

LINGERING THOUGHTS ON THE MANITOBA HISTORIC SITES SURVEY

Dave McDowell
Winnipeg, Manitoba

From time to time we in archaeology get a chance to look back at earlier work. Archaeology has come of age with the current generation, from the early works of avocationalists to a profession. I was lucky to come into the field via the side door of historical geography, and a course in 1969 with Dr Tom Shay opened up new vistas with an introduction to Manitoba archaeology.

In the melding of studies on Aboriginal movements in North America with Dr Wayne Moodie's course on historical geography, I did a term paper on the artifacts from a set of historical site collections done by the Manitoba Historic Sites Survey (MHSS) that had been conducted during the summer of 1967 by Messrs Stephen Baker and Morgan Tamplin in conjunction with the Glacial Lake Agassiz Survey (GLAS). Those artifacts were stored at the U of M Anthropology Lab, awaiting analysis. The results have recently been reworked and published by Leo Pettipas - see McDowell, David, 1969, "The Manitoba Historic Sites Survey, 1967" in the *Manitoba Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 15(1&2), 2015.

Within that study a novice (myself) was introduced to the joys of cleaning, sorting, reconstructing, and writing up what had been collected, and then of trying to set it in context. Two categories that caught my fancy in trying to reconstruct trading-post life were the GLASS-BOTTLE and POTTERY materials. Many stories can surely be conjured up by closely examining a medicine bottle and a china plate.

The first question to arise was, "what were the contents of a given bottle, and how was the concoction it contained used in a fur-trade era of self-administered medicine?" We do know that such contents often had a high alcohol content, so were they a cure or just a means of masking pain?

There is a procedure that can be followed by the archaeologist at work that involves using abbreviations for artifact attributes: B for bottle, N for neck, D for diameter, etc. to show what can be measured (Fig 1). My own study did not involve actually creating a table with specific measurements for the sake of categorization or comparison, but even if measurements had been taken, they would of course have been a means to an end, not the end in themselves, and once made, what might they mean? *Why* were the presumed medicine bottles as long, or wide, or as thick as they were? *Why* was the neck as short (or long) as it was, and what was the purpose of making the diameter of the lip ("rim") that wide or that narrow, as the case may be?

The foregoing are "quantitative" attribute categories, i.e., measurements. Then there are the "qualitative" ones such as shape and colour. Some bottles were rectangular in transverse cross-section, while others were round, leading to the questions, *why* were some round and others rectangular, and *why* was the glass clear rather than coloured (and vice versa)?

The second class of artifact was the Blue pottery (Fig 2) that had obviously been a proud import to grace the table of a rough fur trade establishment, lending some nostalgia to those who were far from friends and home back in the British Isles.

What stories could be discovered about the entertainment and survival of men living off the land, awaiting the next season's supplies from the Bay; or at the time of a given site, maybe even about trade goods arriving by ox cart from the southeast outposts in the United States, especially in Minnesota?

Manitoba historical archaeology - a corner of the discipline that deserves revisiting. Let's hear about your discoveries and the stories we can weave.

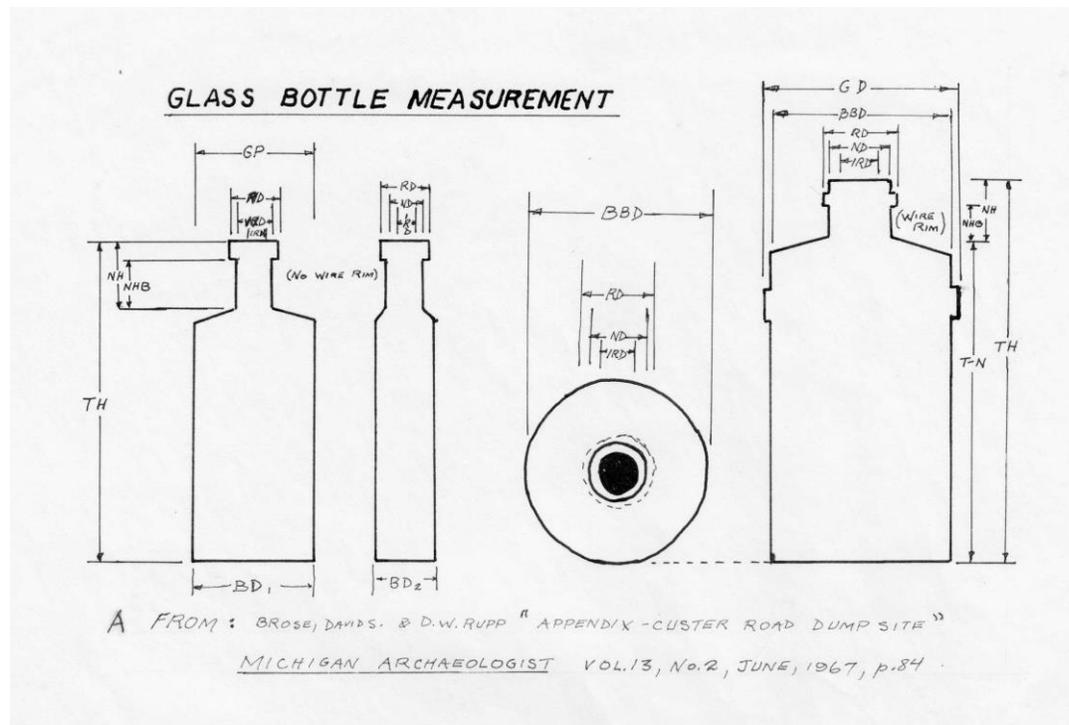


Fig 1. Above (drawings): measurements that can be taken on presumed medicine bottles; below (photos): examples of glass containers recovered by the MHSS.



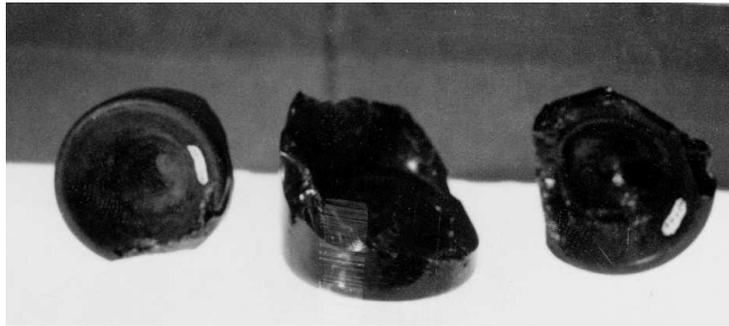
Necks of complete and fragmentary bottles.



Green-pickle bottles.



Patent-medicine bottles.



Bottle-bases with kick-ups.



Fig 2. Blue & brown transfer-printed Bosphorous ware, Bo'ness Potteries, Scotland, 67-97.