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Prisoners of War and Dreams of Freedom: Dugout Canoes at a Second World War Work Camp in Manitoba, Canada

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PRISONERS OF WAR AND DREAMS OF FREEDOM: DUGOUT CANOES AT A SECOND WORLD WAR WORK CAMP IN MANITOBA, CANADA

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ABSTRACT

During the Second World War, nearly 34,000 German Prisoners of War (PoWs) were transferred from British to Canadian control, and Canada thus hastily set up several large PoW camps and smaller satellite camps. PoWs filled leisure time with hobbies and crafts such as theatre, painting, model ship building, and woodworking. At Riding Mountain Work Camp, a forestry work camp in Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba, PoWs were even allowed to build and use dugout log canoes on a nearby stream and lake. Archaeological fieldwork at the site revealed that at least four of these canoes are still extant in the forest, and that two additional canoes are displayed at a nearby community museum.

PRISONERS OF WAR AND DREAMS OF FREEDOM

Large-scale internment has been one of the significant features of military and social conflict in the modern era. While conditions of internment have varied, and prisoners' experiences have been as individual as the prisoners themselves, both firsthand accounts and scholarly research reveal that most prisoners of war (PoWs) inhabit a common psychological landscape where lingering boredom and recurrent thoughts of freedom and escape predominate (Moshenska and Myers 2011). Interestingly, both of these factors threaten both physical and mental health, even life: Extreme boredom can lead to mental health problems and even suicide. Thoughts of escape and freedom, if acted upon, can lead to physical punishments up to and including death (Carr 2011; Vance 2006, 242; Vance 1993). Once outside the wire, PoWs risked death from exposure, starvation and fear of being caught by a hostile populace. There is a difference, however, between Allied PoWs held in Germany, who were occasionally summarily killed or sent to concentration camps, and German PoWs held by the Allies in North America and elsewhere who would normally be sentenced to brief periods in solitary confinement for their escape attempt (Vance, 1993; Krammer, 1979).

The negative impacts, then, of boredom and escape can be very real and certainly devastating; but these realities, ever present in the minds of PoWs, might also have positive impacts: erstwhile negative feelings might motivate the prisoner to seek out beneficial activities, where possible. To alleviate boredom and to get away from stringent controls, PoWs might volunteer for work duties, or take up reading, music, gardening, theatre, or materially creative hobbies such as painting, sewing, or wood carving (Bush 2009; Madsen and Henderson, 1993:39). Often interned in foreign lands for years on end, prisoners of war turned to activities that both preserved their cultural identity, and

transformed their environments into something more liveable and reflective of their interests (Bush, 2009:153).

Prisoners at the Riding Mountain Work Camp had a particularly keen interest in wood carving. Being a camp dedicated to the procurement of fire wood these unique conditions allowed the PoWs, with full permission from the guards to carve full-size dugout canoes in which they paddled and sailed on a nearby lake. The creation and use of these canoes offers an intriguing example of a PoW leisure activity that directly addressed both boredom and thoughts of escape. First, the work to create the canoe, like other work and leisure activities, countered the threat of ennui; and second, the action of paddling a canoe down a river and into a lake is clearly a more than metaphorical experience of freedom.

GERMAN SOLDIERS IN A CANADIAN NATIONAL PARK

During the height of the Second World War, pressure from Great Britain resulted in the transfer of 33,798 German PoWs from British to Canadian control (Madsen and Henderson, 1993:1; Auger, 2005; Kilford, 2004). The British were fearful of possible invasion by Germany, and thus looked to evacuate PoWs who might be released by their invading comrades. The majority of the German PoWs sent to Canada had been captured in Egypt after the Second Battle of El-Alamein in November 1942 (Strawson, 1981; Forty, 2003). To accommodate the large influx of PoWs, Canada hastily built several large camps along with a system of small satellite work camps that each held hundreds to thousands of these *Afrika Korps* men. Located within Riding Mountain National Park in southwest Manitoba the Riding Mountain Camp was established in 1933 as a small satellite logging camp, focused on the procurement of firewood for the local communities (Waiser, 1995) (Figures 1–3).

Riding Mountain Camp was composed of about 15 wooden buildings constructed by the Carter-Halls-Aldinger Company, with subcontracts awarded to other local businesses. The camp held 450 PoWs who had volunteered to be transferred from a larger and more crowded camp in Alberta. In exchange for the better conditions, the prisoners agreed to work for wages at logging a fire-killed stand of trees in the park, which would help the Canadians, who were at the time facing a severe shortage of fuel for wood-burning stoves. Riding Mountain Camp is the only known Second World War PoW camp built inside a Canadian national park, but other internments did occur in Canadian parks in the period of 1915 to 1946, including of “enemy aliens” during the First World War and of Japanese-Canadian civilians during the Second World War (Waiser, 1995).

Riding Mountain Camp appears to have had much less stringent standards for surveillance than most other Canadian PoW camps. Three core elements of standard prison control—clear lines of sight, elevated guard towers, and barbed-wire perimeter fences—are totally absent at the Riding Mountain Camp. Compared to the hellish conditions experienced in North Africa—and the prospect of even worse conditions if sent to the Eastern Front—PoWs sent to the forest in Manitoba were quite content.

Though strictly forbidden, the PoWs did sneak out of camp at night and rejoined new friends made in nearby towns—communities mostly made up of European immigrants friendly to Germans (Waiser 1995; Stozek 2007). Interestingly, amidst these material conditions of more relaxed security, the Canadian guards were known to have deployed

programs to re-educate and “democratize” the German PoWs (Kelly, 1978; Page, 1981; Kilford, 2004). Thus on the one hand we have material conditions that suggest relaxed measures of control, but on the other, we have documentary evidence that suggests psychological manipulation of the PoWs (Myers 2013).

THE SITE IN CONTEXT

The remains of Riding Mountain Camp are located about 500 metres east of Whitewater Lake, a 10.5-square-kilometre freshwater lake in the backcountry of the park. The location of the PoW camp has always been known by the park staff, though it was not considered an archaeological site until recently. Surrounding the site today, as when the camp was in operation, is a moderate amount of vegetation composed mostly of spruce and willow trees interspersed with dense bushes. The central area of the archaeological site is located within a flat clearing of about 0.032 square kilometres (3.2 hectares) covered with thick grasses and new forest growth. The site is bordered to the west and south by the Little Saskatchewan River (also known as the Minnedosa River, and in one source [Schwartz 1944] as “White Water Creek”) which drains from the lake, and to the east by the Central Trail, providing access to the site. The lands are administered from the town of Wasagaming, Manitoba, by the Parks Canada agency.

Extensive field work at the site in summers 2009, 2010, and 2011 established that the camp retains both architectural and archaeological remains. Though there are no standing buildings, there are concrete and earth foundations representing at least 15 buildings and three cellars. Additionally, there are remains of at least four trash middens, a concrete garbage incinerator and associated ash middens. This field work combined with oral history interviews and archival research was the basis for Myers’ PhD dissertation (Myers 2013).

DUGOUT CANOES IN HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Dugout canoes, also known as logboats or dugouts, have been used in many parts of the world. Examples have been documented from every continent except Antarctica. In Europe, dugouts have been found in latitudes stretching from Scandinavia to Iberia (Weski, 2005; Rogers, 2009; McGrail, 2001). The oldest known dugouts are about 9000 years old and are from the Netherlands and north central France (McGrail, 2001:173). In North America, archaeological surveys and excavations have recorded Native American/First Nations dugouts in the states of California, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Vermont, and Wisconsin, and in the provinces of British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec (Porter, 2009; Plane, 1991; Leshikar, 1988:17; Waugh, 1919:30; McGrail, 2001:423; Russell, 1967: 341).

In Manitoba, no evidence has been found for the use of dugout canoes by First Nations or fur traders. Manitoba First Nations made their canoes out of either birch bark or animal hides. Birch bark canoes in particular were common during Manitoba’s fur trade era. Birch bark and hide canoes were preferred over dugouts since their lighter weight would make for easier portaging. These canoes are referred to in historic journals, visual evidence for them is found in paintings and photographs (e.g. Jennings, 2002), and one highly deteriorated specimen is reported to have been found on an archaeological surface

survey, though no written report is known to exist (Virginia Petch, 2011: Pers. com; Kevin Brownlee, 2011: Pers. com). Poor preservation of organic materials in Manitoba, suggests that few if any survived. Recently, a birch bark canoe emulating the Ottawa River Algonquin canoe style was constructed and displayed at the Manitoba Archaeological Society Meeting (Brownlee, 2010; Adney and Chappelle, 1964:114). It comes as a surprise to the authors that the only confirmed archaeological find of canoes in Manitoba is related to the Second World War and not earlier periods.

Like that of all watercraft, dugout canoe construction varies greatly in complexity. McGrail (2001) defines a “simple logboat” as being constructed by hollowing out a single log and then shaping the ends and outside. These simple logboats are in some cases powered by paddle, and their use limited to inland waters (lakes and rivers). More complex dugouts might have additional components that increase stability and control, such as rudders, keels, and washstrakes (boards on the side of the canoe to block waves from coming in)—embellishments that require more advanced woodworking knowledge and tools and more advanced understandings of boating and seafaring (though it is also possible that the PoWs simply learned through trial and error—design could have developed over time as earlier types were adapted through experimentation). These added components allow for dugouts to be used in the rougher waters of the open ocean and to have greater carrying capacity.

LEISURE TIME AND CRAFT MAKING IN THE POW CAMP

The German PoWs held in Canada were treated extremely well, particularly when contrasted with the experiences of many PoWs held by the Nazis and the Japanese, for example (Prugh, 1956; Roland, 1991; MacKenzie, 1994; Waiser, 1995; Vance, 2006). Even repeated escape attempts and cases where PoWs snuck out of camp at night and returned before morning roll-call, went relatively unpunished (Waiser, 1995). The Canadians seem to have generally followed the 1929 Geneva Conventions provisions in their treatment of prisoners (both Canada and Germany signed and ratified the 1929 Geneva Convention), and the prisoners at Riding Mountain had leisure time to pursue activities and hobbies (Geneva Convention, 1989). Many prisoners occupied their time by wood carving and other handicrafts. One of the most popular crafts was to carve small model wooden ships, including ships in bottles (Waiser, 1995:232; Stozek, 2007:56).

The diary of Riding Mountain PoW Konstantin Schwartz, which was confiscated and translated by Canadian intelligence officers, provides one of the few known accounts that mentions some of these small craft activities. Schwartz (1944) wrote:

We build boats, doll houses, and many other things. Varnish, paints and tools are plentiful. We sell these articles mostly for dollars. For our first boat I received \$15.00 and 25\$ for the second. I specialize now in sailing boats, Groch-Foch model. I was photographed with the boat.

The mention of a “Groch-Foch” sailing ship is likely a reference to the *Gorch Fock*, a German Reichsmarine three-mast training barque launched in 1933 (Showell, 1979:125 and 137) – a naval PoW might have been familiar with this particular ship. Riding Mountain had a modest library for the PoWs to use, and it is tempting to suppose that one

of the books had a picture of this ship in it. According to Schwartz and other sources, these small craft projects were sold or traded to civilians and guards, or given as tokens of appreciation for good treatment or friendship. According to camp records, model ships were traded for a train ticket as part of an escape attempt, and in another for an illicit radio (Weis, 1944; Reid, 1944).

A far more ambitious project undertaken by the prisoners was construction of dugout canoes (Figs. 4-7). According to former PoW Josef Gabski, the idea of constructing the dugout canoes came after the prisoners saw pictures of birch bark canoes in a Canadian magazine that circulated around the camp (Stozek, 2007:56). In an interview conducted many years after his internment, Gabski (1991) explained that the first step in constructing a canoe was to carve the paddles. Once the paddles were finished, a large tree would be cut (likely fir, spruce, or poplar) and then floated up the Little Saskatchewan River to a clearing near the camp. Once the log was on shore, the bark would be removed and the interior of the hull would be hollowed out.

In another diary excerpt, Konstantin Schwartz described the building of the canoe:

Schuster and I built a canoe. We made it out of dry fir, fixed the weak spots and covered the whole with flour sacks and painted it, and we now have a good boat. It is 5.6 meters long, two men can carry it. In the winter it takes one hour to cross the lake. I can make it now in twenty minutes. (Schwartz, 1944)

Oral histories and documentary research commissioned by Parks Canada (Tabulenas 1978, 1983) suggests that it took about eight hours to chisel out the interior of one canoe. Once the interior was hollowed out, the outer hull would be shaped and sailing hardware added. Gabski (1991) said that a Swedish bow saw was used to cut the trees down and that the primary tool used in hollowing out the canoes was a 2½-pound single-bladed axe. Another source, however, suggests that double-bladed axes (one horizontal blade and one vertical) were used. Smaller tools such as chisels, hammers, and knives were likely borrowed from the camp's workshop and used for the addition of sailing hardware and other finishing work. Tool marks are still visible on the better preserved sections of some canoes. Based on a brief field analysis the tool marks coincide with the use of metal tools.

Once completed, the PoWs launched the canoes in the Little Saskatchewan River, located about 200 metres south of the camp, and then paddled upstream to Whitewater Lake (a distance of about 2200 metres). Once out in the open water, the prisoners could paddle out to Elk Island, where they picnicked and built bonfires (Stozek, 2007:56). These excursions would generally occur on Sundays, when the prisoners were given their mandatory 24-consecutive-hour break as specified by the Geneva Convention (Stozek, 2007:56; Waiser, 1995:232; Geneva Convention, 1989). One anecdote recounts the prisoners gathering up canoes, forming a small flotilla, and launching a mock invasion of the camp (Waiser, 1995:232). After roll call prisoners were also known to have paddled canoes across the lake and to have hiked to the town of Seech, seven miles away, to surreptitiously visit local Ukrainian farmers they had befriended (Stozek, 2009:1). Schwartz's (1944) confiscated diary describes the moment he and a conspirator slipped past the guards and into their canoe: "We started to row and the lake was ours." Though it was considered a privilege to be interned in a forest work camp rather than the regular

camp—and this privilege could be taken away as punishment—clearly the potential repercussions for being caught outside of the camp were not enough to stop these temporary escapes.

INVENTORY OF CANOES AND RELATED FEATURES

Our field survey at Riding Mountain identified six canoe hulls and three canoe fragments. Of the six canoes observed, four remain on site (Figs. 8 to 13); three of them partially submerged in the Little Saskatchewan River and its grasses and showing heavy deterioration. The final two are well preserved at a museum. The larger of these two canoes is a more complex sailing canoe, as evidenced by the presence of sailing hardware and features such as a keel, mast step, thwart sockets, and a rear rudder attachment. The total number of canoes constructed by the prisoners is not known.

At least three different styles of canoe were built by the prisoners at Riding Mountain Camp: single-man paddle canoes, two-man paddle canoes, and a more complex sailing canoe. Tabulenas (1978, 1983) specifically states that the canoes were either one-man canoes measuring around 10 feet (about 305 cm) or two-man canoes measuring between 14 and 16 feet (about 427 to 488 cm). The PoW Schwartz (above) states that his canoe was “5.6 meters” (560 cm), which is even longer than the estimate suggested by Tabulenas for a two-man craft.

The two canoes located at the Fort Dauphin Museum in Dauphin, Manitoba, were also recorded. These two canoes were removed from the Riding Mountain site by Parks Canada and officially loaned to the museum in 1981. These two canoes remain in excellent condition—in sharp contrast to the on-site canoes, which have deteriorated significantly in the last 30 years. The canoes in the museum are supported off the ground in a shed, and have not been subjected to any special treatment; their superior state of conservation seems to relate simply to their removal from the direct effects of the natural elements.

Canoes were not the only boating-related features built by the prisoners. Recorded during site visits by Parks Canada archaeologists (listed in Parks Canada 2009), and again during our 2009 and 2010 field seasons, were the remains of a cut log bridge or dock approximately 50 metres west of the four canoes. Though there is no known mention by the prisoners of this structure, the single known historic photograph of a canoe at the camp also clearly shows a log structure resembling a dock (Fig. 4, right foreground). This dock appears to be the same structure that was recently located on site. The same photo also shows what appears to be a rowboat of some kind (left background), but nothing is known about this watercraft, and no other known sources suggest that PoWs built boats other than dugout canoes at this particular camp. Since the park staff aimed to keep park visitors away from the PoW camp, it seems unlikely that the rowboat would have been associated with any other group than either the guards or PoWs.

RECORDING METHODS AND RESULTS

The recording methods used varied depending on the specific contexts and features of individual canoes, such as structural integrity, size, and depositional environment. Each canoe was individually drawn to a 1:10 scale. A 1:30-scale site overview drawing was made of canoes 31K29A to C to show their location along the bank of the Little

Saskatchewan River. The small fragments 31K28B1-3 and canoe 31K29A were also drawn and photographed. Each canoe and fragment was photographed with and without scales before, during, and after the recording process.

For 31K28A (on site) and 31K32B (at the museum)-the two canoes that we were able to safely move-we drew a plan, a longitudinal section, and three transverse cross sections (Figs. 12, 13). Prior to drawing, canoe 31K28A was cleaned with a soft brush and levelled using wooden shims, and canoe 31K32B was levelled using a cloth strap looped around rafters. Once levelled, a fixed horizontal datum string with measuring tape was extended along the centreline of the canoes. With the use of ruler, line level, and plumb-bob, a movable vertical datum was used to take measurements at 10-cm intervals along the length of the canoes.

The keel found in canoe 31K32A (a sailing canoe) measures 300 cm long, 4 cm wide, and 10 cm high, and is tapered at both ends. Protruding from the keel are three iron nails and three 1cm-diameter iron bolts, with nuts and washers. The rudder attachment is a simple 1cm-diameter iron rod attached to the stern of the canoe. The mast step, located approximately 150 cm from the bow, is slightly off centre and measures 6 cm long, 3 cm wide, and 2 cm deep.

Due to the heavy deterioration of one of the canoes, we were only able to determine the approximate original overall length for five of the six canoes. Based on these measurements, and comparing our data with documentary sources, we tentatively suggest that canoes 31K28A (paddle propulsion), 31K32B (paddle propulsion), and 31K29C (unknown propulsion) are of the single-man variety, and that canoes 31K29B (unknown propulsion) and 31K32A (sail propulsion) were built for two men.

Based on a Parks Canada site photograph from 1997, fragment 31K28B2 (which is in situ) was identified as being a fragment of the bow of the canoe present in 1997 but no longer on site today (Fig. 8, right side). We found no traces of the canoe visible on the left of the 1997 photo (Fig. 8, left side). Similarly, a photograph from 1973 provided by an informant shows a group of unknown people appearing to remove a canoe from the water (Fig. 9). Though we do not know definitively what happened to these particular canoes, we do know that for many years the site of the PoW camp was a source of scrap wood and building materials for local farmers and others. There are stories told locally that canoes were taken from the site and used as water troughs for animals on farms (Ed Stozek, 2010: Pers. com.).

DISCUSSION

At Riding Mountain Camp, fashioning and use of dugout canoes was possible due to a few unusual circumstances. First, the camp was established as a logging work camp, making accessible to the prisoners both logs and tools that would be otherwise forbidden. Second, the camp was in the Canadian wilderness and ostensibly filled with “low-risk” prisoners-escape attempts were thought to be unlikely. This situation led to a more relaxed atmosphere of control, in which the PoWs were not fenced in and were even allowed to paddle on a lake (Waiser, 1995: 232). Reports of prisoners using the canoes to temporarily escape and visit the local towns, farms, and even dance halls, were also documented (Waiser 1995).

The material and documentary evidence of the carving and use of dugout canoes at Riding Mountain Camp illuminates the experience of German PoWs in Canada, and in particular a possible prisoner response to the dual threats of extreme boredom and obsessive thoughts of freedom and escape. The carving of canoes, along with other leisure activities such as creating ships in bottles, playing music, or joining a theatre troupe, all contributed to the psychological welfare of the PoWs. Paddling and sailing the canoes on the Little Saskatchewan River and on Whitewater Lake, in turn, was a temporary experience of freedom and escape. Though the prisoners are known to have made real attempts at escape as well, it is intriguing that there is no evidence that canoe carving was ever banned.

This study is the first known archaeological report on dugout canoes related to the Second World War, as well as the first known report on canoes in Manitoba from any time period. This initial work on the Riding Mountain canoes raises many questions. We do not know how or where the prisoners learned to build dugout canoes. The complexity of building the sailing canoe, at least, suggests that someone in the may have had a basic understanding of boats and boat building. Was it from their prior experiences in pre-WWII Europe? Were some of the PoWs members of the German Navy? Or did the knowledge come from a book in the camp library, or, as one oral account suggests, from a Canadian magazine that circulated in the camp (Stozek, 2007:56)? Even if some of the PoWs were from the Navy, it seems unlikely that they would have had experience with building wood boats. Perhaps, then, the PoWs had no prior knowledge and simply developed their canoes through a process of trial and error, with help from a publication.

According to several sources, at least two other PoW camps in Canada allowed prisoners to build and use canoes (Henderson 2009; Carter 1998; Lieberwirth 1985). These references, combined with the knowledge that other satellite logging camps were established near lakes both in Canada and the United States, suggest that the subject of canoe building by Axis Second World War PoWs in North America is deserving of future research-both at Riding Mountain and at camps so far unexplored.

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Figure 1. Location of the Riding Mountain Camp in Manitoba (the authors)

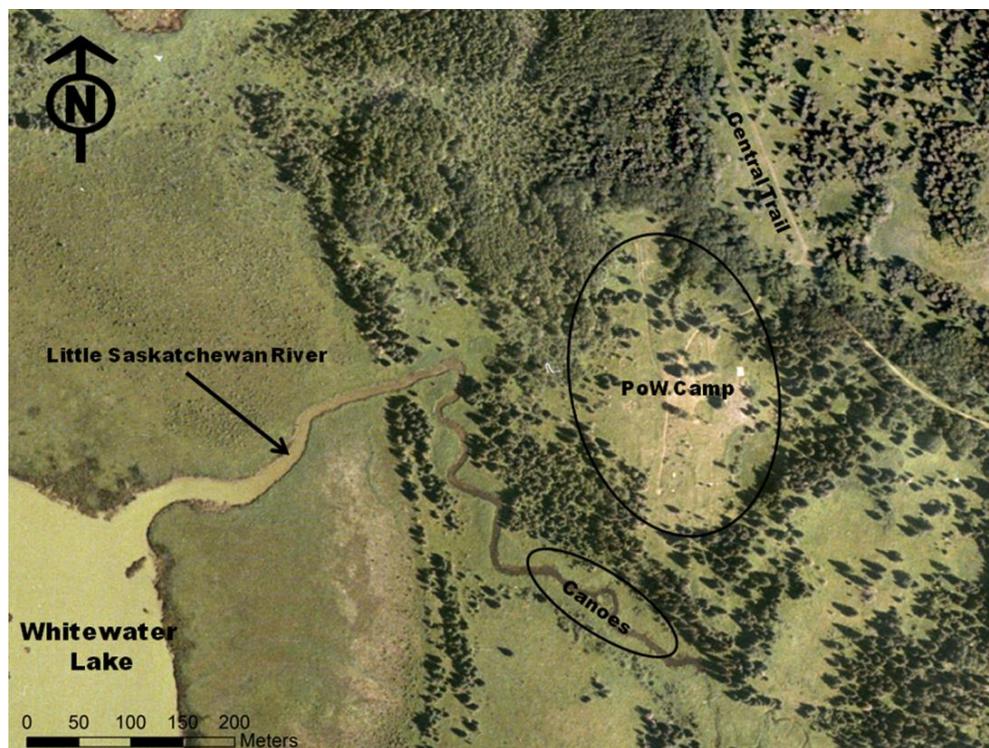


Figure 2: Satellite image of site with areas discussed in text labelled (Google Maps and the authors)



Figure 3. Riding Mountain Camp, circa 1943 (Parks Canada)



Figure 4. PoW sitting in his completed canoe on the banks of the Little Saskatchewan River. Note the mast on the canoe and the log dock in the right foreground (Parks Canada)

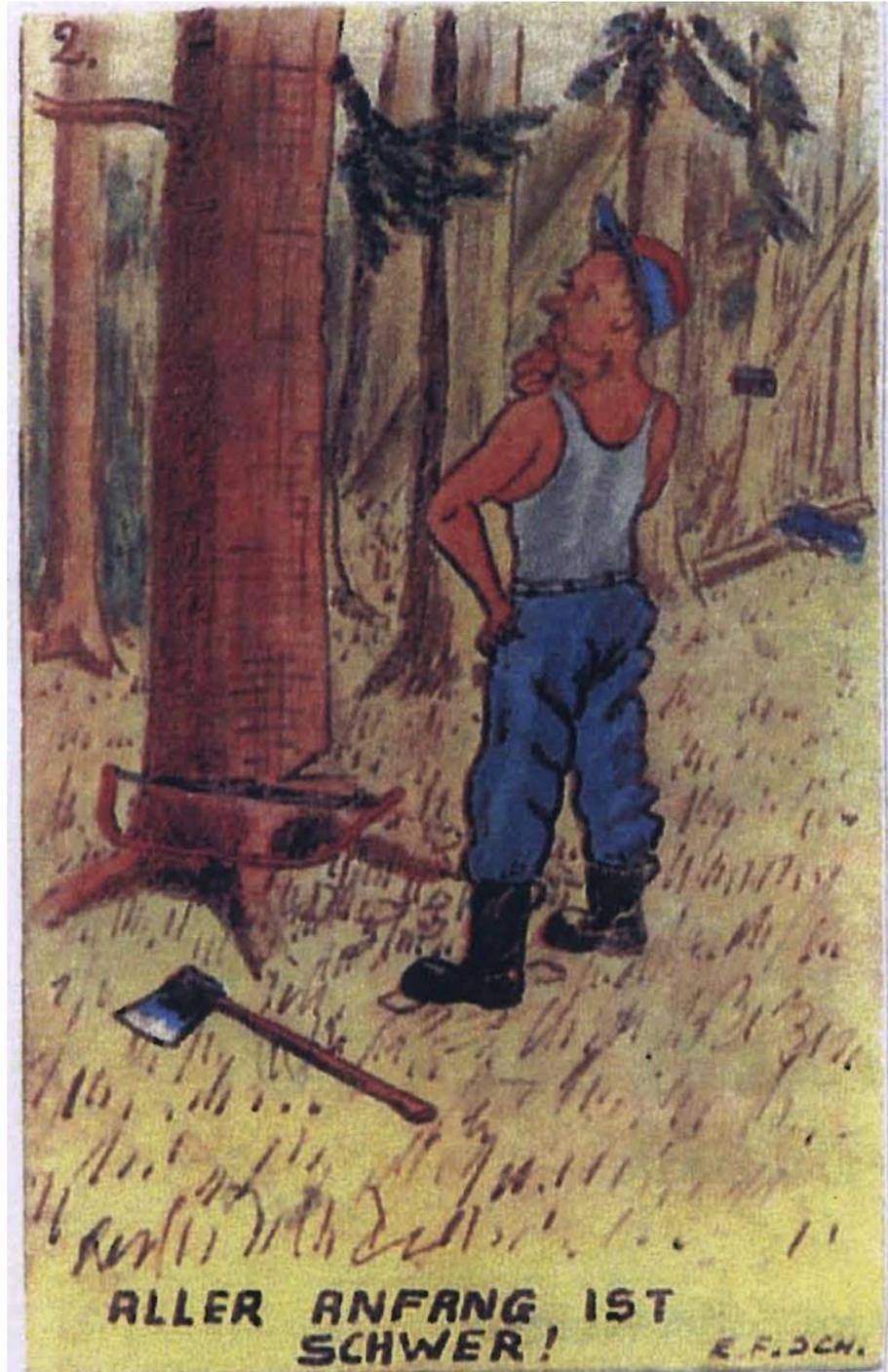


Figure 5. “Every start is hard!” Sketch drawing by a German PoW in Canada showing a PoW assessing a tree (Robert Henderson collection)



Figure 6. Sketch drawing by a German PoW cutting down a tree (Robert Henderson collection)



Figure 7. "Break a Leg!" Sketch drawing by a German PoW in Canada of PoWs on a lake (Robert Henderson collection)



Figure 8. Main: Two canoes photographed at the site in 1997 by Parks Canada are now missing from the site (Parks Canada). Inset: Fragment 31K28B2 photographed at the site in 2010 remains from one of the canoes observed in 1997. (the authors)



Figure 9. This 1973 photograph provided by an informant shows unidentified people removing a canoe from the site (Bill Baker)



Figure 10. Canoe 31K28A on site approximately 5 metres from the Little Saskatchewan River (the authors)



Figure 11. Two canoes located at the Fort Dauphin Museum, Dauphin, Manitoba. On top is a single-man paddling canoe (31K32B), and on the bottom a two-man sailing canoe (31K32A) (the authors)

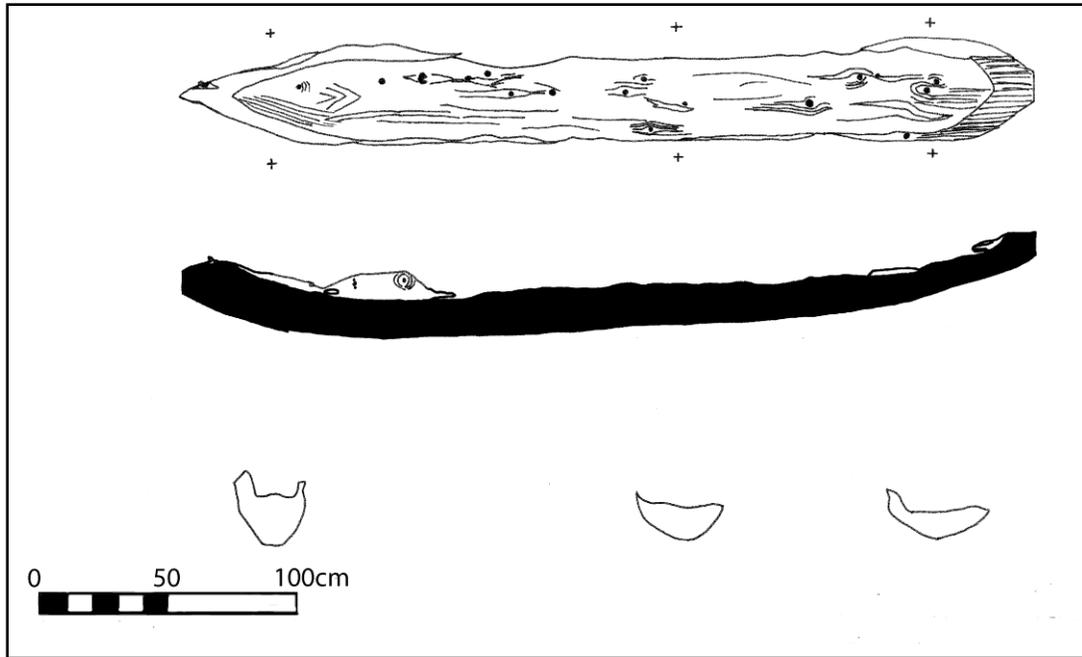


Figure 12. 1:10 scale line drawing of canoe 31K28A (the authors)

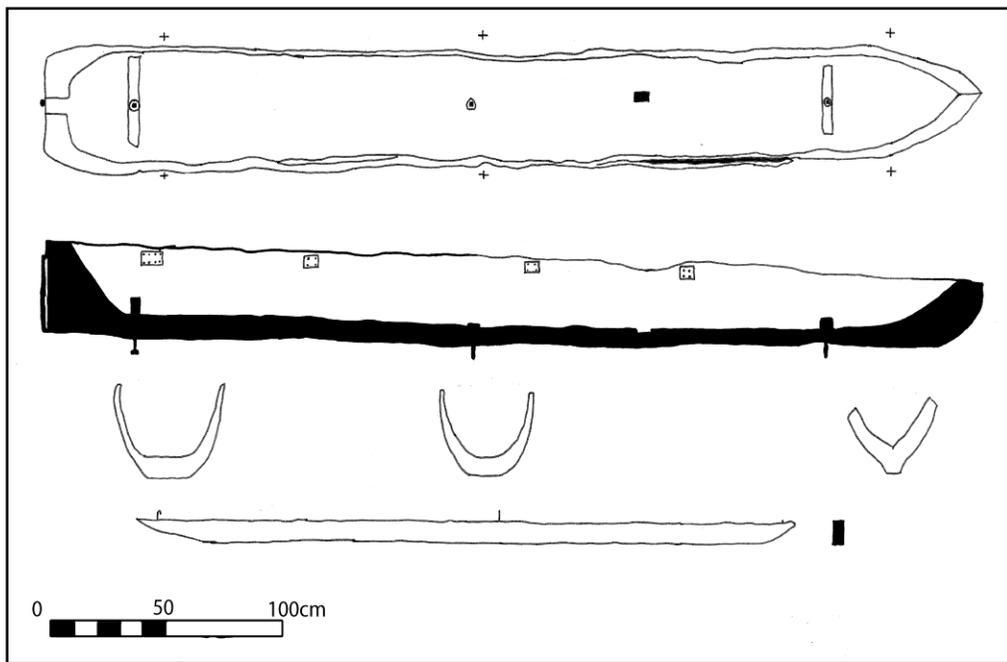


Figure 13. 1:10 scale drawing of canoe 31K32B. Note mast step and thwart sockets (the authors)