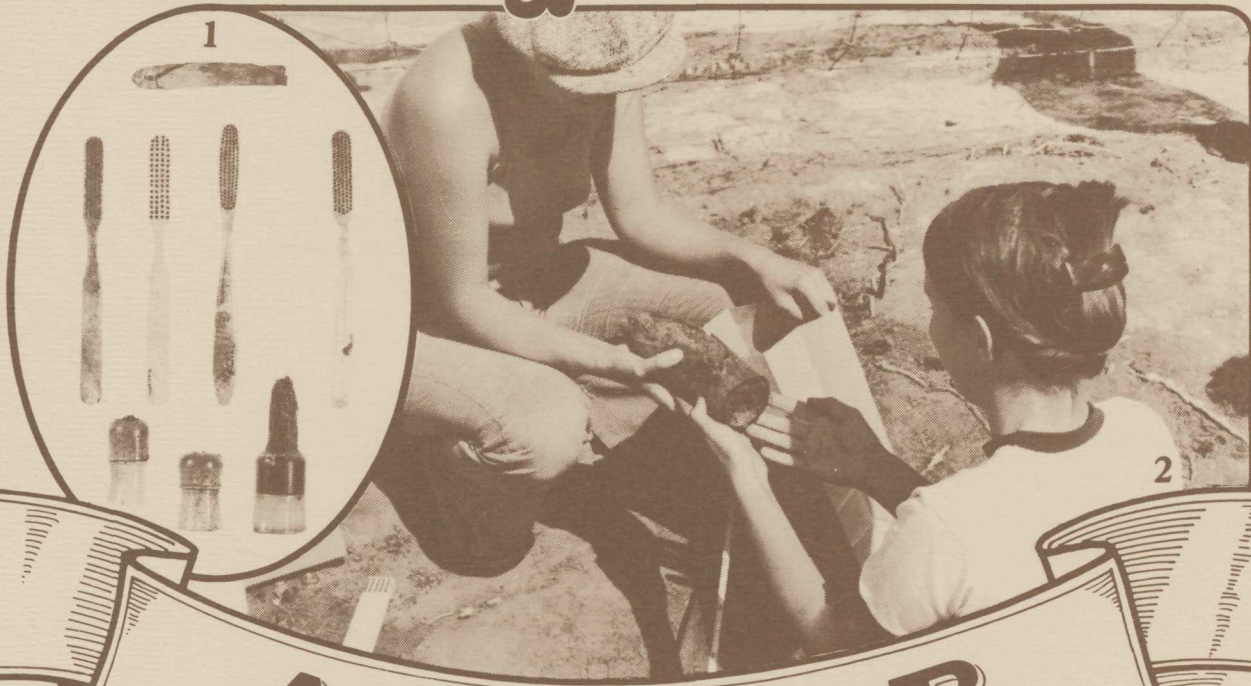


# Archaeology at Fort Walsh



## A MIRROR OF OUR PAST

**1** A straight razor, shaving brush and tooth brush handles recovered from the building excavations.

**2** Removing artifacts from the ground.

### A Mirror of Our Past

**I**magine 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 a 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

**K**nowledge 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



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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, the elevation of the floor in the N.W.M.P. saddlery is being measured from a horizontal line. This will provide information on the extent to which the police leveled the ground surface before the building was constructed.



The archaeology field lab. Artifacts are being catalogued for future analyses.

Excavations in progress. Hand tools are used in order to peel the soil away in thin layers.



study of the physical remains of common, patterned, everyday behavior of *all* persons, be they rich or poor, famous or infamous, helps foster a broader understanding of the cultural and physical past. Thus historical documentation is important to understanding past events at Fort Walsh. In fact, a thorough knowledge of the archival documents is necessary before the archaeologist can begin to interpret the results of his/her excavations. The historic documents provide the archaeologist with an idea of what to look for and the framework in which to interpret archaeological data.

## Fort Walsh

In the archaeologist's interpretation of mankind's past, the items (artifacts) excavated are important in 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 shovelful of earth is removed. This awesome responsibility is vital since 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 find 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 a site the older the deposit.

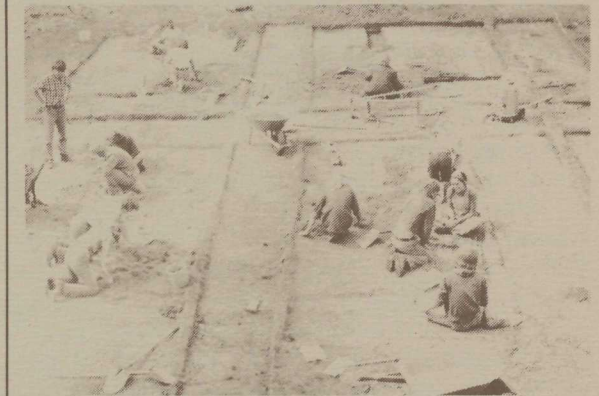
At Fort Walsh three stratigraphic levels are the major concern of the archaeologist. The upper layer

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.

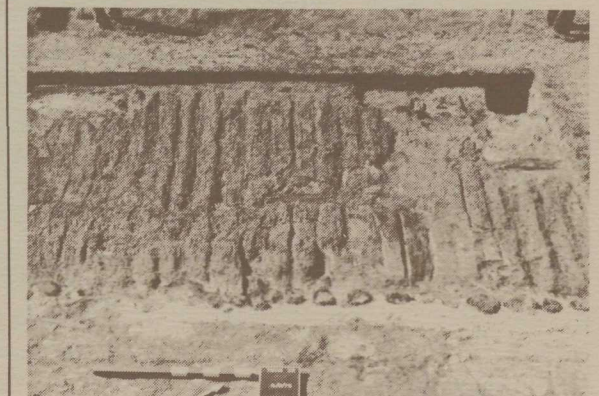
On completion of the excavations, all records and artifacts are taken

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 is faced with providing building locations and architectural data, to assist in the reconstructions of the fort. In addition, the day-to-day life at the post will be studied.

To undertake the study, 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.



Archaeologists in the process of uncovering the remains of the enlisted men's barracks/mess.



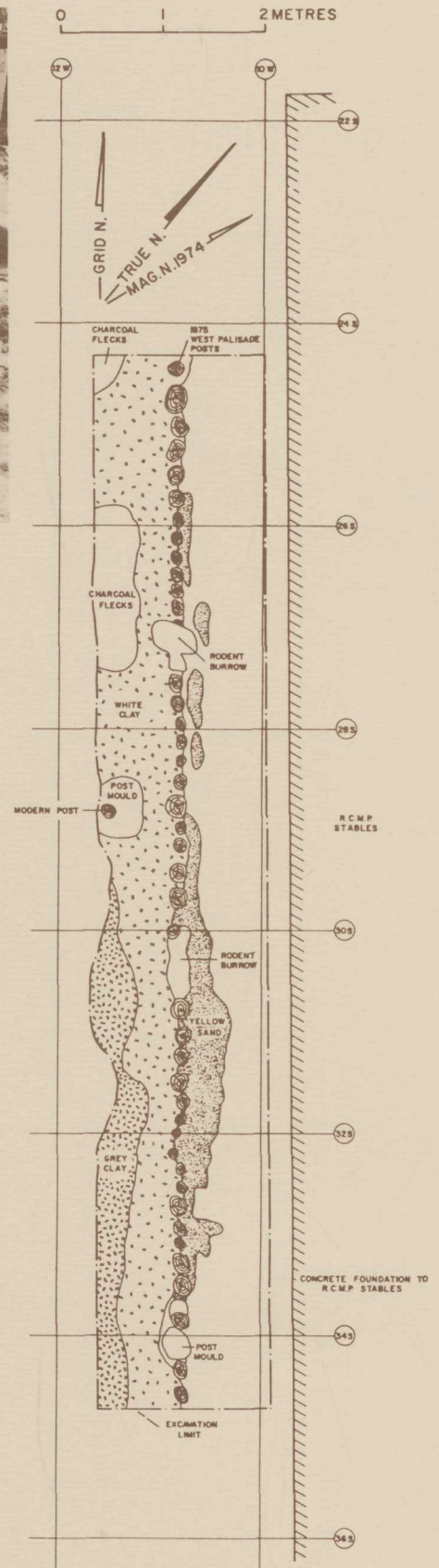
The wall and floor remains of the 1875 north stables. The structure was built with vertical log walls and whitewashed with white clay.



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.



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.

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## Archaeological Societies

A number of provincial archaeological societies have been established across western Canada. Membership is open to persons interested in fostering the study of archaeology on a professional and/or amateur level and in promoting the preservation and scientific investigation of archaeological 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