A Mirror of Our Past

Imagine yourself a constable in the North West Mounted Police, one of more than 100 enlisted men and officers garrisoned at Fort Walsh in the spring of 1883. Senior command has just ordered the fort dismantled in favour of a relocation 40 miles north, near Maple Creek on the CPR mainline. The barracks are to be demolished, so you simply discard your worn or broken possessions. Unknowingly, you have just left a message to be read by future generations... archaeologists who will gain insight into the history of Fort Walsh through painstaking excavation of the buildings and your effects.

Archaeology

Knowledge of the past, gained by excavation and examination of mankind’s cultural remains, is the pursuit of archaeologists. Archaeology has an obvious parallel with history. However, there is a difference in method. The historian relies heavily on documentary references found in archives and a variety of other sources. The archaeologist relies on cultural remains excavated from the ground. History alone often tells only a fraction of our past, because records concentrate only on a minority of the people and phenomena that existed at any given time. Archaeology, in its
Surveyors establishing grid lines over a N.W.M.P. building site which will be excavated by archaeologists.

Archaeologists record in detail every observation made during excavations. In this photo, elevation of the floor in the N.W.M.P. saddlery is being determined to meet the requirements dictated by the dimensions and layout of each structure. The coordinates of the grid are tied into the overall context and relationship in which each discovery was made. For example, the recovery of scrap leather associated with awls, needles and rivets, has identified the shoemaker’s shop and saddlery at Fort Walsh. Had these materials been removed from the ground without regard to the structural area from which they originated, the function of the building could not have been identified. The archaeologist records observations from the moment the first shovel of earth is removed. This awesome responsibility is vital to the site, once excavated, is forever destroyed.

To record information on the Fort Walsh excavation, a grid system was surveyed across each N.W.M.P. building site. The size and orientation of the grid is individually determined to meet the requirements dictated by the dimensions and layout of each structure. The coordinates of the grid are tied into a central point which serves as a permanent reference to which all excavations at the fort are spatially related. All artifacts and features uncovered are described in terms of their grid coordinates. When the artifacts or structural remains are subsequently removed from the ground, it is possible to relate the finds to its exact horizontal and vertical position.

Each grid unit is numbered and excavated separately. The material from each unit is segregated vertically according to the natural layers, or stratigraphy, in the soil. This method is preferred since each layer of soil usually dates to specific time periods. Obviously, if material from separate layers and time periods is mixed, interpretations will not be accurate.

Simply stated, the deeper a layer in the soil, the older the deposit. At Fort Walsh three stratigraphic levels are the major concern of the archaeologist. The upper layer consists of sod and topsoil which has built up since the N.W.M.P. abandonment of the site. The artifacts contained within this level usually date to the last three decades and have been separated from the lower stratum. The underlying layer is grey clay, averaging 0.15 metres thick, and lies directly over the floorboards of the historic N.W.M.P. structures. It was originally used by the police as a roof covering or insulation. When the structures were demolished the clay was allowed to fall to the floor, effectively sealing all the artifacts and basal structural remains under a protective covering of earth. The N.W.M.P. buildings lie directly in contact with the third stratigraphic level, an older layer of sod combined with silt. Material from this level is segregated from the N.W.M.P. roofing deposit since it features artifacts from the native occupation of the area prior to the police arrival in 1875.

On completion of the excavations, all records and artifacts are taken to the field laboratory. Artifacts are cleaned, catalogued and coded to identify the location and context of each discovery. Some of the material will require conservation to arrest the deterioration process. For instance, rust may be cleaned from some metal artifacts and leather may have to be treated to prevent disintegration.

Subsequent to the cataloguing, the archaeologist will seek the assistance of other experts ranging from anthropologists, geographers and other social scientists to architects, statisticians, biologists and historians. Fort Walsh occupies an important position in the history of the North West Mounted Police. Future archaeological studies will, hopefully, contribute more information to the story of this remarkable epic of Canadian history.
The enlisted men's barracks/mess after excavations were completed. The building walls, floorboards and joists can be seen in the photo.

The final stages of an excavation. Dust is cleared from the historic building remains to prepare the site for final recording and photography.

Selected Bibliography

Deetz, James

Dempsey, Hugh

MacLeod, R.C.

Newlands, David L. and C. Breede

Sciscenti, James V. et al.

Archeological Societies

A number of provincial archeological societies have been established across western Canada. Membership is open to persons interested in fostering the study of archeology on a professional and/or amateur level and in promoting the preservation and scientific investigation of archeological sites. Inquiries regarding membership are welcomed by any of the societies listed below.

British Columbia
Archaeological Society of B.C.
4430 West 7th Avenue
Vancouver, B.C.
V6R 1X1

Alberta
Archaeological Society of Alberta
Edmonton Centre
11526 77th Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta

Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan Archaeological Society
P.O. Box 1012
Regina, Saskatchewan
S4P 3B2

Manitoba
Manitoba Archaeological Society
P.O. Box 1171
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Archaeologists make extensive use of graphics to illustrate the results of their work. This example, a plan of the west palisade, shows the butts of the palisade posts as uncovered during excavations. The posts were cut off at ground level during the N.W.M.P. abandonment of the site. Note the grid coordinates which provide the archaeologist with precise locational data on each post.