

If you weren't there, you missed a good time.

By Rory MacKay, Return to Basin Depot Committee

Well, it may have taken thirteen and a half years, and there certainly was no pot of gold (although we did have a rainbow) but it will interest all Ottawa Chapter members that we finally got to the bottom of a fruitful test pit from May of 1996.

The occasion was the long awaited "Return to Basin Depot", organized by chapter members over the past year and held in partnership with The Friends of Bonnechere Parks. As you know, Basin Depot was an important stopping place and supply depot for lumber companies on the Bonnechere River in current Algonquin Park from as early as 1847 at least until 1914. The lumbering industry of the Ottawa Valley is a high ranking category in the *Topical Organization of Ontario History*.

Previous archaeological investigations carried out in 1996 under Chris J.-Andersen and in 1998, 1999 and 2000 under Tom Ballantine had centred on the remains of a boarding house where countless loggers had stayed overnight while on their way to the logging camps of the area. The Roche house, named after the most recent family of caretakers, yielded a multitude of domestic artifacts such as broken plates and bottles, clay pipe pieces, and thousands of shards of window glass.

The focus of this past October 1st to 9th fell on two areas of the site much less likely to produce evidence of domestic life: the blacksmith shop area, in which one unit was partially excavated in September 1996 around a shovel test from five months earlier, and an area of possible foundation mounds at the west end of the site, where a storehouse had been indicated on an 1890 survey map.

The weather forecast for the week was for rain every day but with some optimism and the much appreciated assistance of superintendent Paul Smith and his able staff from Bonnechere Provincial Park two porta-potties, three picnic tables, and two shelters (provided by the Friends of Murphy's Point Park) for our Field Lab were set up in advance of our permitted start date of October 1st.

Now at this point one might be asking how it was that personnel from Bonnechere Provincial Park were assisting us with archaeological work in Algonquin Park. Some years ago an enlightened decision was made whereby archaeological investigations along the Bonnechere River would be carried out on a watershed basis rather than from a park to park to park viewpoint. Thus, at night after a day working in Algonquin we were the grateful recipients of use of the Bonnechere Park staff house facilities (including showers). Artifacts recovered in Algonquin remain "theirs", but the entire collection of artifacts along the river upstream from Round Lake is stored at Bonnechere Park's Davenport Centre.

In the days prior to commencement of excavations, grids were laid out in the two areas of interest, under direction of archaeologist Ken Swayze. These were not only for shovel testing and excavation purposes but also for investigation using Ground Penetrating Radar. One of our chapter members, Melanie Zahab, who is a doctoral candidate in geography and classics at the University of Ottawa, was

able to provide access to such equipment and it was decided to see if it could shed any light on what we might expect in the ground. Despite a very bad back she came, along with her husband Ismat to do the work. The results were indeterminate, but it was an interesting start to the week, and much appreciated. Any illusions that GPR can function well in areas of dense undergrowth, and thus dispense of the need for in-the-ground archaeology, were dispelled.

It wasn't quite a "Le Man's running start", with a "Ladies and gentlemen, start up your shovels" at break of day on October 1st, but it wasn't very long before the "Chronology Crew", directed by Ken Swayze and Don Webb were engaged in shovel testing around the alleged storehouse mound. After only a few "shovel-fulls" the first artifacts began to turn up; buckles and clips associated with horse harness. Once it was established that there was something there to be found, Rory MacKay, Denise Bourgeois, and Michel Gaudet walked the 210 metres along the baseline to the adjacent one-metre units laid out across the previously partially excavated and then back-filled unit in the blacksmith shop area.

If one simply compares the number of units opened at each end of the baseline, the blacksmith shop crew might appear to be slackers, as they only opened three units over an eight day period. However, when one considers that it took a complete half day to re-excavate down to the plastic laid where excavation ceased in 1996 and then factor in that each unit was excavated to approximately 90 cm through a complex jumbled structure of debris, it would seem that they accomplished a great deal.

Although our submissions for funds had asked for extra money to run a public archaeology activity, we were unsuccessful in obtaining those additional funds. However, public involvement is a cornerstone in each of the partners' philosophies, so we planned on one anyway. Fortunately, through the generosity of the Algonquin Forestry Authority and The Friends of Algonquin Park, in equal parts, our costs for hiring an archaeologist, Ken Swayze, had been met. Some additional financial donations and fund-raising on the part of the Ottawa Chapter at the Great Glebe Garage Sale provided for portable toilets and extras for archaeology day, held on the third day of the dig.

On Saturday, October 3rd, displays about the history of Basin Depot and our previous work were set up under one shelter. Two other shelters provided by Coleman Canada (they donated three) were used for displays by The Algonquin Forestry Authority and Ontario Parks, each outlining their respective efforts to protect cultural heritage resources. The Friends of Bonnechere Parks also set up a display.

Tours were led by Jim Fraser, Paul Smith, Justin Peter and Jane Duff. Once the first of many tours was underway, those organizing the day could return to excavating, secure in the knowledge that each group leader was well equipped with maps, both current and historical, and a well-prepared script outlining the history of the site and our work on it in years past. Sandy Barr and Lois King worked in the Field Lab that day.

Despite rain showers in the surrounding vicinity, but not at the site during the tour period, and competition with a local artists' tour we had 65 or perhaps a couple more visitors to our relatively remote location twenty two kilometers up the gravel road from County Road 58. Supervision requirements and park concerns prohibited a hands-on approach at this public event, but with close access to the excavations, access to the archaeologists for answers to questions, and an opportunity to

handle some of the artifacts there were no complaints from our visitors. Even some Algonquin North Ontario Parks staff stopped to see our work.

At the end of the day we left the site earlier than usual to get changed and presentable, for once again we joined with The Friends of Bonnechere Parks in an after-dig meal, in the Davenport Centre. The gathering had much the same feeling as a homecoming, as old friendships were rekindled and new ones established. Paul Smith, current superintendent of Bonnechere Park, introduced his predecessor, Jim Fraser, who in turn introduced the recipient of the 2009 Friends of Bonnechere Parks Directors' Award. Ken Swayze was presented with the award by last year's recipient Laurie Fraser. Following the presentations, Rory MacKay presented a Powerpoint presentation on excavations he has done in Algonquin Park on a Camboose Shanty. Since he had very short notice that he was to do that particular talk, his slides were designed for self-use and included text, but Rory was able to add significantly to what showed on the screen.

Over the period of nine days, quite a number of people were involved in these blacksmith shop units. Of course we had the benefit of Tom Ballantine's familiarity with the site, experience at shovel testing, and ability to produce accurate paperwork. Marian Clark took time from running the Field Lab and assisted in measuring and drawing some very complex floor plans, and later Heather Stronach took on the task of drawing some of the wall profiles. Dave Croft dropped by to "just visit", then "supervise the excavation" and then "demonstrate a few points" of excavation. Before long he was right into the unit and working with Libby Imrie to extract two horseshoes. At one point, when shovel testing was on-going in the area, one could see at least five presidents of the chapter (Lois King, Heather Stronach, Marian Clark, Glenna Roberts, Jim Montgomery) working in close proximity. Also working with them at various times were: Bill MacLennan, Norm McBride, Betty Biesenthal, Paul Smith, Sandy Webb, Larry Graham, Sarah Taylor and Ron Bernard. Somewhere between 250 and 300 test pits were dug, in the vicinity of the blacksmith shop, storehouse and south datum line, although Glenna claims to have dug something like "6,599" herself. Forrest Poff-Smith did some surface collecting along the adjacent road. Al Fraser took some video as has been his custom on previous digs. Roger Lupton was the all important site photographer throughout the week. Bonnechere Park staff Stephanie Clarke and Kristen Dunlop also did some excavation. (Apology is extended if I forgot anyone.)

So, what did we find? Unfortunately, our carefully drawn wall profiles and the condition and location of artifacts suggest that that at some time a deep hole was dug within the former walls of the blacksmith shop, and into that hole all manner of debris was dumped and burned. Later, perhaps many years later, it would appear that the area was bulldozed or scraped, producing a fairly extensive debris field, shallow in some places and quite deep in others. Almost all of the finds through shovel-testing within this area were metallic, although what may be a few fragments of a tea cup were also found. It was not surprising to find pieces of metal of various lengths and cross-section, pieces of cut chain, short-shank nails with broad heads (possibly used to fasten leather on a bellows) or even tin cans. All but the latter might be expected to accumulate on a blacksmith's floor. Even a broken pair of blacksmith's tongs was no surprise. However, a broad-axe in fairly good condition, a tiny drawknife, and a carpenter's hold-down all suggested that that some woodworking had been done in the blacksmith shop, perhaps in aid of repairing logging sleighs or the like.

Among the items that came from the excavated units in the blacksmith shop were a spade and damaged scythe, many nails and other scrap iron items, slag or clinker, melted glass, sheet metal, and some stove parts. In one of the units there was evidence of a rectangular post buried upright in gravel, beginning some distance below the surface. It was back-filled with coal dust and anvil-scale, suggesting it had been installed within a shop already being used, perhaps as a leg for a work bench. Thin disks of metal, presumably punched from bar-stock suggest that two men worked at the anvil at times, as their diameter suggests a punch size too wieldy for one man to handle.

With twenty-some excavators and shovel-testers , mostly from the OAS, coming and going over a ten day period, we accumulated over nine hundred hours of volunteer work, not counting planning time and with artifact processing yet to come. We provided a self-generated, hands-on, archaeological research experience for our members, added to the existing knowledge the Park has about Basin Depot, and provided a public archaeology day for the local residents whose heritage we were studying. We hope that one day we may be permitted to add to the information available about our previous work at the Virtual Museum of Canada website "Land of the Spirits". My thanks are extended to my committee of organizers and all participants.

We had an interesting opportunity to see ourselves through another person's eyes, specifically a writer, Jonathon Reynolds, who wanted to prepare a brief article on archaeology of logging in Algonquin Park. Since we are "the only show in town" on that topic, or at least have been for the past 15 years, we invited him along. He spent three days with us, and will be submitting his article to *Archaeology Magazine*. We aren't sure what he will write, but we suspect at the very least he will describe us as "a very curious group".

We also had a good time. As promised, the colours were lovely in the leaves. The rain held off. We heard wolves howling spontaneously on three occasions in the middle of the day. Accommodations at the staff house at Bonnechere Park were comfortable and the fire alarm behaved. The meals prepared by our own OAS chefs were extremely tasty (someone gained weight during the week). We had interesting conversations, over lunch around the Basin Cabin and back at the staff house. We rekindled past friendships and developed new ones. We made a contribution to cultural heritage knowledge.....and we got to dig!!!!

However, getting artifacts out of the ground is only a small part of the work of archaeology.

On the weekend of November 20, 21, 22, 2009, a dedicated group of volunteers once again benefitted from the generosity of the Superintendent of Bonnechere Parks, Paul Smith. The staff house was made available for an artifact cleaning crew of twelve in total. Of course the staff house was not the place of cleaning; that task was done in the comfort of the Davenport Centre. When plans were made for the weekend selected, it was quite possible that we would have to mush through deep snow. Instead, the weather was warm and dry all weekend. It was a perfect place to carry out our cleaning and cataloguing. Many thanks are offered to Kristen Dunlop of Bonnechere Parks for turning on the heat in advance of our arrival.

Once again the fare at meal time was a chef's delight. Saturday evening's meal was in part a birthday party for Heather Stronach. As always, conversation around the table was lively, and covered a wide variety of topics.

At the end of the weekend, of more than 65 hours of volunteer work, the artifacts were boxed up for delivery to Ken Swayze's storage room in the Diefenbunker, where access will be more ready in March when we hope to continue the work of cleaning and cataloguing. An invitation will be made regarding time and dates, for those who wish to contribute to this important follow-up to the dig.