

WANUSKEWIN HERITAGE PARK: UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF THE NORTHERN PLAINS INDIANS

by Ernest G. Walker

On 27 June 1992, Wanuskewin Heritage Park became a reality. After more than a decade of planning and fund-raising, this ten million dollar facility opened its doors and during its first few months of operation has been acclaimed as a unique, dynamic, and significant cultural centre portraying the cultural history of the Northern Plains Indians. Although the Wanuskewin area had been known to the local Saskatoon archaeological community for many years, sustained interest in the project began only in the early 1980s. The park was designated as provincial heritage property in 1984 and as a National Historic Site in 1987 during a visit by H.R.H. Queen Elizabeth II.

The Wanuskewin Heritage Park is located approximately three kilometers north of the city of Saskatoon. The area consists of undulating, eroded till plains and gravelly glaciolacustrine plains. These uplands are deeply dissected by the South Saskatchewan River and its tributary, Opamihaw Creek. Coulee depressions along the valley walls, as well as terraces and point bars in the valley bottom, contain a large number of archaeological sites spanning the past six thousand years of prehistory. These sites include various habitation sites, bison procurement sites, tipi rings and a boulder alignment known as a "medicine wheel." The encroachment of expanding city boundaries made the establishment of the park even more urgent.

Wanuskewin (Wah-nus-kay-win) is an ancient Cree word which translates roughly as "a refuge or sanctuary, a place of harmony." The park maintains its autonomy under provincial legislation (*The Wanuskewin Heritage Park Act*) with a board of directors chaired by Cyrus Standing of the Wahpeton Band located near Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The board has representation from the federal and provincial governments, the City of Saskatoon, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (F.S.I.N.), the University of Saskatchewan, the Meewasin Valley Authority, and Wanuskewin Indian Heritage Inc. (W.I.H.I.). The last group represents the conscience of Wanuskewin and is composed of eleven members comprising a cross-section of the Saskatchewan Indian community. Each administrative district in the province and all cultural groups (Nehiyawak or Cree, Anishinabeg or Saulteaux, Dakota or Sioux, Nakota or Assiniboine, and Dene or Chipewyan) are represented. This group has played a major role

in the planning and development process ensuring the accuracy and cultural sensitivity of the entire project. In addition, W.I.H.I. is charged with ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the native community are met by organizing and sanctioning all ceremonial activities within the park. W.I.H.I. also owns and operates the gift shop and the restaurant in the interpretive centre, thus ensuring that economic benefits are returned to the Indian community. This group is chaired by F.S.I.N. Senator, Ernest Mike, of the Beady's Okemasis Band at Duck Lake, Saskatchewan.

Wanuskewin Heritage Park is concerned with four broad objectives. In no order of importance these are: (i) scientific research, (ii) public education, (iii) tourism, and (iv) cultural expression. The research objective is achieved through a multidisciplinary, scientific research program designed to increase our knowledge about the immediate Wanuskewin Heritage Park locale as well as prehistoric life on the Northern Plains in general. This research program is centered at the on-site archaeological and paleoenvironmental laboratory operated by the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Saskatchewan. A team of scientists from across the country participate in this research effort along with graduate students from the department.

The proximity of the park to the city of Saskatoon and the opportunity to use Wanuskewin as an educational tool was recognized early in the planning process. The educational objective is to increase public knowledge about Northern Plains Indian culture from prehistoric times to the present and to focus specifically on the interdependence between human groups and their changing natural environment. Wanuskewin is currently included in the provincial grade four social studies curriculum with plans to expand this curriculum to include other grade levels in the future. The development of an educational kit which can be sent out to schools across the province provides for classroom-focused activities prior to an actual visit to the park. It is hoped that through this education program both Indian and non-Indian school children can develop an understanding of the history and traditional values of the Northern Plains peoples.

This bicultural approach is also evident in the tourism objective which is to market and promote Wanuskewin as an attraction of national and international significance and to use the park to enhance the status of Saskatoon and Saskatchewan as a tourist destination point. The first few months of operation saw over 70,000 visitors to the park.

Finally, the active participation of Saskatchewan's Indian community is of great cultural significance. The objective is to provide a focal point for the expression of the cultural heritage of the Northern Plains Indians by preserving the site's spiritual character and artifacts, and to provide for ceremonies and events that promote and strengthen Plains Indian culture.

The focal point of the Wanuskewin Heritage Park is the interpretive centre which includes abundant symbolism in the actual design of the building. The roof line, for instance, consists of two conical structures representing an abstract tipi motif. The larger conical feature covers the main gallery area towering some forty feet about the enclosed exhibits. The smaller conical element is sectioned

into four parts each lined with glass partitions to focus light on to a bison pound and shaman sculpture in the rotunda below. Also symbolic is the orientation of the two main hallways within the building along the north-south and east-west axes representing the cardinal directions. Visitor flow through the main gallery and the building generally is circular in a clockwise manner again highly symbolic of Indian values and traditions.

The Wanuskewin Heritage Park interpretive centre is situated on the edge of the valley wall above the Newo Asiniak buffalo jump site. The building lies on the actual drive lane or pathway leading to the jump and this feature has been demonstrated by the placement of stone cairns along the outside entry way to mimic cairns that were used to funnel the bison towards the precipice in prehistoric times. Future planning calls for sculptured bison to be placed along this entry way leading to the building. Taxidermied bison are found along the main hallway inside the building leading to a reconstruction of a bison "pound," thus completing this sense of ancient hunters manipulating these animals towards some trap or cliff face. A "pound" is a type of corral purposely constructed to contain bison where no steep drop or embankment was available. By placing brush and hides over the corral fence, the hunters would confuse the bison long enough to dispatch some animals before the frightened animals finally broke free. Inside the corral structure is a large sculptural element depicting a shaman calling the bison into the trap. Among hunting and gathering peoples, hunting behaviour always has spiritual connotations and the shaman figure is meant to portray that connection.



The Wanuskewin Heritage Park logo depicting a buffalo petroglyph.

At various points along the entrance hallway and rotunda area are the entrances to a number of important components of the interpretive centre. Immediately inside the main entrance is the information/reception area and the gift shop. The latter provides a wide range of articles from low-cost souvenirs to higher-priced artwork and collectibles. A short distance away is the temporary exhibit area which is designed as a gallery to house a variety of exhibits including native artwork, both contemporary and traditional, as well as artifactual materials. It is hoped that exhibits from other parts of North America and beyond can be presented in this gallery. An activity room immediately adjacent to the gallery is designed for use as a small classroom for children or a meeting room, although similar treatments in wall-covering and flooring with the gallery allows for use as an overflow area to house larger exhibitions or receptions.

The orientation area is circular with a low bench surrounding a large coloured disk inset into the floor which depicts the colours of the cardinal direction points. This glass-walled area provides a commanding view of the valley below and is used for story-telling and craft demonstrations such as basketry-making, beadwork, and pottery manufacture.

The rotunda area also provides access to the restaurant, the theatre, and the main gallery. The restaurant currently operates cafeteria-style, serving both regular and traditional cuisine including buffalo, fish, wild rice, and bannock. As the park matures, it is hoped that this facility can serve as a destination restaurant in the evening hours with a wider range of specialty foods. The theatre seats eighty-five persons and highlights an audio-visual presentation dealing with the spirit of Wanuskewin. This production stresses the Northern Plains Indian world-view and the important sense of cultural survival. The inter-relationships among all living things in the circle of life and the idea that "we are all related" are particularly poignant messages in this presentation.

The main gallery continues this theme and attempts to recreate an ancient setting dating to about two thousand years ago. Rather than using static displays, the main gallery uses computers to control lighting and sound to create a living model and soundscape. Using a background mural and a lighting scrim in addition to the sound track, each of the seasons as well as day and night are presented. A particularly popular segment includes the passage of a storm complete with lightning, thunder, and pounding rain. The gallery is divided into five components. One section deals with aboriginal plant use with display elements depicting a wide range of plant materials and their varied uses. A second section is concerned with hunting and includes a reconstruction of a bison jump with taxidermied bison about to spill over the escarpment. Adjacent is a third section housing a tipi village primarily dealing with social organization as its major theme. The four buffalo hide tipis are each display elements in themselves. The fourth part of the main gallery is devoted to the science of archaeology and, in addition to display materials, provides a large viewing window into the laboratory facility. A mini-theatre designed as an archaeological excavation, complete with a detailed stratigraphic profile, presents an audio-visual

production about the archaeological research at the park. The final component called "Living Culture" portrays modern times and includes exhibits and information regarding the significance of the treaties, self-government and so forth. Interactive computer exhibits are located throughout the main gallery providing a novel method of presenting more detailed information concerning these various themes. Clearly the approach here is not one of entertainment but rather one of instruction.

The administrative section of the interpretive centre houses the main office and receiving area, a multi-purpose meeting room, and support facilities for the interpretive staff.

Finally, the laboratory complex includes the main laboratory and associated offices, an illustration/graphic arts studio, a paleoenvironmental laboratory, a curation facility, and an equipment storage and maintenance shop. The main laboratory is open to the public each Friday to allow for more detailed examination of archaeological methods and materials, or to discuss current research with the staff. In the near future it is hoped that a science program for school children will also be established at the laboratory facility.

The outdoor interpretive components are just as important as the interpretive centre itself. Immediately adjacent to the building is a circular amphitheatre which provides exposure for the performing arts during the summer months. A series of four trails extend to various parts of the park each highlighting a specific theme. The main trail passes through the floor of the valley and highlights many of the archaeological sites along the way. This includes an active excavation site near the mouth of the creek although the location of the dig will necessarily change periodically. An outdoor tipi village demonstration area is also a part of the main trail system. Another trail follows an old buffalo trail to the upland on the east side of the valley while another passes to a remote area of the park and the "medicine wheel." A raised platform allows the visitor to view the boulder alignment from above thus mitigating the need to walk virtually on top of this special feature in order to see it.

The establishment of Wanuskewin Heritage Park has been a long process and has involved the efforts of a large number of groups and individuals. It is particularly gratifying to witness the ever-expanding enthusiasm the project has gained over the years from both the Indian and non-Indian communities. The Wanuskewin project has been acclaimed as a model for heritage park development and has been praised for its instructional approach, attention to detail, and its cultural sensitivity. Wanuskewin will be successful because of the commitment of all parties involved and, if indeed Wanuskewin can serve as a model, it is because of its community-based approach. The park can go a long way to achieving an understanding of Northern Plains Indian culture which can only benefit the city of Saskatoon, the Indian community throughout the province, and Saskatchewan as a whole.