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A Second World War Prison Camp in the Wilderness

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Where in the World?

In this issue we visit two sites in Canada from different ends of the archaeological timeline. Phillip’s Garden is a hunting base used by the nomadic Dorset Palaeoeskimo people over 1,200 years ago. But first we explore a Second World War Prisoner of War camp, which is only about 70 years old...

A Second World War Prison Camp in the Wilderness

In a remote area of Manitoba in central Canada lie the remains of Riding Mountain Camp. It was once a busy logging camp where over 450 men worked. But these loggers were not like any other loggers that came before them, or would ever come after. They were German Prisoners of War (PoWs); battle-weary soldiers of the Nazi Afrika Korps. Captured in Egypt in late 1942, about 35,000 of them were shipped to Canada, where they would stay until the end of the Second World War.

Riding Mountain Camp housed prisoners who were in the lowest risk category of PoWs. Their task was to provide wood for heating Canadian homes. In exchange, they lived in less crowded conditions, with more freedom. The PoWs were well provided for and well treated by the Canadians; the camp was not even surrounded by barbed wire or towers, and the PoWs were free to explore the woods around the camp.

For the last five years, research led by Adrian Myers has used both historical and archaeological methods to find out more about daily life in Riding Mountain prison camp. He explains more about the work that his team has done...

We first mapped the entire site using surveying equipment, and then we excavated some of the PoW camp’s rubbish dumps. The dig produced over 50,000 artefacts, representing a wide range of activities that took place in the camp. The excavations revealed signs of the PoWs’ work logging in the park, such as broken saw blades and tools. We also found personal items like combs and toothbrushes, and containers that once held toiletries like shampoo. Evidence for how the PoWs liked to enjoy themselves whilst not working was discovered too, including alcohol bottles and smoking pipes, bits of carved antlers, and a broken ice skate.

The archaeology and historical evidence revealed a competition for the minds of the PoWs. The Canadians tried to teach the PoWs about democracy by providing books and teaching courses on history and political science, and by allowing them to spend time with local people. Meanwhile, the Nazi Germans sent the PoWs held at the camp new German military uniforms, Christmas cards, and packages filled with German goods decorated with Nazi symbols like the swastika.

As part of my research strategy I tracked down the few former PoWs still alive, to record their unique stories. So many years after the war, these veterans now lived in Germany, Canada, and the United States. Amazingly, several of these former PoWs told me that Riding Mountain Camp was more of a summer camp than a prison camp, and that their stays in Manitoba were the best years of their lives!
An Ancient Hunting Site by the Sea

Phillip’s Garden is a large site on the northwest coast of Newfoundland in Canada. It was inhabited by the Dorset Palaeoeskimo people, whose ancestors arrived from Siberia in modern-day Russia approximately 4,500 years ago. Patricia Wells from the Memorial University of Newfoundland explains more…

The Dorset were hunter-gatherers who hunted land animals such as caribou and musk ox, and sea creatures such as walrus and seals. They lived a nomadic lifestyle, but returned to some places repeatedly, re-using their small, circular houses and building new ones. As a result there are sites with many houses spanning long periods of time; however few of the houses have overlapping dates, suggesting that the sites’ populations were small.

Phillip’s Garden is extraordinary for many reasons. It is in Newfoundland, which is the southernmost place where archaeologists have discovered evidence of the Dorset. The houses at this site are larger and better built than elsewhere. Many of the houses at Phillip’s Garden were in use at the same time, suggesting that an unusually high number of people lived there when the site was occupied (2,000–1,200 years ago). Based on the size of houses, it is likely that as many as six families lived there. In addition, we have discovered unique tools made of whale bone; a material used much less on other sites.

The way in which the Dorset lived at Phillip’s Garden was affected by the life cycle of the harp seal (Phoca groenlandica). Harp seals still arrive on the site’s changing human settlement. Zooarchaeological studies looking at the animal bone found at the site have shown many more seal bones than those of other animals. By measuring some of the seal bones we discovered that the Dorset hunted seals during their migrations both south and north (in mid-winter and spring), with more being killed during the spring hunt. We have also discovered that the amount of seal bone declined toward the final years of the site’s occupation.

By using a global positioning system (GPS) to record small surface features, such as shallow depressions, we have been able to identify more houses on the site surface than we could see with just our eyes! We have also investigated how the houses were constructed; explored how the tools found on the site were made; and looked at where the Dorset acquired the raw materials that they used. All of these areas of research will help us to understand more about how the Dorset lived at Phillip’s Garden.

With thanks to Adrian Myers and Patricia Wells

Fascinating Facts

- The motto of Canada is A Mari Usque Ad Mare, which is a Latin phrase meaning “From Sea to Sea”.
- The St. Lawrence Iroquoians were a prehistoric indigenous (or native) people who lived in the area that is now modern-day Quebec and Ontario. Their word Kanata, which means “village” or “settlement”, is the origin of the word Canada. In 1535, the St Lawrence Iroquoians used the word when giving directions to a French explorer called Jacques Cartier to help him find a village called Stadacona. Cartier later used the word Kanata to describe the whole area. In the 19th century, Canada became the legal name for the country.
- One of the oldest archaeological sites in Canada is Bluefish Caves in Yukon, in north-west Canada. Here a piece of mammoth bone was found that some experts believed had been worked by a human. It was radiocarbon dated to around 28,000 years before present!