

ANNUAL REPORT: FORT VERMILION 2018 FIELD SCHOOL

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Fort Vermilion field school team at the Boyer River site

This year's field school was incredibly challenging but rewarding. We began the field season at the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Fort Vermilion II (occupied from 1830-1930) in hope of confirming the earliest occupation level, which would allow us to compare the cultural assemblage from this site to what we have recovered from Fort Vermilion I (1798-1830) in previous excavation seasons. Parts of the fort have been designated as a Historic Site by the Government of Alberta, including the Old Bay House, which was constructed in c. 1906 and still stands on the property. It was around this building that our test unit excavations were positioned. We excavated 13 50x50 cm test units to establish the date(s) of the cultural material in this area of the site. Previous CRM work at the site documented the presence of historical remains, but their limited investigations did not confirm the establishment of the fort in c. 1830. Unfortunately, neither did we. The cultural remains unearthed dated to the latter part of the 19th century up to the mid-1900s. Moreover, the site was heavily disturbed and was capped with gravel road fill.

Recognizing that continued excavations at this site would likely not yield pre 1850s remains, we moved the field school to the Boyer River post; the first fur trade site established in the region in 1788, by NWC employee, Charles Boyer. We reopened previous excavations from 1987-1988, in order to confirm that it is the Boyer River North West Company (NWC) post. We excavated 46 square meters this season, cultural material dating to the late 18th century (the time period that Boyer's post was occupied) was unearthed along with what may be the burnt remains of Charles Boyer's cabin. We also recovered a faunal assemblage that potentially reflects the diet of these

early fur traders in a region not yet overhunted and trapped through, and acquired an artifact collection that denotes the activities of the NWC and the First Nations groups they were trading with. Artifact discoveries included tobacco pipe fragments, a metal trade point, lead shots, gun flints, wrought nails, hand drawn glass beads in a variety of colors, and finger rings.

A significant component of this field school involved archival research. The long period of occupation at Fort Vermilion II generated considerable historical documents, including HBC journals, maps, and photographs. Fortunately, a large portion of these archival resources have been copied and are curated at the community museum (the originals are housed in the HBC in Winnipeg, Manitoba). The students read and prepared summary reports on documents relating to the first 50 years that the fort was occupied, focusing on site location, site construction, diet, artifact trading lists and uses, and relations with other forts and the First Nations. Their archival research significantly contributes to our understanding of the site.

As a bonus project, we were asked to create an exhibit for the museum's travelling trailer. The students put together a complete exhibit they called Archaeology in Action. It features an introduction to archaeology unit, sections about survey, excavation, laboratory work, and publication, laws about collecting, a trivia game, and a wall of pictures of the field school team. They created text panels, images, maps and plans, and used artifacts from the museum's collection. It is an outstanding exhibit that will be taken to schools and communities throughout the region. The students worked closely with the staff at the museum and their positive presence was noted throughout the community. Fort Vermilion is a small northern town of about 750 inhabitants, many of which have direct ties to and stories about the sites we were excavating. That we were researching their history was much appreciated. On the third weekend we were invited to an indigenous (Metis) ceremony, where we were treated to traditional beef stew and bannock, and got to be a part of the round dancing to the drummers. What an experience!

The students also participated in three Saturday field trips. The first was to the Metis 19th century settlement of Buttertown, where many of the historic structures of this community have been preserved. The second field trip was led by a CRM company to a series of prehistoric and historic sites along the northern bank of the Peace River. The third trip was to the Gull Lake site. The students surveyed and dug 13 test units at this unrecorded site. Hundreds of artifacts were recorded and collected, dating to c. 10,000 BP to the Historic period. These artifacts, the catalogue, site form, and report, will be submitted to the Royal Alberta Museum and the Archaeological Survey (Gov. of Alberta). It is a newly recorded multi-occupation site that adds to our understanding of the history of cultural groups and their activities in northern Alberta.

Finally, in regards to dissemination, the travelling museum exhibit the students created is a highlight of the field school. It will reach many members of the local community. We gave several tours while excavating at Fort Vermilion II and a few at Boyer River (this site is remote). Undergraduate students will assist with the analysis and cataloguing of the archaeological materials during the fall and spring semester. Once complete our search findings will be presented to the centers of the Archaeological Society of Alberta and at their annual conference, as well as at least two academic conferences. Our final report will be submitted to the Archaeological Survey as required by law, and we hope to submit two articles. There are a number of students interested in pursuing graduate degrees at the University of Lethbridge with a focus on these sites. That would be great!

