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FORT MCKENZIE (1832-1843):
HISTORIC SITE SALVAGE ARCHAEOLOGY

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Historical Background

In the fall of 1831, the American Fur Company established a trading post in Blackfeet country on the upper Missouri River that became known as Fort Piegan (Fig. 1). It was built in the angle of land formed by the confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers. A party of 25 men led by James Kipp went up the river from Fort Union and constructed this post in 75 days. Twenty-four hundred beaver skins were taken in trade the first 10 days after completion of the Fort, with prospects of reaching 4000 by the end of the winter. The following spring, Kipp started downriver for Fort Union with the returns. The men who were to remain behind refused to do so. Fort Piegan was abandoned, and was burned shortly thereafter by the Indians.

That summer, in 1832, the Company sent another party up the river from Fort Union to build a new post on a wide stretch of bottomland along the Missouri River, about seven miles above the mouth of the Marias River. In charge of building this post was David D. Mitchell; he remained as factor after its completion. This post was named Fort McKenzie in honor of Kenneth McKenzie, at that time factor at Fort Union in charge of all American Fur Company operations on the upper Missouri River. Fort McKenzie was built to carry on the fur trade with the Piegans, Bloods and Blackfeet proper and with several neighboring nations such as the Gros Ventre, Sarcee and Kutenai. The Piegans were the most important beaver hunters, while the others dealt more in the trade with buffalo robes.

17. Pendants made of sheet copper, and flattened pieces of lead.
18. Tubular bird bones with incised markings (Fig. 6, e).
19. Pieces of china dishware, usually blue, rubbed into small round discs and occasionally pendant-shaped; they may be gaming objects.
20. Small disks made of tree bark with a cross incised on one side. Some have vermillion still visible in the markings (Fig. 6, f).
21. Game sticks made from rib bones with shallowly drilled holes and incised markings of simple design (Figs. 7 and 8). Some designs still contain red ochre. Bone tally sticks were used to keep score in a guessing game. Sides were chosen and an object was passed from hand to hand to confuse opponents. The latter would then guess with a slender wand which concealed hand contained the concealed object.
22. ✓ Tubular white clay beads. Most of these were made from broken stems of clay pipes. Considering the number found, it is quite likely that broken pipe stems were shipped directly from the factory for re-use as trade beads.
23. Fragments of clay smoking pipes (Fig. 9), some with the initials of the owner scratched on the bowl. The letters T D appear on the bowls of some pipes. This was the pipe maker's mark that was usually registered with a craft guild.

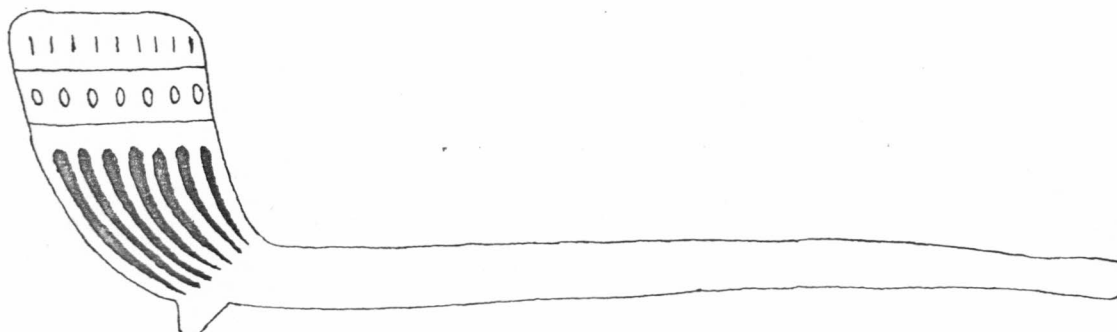


Fig. 9. Historic clay smoking pipe from Fort McKenzie.

24. Many glass trade beads of various colors (Fig. 10). The shapes include round, cylindrical, spindle-shaped and faceted. Among the spherical round beads, there is a greater variation in color: red, different shades of blue, black, tan and white. Green was used only in medium size round beads made of paste. The faceted glass beads are transparent, light and dark green, light and dark blue and red. The short spindle-shaped beads are red, white and blue. Practically all pony beads of colorful design were found broken. They were no doubt highly prized and, when lost, were sought with care.
25. Many glass seed beads were found. They are almost entirely white and sky blue, with a few that are black, yellow or red. The red glass seed beads have no white cores. White cores did not appear on red glass seed beads until about 1850. The only beads found with white cores were one fairly large cylindrical red bead and two medium-sized round red beads. A few seed beads were made of green paste. Apparently the green color was difficult to produce in glass beads, except by the bead makers who manufactured the faceted type.
26. Many small pieces of broken pane glass are covered with a tarnished coating. Some of these pieces are most likely from broken looking glasses. The same tarnished coating was also found on the majority of the glass trade beads. This coating may have resulted from some of the glass having been in direct association with ashes, as some beads were found untarnished.
27. Metal brocade, consisting of brass wire woven around cotton thread.
28. Large beaver tooth. This is a distorted tooth that had grown into a half-circle like a tusk. This occasionally happens when beaver teeth become disaligned and the beaver cannot chew properly to wear them down. During the fur trade era, the most common cause of tooth damage was chewing on steel traps. The trap chains were attached by a loose ring to a slender pole stuck in the mud at the bottom of water deep enough to drown a beaver. The trap was set on or near the edge of a drop-off into deep water and weighted with a rock or, in lieu of the latter, a pouch filled with sand or gravel. When the beaver plunged into deep water to escape the trap, the loose ring slipped over a notch on the lower end of the pole and caused him to drown. The traps

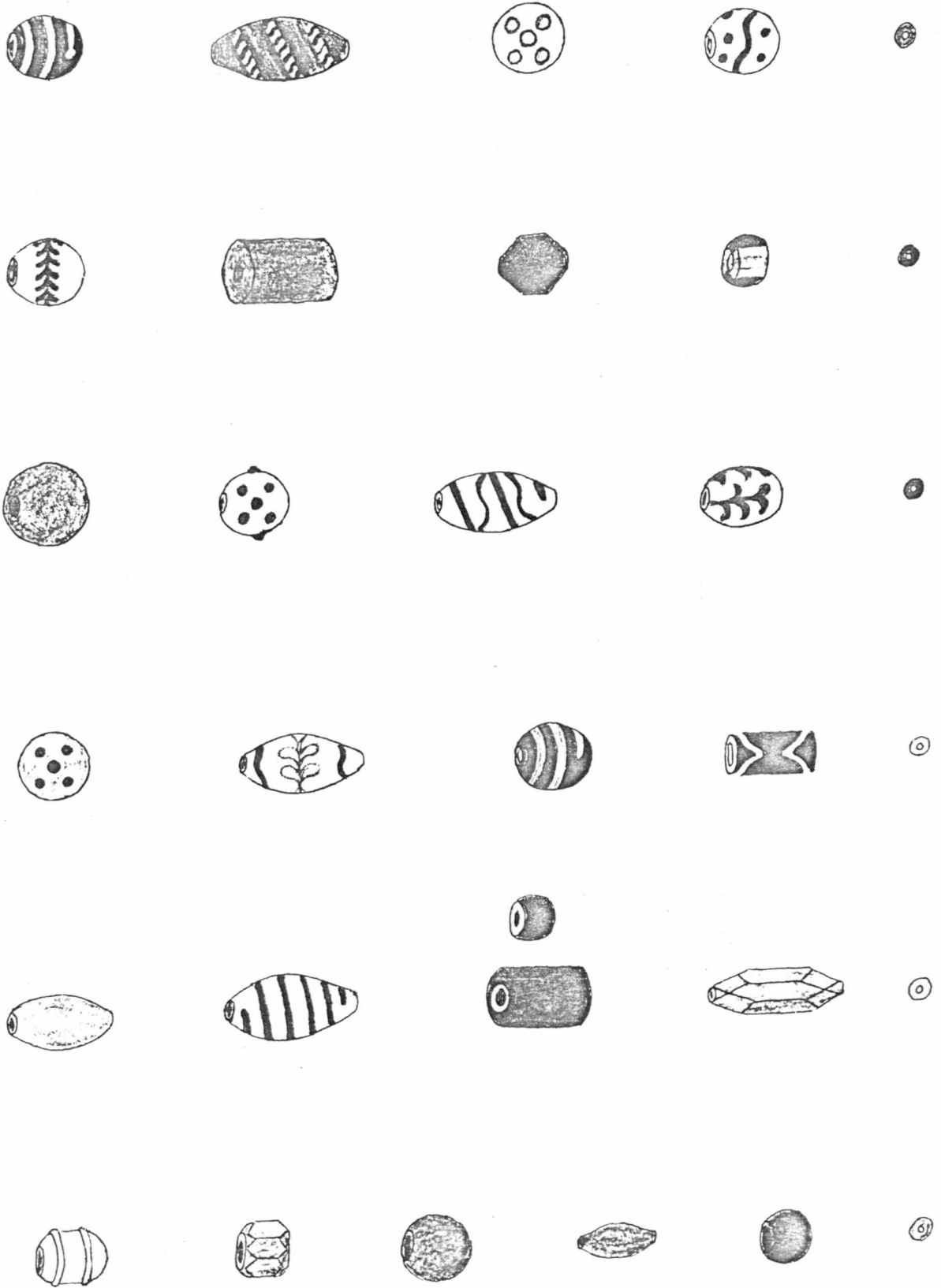


Fig. 10. Historic bead varieties from Fort McKenzie.