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Excavation Work on a Canadian PoW Camp Reaches Its Conclusion

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Many Axis personnel captured during the Second World War were interned in prisoner of war camps in Canada. At the peak of their numbers there were more than 33,000 such PoWs, as well as nearly 6,500 civil internees, members of the merchant marine and refugees.

It is known that there were forty such camps across Canada, including the one built of Whitewater Lake in Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba. In the face of a projected fuel wood shortage in in Canada during 1943, in August that year the Department of Munitions and Supply was given special authority to establish a PoW work camp in Riding Mountain National Park. The camp was to be located in the heart of the park on Whitewater Lake. The intention was to provide cord wood from a fire-killed poplar stand just east of the lake. The camp, consisting of separate accommodation and dining facilities for the prisoners and supervisory personnel, was constructed using alternate service labour and was serviced from the nearby community of Dauphin.

Known as Whitewater PoW Camp, it held 450 men, predominantly members of the Afrika Korps who had been captured in Egypt after the Second Battle of El Alamein. Due to its remoteness and available wood supply Riding Mountain was a desirable place to have a PoW camp. The camp was surrounded by bush and conveniently distant from the park boundary and outlying communities. Located within central Manitoba, and the centre of Canada, escape from the country was considered to be virtually impossible. Consequently, the camp was unusual in that it had no fences or walls enclosing it.

The Canadian Department of Munitions and Supplies was responsible for the construction of the camp and the maintenance of proper living standards. Construction began in the summer of 1943 and by October some 450 German prisoners arrived at the camp to take up residence and work.

In total there were fifteen buildings erected at the Whitewater camp, including, five bunkhouses (with complete washroom and bathing facilities), administrative staff quarters, an administration office, a large cookhouse (with a dining room to accommodate the entire camp), a commissary store, a
garage, a blacksmith shop, a power plant, a machine shop, barns for horses, and a small hospital. The Winnipeg Free Press in 1943 described the completed project as “the largest work camp yet constructed in Canada to accommodate prisoners and ... to use prisoners in fuel wood production”.

Each prisoner was paid 50 cents a day for cutting the required amount of wood. Although bonus rates were offered as an incentive to the prisoners cutting cordwood, the best production achieved by the men was a cord per day per individual. The first winter of wood cutting was a dismal failure – largely because of discipline problems. After approximately seven months of cutting, the total fuel wood production only amounted to 33,000 cords.

The site is now the subject of an on-going, highly-detailed study which involves archival documents, oral history, and an archaeological survey and excavation. As a result of this project – the Whitewater PoW Camp Archaeology Project – much information has now been revealed about the camp and camp life. The work is being led by a graduate student of the Stanford Archaeological Center, Adrian Myers, with volunteers from across Canada and the United States.

The PoWs were shipped to Canada from the United Kingdom (at the latter’s request) on returning troop carriers, as Britain farmed out tens of thousands of PoWs to its allies and former colonies. “Some of them had fought in the Eastern Front in Russia, in France, in Europe and then in Africa for the most part,” Adrian Myers explained. “We do know that the prisoners on the whole were delighted to be captured as PoWs and brought to Canada, taken out of brutal conditions and brought to a paradise compared to where they’d been before.”

The project team spent the summer of 2009 surveying the site which once held log buildings, forestry equipment and teams of horses to haul the logs. With access to the site being restricted it had sat neglected and abandoned for decades with little more than a few overgrown foundations still visible. After it was shut down in 1945 (having started to be wound down in 1944 as the fuel crisis abated), the Canadian government auctioned off everything it could; local residents then scavenged anything they could use. Nature did the rest, essentially reclaiming much of the site. In 2010, during the second phase of the project, the project team began sinking test excavations and mapping the location, essentially creating a digital model of the site as it would have appeared in the 1940s.

Riding Mountain was a “minimum security” camp, and the prisoners took advantage of the situation. It is known that they fraternized with guards and often slipped away to the outlying communities. They purchased mail-order items from a well-known catalogue (the Eaton’s catalogue), kept themselves impeccably groomed. All this has been verified through the excavations in which such items as plates, cutlery, tin cans and bottles have been unearthed, as well as some rather surprising objects.

“We’re finding large volumes of LEFT: One of the many artefacts unearthed at Whitewater and carefully recorded and preserved by the project team – a tin of German Rec Cross chocolate.

ABOVE: A member of the Whitewater project records a remarkable find – a canoe carved by the PoWs at Whitewater. The idea for construction of these canoes came from a Canadian magazine that circulated in the camp. They were completed by means of a spruce or poplar log being chiseled out by hand, the feat requiring many hours of labour. These one-man canoes measured approximately ten feet in length, whereas two man vessels were fourteen to sixteen feet long. They were launched in the creek to the south of camp (which was narrower and deeper at the time), and Whitewater Lake.

BELOW: One of the canoes being used by a German prisoner of war.
personal grooming products,” said Adrian Myers. “So it appears they were really taking care of how they looked and how they smelled. We’ve got toothbrushes, combs, face cream; we’ve got cologne, aftershave, razors, all these kinds of things. It is an intriguing situation because they are in a bush camp but they’re really taking care of their appearance. On a daily basis we are pulling things out of the ground that we can compare to the Eaton’s catalogue by flipping through the pages, and we’re finding them,” he added.

Incredibly, the PoWs went on strike once when pyjamas they had ordered from the mail order catalogue failed to arrive on time. They suspected the guards of stealing them, though the items eventually arrived.

Rumour also has it that they had built their own whiskey still. While Myers’ team has not dug up physical evidence of alcohol production, it has, however, found numerous flask-type bottles that may well have held alcohol.

In addition to the hard, physical evidence turned up at the site, the project has also managed to track down the few surviving PoWs who were imprisoned at the camp, to collect their stories. Through this work, it has learnt that PoWs would sneak out after evening roll call and return by morning roll call, and they would be doing things like going for walkabout, or going out, leaving the park and finding towns. “And there are stories of them joining local barn dances. There is even a fellow still alive out here who took a PoW out for a beer,” Myers observed.

This information has led Myers to develop an intriguing theory. The Riding Mountain area of Manitoba was settled largely by Eastern European immigrants, including many Ukrainians, who would have been relatively new arrivals at the time. “Perhaps due to a belief that the Germans would eventually unseat the tyrannical Russians who were occupying Ukraine at the time, there was a relatively sympathetic attitude towards the PoWs among locals,” Myers continued. “They don’t seem to have been seen as enemies, really,” he said, noting that in many other parts of the country the sentiment was clearly the opposite.

The third and final season of archaeology work at the site was completed in September of last year. This included a full-scale excavation of the site with particular attention being given to areas where the camp’s rubbish was dumped. The work has been undertaken by trained archaeologists and all of the excavated artefacts, which remain the property of the Canadian government, have been shipped to Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, where they will be examined and conserved by the project team. With time, it is intended that some of the objects will be placed on display to allow the wider public to enjoy the finds, ensuring that an intriguing aspect of Canada’s wartime history is properly recorded and maintained for future generations.

* Full details of the project, along with archival documents and photographs as well as a comprehensive history of Whitewater, can be found on the project’s website: www.whitewaterpowcamp.com