

THE ORCHID SITE OSSUARY, FORT ERIE, ONTARIO

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On July 17, 1964, a bulldozer was excavating a corner lot at Niagara Boulevard and Forsythe Avenue, Fort Erie, Ontario, in preparation for a black-topped parking lot. After a considerable portion of the earth surface had been removed and trucked away, contractor James Flake noticed that his machine had dislodged human bone. He responsibly reported his observations to the Fort Erie City officials and ceased work until an investigation could be made. At the request of the city officials, Mrs. Lee Moore contacted several institutions, including the University of Buffalo Anthropology Department, where the writer agreed to investigate and make recommendations since the site was directly across the border.

Through a series of unforeseen circumstances, the investigation turned into an immediate salvage operation conducted under most discouraging and restricted conditions. It was made tolerable by the excellent cooperation of William C. Noble, National Museum of Canada representative, who worked with us throughout most of the period and by certain townspeople in Fort Erie who became friends and helpers. The Frederick M. Houghton Chapter of the New York State Archeological Association came through as always with invaluable help. But above all, credit must go to the crew of UB students who reacted to a most difficult situation with dignity, good judgment, humor, and the conviction to work 24 hours straight to give the job the best that circumstances would allow.

Our labors extended over ten days during which we attempted to get the greatest amount of overall information on a most important multiple occupation site at the expense of detailed information and precision on

any single portion or occupation. Consequently, many details remain unclear, and the cultural and skeletal material which had to be left in the ground at the deadline for closing the operation are lamentable losses. But the information which we acquired is reliable and important. The material recovered is now part of the collections of the National Museum of Canada with whom we share the responsibility for analysis. The account which follows is mainly concerned with field excavations and impressions of the Orchid Site material.

Lots 1 and 2, Fort Erie, Ontario are owned by Anthony Marinaccio and stand on the first terrace above the present Niagara River level, paralleling the river at 10° East of North. The eastern edge of the lot is approximately 150 feet from the edge of the terrace. Only the northern and western portions of the lots were freshly leveled by the construction, the remainder being covered with buildings or crushed stone. The portions which were examined had been covered with fill. As a result, no accurate reconstruction of the original terrain could be made. But the large amounts of cultural debris and the numbers of pits indicate that this sandy knoll was a favored spot for human living right up to the present.

The work of earlier investigators as well as that of the writer indicates that the Orchid Site is not unique in its location or its multiple occupations. All records of earlier workers in the Niagara Frontier such as Benedict and Houghton indicate extensive remains along this terrace on both sides of the River. But nearly all have been destroyed by modern occupation. An exception is the Martin Site which the writer excavated in 1963 at the southern tip of Grand Island, four miles away. Surface collections reveal the distinctive artifacts of every time period except that of Paleoindian. Flint deposits were at one time exposed and quarried from the Onondaga limestone where the escarpment crosses the Niagara River near the Peace Bridge

which has obliterated the former workshop about a mile from the Orchid Site.

Examination of the disturbed surface at the Orchid Site showed two areas to be investigated. One, Unit A, later shown to be an ossuary, was a discrete unit and will be described separately. The second area, Unit B, was a narrow strip delimited by the house in the adjoining lot to the north and the edge of the crushed stone to the south. It consisted of the refuse of several occupations, but mainly Late Middle Woodland. Scattered about in the refuse were single burials and pits. One of the most interesting finds was an Iroquois burial with netsinkers and wearing on his chest a shell gorget inlaid with blue Venetian beads.

Unit A.

The bulldozer had removed the surface over most of this area except for an unknown extent which was under the bulldozer-cut bank. In removing the upper two feet of the feature, the machine had left a mass of broken bone which was further confused by looting. This mass was identified as an ossuary, and its unique structure warrants a brief description.

The form of the ossuary was roughly oval with numerous lobes like scallops. Interpretations of the shape were complicated by intrusive pits on both the eastern and western edges. Irrespective of the irregular outline the maximum length and breadth were the same, 18.5 feet, and the maximum depth, 6.5 feet below the original surface. The structure was very complicated, consisting of a central core of bone rimmed by a wide band of brown sand within a central pit. Around the edge were several subsidiary pits, shallower than the main pit and separate but attached to the main pit. The contents of the pit were stratified in three layers. The top layer was the core of bone. Below this was a middle layer which was nearly sterile brown sand. The bottom layer was filled with bone and covered the bottom and sides of the pit.

Burials of diverse types were noted in the ossuary. Both Layer A and Layer C had many bones in a disarticulated jumble usually interpreted as the result of being thrown in. Articulated segments were frequently noted. Two complete individual burials may have been intrusive. Bundles could occasionally be recognized and, in one area, clusters of bundle burials.

Estimates of the number of individuals are very approximate. Perhaps about 300 individuals remained in the ossuary after the bulldozer had removed about two feet. One or two hundred should probably be added to account for this loss. This large number of individuals is unusual in the Niagara Frontier where ossuaries were never numerous. Most of those which have been analyzed are small, consisting of 20-50 individuals, and are of the Early and Intermediate Periods of Iroquois development. The Orchid ossuary does not belong to this class.

No grave goods were present to aid the problem of identification. However, a number of artifacts were found in the ossuary fill. These have not been studied, but it was noted in the field that incised pottery was absent, whereas Late Middle and Early Late Woodland types were present. Tentative conclusions would place this ossuary around 900 A. D.