

## Archaeological Study of the Fort Pelly Site

**D**URING THE MONTHS of June, July and August, 1971, the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History in Regina, a branch of the provincial Department of Natural Resources, began the excavation of the site of the first Fort Pelly which was one of the major fur trading posts in Saskatchewan. I had the good fortune to be in charge of the fine crew that was assembled for work on the site.

The first Fort Pelly was built in 1824 by the Hudson's Bay Company after the amalgamation of this company and the North West Company. Fort Pelly soon became the headquarters for the whole Swan River area and as such served as provision centre for posts as far away as Fort Ellice, Fort Qu'Appelle and Last Mountain House. The major area of trading influence extended to the areas bounded by Lake Winnipegosis, the Red Deer River, the Quill Lakes, Touchwood Hills and the Qu'Appelle Valley. In November, 1842 the original buildings were destroyed by fire but the post was immediately rebuilt on the same location. In 1856-57 a new Fort Pelly was built on higher ground a quarter of a mile to the south-east of the original site. This move was necessitated by the periodic flooding of the original post at times of high water on the Assiniboine River. For a period of time the old fort buildings were used as living quarters for some of the men and as barns for cattle and horses.

After much archival research, it was determined that no ground plans, drawings, or sketches of the first post existed, so armed with only sketchy references extracted from various journals we began to tackle the task of filling in the gaps of history by archaeological means. Of prime importance was the location of the original palisade, which according to journal entries was 120 feet square.

By a fortuitous occurrence, while clearing the site a rather heavy post was noted as exposed by an open badger hole. This, therefore, became our first excavation unit and as it turned out was located on the original eastern palisade line. The original north palisade line was also later located. A total of twenty-six 10' x 10' excavation units were done during the summer.

As excavations continued, the following features or structures were at least partially excavated so that locations of some of the buildings became known. Adjacent to the east palisade line the forge area and tempering trough of the blacksmith shop were located. Along this same line, further to the south, the superstructure of a building tentatively designated as a stable was located. Near this structure a bone refuse pit was excavated. A series of two superimposed fire hearths and what would appear to be the wooden and stone superstructure of a major building (warehouse??) were also located. Immediately adjacent to the north palisade line we excavated what appears to be one of the blockhouses and just inside this structure the base of the flagpole was excavated. A section of this north palisade was located further to the west. This section, however, was

not in an upright position but had apparently fallen over in situ and been thus buried, by subsequent soil drifting. A circular pit that was evidenced by a shallow depression on the surface was excavated. No definite use for this can yet be determined. The most feasible explanation seems to be that it was a shallow pit dug below an already existing building for storage. At this point we are designating the major structure revealed by this summer's excavations, as the chief factor's or master's house. The cellar depression is located on the highest point of land in the surrounding area. The northern half of this cellar was excavated. Features found included the east foundation line, cribbing logs, cellar outline and bark-lined floor.

Material common to most historic fur trade sites was recovered in some volume. Artifacts such as hand-wrought and machine-made square nails predominated. Next in number of occurrences were fragments of stems and bowls of Kaolin trade pipes. They were largely the T. D. variety. Broken china was found in all excavation units and those that were recognizable by the hallmark were "Copeland-late Spode". A major recovery was the almost totally restorable plate found in many fragments in the tempering trough of the blacksmith shop. Glass fragments representing both window glass and glass bottles were numerous. Several metal trade points and much of the barrel-hoop material from which they were made were found. Other hunting artifacts were two long bone harpoons—one from along the east palisade line and one in the warehouse fire hearth. One large fish hook was recovered from the master's house cellar. Fragments of lead foil—the lining from tea crates—was a rather common recovery. Clothing was represented only by two shoe soles and one heel, and a small section of green stroud cloth. Artifacts, however, associated with clothing were numerous. These included buttons of metal, bone, and shell; needles; dressmaking pins; thimbles; and dress or collar hooks and eyes.

Small glass seed beads were common. In one instance some 1,400 were recovered near the firehearth in the warehouse. These had once been stored in a cylindrical birch bark basket. This basket was found underlying some of the outer stones of the hearth. Two baling seals were found, one in the warehouse, and one beside a third cellar depression we are tentatively designating as the kitchen, which is immediately adjacent to the factor's house. A metal hoe blade was recovered from the blacksmith shop in the tempering trough. Tableware was not common, but several knives were found including one with complete incised bone handle still intact.

Evidence of boat building activities, which the journals tell us was carried on here, was provided by the finding of a large oar lock along the north palisade line. Other single or similar groups of artifacts of note recovered included a jew's harp, two dog harness bells, one trade axe richly engraved, darning needle made of lead, several locks or lock parts and keys, door hanger spikes, files, chisels, offset awls, pen nibs, gun flints, gun worms, and serpentine side plates, to list just a few.

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