

Reconstructions of a Different Kind: The Mounted Police and the Rebirth of Fort Walsh, 1942-1966

by James De Jonge

Fort Walsh has been dismantled and the police stationed there moved to Maple Creek ... Very likely at some future day admirers of ancient ruins will rediscover its desolate mud chimneys and entwine them with romances such as the poetry loving people of the East believe to be the lot of every man who proceeded the Canadian Pacific Railway (*Benton Weekly Record*, 29 September 1883).

A Fort Benton, Montana newspaper proved remarkably accurate in its prediction that future generations might attach significance to the site of this North-West Mounted Police fort. The writer was aware of the aura already surrounding the Mounted Police, who had ventured into the Canadian Northwest in 1874 to assert sovereignty and establish "law and order." Fort Benton was a principal source of supplies for Fort Walsh, the frontier post erected by the Mounties in 1875 in the Cypress Hills area of present-day Saskatchewan. Despite its brief period of operation, Fort Walsh was long remembered by police and early settlers alike as a site that had witnessed important events in the history of the Canadian West. During the first half of the twentieth century, the appreciation of this historic place went far beyond a mere romanticization of ruins. Only sixty years after its abandonment in 1883, the fort was "reborn" as a historical reconstruction, a project undertaken by the Mounted Police themselves to re-establish a link with the early years of the force.

Today, thousands of tourists visit the site of the historic fort annually. The role of the police in the Canadian West during the turbulent years of the 1870s and 1880s is conveyed by interpretation panels set against a backdrop of reconstructed log buildings and a log palisade. These displays and re-created elements form an integral part of Fort Walsh National Historic Site, which has been administered by Parks Canada since

1968. Parks Canada's close association with the site today belies the fact that it had relatively little to do with the fort's early development. Visitors may not initially be aware that the log buildings were constructed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police during the 1940s. Their accomplishment in resurrecting the fort is a fascinating chapter in the evolution of this national historic site. Fort Walsh has the distinction of being both an early example of a "reconstructed" historic site in Canada and one that had a peculiar, if not unique, purpose. Despite the immense work involved in re-creating the historic fort buildings in the 1940s, Fort Walsh was not meant to be a public attraction. Rather, the police designed it as an operational ranch or "remount station" for breeding and raising horses for ceremonial purposes. As envisioned by RCMP Commissioner Stuart Taylor Wood, the buildings were "historic shells" intended to evoke the character of the 1870s fort and thereby help the force maintain a link with its origins and traditions.

The log buildings at the site today probably tell us more about the Mounted Police in the 1940s than they do about the historic fort buildings of the 1870s, which they are supposed to emulate. It was quite an achievement for the police to establish a ranch in this relatively isolated location during the Second World War, and to carry out this activity using buildings that were also meant to be historicized shells. Unfortunately, the implications of this dual-purpose site were not fully thought out at the beginning, which created numerous challenges for the police and its commissioner in the years that followed. The events leading to the resurrection of Fort Walsh also form an interesting early chapter in the heritage preservation movement in Saskatchewan. The aspirations of various heritage-minded individuals and groups in the province coalesced during the 1930s, and became an important catalyst for raising and sustaining interest in this national historic site.¹ For all of these reasons, the modest log buildings at Fort Walsh merit a closer look.

GENESIS OF AN IDEA

The fort that captured the attention of the police and heritage enthusiasts during the first half of this century

James De Jonge is an historian/architectural historian who works for the National Historic Sites Directorate of Parks Canada in Ottawa. This article arises from his ongoing interest in historical reconstructions and in the built heritage of the Mounted Police.

had been an important centre of police activity in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Fort Walsh was established in a strategic location near the site of the notorious Cypress Hills Massacre where Natives had been killed by American fur traders in 1873, following a misunderstanding over the missing horse of a trader. This nationally reported event served as a catalyst for the despatch of the police to the West, and influenced the choice of the fort's location in the heart of the fur trading region. During its brief eight-year history, Fort Walsh grew rapidly in size and importance. It became the headquarters of the force in 1878 in response to the presence of a large party of Sioux under Sitting Bull and other chiefs who migrated to Canada to seek refuge after they defeated Custer at the Little Bighorn. Fort Walsh remained a major centre for treaty negotiations and police activity until the early 1880s, when the headquarters were moved to Regina, near the line of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Within a few years, little remained of Fort Walsh and its adjacent trading settlement, as most buildings were dismantled or left to decay.²

Following its abandonment by the Mounted Police in 1883, the site of Fort Walsh became integrated into a ranch operation—one of several established in the Cypress Hills region of southern Saskatchewan during the 1890s. The physical remains of the fort gradually deteriorated, becoming overgrown with vegetation and increasingly obscured by the overlay of ranching activ-

ity. Still, the site remained a vivid memory for many local settlers, Mounted Police veterans, and former residents of the abandoned trading community adjacent to the fort. The first concerted effort to acknowledge and mark the site, however, did not arise locally; it originated with the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC). Established in 1919, this federal advisory body was composed of historically minded individuals whose approach to commemoration focused on sites that exemplified the process of colonial expansion, with a particular appreciation for the role of military force. Fort Walsh fit comfortably within this nationalist vision, and became one of a multitude of military sites across the country commemorated for their national significance by the HSMBC during its early years.³ The federal government acquired title to the 1870s Mounted Police cemetery beside Fort Walsh, where it erected a cairn and unveiled the HSMBC plaque in 1927. Written by Professor A.S. Morton of the University of Saskatchewan, the commemorative plaque reinforced the predominant colonial perspective that the Mounted Police "imposed Queen's Law on a fretful realm" where hunting parties of Native people "met and fought."⁴

In view of the fort's isolated location and the limited financial resources at their disposal, the HSMBC and the Dominion Parks Branch (the administering body of the HSMBC) were not eager to become involved in further site development in the years that followed. The

impetus to do more came from local individuals and organizations during the 1930s. In 1931 the Canadian Club of Govenlock and the Old-Timers' Association of Maple Creek placed concrete markers at the corners of the former stockade at Fort Walsh, which by then was all but obliterated.⁵ Prominent in this endeavour were David Fleming, an RCMP sergeant and history enthusiast in charge of the Maple Creek detachment, and Horace Greeley, an "Old-Timer" who had clerked in one of the stores in the village adjacent to the historic fort.

Their activities inspired others to the cause of heritage preservation, notably George Shepherd, a farmer and rancher who lived near the fort in Maple Creek, and who would later become the first curator of



National Archives of Canada, C15281.

Fort Walsh around 1878.

the Western Development Museum in Saskatoon. In 1932 Shepherd attended a rifle shoot and picnic at Fort Walsh sponsored by the Canadian Club and the Old-Timers as a fund-raiser to pay for the concrete markers. Here, he met Horace Greeley and "fell under the spell of his gospel."⁶ In his published memoirs, Shepherd recalled that his visit to the site converted him to the "pioneer history of the West ... rather like a man who had cast everything aside to enter the ministry of the church" This interest in history and historical preservation was also rooted in the harsh realities of the Depression. The widespread hardship on the Prairies resulting from crop failures and prolonged drought prompted Shepherd and others to "escape the unpleasant realities of the thirties" and retreat to "the good old days of the past." Shepherd explained:

I led two lives during much of the thirties. I lived in the world of yesterday: the heartaches, the anxiety, the hopelessness of the Depression. I also lived in the region west of yesterday: the glamour, the vitality, and the purposefulness of bygone frontier history.

I desperately needed an escape from the frustrations of drought and dust. What better escape than a flight into the heroic past? It was not a long journey, for all about us in the south country were aging giants of an earlier day.⁷

The activities of Shepherd and Greeley underline the important role of local enthusiasts in raising public awareness about the province's heritage, and in buttressing the work of the few professionally trained academics like A.S. Morton during this period. Shepherd began to collect information on the fort's history and spoke at picnics and other local gatherings to raise interest in the site. In January 1933, after a trust company foreclosed the mortgage on the ranch at the Fort Walsh site, he requested that the Dominion Parks Branch in Ottawa intervene to ensure the preservation of the site.⁸ Other groups, inspired by Shepherd, reinforced his request. The Canadian Club of Shaunavon and the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association, which held its convention in Shaunavon in 1933, passed resolutions urging the federal government to reserve the fort property as a national historic site. In Ottawa, James Harkin, the commissioner of the National Parks Branch, was not keen to become further involved in Fort Walsh, given financial constraints and the absence of major physical remains at the site. He conferred with the sole HSMBC member from the West, Judge Frederick Howay from New Westminster, who had supported the erection of the original plaque and cairn.⁹ Howay probably captured the sentiments of federal bureaucrats in his terse reply: "I do not see that Fort Walsh was of such outstanding national importance as to justify its being classed as worthy of this action."¹⁰

Shepherd elicited a more sympathetic response from Stuart Taylor Wood, the assistant commissioner of the RCMP stationed at Regina. Wood had become

acquainted with Shepherd after reading newspaper accounts of Shepherd's research into the heritage of the force, and by 1933 the two were close friends. Wood, who had entered the force in 1912 and served at numerous outposts in western Canada and the Arctic, had also developed a keen interest in the history and traditions of the Mounted Police. He followed in the footsteps of his father, Zachary Taylor Wood, a distinguished officer of the force who was recruited in 1885 and rose to the position of assistant commissioner before his death in 1915.¹¹ Around 1933 George Shepherd accompanied Stuart Taylor Wood to the Cypress Hills area where, according to Shepherd, the assistant commissioner too fell under the spell of the historic fort:

After his initial visit to the Cypress Hills it was a case of love at first sight. The historic significance of Fort Walsh struck Stuart Wood like a bolt of lightning and from this he never fully recovered. The Fort had been built in 1875 in the beautiful Battle Creek Valley and Wood never rested until he had purchased the fort site...¹²

For the remainder of the decade the fort remained in private hands, while Wood considered ways for the force to acquire the site. His affinity for the traditions of the force continued to grow as he gradually ascended to the position of RCMP commissioner in March 1938 at the age of forty-nine. He was influential in the establishment of the RCMP Museum at Depot Division in Regina in 1933, took steps to form a musical band, and subsequently commissioned an official history of the force, undertaken by John Peter Turner during the 1940s. His particular interest in Fort Walsh became evident soon after his appointment as commissioner, when he made an agreement with the National Parks Branch to look after the Mounted Police cemetery near the site of the historic fort. By 1939, using George Shepherd as a go-between, Wood was actively negotiating for the purchase of the fort site with Frank Nuttall, the owner.¹³

Since he lacked a mandate to purchase the property solely on the basis of its historic significance, Wood's strategy was to link the acquisition to the equestrian needs of the force. An experienced horseman himself, the commissioner was keen on preserving the force's equestrian tradition, which had been a characteristic feature of police work in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Despite the advent of the automobile, the police still used horses on occasion into the 1930s for patrols and for the "control and dispersal of mobs and unlawful assemblies." By this time, however, the practical benefits of horses had become secondary to their symbolic role in promoting a positive popular image of the force. The importance attached to the mounted tradition was evident in the force's concern over the quality of its saddle horses, which in 1939 included about 150 mounts concentrated in Ottawa and Regina. That year the police secured a suitable stallion and began breeding mares in the existing stable facilities at Depot Division

in Regina.¹⁴ Commissioner Wood devised a plan whereby Fort Walsh would be transformed into a horse-breeding station, a facility that he argued was essential for providing sufficiently large saddle horses that were of a consistent black tone—a colour that contrasted effectively with the force's scarlet uniforms.¹⁵

After making a tentative agreement with Frank Nuttall in 1939-40, Wood sought federal approval to acquire the Fort Walsh site. A cut in the force's budget for 1941 prevented the commissioner from securing the deal, but he persevered the following year. In his justification for purchasing the site, Wood blamed the shortage of saddle horses on the American and French governments, which had been buying horses since the outset of the war. He also claimed that mounted patrols were becoming increasingly attractive in the face of gas rationing. As an added measure, he sought the political support of James Gardiner, the former Premier of Saskatchewan who was now the federal Minister of Agriculture. In the end, the Privy Council succumbed to his plan and authorized the purchase in August 1942, which included over 700 acres of deeded land and nearly 1700 acres of leased grazing land.¹⁶ Wood's accomplishment was noteworthy, given that the force's principal ceremonial function for its horses, the famed Musical Ride, had been temporarily suspended in 1939 because of the war, and would not be reinstated until 1948.¹⁷ Nonetheless, for an initial investment of \$10,000, the RCMP would get its black horses, and the commissioner his historic site.

ARRIVING AT THE APPROXIMATE, 1942-1948

Commissioner Wood and the Mounted Police wasted little time in re-creating Fort Walsh as a specialized detachment for breeding horses. His intention, however, was not simply to develop a conventional ranch near the site or to renovate the existing buildings from the Nuttall ranch. The commissioner had in mind the far more ambitious goal of actually reconstructing log buildings from the original fort. These replicas, erected on their original sites, would accommodate the various operational needs of the remount station. While historical reconstructions were by no means a new phenomenon, the dual purpose behind Commissioner Wood's plan for Fort Walsh was quite unusual. Officially, the site was not intended to be developed as a tourist attraction. Instead, it would be an operational police detachment, albeit one with a unique character that would provide a tangible link with the force's origins and traditions.

Wood's private motives appear to have been the driving force behind the project, though he apparently never articulated his vision in writing in any comprehensive way. George Shepherd's account leads us to believe that Wood's interest in the site was akin to a religious conversion. The commissioner's enthusiasm may

also have been rooted in the changing nature of police work in the 20th century, which was increasingly focused on urban areas and issues such as labour unrest. Commissioner Wood, like Shepherd, may have been trying to escape some of the realities of the time and reinforce the connection with frontier policing and the early years of the force. Still, an obvious question that remains is who exactly was supposed to benefit from the considerable effort invested in the reconstruction? Given the isolated location of the remount station and its specialized purpose, this was a site that relatively few members of the RCMP would ever see. Moreover, the remount station was not intended to be a tourist destination.

Wood's overall approach was to re-create the fort as it would have appeared around 1877 to 1879, but in a manner that combined the principle of practicality with vague and generalized notions of the past. To facilitate the operation of the remount station, it made sense not to strive for a faithful replica of Fort Walsh, but merely a stylized and sanitized shell of the original. The police did not reconstruct all the fort buildings, just those that would be useful to the functioning of the remount station. Hidden behind the romanticized image of the frontier police fort was the stark reality that this had not been an especially attractive or desirable place to live during the late 1870s. Dirt, discomfort and disease were characteristic features of the early forts, but these elements did not fit well with the popular and idealized view of the past.

Using the ranch buildings adjacent to the fort as a base of operations, the police engaged several constables and civilians in 1942 and 1943, including Frank Nuttall, the former owner of the ranch, who began cutting logs and preparing the site.¹⁸ Nuttall supervised much of the day-to-day work and conferred closely with RCMP Sergeant David Fleming, whose passion for the history of the force rivalled that of the commissioner. George Shepherd was also consulted frequently. Despite their enthusiasm, the police had only scant historical evidence to guide the reconstruction work. In the absence of accurate plans of original buildings and their arrangement, they relied heavily on recollections of veterans of the force who had served at Fort Walsh, and on a few surviving historical photographs. This information was supplemented by some "pick and shovel archaeology" undertaken by individuals with no formal training in excavation.

Determining the appearance and location of each of the original fort buildings proved to be a challenging task, complicated by the numerous structural changes made to the fort during its brief period of operation. As Commissioner Wood summed it up in January 1943, a few months before work was to begin on the first buildings, "the further we go the more confused it gets."¹⁹ The following year the police were still unable to determine the precise evolution of the fort. John Peter

Turner, the historian employed by the force, noted: "We cannot nail down a plan to fit in with all the various changes that went on from time to time, and it will be necessary, to a great extent, to arrive at the approximate."²⁰

The operational dictates of the remount station undoubtedly influenced the reconstruction concept and contributed to the unique character of the site. The stylized and sanitized nature of the buildings was, however, consistent with reconstruction projects of the day that were specifically built as tourist attractions. During the 1930s various levels of government funded the reconstruction of buildings at historic sites, in part as Depression relief projects; notable examples were the Port Royal Habitation in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley, and Fort York and Fort George in Ontario. In all of these projects, historical evidence was used when available and when it suited the underlying predisposition to present and evoke a generalized "pioneer aesthetic." Scant site-specific data was readily supplemented by conjectural knowledge of the "typical" whenever detailed evidence was lacking.²¹ The exposed log structures at Fort Walsh fit nicely within the prevailing contemporary view that pioneer buildings should convey a rugged, woody aesthetic.

Another and more direct influence on the Fort Walsh reconstructions was the rustic building programs that had evolved in the national parks in western Canada during the opening decades of the twentieth century. With its emphasis on peeled-log construction and natural stone surfaces, the rustic design approach was popular for the construction of park administration and recreational buildings. Rustic park buildings harmonized with the natural surroundings and evoked the virtues of a rural pre-industrial era.²² The overall aesthetic was similar to that conveyed by the reconstructions at Fort George and comparable historic sites. The Mounted Police took advantage of the knowledge and construction experience accumulated by the national park administrators.

In Ottawa, using historical photographs as a guide, Commissioner Wood had some rudimentary drawings prepared for several Fort Walsh buildings in 1943. The execution of the design, however, was left largely to the discretion of skilled logmen recommended by the National Parks Branch who had constructed many buildings at Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan in the preceding years.²³ Specific construction details were not a priority, as evidenced by the use of off-the-shelf windows and building hardware from a nearby outlet store of the Beaver Lumber Company in the town of Maple Creek.²⁴ Commenting on the rough drawings for the first three buildings to be erected in 1943, Wood emphasized that they were to be used as a rough guide, supplemented by historical photographs and by the foreman's own judgement:

Wherever there is any doubt, keep as close to the

original design of the buildings as possible in regard to the windows, interior layout, doors, etc., as I can only indicate to you my ideas in a rather rough way; in other words, follow the photographs as closely as practicable. I leave it to your own good judgement in the majority of questions, as you know the policy I have discussed from time to time.²⁵

From 1943 to 1948 the police constructed eight buildings on the site of historic Fort Walsh (see photo on page 28). All but one (the artisans building) were built using horizontally laid logs, connected at the corners with saddle-notched joints and covered with low-pitched gable roofs. Log cross walls divided the interiors into rooms. Although this traditional construction technology had been employed on the original fort buildings, the 1940s reconstructions were set on concrete foundations, with cement or plaster chinking between the logs in place of the clay-based mixtures applied to the originals. The horizontal log-work beneath the gable ends was continued up to the roofline even though the historical photos available to the RCMP showed many gable ends covered by vertical boards. The roofs were supported by log purlins, rafters, boards and an exterior cladding of red asphalt shingles. By contrast, the roofs of barracks and workshops from the original fort had been clad with split poles laid flush from a central ridge pole to the rafters, on top of which was placed a layer of clay to serve as insulation, and a final covering of overlapping planks. Wood-shingle roofs were reserved for storage buildings where the extra expense could be justified on the basis of preventing goods from being damaged by water.²⁶

The overall aesthetic of the remount station was more reminiscent of the rustic buildings in the national parks, from which many of the design elements were borrowed. In this way the RCMP avoided several unpleasant aspects of the original fort, including leaking roofs, infestation by vermin and a prevailing dampness, which had caused a virulent and recurring fever in the late 1870s and early 1880s. To remedy this problem the police had routinely whitewashed and fumigated the barracks with burning sulphur and pulled up the floors to dry out the interiors.²⁷ The historic ambience of the 1940s remount station was also affected by utility poles and overhead powerlines that brought electricity to the various buildings.

Despite numerous concessions to modernity, Commissioner Wood attempted, where possible, to use the remount station buildings in a manner sympathetic to the functions of the historic fort buildings they represented. An obvious functional link between past and present was evident in the large log stable for the remount station, which was located near the site of a horse stable from the 1870s fort. Adjacent to the stable the police constructed a vertical-log artisans building that accommodated a carpenter's shop, blacksmith's shop and sick horse stable for the remount station. It too was situated in the same general area as buildings

from the original fort which had served similar functions. The vertical-log design was historically appropriate for workshop buildings of this kind, although the logs would have been set directly into a trench in the 1870s. The vertical logs of the 1940s version were set on, and toe-nailed to, a timber base which rested on a concrete foundation in order to prevent their decay.

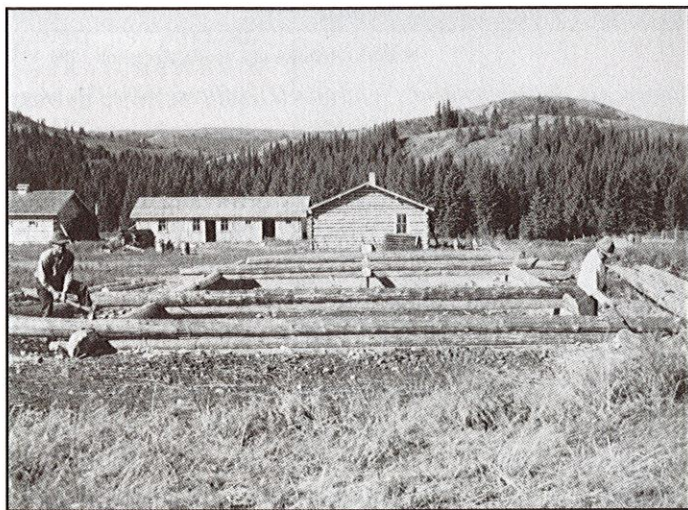
The residence for the ranch foreman, located as it was on the site of the quarters of Superintendent James Morrow Walsh, the commanding officer of the historic fort, also demonstrated the link between past and present. Probably the most interesting building was the reconstructed quarters of A.G. Irvine, assistant commissioner of the Mounted Police during the Fort Walsh era. This was one of the first buildings erected at the remount station in 1943, and it initially served as a residence for the ranch employees. Around 1951 after his retirement from the force, however, Wood used the building as his summer retreat, in an obvious effort to establish a link with his predecessor. Wood may have been contemplating his retirement plans already in 1943 when he reviewed the design drawings for the commissioner's residence. He requested that the workmen strive for accuracy in replicating the building's dimensions, construction materials, and window placement, but was pragmatic in stipulating the inclusion of conventional hardwood flooring and an attractive stone masonry fireplace in place of a utilitarian and historically appropriate woodstove. Wood noted that, "Only

was awkward in the case of the reconstructed guard-house, which had no obvious purpose at a ranch. Built in 1943, it initially served as a granary for storing oats, with the rear portion subdivided into three feed compartments intended to evoke jail cells.²⁹ Wood may have cherished the guardhouse because of its distinctive role at the historic fort in helping the police monitor the entry and exit of personnel, and for its associations with internal discipline and "law and order" in general. Within a few years, though, the ranch employees were using the building to house a gasoline-powered generator, and they erected a new log granary building closer to the stable on a site loosely corresponding to that of a bakery and kitchen from the original fort.³⁰ It must have required quite a stretch of the imagination for the ranch hands to refer to the remount station's two-vehicle garage as the "Magazine" simply because it was built of logs and situated near the site of the historic fort building used for storing gun powder and armaments.

The decision not to reconstruct the palisade limited the effectiveness of the remount station in evoking the atmosphere of the original fort. The police built a fence around the site's perimeter along the line of the circa 1878 palisade, though this probably reinforced the site's attributes as an operational ranch. Moreover, the relatively small number of reconstructed buildings did not readily convey the impression of a military site capable of accommodating a large garrison, in contrast to the original fort with its numerous, hastily constructed buildings. Still, by following a gradual program of erecting a few buildings each year, the police had by 1948 completed work on the ranch and achieved the commissioner's goal of re-creating, in a generalized manner, the historic fort. Set among the scenic Cypress Hills, the dual-purpose breeding ranch/historical reconstruction was the culmination of one man's vision. Combining these two functions at one site had required considerable energy and imagination on the part of Commissioner Wood and the RCMP. Reconciling these rather disparate purposes at this remote location, however, would prove equally challenging in the decades to follow.

THEY RAISE HORSES, DON'T THEY?

Despite the historicized appearance of the remount station, its primary purpose until the mid-1960s was to breed and raise horses for police work. In 1943 the police transferred brood mares, colts, and a stallion to Fort Walsh from Depot Division in Regina, where they had been breeding mares for several years. In late 1944 the commissioner noted there were about fifty horses at the site, though the number would fluctuate from year to year.³¹ Each spring about fifteen foals were born at Fort Walsh, where they remained until the age of three. At that time the police transported those deemed suitable for equestrian training to Depot Division, and sold



National Archives of Canada, Accession 1996-400

The "Officers Mess" under construction at the remount station, Fort Walsh, 1948.

the builder can advise whether it is more practical to build the fireplace on the outside of the building, the inside, or build it into the wall. Any of the three will suit me ... I am not particular as to the size of the fireplace, other than that it take wood from 3 1/2 to 4 feet long ..."²⁸

Some of the remount station buildings lacked obvious counterparts from the original fort. The historical fit



National Archives of Canada, Accession 1996-400

Remount station at Fort Walsh, ca. 1948-50, showing commissioner's residence (1), superintendent's residence (2), officers mess (3), magazine (4), artisans building (5), stable (6), bakery/granary (7), and guardhouse (8).

the remaining horses or transferred them to other government agencies.³² Managed by a permanent staff of two or three employees, the ranch fulfilled its mandate of supplying the RCMP with the horses it required for ceremonial purposes. An article in the *Globe and Mail* in 1958 boasted that Fort Walsh had provided twenty-nine of the thirty-six "perfectly-matched blacks used in the world-famed RCMP Musical Ride."³³

The success of the remount station did not come easy, however. Commissioner Wood, who spent his summers at Fort Walsh after retiring in 1951, no doubt enjoyed his evenings contemplating the traditions of the force in front of his fireplace in the reconstructed quarters of Commissioner Irvine. But those responsible for day-to-day operations confronted a less-romanticized reality, namely that Fort Walsh was not an ideal place for raising horses. In part, the difficulties stemmed from the severe winter climate, isolated location, and rough terrain, which caused twisted joints, sprains, and broken hooves to the horses. The ranch staff complained about the poor quality of the well water and had to contend with log buildings that were cracking and rotting in places by the early 1950s.³⁴

Moreover, a report prepared by the Swift Current Experimental Farm around 1954 criticized the feeding value of the range grass in the locality, which was believed responsible for the slow maturation of the horses. The police responded in the late 1950s by moving two log buildings close to the stable to be used for storing and preparing feed supplements for the horses. The police had constructed these two buildings around 1945 south of the ranch at Battle Creek to serve as an ice house and meat house for the remount station.³⁵ In their new locations within the fort, they were simply positioned on the approximate site of a large barracks building from the original fort, perhaps to reduce their inappropriateness to the site as historical reconstructions.

The large log stable also proved insufficient to the needs of the remount station. During the late 1950s several of the single standing stalls were removed and replaced with more commodious box stalls used for foaling, and the ceiling was lowered and lined with planks to minimize heat loss during the cold winter months. The ranch hands still found the interior confining for the horses, but ex-Commissioner Wood scuttled

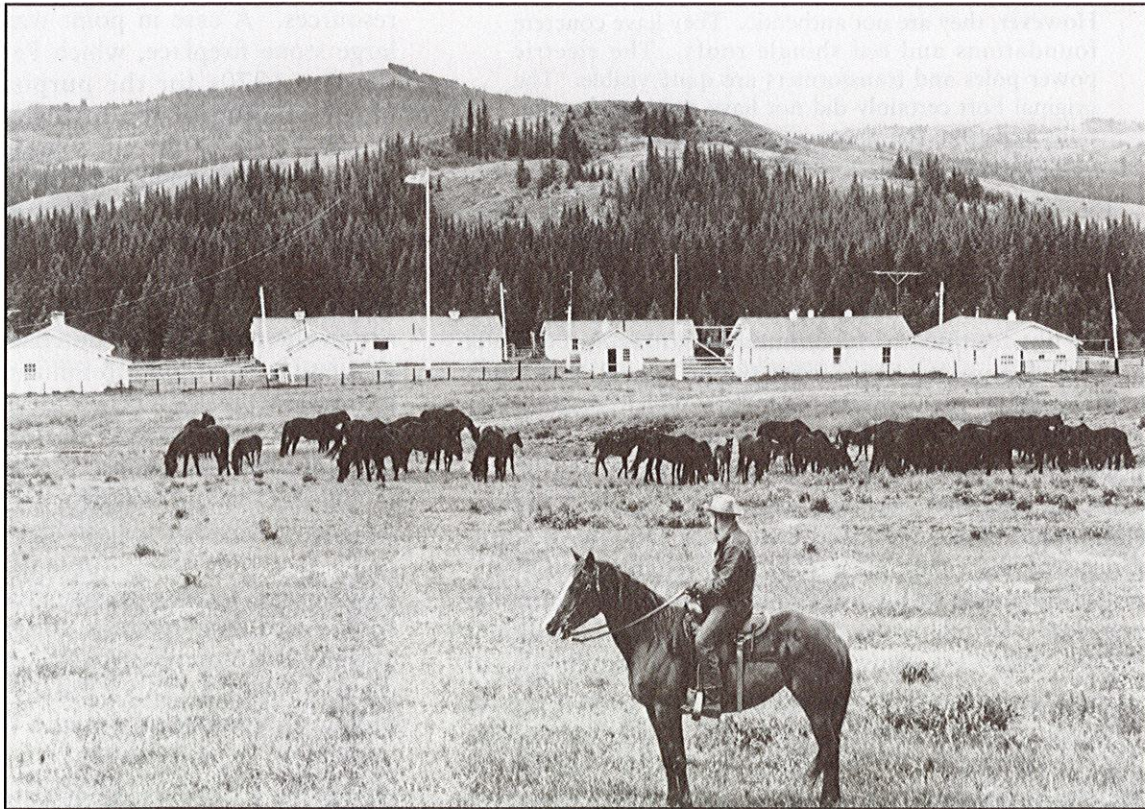
plans to build an extension to the stable, on the grounds that this would impair the building's historical character. He did, however, sanction the addition of a doorway in the southern end in 1957 to permit access by a team and wagon, and thereby facilitate the handling of feed and manure.³⁶ Eventually, in 1962, the police built a new frame foaling stable behind the log stable to resolve the situation. Time and time again, modifications to improve the functioning of the remount station had to be reconciled with the site's historic character, whether real or imagined. Although the balance seemed to shift gradually in favour of the practical needs of the horse ranch, the ever-watchful ex-Commissioner Wood strove to maintain an appropriate historical ambience.

Although climate, geography, and the functional qualities of the buildings created problems for the operation of the remount station, probably the greatest challenge was the influx of tourists. The police had never intended the remount station to become an attraction, but once the historic fort was rebuilt it was probably inevitable that tourists would come. In the early years, visitors occasionally came to this curious site to see how the police had resurrected the old fort to raise horses. During the 1950s, interest in the site increased with the development of Cypress Hills Provincial Park in the vicinity of the fort, and also in response to a growing public interest in historic sites generally in the post-War era. In 1955-56 the profile of Fort Walsh was raised by the provincial government, which included the site in a tourist guide published as part of Saskatchewan's golden jubilee celebrations. As more and more visitors arrived, the novelty wore off for the ranch's permanent staff of two, who were not prepared to deal with upwards of fifteen cars a day during the weekend in the summer months.³⁷

The remount station became the focus of public attention in 1956 when an editorial in the *Maple Creek News* complained about the poor reception and inadequate facilities reported by several disgruntled visitors.

The issue embarrassed the police and no doubt raised larger questions about the mandate of the remount station. Was this merely an operational RCMP detachment, or a legitimate tourist destination? The official police line was to emphasize that the force was not in the tourist business, and to express regret that the remount station did not meet the expectations of those who chose to journey there.³⁸ The problem was not easily resolved, however, and the police increasingly viewed tourists as an irritation they were anxious to avoid. They posted a sign outlining the history of the site to visitors but emphasizing that none of the buildings had any historic value. At one point the police apparently suggested that provincial heritage officials ask the press not to write about the fort, though a senior provincial bureaucrat pointed out that such a tactic was impractical and likely to reflect adversely on the RCMP.³⁹

While neither the federal or provincial governments actively promoted Fort Walsh as a tourist attraction in the late 1950s, interest in the site peaked in 1960-61, following the filming and release of the Twentieth Century Fox production of "The Canadians," segments of which were shot on location at the site and in the vicinity. The public was understandably confused about this site, which seemed to possess the obvious attributes of an historical attraction, yet was practically inaccessible to visitors.⁴⁰ An editorial article in the *Calgary Herald* in November 1960 captured the growing frustration with the RCMP:



National Archives of Canada, Accession 1996-400.

Ranch hands monitoring horses at Fort Walsh, probably early 1960s.

There is good reason why the public should not stream through the ranch buildings. At the same time the ranch is in an area of great beauty that is an historic site. In time word-of-mouth advertising will defeat the government's intention to keep it hidden. For better public relations the full story, past and present, should be told at Maple Creek.⁴¹

The public, indeed, could not be deterred from visiting the site. In 1960-61 the police and its federal bureaucrats lobbied heritage and tourism officials at the federal and provincial levels to provide seasonal guides to deal with visitors to Fort Walsh. Their efforts proved unsuccessful, however, in large part because the remount station was officially an RCMP detachment, which nobody, including the Mounties, had a clear mandate for developing as an historical attraction.⁴² In the summer of 1965 about twenty cars arrived during the weekdays and forty to fifty on the weekends. The continuing influx astonished the ranch hands who must have found it difficult to carry out their duties efficiently while coping with tourists intent on seeing the "historic fort." An RCMP property engineer who visited the site that year was dismayed by the poor quality of the reconstructions. His report had parallels with the fable of the "Emperor's New Clothes," in which someone finally stepped forward to point out that the emperor was not exactly dressed in the finest attire:

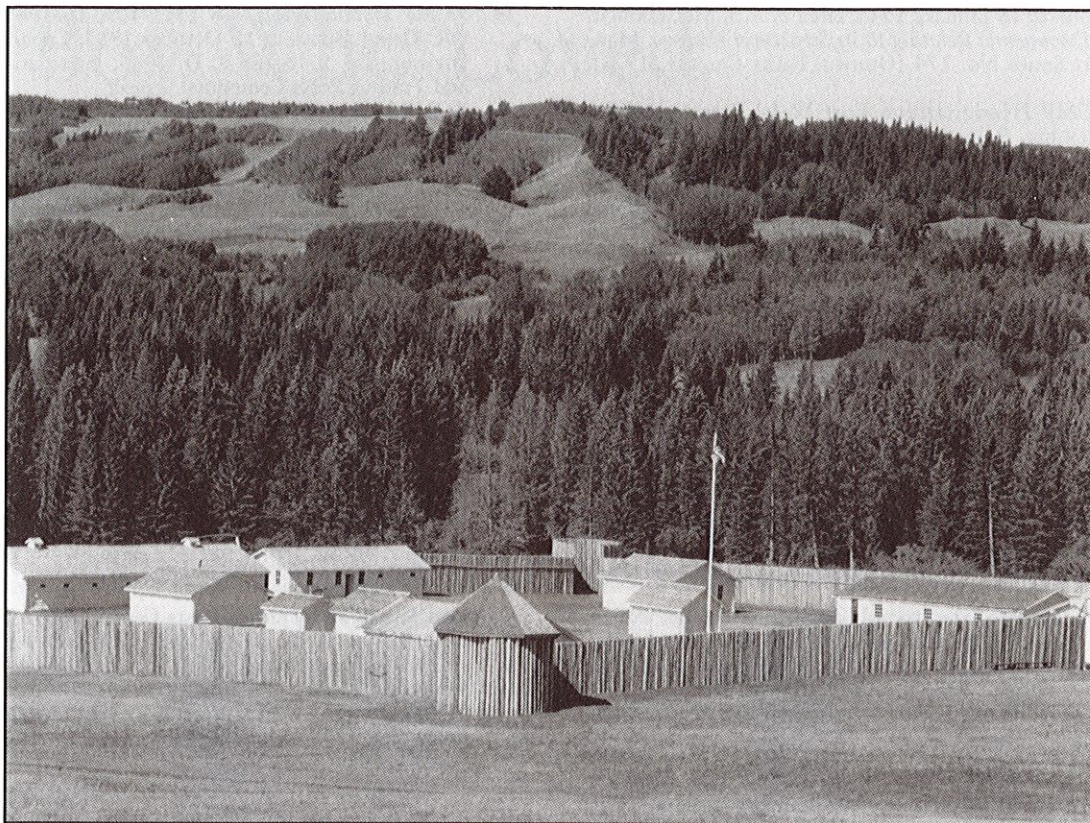
It is evident that we will get tourists at the Fort. What are they going to see? The buildings as they stand are well constructed, white washed and clean. However, they are not authentic. They have concrete foundations and red shingle roofs. The electric power poles and transformers are quite visible. The original Fort certainly did not have concrete foundations and from the photographs, the roofs were split logs covered in mud, probably sodded.⁴³

Ex-Commissioner Wood might not have been amused by this assessment, but by then his involvement in the site was coming to an end. By the time of his death in 1966 the police had already concluded that Fort Walsh would not continue to accommodate horses and tourists at once. Conscious of the site's public appeal, they initiated plans in 1965 to develop Fort Walsh as a tourist attraction to celebrate Canada's centennial. In 1966 the police announced their decision to relocate the horse-breeding operation to Pakenham, Ontario, close to their stables and riding school in Ottawa.⁴⁴ Despite the limitations of the remount station as a reconstruction, the police enhanced its historical character by rebuilding the non-commissioned officers quarters from the original fort to serve as a museum/interpretation building, and by erecting a palisade along one side of the site. In addition, they reconstructed the two nearby fur trading posts (Soloman's and Farwell's) and developed amenities for the convenience of visitors. This work was done with the knowledge and partial collaboration of the National and Historic Parks Branch which agreed in

principle in January 1966 to take over administration of the site at a future date. The RCMP, not anxious to remain in the historic sites business, completed the transfer in 1968.⁴⁵ The details of the site's second makeover as a historical attraction for Canada's centennial fall outside the scope of this paper, though this redevelopment, like that initiated by Commissioner Wood decades earlier, has left an imprint on the site to this day.

The transfer of the remount station to Ontario in 1966 marked the end of the unusual function that Fort Walsh had served since 1943. In one sense it brought to an end Commissioner Wood's vision of raising horses there, but this had always been a means to his primary aim of safeguarding this historic site and the traditions it embodied. Parks Canada's administration of the site over the past decades has resulted in the construction of a larger, more imposing palisade and an enhanced interpretation program. Though adapted for exhibits and administrative uses, most of the remount station buildings from the 1940s have survived and still contribute to the site's distinctive rustic character.

Over the years, Parks Canada has wrestled with the question of how best to manage the resources inherited from Commissioner Wood and the RCMP. On the one hand, efforts have been made to modify the roofs and other elements of these buildings so that they better reflect the 1870s era. This approach has been tempered by a concern that the remount station's historical "imperfections" may in fact possess value as cultural resources. A case in point was Commissioner Wood's large stone fireplace, which Parks Canada removed in the late 1970s for the purpose of enhancing public understanding of the historic 1870s period. In the process, part of the site's legacy from the 1940s was lost. With the passage of time, at least two buildings—the stable and the commissioner's residence—have been determined to possess heritage value because of their unique associations with the Mounted Police in the 20th century. Indeed, Commissioner Wood's vision for the site in the late 1930s, limited though it may have been at the time, continues to influence the visitor experience today. His precise motives for initiating the project may always be open to speculation. Was the Fort Walsh reconstruction in essence a powerful man's act of self-indulgence, or did it reflect a broader concern to reinforce a link with the past for the benefit of the whole force at a time when the nature of police work had shifted away from frontier law enforcement? The RCMP and their remount station are part of the rather curious and complex story conveyed to visitors interested in the evolution of Fort Walsh. These unassuming buildings continue to provide a link to the early development of this national historic site. They also form an interesting episode in the history of the Mounted Police and the evolution of the heritage preservation movement in the province of Saskatchewan.



Parks Canada.

Fort Walsh in 1982, showing palisade reconstructed by Parks Canada.

Endnotes

- 1 This paper grew out of a heritage evaluation report on the remount station buildings prepared by the author in 1989 for the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office (FHBRO). See James De Jonge, "Ten Buildings, Fort Walsh National Historic Park Saskatchewan," FHBRO Building Report, 88-68.
- 2 Studies on the early history of Fort Walsh include: A.B. McCullough, *Fort Walsh National Historic Site: An Administrative History* (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1994) and Papers Relating to the North-West Mounted Police and Fort Walsh, Manuscript Report Series No. 213 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1977); Philip Goldring, "Whisky, Horses and Death: The Cypress Hills Massacre and its Sequel," *Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History*, No. 21 (1979), 41-70; and Ellen McLeod, Fort Walsh, Saskatchewan, Manuscript Report Series No. 62 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1969).
- 3 Shannon Ricketts, "Cultural Selection and National Identity: Establishing Historic Sites in a National Framework, 1920-1939," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Summer 1996), 24-25. On the evolution of the heritage preservation movement in Saskatchewan see, Don Kerr, "In Defence of the Past: A History of Saskatchewan Heritage Preservation, 1922-1983," *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990), 277-300. Kerr discusses early commemorations by the HSMBC in the 1920s, but not the efforts by individuals and organizations in the province to preserve the site of Fort Walsh in the 1930s.
- 4 National Archives of Canada (hereafter NA), RG84, Records of Parks Canada, Vol. 1385, HS-10-10, pt. 1. Fort Walsh was one of only eight sites in Saskatchewan designated by the HSMBC prior to 1951.
- 5 Ibid., pt. 2, Fleming to Starnes, 4 March 1931; George Shepherd, *West of Yesterday* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), 115-18.
- 6 Shepherd, *West of Yesterday*, 115-16.
- 7 Shepherd, *West of Yesterday*, 116.
- 8 NA, RG84, Vol. 1385, HS-10-10, pt. 2, Shepherd to Harkin, 20 January 1933.
- 9 Ibid., Harkin to Howay, 26 July 1933.
- 10 Ibid., Howay to Harkin, 15 September 1933.
- 11 G.T. Hann, "Ex-Commissioner Stuart Taylor Wood, CMG," *RCMP Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (July 1951), 4-9; George Shepherd, *Brave Heritage* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1967), 122-26.
- 12 Shepherd, *Brave Heritage*, 124.
- 13 McCullough, *Fort Walsh National Historic Site: An Administrative History*, 18, 39.
- 14 *RCMP Annual Report* (1936), 32; (1939), 30; (1940), 24.
- 15 Sergeant R.R. Van Patten, "Police Remounts," *RCMP Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (April 1951), 287.
- 16 McCullough, *Fort Walsh National Historic Site: An Administrative History*, 19.
- 17 S.W. Horrall, *The Pictorial History of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1973), 159-60.
- 18 Much of the reconstruction work at the site of Fort Walsh is documented in an RCMP file at RCMP Headquarters, Ottawa, Records — GS 1315-109 - Buildings- Fort Walsh; GS 1315-109, D. 1944, Roberts to Wood, 26 January 1943. The RCMP kindly granted the author direct access to files pertaining to the remount station during the preparation of the heritage evaluation report for FHBRO.
- 19 Saskatchewan Archives Board, G. Shepherd Papers, A, SH48,

- Wood to Shepherd, 16 January 1943, cited in A.B. McCullough, *Fort Walsh: Documents Relating to its Structural History*, Manuscript Report Series No. 174 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1976), 214.
- 20 Ottawa. RCMP Headquarters, Fort Walsh Research File, Turner to Fleming, 9 June 1944, cited in McCullough, *Fort Walsh: Documents Relating to its Structural History*, 231.
 - 21 Ricketts, "Cultural Selection and National Identity," 33-36.
 - 22 Edward Mills, "Rustic Building Programs in Canada's National Parks, 1887-1950," Report prepared for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, November 1992, part 1, 1-10.
 - 23 RCMP Headquarters, GS 1315-109, D. 1944, Smart to Gibson, 8 August 1942; Fleming to O/C Swift Current, 21 May 1943.
 - 24 Ibid., Fleming to O/C Swift Current, 10 June 1943.
 - 25 Ibid., Wood to Nuttall, 21 June 1943.
 - 26 Jeffrey S. Murray, "Social Relations and the Built Environment: Archaeological Reconstructions of Cultural Ideologies," M.A. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta, 1985, 97-101, 106-7.
 - 27 Ibid., 56-58.
 - 28 RCMP Headquarters, GS 1315-109, D. 1944, Wood to Nuttall, 21 June 1943.
 - 29 Ibid.
 - 30 Ibid., D. 1952, Wood to O/C F Division, 20 October 1945; Inventory of Buildings, August 1947.
 - 31 NA, RG18, Records of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Vol. 3760, G 516-114, Wood to Schofield, 25 November 1944.
 - 32 Van Patten, "Police Remounts," 287-89; McCullough, *Fort Walsh National Historic Site: An Administrative History*, 26.
 - 33 "RCMP Raises Horses at Historic Old Fort," *Globe and Mail*, 13 August 1958.
 - 34 RCMP Headquarters, GS 1315-109, D. 1960, Macdonnell to O/C Depot Division, 15 October 1953; Lapointe to O/C Depot Division; GS 1315-109-8. D. 1966, Restoration of Fort Walsh and Trading Posts Centennial Project.
 - 35 RCMP Headquarters, GS 1315-109, D. 1960, Wood to Nicholson, 21 October 1954; Nicholson to Wood, 27 October 1954; Maxted to Commissioner, 12 July 1957.
 - 36 Ibid., Maxted to Commissioner, 12 July 1957 and 17 September 1957; Forbes to Commissioner, 21 February 1962.
 - 37 McCullough, *Fort Walsh National Historic Site: An Administrative History*, 47-48.
 - 38 *Maple Creek News*, 26 July 1956, editorial by Walter Migowsky; NA, RG18, Vol. 3760, G 516-114, pt. 1, Nicholson to editor of the *Maple Creek News*, 7 August 1956.
 - 39 NA, RG18, Vol. 3760, G 516-114, pt. 1, Memorandum by T.C. Hill, 8 May 1961.
 - 40 NA, RG84, Vol. 1386, HS 10-10, pt. 3, Hill to Herbert, 7 October 1960.
 - 41 "Fort Walsh a Shrine?," editorial by Ken Liddell, *Calgary Herald*, reprinted in *Maple Creek News*, 10 November 1960.
 - 42 NA, RG84, Vol. 1386, HS 10-10, pt. 3, Hill to Herbert, 7 October 1960; Dinsdale to Brown, 28 September 1961.
 - 43 RCMP Headquarters, GS 1315-109, D. 1969, report by property engineer, 16 September 1965, p. 11.
 - 44 RCMP Headquarters, GS 1315-109-8. D. 1966, Restoration of Fort Walsh and Trading Posts Centennial Project, press release, 21 June 1966. NA, RG18, Vol. 3760, G 516-114, pt. 2.
 - 45 RCMP Headquarters, GS 1315-109-8. D. 1966, Nichol to Brakefield-Moore, 28 January 1966. Ottawa. Parks Canada, NHPS file 8500 - F13, Vols. 1 and 2, various correspondence, September 1965 to July 1968.