RESEARCH BULLETIN

No. 201 August 1983

Scratching the Surface-Three Years of Archaeological Investigation in Wood Buffalo National Park, Alberta/N.W.T.-Preliminary Summary Report

Marc G. Stevenson
Archaeology, Prairie Region, Parks Canada, Winnipeg

In 1980, a team of archaeologists from Parks Canada, Prairie Region carried out the first of two years of archaeological reconnaissance proposed for Wood Buffalo National Park. Despite the size and diversity of the park and the logistics of conducting a survey within it, the projects goals remained ambitious, if not difficult to attain, throughout each year of research. In essence, the project was initiated to provide an adequate information base on the parks archaeological resources so that they might be properly managed and incorporated into the planning process. More specifically, the project sought to provide statements on, a) site locational tendencies, and b) site age, function and cultural affiliation and recommend measures for their protection, avoidance, mitigation and interpretation. This report briefly presents the preliminary and substantive results of archaeological investigations carried out in Wood Buffalo National Park between 1980 and 1982.

Survey-1980

The survey in 1980 first began with the assessment of the Peace Point and Lake One dune sites--two highly visible and vulnerable sites identified previously by park visitors and staff. Each was determined to be extremely significant from a regional perspective. While Peace Point was assessed to be the most deeply stratified site yet discovered in the northern boreal forest of western Canada (Stevenson 1981a,b), the Lake One dune site, based on its projectiles (Figure 1), was found to contain one of the longest and most complete

records of prehistoric occupation in the region. As well, both initially produced evidence which suggested that they might be among the earliest sites in this part of Canada (Figure 1)(Stevenson 1981a,b).

Following the assessment of these sites, 30 km portions of the three major rivers that flow through the park--the Peace, Athabasca, and Slave--were systematically surveyed. This survey was designed specifically to gather information on riverine site location which would aid in locating sites during the second year of research. A total of 28, 14 and two sites were found on each river, respectively. After the initial survey, portions of several rivers which flow north from Lake Claire and Lake Athabasca and numerous features accessible from the Loop road in the park were investigated. These judgemental surveys located an additional 11 and six sites, respectively. Further information on work conducted within the park in 1980 can be obtained in Stevenson 1981a, b and n.d.b.

Excavation-1981

In recognition of the potential archaeological significance of Peace Point and its vulnerability to pack ice erosion, Parks Canada temporarily postponed survey in the park in 1981 to conduct a more thorough assessment of the site and to salvage archaeological materials in danger of being lost.

Perhaps the most significant result of excavation at Peace Point in 1981 was the finding that the most deeply stratified area of the site contained not six or seven distinct occupational surfaces as presumed, but 16 or more (Figure 2). At the same time, radiocarbon estimates indicated that the lowest levels at the Peace Point site (30R1-38)(IgPc2) dated to shortly after 2500 years ago [2210±155 B.P. (S-2158), 2190±270 B.P. (SFU-167)] and not to Agate-basin/Northern Plano times as was previously thought (Stevenson 1981a, b; 1982). However, what the site lacked in antiquity, it more than made up for in integrity. Recent analysis (Stevenson n.d.a) has indicated not only that most occupational surfaces have suffered little post-depositional disturbance but also that they may be the result of single or related events of occupation rather than multiple episodes of deposition. Given the possible diversity and/or co-occurence of both plains and boreal forest related cultures in the area over the past 3000 years (see Figure 1), the Peace Point site may be invaluable for elucidating prehistoric culture development, change, and continuity through time within the region. Culture-historical, methodological, and

theoretical considerations arising from the 1981 assessment of the Peace Point site are dealt with in Stevenson n.d.a.

Survey-1982

Similar to 1980, survey in 1982 employed a variety of means to locate and assess archaeological sites within the park. Armed with information obtained in 1980 on riverine site location, the rest of the Slave River and a major portion of the Peace River were surveyed. Other major activities included the investigation of six large lakes in the vast interior region of the park; the west side of Lake Claire; several secondary tributaries of the Slave and Peace rivers; and most major trails and access roads--including a major section of the Garden Creek/Peace Point winter road. More than several dozen sites were found bringing the total number of known sites in the park close to 100. Also briefly re-investigated were the Lake One dune and Peace Point sites, as well as favourable locations accessible from the Loop road.

The most important site recorded during 1982 may be the large lithic reduction/habitation foci found along the Garden Creek/Peace Point winter road in the vicinity of the Boyer Rapids. For up to three kilometers or more along this road allowance, virtually thousands of early stage core/tool reduction flakes as well as cores and tools were noted. As lithic artifacts were observed in the road more than a kilometer away from the river, the site is estimated to be very large, perhaps on the order of hundreds of hectares. This would make it one of the largest sites yet found in the northern boreal forest. Other significant results include the finding of up to one-half dozen multi-component and/or stratified sites on the Slave River. At least two of the most productive of these sites on the park side of the Slave are protected by soil ridges formed by ice shove during spring break up. However, it is obvious these ridges will be destroyed by any rise in water level, however minor, should hydro- electric dam construction proceed downstream.

Concluding Remarks

Even though a team of two archaeologists has carried out three seasons of archaeological investigations in Wood Buffalo National Park, it is obvious that, in an area larger than some countries, only the surface has been scratched. Yet some steps, however meager, were made towards realizing the projects objectives. For example, we now have a better idea where sites are

going to be located in the park, both along and away from rivers. We can not predict with any confidence where sites will not appear. We do know, however, what features will continue to be favourable for the recovery and preservation of archaeological resources. With respect to the age and cultural affiliation of sites recorded, it is fortunate that datable bone was found in association with culturally diagnostic artifacts at some sites along the Slave and Peace rivers where soils are comprised of well-drained silty sands. While it is hard to escape the conclusion that the many sites along the gypsum/limestone cliffs of the lower Peace are primarily lithic reduction foci with some habitation, the function of other sites may eventually come to light with further lithic and faunal analyses. Finally, although specific recommendations remain to be formulated, it seems obvious that some sites more than others will require protective and mitigatory measures.

In the light of the above statement, no more deserving of attention are the Peace Point, Lake One dune, and Boyer Rapids sites. Not only are they subject to severe attritional processes (either through natural or cultural disturbance or both), but each, because of its own unique characteristics, are among the most significant archaeological sites yet discovered in the northern boreal forest of western Canada.

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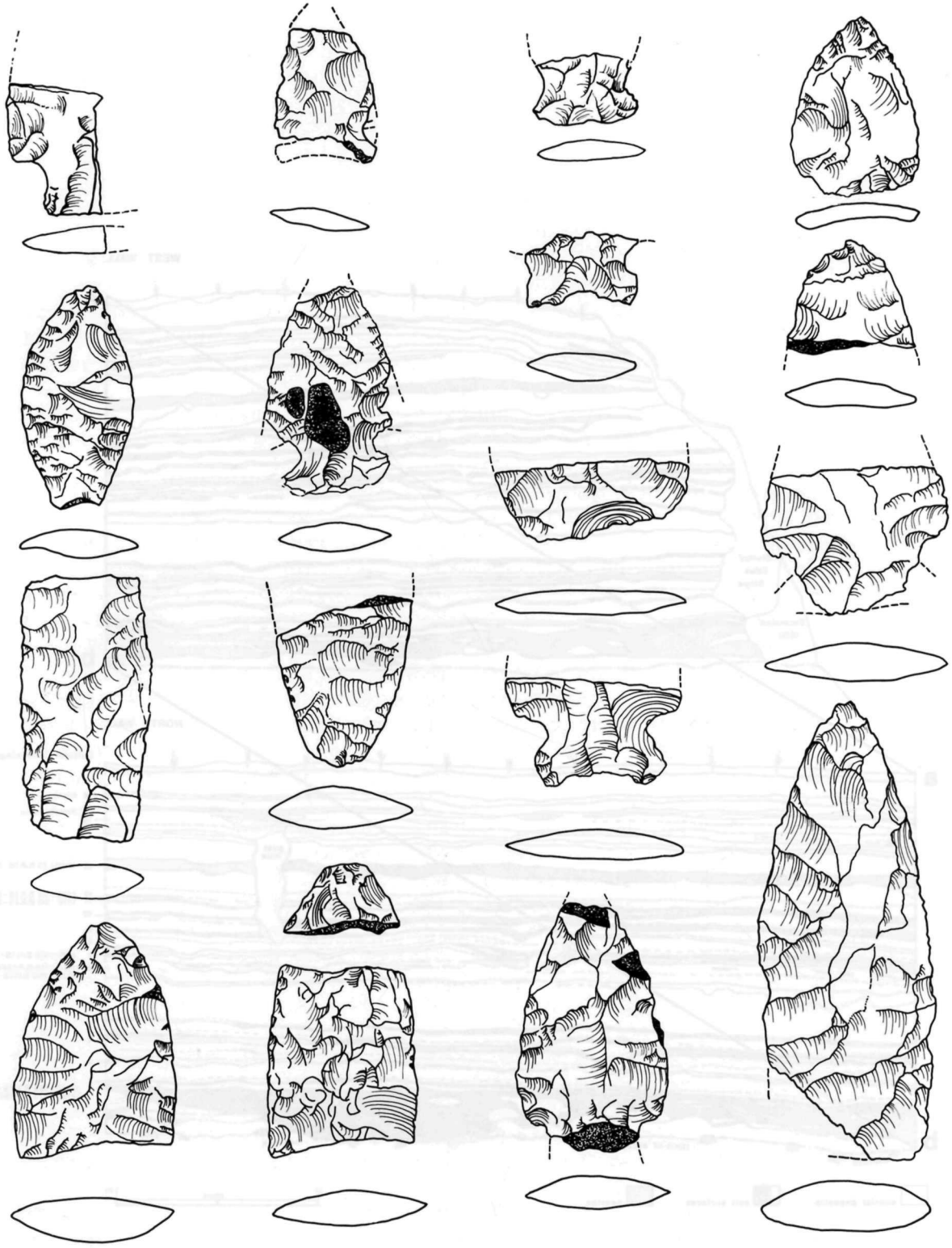

Figure 1. Projectile point forms from Lake One Dune Site.

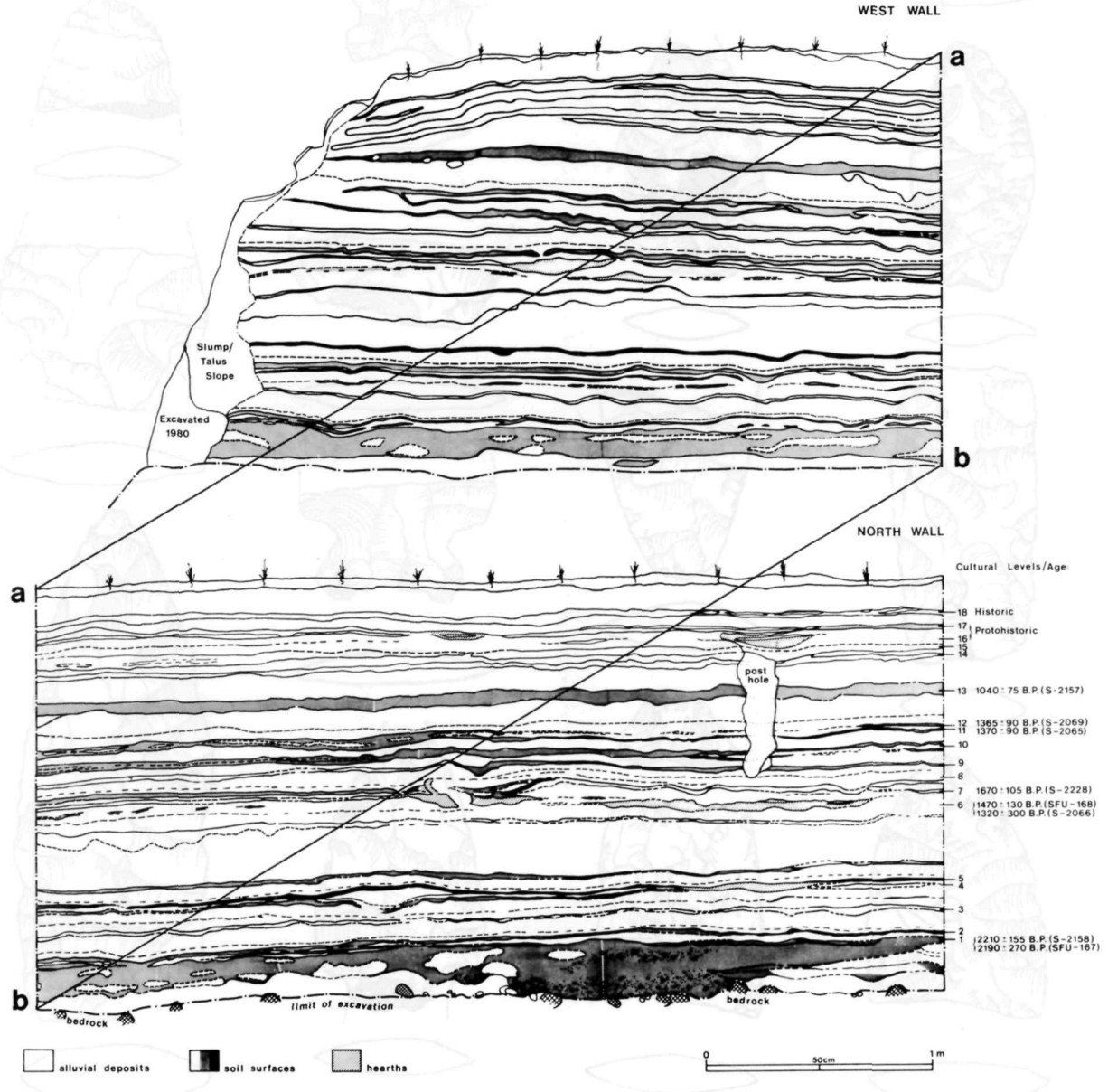

Figure 2. Profiles of north and west walls at excavation unit with occupation surfaces and associated radiocarbon dates (bone collagen, uncorrected).

ISSN: 0228-1228
Published by authority of
the Minister of the Environment
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Services Canada 1983

Canada