A Review of the Motherwell Homestead National Historic Site, Abernethy, Saskatchewan.

By Bruce Dawson

The name of the site, Motherwell Homestead, conjures up romantic images of a small wood or sod house set upon the open prairie. The drive to the site, located approximately 100 km north-east of Saskatchewan’s capital city Regina, does not dissuade one from this image as the highway takes one past century-old farms and small agricultural communities. The last few kilometres down a good grid road forces one to slow down to a pace somewhat closer to that experienced by W.R. Motherwell when he travelled this same road four generations ago. However, this is where image clashes with reality. Rather than a small shack on an open field, one is confronted with a 2 ½-storey Italianate-style stone estate house and a large stone and timber barn set on 3.59 ha (approx 9 acres) of landscaped grounds.

Named Lanark Place, these impressive buildings and grounds appear like an oasis on the prairie. They were designed to have exactly this effect. By using architectural and grounds designs based on the established farms of his native Ontario, William Richard (W.R.) Motherwell intended for his farm site to project both an image of success as well as a particular scientific approach towards farming. In doing so, Motherwell was part of a movement amongst ex-Ontarians in western Canada whose second and third generation homes reflected Ontario designs blended with western materials and forms. Motherwell’s approach to agriculture and the architectural design of the house, barn and grounds, are two reasons why the site was commemorated by the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 1966. The other major themes for Motherwell Homestead National Historic Site focus on the political and agricultural career of Motherwell.

Today, the name Motherwell is scarcely known outside academia or amongst those who live in buildings or on streets named in his honour. However, a century ago, he was well known as an innovative agriculturalist, a leader of the early-20th century agrarian revolt in western Canada, and, after 1905, as the first Minister of Agriculture for the province of Saskatchewan. Later, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he would serve eight years as the federal Minister of Agriculture. His actions led to new farming techniques, the formation of the Territorial Grain Grower’s Association, precursor to the Saskatchewan Grain Grower’s Association and the National Farmer’s Union, and the introduction of several laws and government programs which continue to benefit Canadian farmers.

Entry to the site is gained through a modern, non-descript visitor reception centre located at the south side of the grounds. Inside, site visitors will find friendly park staff at the reception desk and equally friendly staff at the Friends of the Motherwell Homestead ready to sell souvenirs or a snack from their kiosk. What visitors will not find is an orientation or interpretive display. While the site map handed out by the park staff is informative, those visitors who learn best by being able to engage with text, visual and artefact displays and the overarching stories typically found in an orientation gallery will certainly miss this resource.

Motherwell Homestead reflects Parks Canada’s long history of undertaking extensive and authentic restorations of its historic sites. Shortly after designation

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as a National Historic Site, the property was acquired by Parks Canada. Research and restoration of the barn, house and grounds initiated in the late 1970’s culminated with the opening of the site to the public in 1983. Restored to a circa 1912 appearance, the site is interpreted according to the four quadrants which Motherwell introduced as part of his site design in the early 19th century: the dugout, the garden, the house and the barn.

While the dugout and the garden are passively interpreted, the barn and the house areas are the focus of the living history program. Visitors to the house are greeted at the kitchen entrance by a costumed guide and led through the house. The well-informed guides provide visitors with third person commentary on many aspects of life at the Motherwell residence, including the daily tasks performed by the servants, the affairs and daily activities of both Mr. and Mrs. Motherwell, the furnishings and set up of the various rooms and the differences in accommodations and work spaces between the family and the servants and hired hands who lived in the house. On occasion, lucky visitors can sample fresh baked cookies as part of their visit. That several of the artifacts in the house are original to the Motherwell family adds to the authenticity of the experience.

The Barn area is the heart of the living history program at the site. Several hectares of land are farmed using horse power and chickens, sheep and other barnyard animals are cared for as part of the interpretive program. On certain days, threshing activities and a steam traction engine demonstration are undertaken. At other times, first person skits featuring topics of the day, such as votes for women and the debates of horsepower vs. machines, are undertaken on the barn steps.

While Motherwell Homestead is not the only historic site in Saskatchewan to focus on the theme of agriculture, it is the only one with on-going live animal and large scale historic farming program. Consequently, the site has gained a reputation for being the place to engage with these past agricultural technologies. This distinction is not lost on the site administration and every effort is being made to promote and enhance this element of the living history program. Site Manager Flo Miller would like to see even more done, with gas powered tractor demonstrations being introduced. However, while gasoline power fits within the broad theme of agricultural practice during Motherwell’s life (he passed away in 1943), such programming would conflict with the pre-World War One restoration at the site.

This conflict touches on what is perhaps the major interpretive challenge for the site. The site receives approximately 10,000 visitors, composed largely of school groups and older visitors who are interested in the farming technology and life during the “pioneer” period. Consequently, the interest in “typical” homesteading experiences is high, as is seeing farm animals and tractors, hearing stories of how settlers arrived and overcame the challenges of farming in the west, and watching guides in century-old costumes talk about Victorian ways of life. These stories are somewhat detached from that of Motherwell, whose story is that of a white, upper-middle class politician who was also a farmer. While his legacy is important within the history of Saskatchewan and Canada, as the major focus of an interpretive program, Motherwell’s story represents a theme in history that is somewhat out of vogue both with national agencies who tell stories and with audiences who listen to them. Reflecting these changing community values, the vision for the Historic Site has shifted during the past 27 years to also envision the site functioning as a significant portal into Saskatchewan’s farming heritage. However, the buildings and grounds of the site were initially restored to tell a much more focussed story related to Motherwell and his agricultural activities. With the interpretive tools at the site largely restricted to the restored elements of the site and the guided and living history programs of the staff, and limited funds available for additional interpretive resources, conveying both the traditional and emerging stories at the site is challenging. As an example of this challenge, Miller discussed her interest in getting a working replica stove installed in the house. This would enable the staff to incorporate baking as part of the public programming rather than, as is done presently, completing the food preparation on a contemporary stove in the staff area of the building. In doing so, the site’s impressive living history program, currently focussed on the Barn quadrant, could be more fully incorporated into the interpretation of the house. However, Miller acknowledged that this activity would likely result in the original stove needing to be displaced for the replica, an action that conflicts with the original set up and concept of the site.

Despite these challenges, Motherwell Homestead National Historic Site does an excellent job of providing visitors with a snap shot of agricultural and political life during the settlement boom in western
Canada prior to World War One. Characteristic of sites operated by Parks Canada, the building and grounds restorations are well done and provide excellent insight into the architectural designs and furnishings in vogue with some rural, upper middle-class farmers in western Canada during the period. The site also reflects Parks Canada's penchant for innovative and informative interpretive programming, highlighted by the dynamic living history program. In this programming, the site has found what marketing experts would call its 'distinct competitive advantage.' In a province where, for decades, the license plates contained the statement "the wheat province", being renowned for providing visitors with an interactive learning experience focussed on farming is a good thing.

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Saskatchewan.

Endnotes

Letter from the Editor

Medicine, throne speeches, parks and theatres. Four different topics that, on the surface, appear to have little in common, yet they are all linked by the desire of someone to peel away the covers and take a closer look. It is one of the wonderful things about history that its appeal is so wide and encompassing that such divergent topics can all be covered in a single issue of an historical journal (in this case the one you are holding). History can also be incredibly personal, both in the sense of exploring one's own past or pursuing an area of personal interest. Indeed, for most historians it is a passion to explore a specific area that fuels them. In fact, many people who are not professionally trained historians find themselves in pursuit of an historical passion. Thus, we find a situation where an English professor (Alex Macdonald), a professor of Nursing (Sandra Bassendowski), an actor and doctoral student (Ian McWilliams) and a government employee (Bruce Dawson) all contributed articles to this issue. It is a testament, I think, to the amazing connections that the discipline of history inspires. I hope you enjoy the fruits of their inspiration.

Jason Zorbas