



The swing of things: Contributions to archaeological research in Alberta, 2018

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF ALBERTA
OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 38

Dedication: Milton (Milt) J. Wright

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On November 15, 2017, Milt Wright died suddenly at the young age of 65. With his passing the archaeological community lost one of the early and much-loved members of the Archaeological Survey of Alberta (ASA). Many younger archaeologists working in Alberta—most of the contributors to this volume—will not have met or known Milt. He left Alberta in 1995 to work in Aboriginal relations with the Government of B.C. But for the older members of the Alberta archaeological community Milt was an important, influential, and respected part of the ASA team; an association that he remained intensely proud of for the remainder of his life.

Milt was born and raised in Ontario and became acquainted with archaeology at an especially early age thanks, in part, to having an uncle (Jim Wright) who just happened to be one of the most prominent archaeologists in Canada. As early as his teens, Milt was already part of archaeology clubs and participating on digs. It seemed that he was genetically programmed to become an archaeologist. Milt completed undergraduate work in archaeology at McMaster University where he also earned his Master's degree before entering the PhD program at Simon Fraser University. At about the same time, Jack Brink was looking for people to work with him on the very early stages of the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (HSIBJ) development project. By 1981 Milt was hired as a research archaeologist at the ASA. It was the beginning of a love affair for all involved.

Development of the buffalo jump involved much land surface disturbance, all of which needed to be archaeologically inspected. During the summers of 1983 and 1984 Milt was a member of the crews that tested and evaluated all areas of the site that were slated for development. This work led to two thick volumes in the

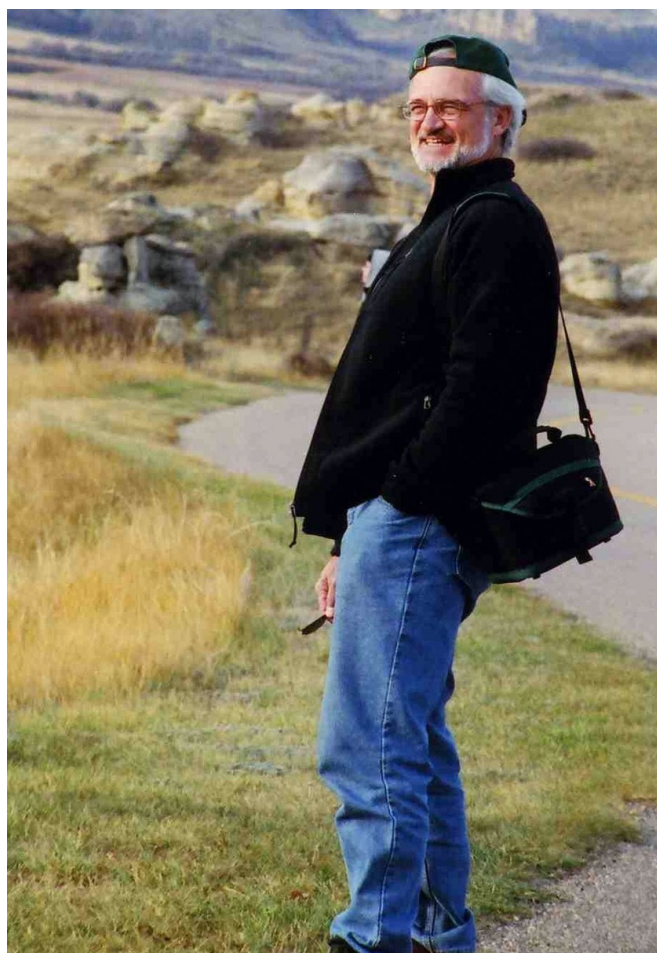


Figure 1. Milt Wright at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park (photograph courtesy of Jean Hourston-Wright).

Manuscript Series publications of the ASA, with Milt as a co-author. Milt continued on with the excavations at HSIBJ through the summers of 1985 and 1986. By then, a public program of site excavation was underway, and research rather than impact mitigation became the focus

of the summer field work. Milt's gregarious personality led him to excel at public archaeology; he was a great ambassador for the Jump as well as for the Provincial Museum through his program, "Time Travellers," a series of lectures and walking tours.

Milt also used his research time at HSIBJ to pursue topics that fascinated him. Excavation of the remains of bison cooking from the Jump led Milt to explore the details of how boiling pits and different kinds of fuel (including bison dung) performed. His comprehensive experiments led to a lengthy report in one of the Manuscript Series publications, and also in a separate publication which he cleverly titled: "Le Bois De Vache: This Chip's For You." Thirty years later this work still holds up as one of the best studies of Plains pre-contact cooking.

Although Milt's background had been in the woodlands of Ontario, he was clearly in his element on the Great Plains. Milt loved the wide-open spaces, the wind and sun, the rugged landscape, and the endless night skies. It is impossible to overstate how much fun it was to share a field camp with Milt. He was one of those rare magical people who manage to be entertaining company all the time. Milt was deeply committed to doing quality archaeology, yet just as passionate about having fun once the digging ended. The evening beers would flow, Milt would sing every song ever written, and the crew was kept continually in stitches. Simply put: if you could not have fun with Milt Wright on your crew, you were legally dead.

Following his fourth summer working at the Buffalo Jump Milt was still in a non-permanent position. By then he had married Jean Hourston-Wright and they were raising two young daughters, Caitlin and Brianna. Milt was looking for a full-time job, and in 1987 he successfully competed for a position as a staff archaeologist at the ASA. For the next eight years Milt served as the regional archaeologist for the northwest part of the province.

Milt made many important contributions to Alberta archaeology as a regional staff member for the ASA. Chief among these was the contacts he made with the avocational community in the northwest part of the province. Milt had a gift for becoming quick friends with collectors and amateur archaeologists. The Peace / Grand Prairie region of the

province has some of the most extensive and undocumented artifact collections in all of Alberta. Milt spearheaded the first systematic recording of these collections. Through an initiative called Peace Past, Milt directed two summer students to visit numerous collectors in the Peace country, record and photograph their artifact collections, and produce a written and illustrated report. More than 25 years later this study remains valuable and, in many cases, is still the only record of Peace region artifact collections. For posterity, an original report, photographs and negatives are curated in the South Peace Regional Archives, Grande Prairie.

Milt almost single handedly created a new chapter of the Archaeological Society of Alberta based in the Peace / Grand Prairie region. Through his contacts with collectors, and with the help of a few key individuals including Morris Burroughs, Greg Donaldson, and Guy Ireland, a new chapter of the Archaeological Society was incorporated on May 25, 1990. For more than a decade this chapter initiated many local projects including surveys around Grande Prairie, the Birch Hills, Saskatoon Mountain, and chapter-led digs at the Trudel Cache and the Zahara site. None of this would have happened without Milt taking a leading role. His excavations at the 9,000 year old Saskatoon Mountain site in 1991, a joint field school project with the University of Alberta, captured local interest and contributed significantly to an understanding of the prehistory of the Grande Prairie region. The Archaeological Society was very involved in this research. When the chapter dissolved in 2001, it was due, in no small part, no doubt, to Milt's departure from Alberta.

Milt was a key member of the Archaeological Survey of Alberta during its early-middle years. He was funny, outrageous, irreverent, dedicated, hard working, talented, resourceful, welcoming, warm, generous, and as loyal a friend as you could hope to have. Physically a big powerful man, he was more likely to crush you in a bear hug than to shake your hand. Most tellingly, Milt was universally liked by every single person who ever met him. His passing was commemorated by an overflow crowd of family, friends and colleagues in Victoria in December 2017. Although he had not been active in Alberta archaeology for some years, Milt remained a dearly loved friend to all those who had the pleasure to know and work with him. His contributions to our discipline are secure. This volume of the Occasional Paper series is dedicated to his memory.