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Fort Macleod history being excavated

BY LETHBRIDGE HERALD ON JULY 30, 2017.



By J.W. Schnarr Alyssa Hamza is a Lethbridge archeologist for Atlatl Archeology. The company is holding a public excavation of the Historic Fort Macleod Township Site ahead of a planned town waterline through the area. The public is welcome to tour the site or volunteer to hunt for historically significant items from Fort Macleod's past.



Archeologists digging up, and learning from, original townsite

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A new water line for the Town of Fort Macleod has provided an opportunity to peer into the history of the area.

Over the weekend and into the coming week, archeologists from Lethbridge company Atlatl Archeology have been conducting a public excavation of Fort Macleod's original townsite located near the Fort Macleod National Historic Site. The work is part of a two-year effort to recover and catalogue items left behind in the town which sprung up near the original Fort Macleod location on the Oldman River in 1874.

Work began last year. Initially there was some confusion over whether the planned water line route would fall along the site of the original town.

After some assessments, it was discovered the trench for the water line would be going through the site.

"Now we're excavating to get as much information as we can out of the area they are going to disturb to put that water line in," said Rachel Lindemann, an archeologist for Atlatl Archeology. "It's a bit of a salvage before they come in and dig it up."

About 120 metres of trenchline were completed last year, and it was at that time Atlatl archeologists discovered they were digging through the backyard garbage dumps left behind when the town was moved.

"When people relocate, they take the good stuff with them," Lindemann said.

Everything from plates, bowls, cups, and wood-handled utensils to shoes is being found.

"We're getting a really good community of stuff," Lindemann said.

"We're seeing families and evidence of children, such as toys, and early dentistry — we've found some early vulcanite dentures, which are really cool.

"We're getting a really good capsule-like window of the time period."

There are conflicting maps of the area from that time period, and none of the maps are to scale. This means nobody is exactly sure just how large the town was, or in how large of an area the archeologists will continue to find artifacts.

"The goal of the dig this year is to find out where the south end of the town was," she said.

One area of importance as far as the history of the area is concerned is that it was not simply a European (white) settlement.

Lindemann said there is a lot of evidence around Metis and Blackfoot people living in the area.

"We know First Nations were camping on-site and canoeing across (the Oldman River)," said Lindemann. "We also have Metis. We have Red River Cart parts, which were typically made and used only by Metis people."

"We're getting a really cool look at these three cultures living together, working together, in a peaceful situation, which I think we overlook sometimes."

The fort and town were located on "the island" between 1874 and 1884, and then relocated due to seasonal flooding and a catastrophic flood which occurred in 1884. The Fort served as the first North West Mounted Police outpost in southern Alberta and operated as its national headquarters from 1874 to 1878.

"It was something they could not have bounced back from easily," said Lindemann. "It was something that would have wiped out any of the agriculture, vegetable gardens and (damage homes)." The people of the time decided it simply was not worth rebuilding on land which was going to knock them down every season, packed up the things they wanted to keep, and moved the town to a nearby higher elevation.

And because there were letters and journals written around the time which have been recovered, there is a solid record of what life was like during that time period.

"It took about two years of gradually moving everything up to the upper terrace where it is now.

"But some of the structures remained because we're finding wooden post holes with wood still in them."

The last stage of work on the area came up with about 30,000 artifacts. Many of these are mundane items such as broken glass, nails and rusty hinges. There are also many First Nations tools such as leather scrapers made from glass, as First Nations people adapted to the technology used in the area.

But more than 100 unique items have also been recovered including beads, buttons, knives, spoons, harmonicas and bottles.

Items are collected, and catalogued before being sent to the Royal Alberta Museum. The reports go to Alberta Culture.

Lindemann said while the RAM is where historical objects are housed, there are options for local museums and community halls to have their own displays on permanent loan.

"History matters because we only get snippets of it," said Lindemann. "It's a giant puzzle piece. And this just adds to our understanding of where we came from, how the country grew up and where some of our difficulties may lie.

"The history of Canada is quite complex, and it's interesting," she said. A lot of time the violence gets sensationalized, but this is a very good example of people working and interacting together in a very peaceful situation that was productive and fortuitous for everyone in the area."

Anyone interested in touring the site or volunteering to help recover artifacts is invited down to the Fort Macleod National Historic Site.

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