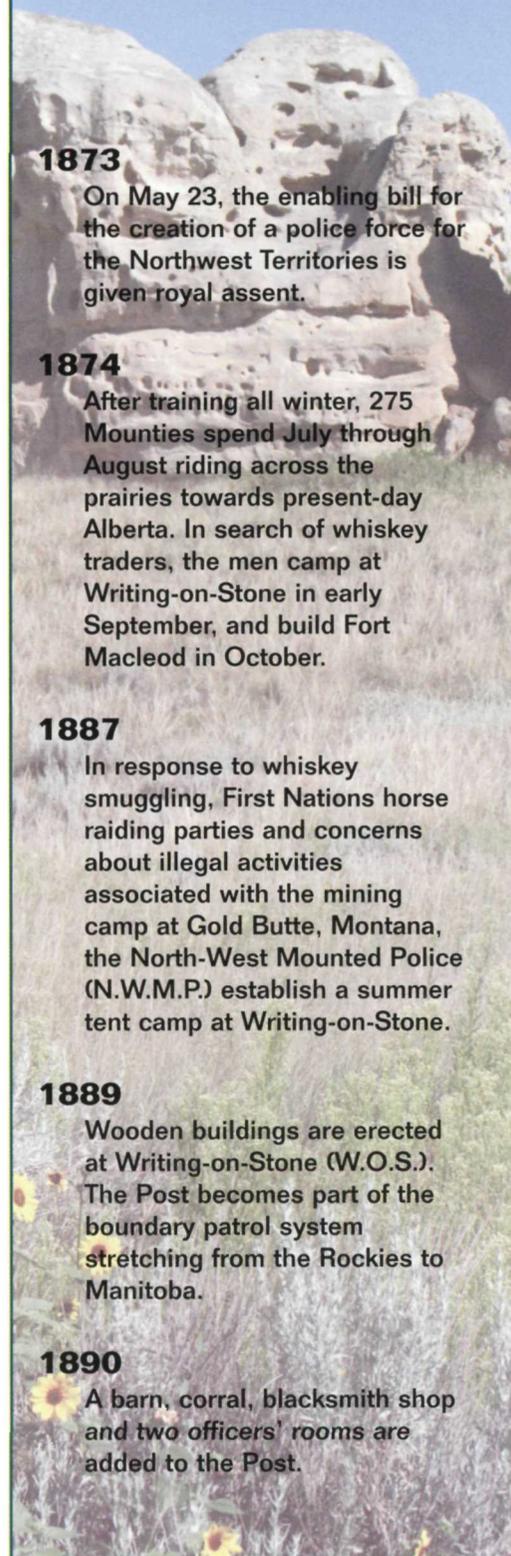
In response to whiskey smuggling, First Nations horse raiding parties and concerns about illegal activities associated with the mining camp at Gold Butte, Montana, the North-West Mounted Police (N.W.M.P.) establish a summer tent camp at Writing-on-Stone.

1889

Wooden buildings are erected at Writing-on-Stone (W.O.S.). The Post becomes part of the boundary patrol system stretching from the Rockies to Manitoba.

1890

A barn, corral, blacksmith shop and two officers' rooms are added to the Post.



Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park Áísínai'pi . . . National Historic Site

Often, these dreary duties became more a matter of survival. Inspector Zachary Wood noted in 1887:

April 21. It grows cold about midnight, and we are nearly frozen. Can stand it no longer, being wet to the skin, so we saddle our horses and lead them along the river, as we dare not ride – the snow is blinding... We strike for Writing-on-Stone. Find Constable O'Connor of Allen's camp with mail arrived noon yesterday, having been lost and spent previous night on the prairie.

(Turner 1950:331)

The monotonous nature of the duties was a disappointment for many of the Mounties posted to Writing-on-Stone. Many of these young men had come from England and Eastern Canada seeking adventure and excitement. The idea of babysitting mange-infested cattle for 50 cents a day proved too much for some. Between 1889 and 1892, 12 men deserted from Writing-on-Stone, never to return. Constable Lackie deserted in 1893 to visit the World's Fair in Chicago, but turned himself in upon returning.

Those who stayed found other ways to battle the boredom. Many turned to alcohol. Others busied themselves with carving their names into the sandstone rocks, hunting and using the cliffs around the Post for target practice. Con Price, a range rider who worked at Writing-on-Stone, noted that card games were common:

We played whist those long winter evenings for 25 cents a game and would have some hot arguments as to the rules of the game, so that we went to bed mad every night – but everybody would be ready for play again the next night.

(Price 1945:52)

Writing-on-Stone reached its height of activity in 1897 with 12 horses, five Mounties, and two hired range-riders.

1897 – 1918: Settlers and Socials

After 1897, no more than three men were ever posted to Writing-on-Stone at one time. Many Mounties were reposted to the Yukon to ensure law and order during the Klondike gold rush. Others volunteered to join the military units taking part in the Boer war in South Africa.

1890 – 1897

The men at Writing-on-Stone are kept busy patrolling the boundary for illegal activities, fighting numerous prairie fires and herding American-owned cattle back across the border. These duties were not as romantic as many anticipated and, as a result, alcoholism, desertion and loneliness became serious problems at Writing-on-Stone.



Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park Áísinaí pi... National Historic Site

Another change in the district after 1897 was, the way people used the land. Farmers began to move into the area and by 1908 nearly every quarter section around Writing-on-Stone had been homesteaded. As a result, the Mounties also became responsible for assisting the settlers in establishing and maintaining their farms. This assistance came in many forms. Sometimes the men helped newly arrived farmers locate their land. Other times they delivered mail. In 1910 and 1911, the Post served as a relief centre for the local people left destitute by storms and drought.

Most of the contact the NWMP had with the settlers came by way of patrol visits. At least twice a month, the Mounties had to visit each homestead in their district and have the owner sign a patrol sheet, and report any strange activities they had noticed since the last visit. After the official business was completed, these visits often turned into social occasions, much to the Mounties' liking.

The Post also became a gathering place for the settlers during this period. On many occasions, the furniture was moved out of the barracks so that dances could be held. Local homesteader Paul Audet said of the events:

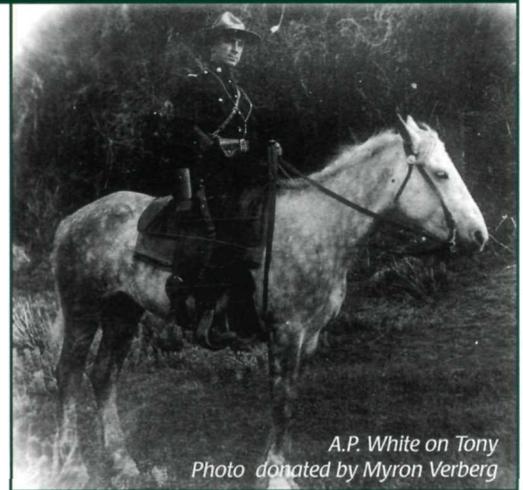
Those "do's" would sometimes last three days and nights. The people would come from many miles distant, bring their tents, and set up camp. They would have horse racing, bucking, roping, camp fires where tall yarns would be spun from near and far, and in the evenings there would be dancing.

(Dempsey 1973:104)

By 1918, the Writing-on-Stone Post was no longer needed. The border was safe, the settlers were established, and the men were needed for other duties. The Post was closed in May, and fire destroyed the barracks a short time later.

The Legacy Lives On

The Writing-on-Stone Post was not to remain abandoned forever. In 1973, as part of the NWMP centennial projects, an archaeological excavation was conducted upon the Post site. In 1975, the barracks, barn, and tack room were rebuilt on the original site. Today, the Post interior is refurnished to recreate the year 1897. Park visitors may be able to view the Police Post by participating in special guided hikes, when available.



A.P. White on Tony
Photo donated by Myron Verberg

1897

Writing-on-Stone reaches its height of activity with 12 horses, five Mounties, and two hired range-riders. However, life continues much the same as before.

1897 – 1917

The number of men declines at Writing-on-Stone, as some are reposted to the Yukon, while others sign on to fight in the Boer war in South Africa. Never having more than three men, during these years, the Post reaches an all-time low in August 1905, when only one special constable is stationed at Writing-on-Stone. During this period, large numbers of settlers move into the area and seek the Mounties' assistance to get established. Fortunately, for the Mounties, the Post becomes the local gathering place and host to numerous social events.



READING LIST: NWMP history

This bibliography contains a selection of titles which give a good general overview of the NWMP history in the area. Some general titles which have an indirect relationship to Writing-on-Stone are also included. Not every article or book referring to Writing-on-Stone is listed here, but the most important titles are included. Some of these titles are not commercially available, but can be obtained through the libraries of most universities and colleges.

General Interest Reading:

**Asterisks indicate recommended titles.*

North-West Mounted Police History

Adams, Gary, Michael R.A. Forsman and Sheila J. Minni, 1977. *Archaeological Investigations: Writing-on-Stone N.W.M.P. Post*. Edmonton: Alberta Culture, Historic Sites Service, *Occasional Paper* no. 4, 356 pp.

*Dempsey, Hugh, 1973. *A history of Writing-on-Stone*. Unpublished manuscript on file with Alberta Recreation and Parks and the Archaeological Survey of Alberta, 150 pp.

Dempsey, Hugh A., editor, 1974. *Men in Scarlet*. Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta/McClelland and Stewart West, 230 pp.

*Hurt, Leslie J., 1979. *A History of Writing-on-Stone N.W.M.P. Post*. Edmonton: Alberta Culture, Historic Sites Service, *Occasional Paper* no 5, 239 pp.

1916 – 1917

The Alberta Provincial Police assume general policing duties from the Royal North-West Mounted Police. The Mounties remain at the border posts to enforce federal border legislation.

1918

With the entry of the United States into World War I, the federal government fears little criminal activity along the border and closes all border posts. Writing-on-Stone closes in May, and burns down a short time later.

1973 – 1975

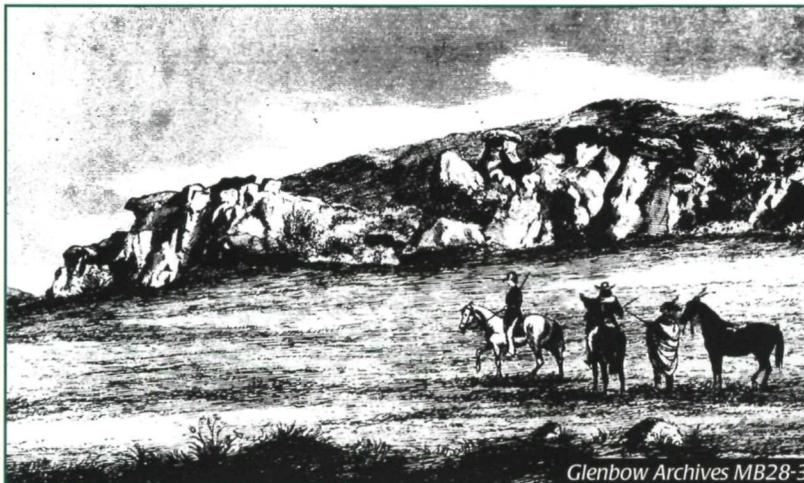
As part of the N.W.M.P. centennial celebrations, the Writing-on-Stone Post site is archaeologically excavated, and the building subsequently rebuilt according to the original specifications.

1989

The interior of the barracks is furnished to recreate the year 1897.

Today

Park visitors may be able to view the Police Post by participating in special guided hikes, when available.



For more information, contact:
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Government
of Alberta ■