

PAST TENTS

A REVIEW OF A SPECIAL 2022 ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF FORT MCCOYS POST WORLD WAR I BIVOUAC AREAS

SPECIAL INSERT TO THE REAL MCCOY NEWSPAPER

Special 2022 archaeological survey at Fort McCoy focuses on ‘tent’ time between world wars

STORY & PHOTOS BY SCOTT T. STURKOL

Public Affairs Staff

For several weeks in July, archaeological team members with the Fort McCoy Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division Natural Resources Branch and the Colorado State University's (CSU) Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands held a special archaeological survey and dig on South Post.

The team did their survey in the South Post Housing Area, which also happens to be the oldest areas of the installation's origins where Camp Robinson and Camp Emery-Upton once were located. In the actual location of the survey, however, the team was looking at areas around old concrete tent pads that were once part of Camp Robinson, said CSU Archaeologist Bill Thompson.

"We believe these pads were put in probably between 1925 and 1939," Thompson said. "Through this survey we are trying to figure out exactly when they were put in. Through the artifacts we are finding, it shows us that this does seem to be fitting into the time period that we believe it fits."

Ryan J. Howell, Fort McCoy's cultural resource manager and garrison archaeologist, said they wanted to complete the archaeological work on South Post in part because of a planned construction project to building 6158 in 2023.

"The area that is South Post Family Housing on today's Fort McCoy sits on the original pre-World War II Camp McCoy and the even earlier pre-1926 Camp Robinson," Howell said. "While documentary evidence in the form of early post maps and old photographs of these earlier military installations are available today, most of the actual physical remains of these camps have been removed by later construction."

"One exception to this pattern is the area around the current family housing headquarters in building 6158, which was originally constructed as an instructor's building in 1931," Howell said. "This building and the surrounding tent pads to the east, along with some remnant foundations in the surrounding woods represents some of the last, most intact physical remnants of early World War I-era and Interwar-era — 1914 to 1940 — of Camp Robinson and Camp McCoy."



Members of the Fort McCoy archaeology team search for and document locations of artifacts near decades-old concrete tent pads July 14 while working an archaeological survey on Fort McCoy's South Post.

"A proposed Americans with Disabilities Act modification project to building 6158 is planned for 2023," Howell said. "This project will re-grade much of the area surrounding the building and will remove or bury some of the tent pads in the park lands to the east of the building. While the tent pads in and of themselves are not historically important, an associated archaeological dig — this dig — is being conducted to better document and understand them and salvage any artifacts left by the Soldiers, Civilian Conservation Corp members and Civilian Military Training Program participants who would have used the area during the early parts of the 20th century."

Recovering these artifacts will hopefully provide a better understanding of the early period of use of Camp McCoy and the 'field lives' of the early Soldiers and civilians who trained and worked here in the early days of Fort McCoy's service to the nation."

Thompson described some of the artifacts they were finding through metal detecting.

"We were finding (rank) insignia, such as officer insignia," Thompson said. "We were finding old .45 (cal.) slugs. We were also finding rope tensioners for tents that were out here on these pads. We found old coins, including a dime that dated to 1923, a penny that dated to 1913 I believe. We even found a handmade tent stake maybe about 70 years old. But probably the oldest artifacts we may have found were those rope tensioners that could date as far back as the Spanish-American War time frame to maybe World War I when the Army used those items."

At one time, it's believed there were more than 800 concrete tent pads located all throughout the area that is now South Post Housing at Fort McCoy, Thompson said. As most people think about Fort McCoy today in the context of the cantonment area that was established in 1942, few might remember the main part of the installation, including camp headquarters, once was near where the archaeological dig took place.

"It's amazing how different it looked 80 to 100 years ago, especially when it was Camp Robinson," Thompson said. "Through this work we're looking back at the time when General McCoy may have been walking through here." The "General McCoy" who Thompson refers to of course is Maj. Gen. Robert Bruce McCoy for whom Fort McCoy is named after.

Looking back to 1909, per Fort McCoy's documented history, "negotiations were concluded, and the Sparta Maneuver Tract became a reality in 1909 on what is known today as 'South Post.' The total parcel was divided approximately in half by the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad. Situated north of the tracks was a maneuver camp named Camp Emory-Upton. An artillery camp known as Camp Robinson went up to the south of the tracks. Temporary galvanized buildings were constructed in the summer of 1909, and training began. The railroad provided an unloading sidetrack near the artillery camp and ran a spur into the maneuver camp."

"On Nov. 19, 1926, the reservation officially was designated as Camp McCoy in honor of Maj. Gen. Robert B. McCoy, who had died in January," the history further states. "The War Department once again regained control of the camp as it settled down to improving buildings and roads. Summer artillery training was conducted from 1926 to 1933 by units from Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa."

CSU Archaeologist Tyler Olsen also worked extensively on the 2022 dig on South Post. When he was sifting through dirt July 14 while working a shaker box full of dirt, he explained some of the things he looks for in artifacts.

"Obviously at this location we are chasing just Fort McCoy history, and that only goes back just over 110 years," Olsen said. "But specifically, this area, we have a strong inclination that what we are going to find items that date to sometime between 1926 and 1940. So, if we can find little materials we are looking to see if they fit into that category. Even after we're done where we have to look up something online or in old journals like the Society for Historical Archaeology, we'll have to probably look at a lot of online material guides that help us narrow down timelines."

"We can also look at things like Coke bottles that have very narrow windows of production," Olsen said. "So, if you can find a specific kind of Coke bottle that will tell you (a date) ... or sometimes you'll get lucky and you'll find some military button that when you do the research it'll tell you it was on a (special) uniform for a period of maybe six months. So, all of these little pieces are really helpful, but it's just a matter of finding them. They're buried below the ground surface ... and we don't know this great history until we actually dig it up."

And according to Howell, from this current dig and from other historical documents and research he's done about South Post since his arrival in the past couple years, he and the rest of the Fort McCoy archaeology team are building a stronger historical record of the installation as it was prior to World War II.

"We found some amazing items in this year's effort," Howell said. "As we learn more through research and further study, I believe we'll be able to build a better understanding of Fort McCoy's vital role in our nation's military."

Decades of archaeology work at Fort McCoy has generated tens of thousands of artifacts — some of which are displayed at the Fort McCoy History Center, building 902, in the Commemorative Area. Others are cared for by the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.



Archaeologist Bill Thompson looks over artifacts found during the survey July 14 during work on Fort McCoy's South Post.



A coin that was found during the archaeological dig is shown July 14 on South Post at Fort McCoy.

Timeframe, background of area of 2022 Fort McCoy South Post tent pad area archaeological survey

There were three to four expansion episodes that occurred during the early development of Fort McCoy in the area of what is now South Post Family Housing.

These episodes of development happened in the first half of the 1900s.

The original development and acquisition of Fort McCoy, then known as Camp Robinson and Camp Emory Upton, occurred in 1909-1910, and has already been documented prior to the current excavation.

The second expansion episode continued with the development of one of the largest artillery training camps in the country.

In 1917, Camp Robinson prepared for mobilization for World War I, and the La Crosse County Council of Defense, Labor Section placed an ad in The La Crosse Tribune on May 21, 1917, for 100 carpenters, 100 laborers, and 50 teamsters to construct approximately 177 buildings.

The buildings would be large barracks with electric lights, plumbing, and permanent military roads.

By the end of 1917, construction ended and the camp was closed down for the season. It is unclear how many buildings were constructed, but various newspaper articles only mentioned the barracks.

There were minor improvements over the next few years, but the third expansion occurred between the end of 1926 and the spring of 1928.

During the summer of 1926, the Citizens' Military Training Camp first utilized Camp Sparta (aka Camp Robinson) in what would become a permanent camp for summer training.

The National Guard, Regular Army, Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and Officer Reserve Corp would also train at the camp from 1926 to 1940.

In September 1926, efforts were being made to have Camp Sparta designated as a

permanent camp.

In October, there was a movement to change the name of the camp from Sparta to McCoy after Maj. Gen. Robert Bruce McCoy, who died earlier in 1926. By November the War Department issued the authorization for the name change to Camp McCoy.

Early in 1927, before summer training, Camp McCoy implemented extensive efforts to improve conditions at the camp.

New construction included an infirmary, a men's club, a headquarters building, a motion pictures theater, and twelve mess halls. During the new construction, older buildings were torn down and reused, but it is unclear what new buildings were erected and which old buildings were torn down.

Construction continued into 1928 with the building of new kitchens and other buildings that were intended to be permanent. In the summer of 1929, the construction of new buildings and new water supply systems was part of a five-year progressive schedule for the buildup of Camp McCoy.

The development of what is now South Post Family Housing during the different episodes described here can be traced in part through old maps and aerial photos.

One particular map, the General Map of Camp McCoy, Sparta, was created in 1942 by the Construction Division of the Office of the Quartermaster, 6th Corps Area, Chicago, Ill. This map confirms the different episodes of building construction mentioned in newspaper articles.

The fourth expansion episode occurred during the 1940s with the buildup to World War II and included the development of and transition to the triad cantonment as well as the acquisition of the rest of the lands which comprise North Post and shape creating the Fort McCoy we know today.

(Article prepared by Fort McCoy archaeology team.)



Army historical photo

This photo shows another look at the South Post area with tents during the late 1920s or possibly early 1930s.

Archaeology team shares knowledge with youth during dig

BY SCOTT T. STURKOL
Public Affairs Staff

While they were busy working a pre-World War II-era archaeological survey in the South Post Housing Area at Fort McCoy, the installation's archaeological team also took some time to share their experience and work with the installation's youth.

For several weeks in July, the archaeological team members with the Fort McCoy Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division Natural Resources Branch (NRB) and the Colorado State University's (CSU) Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands held a special archaeological survey and dig looking at areas around old concrete tent pads that were once part of Camp Robinson. On July 18, 20, and 22, there were 46 Fort McCoy youth who visited the archaeological dig site to learn more about everything.

"This dig was a great opportunity to teach the kids about some of the World War I-era Army history on Fort McCoy and introduce them to some outdoor science and history programming cooperatively with the Fort McCoy Child Development Center," said Fort McCoy Garrison Archaeologist Ryan Howell with the NRB. "It was a happy coincidence that a required environmental-compliance dig also took place on the park grounds of South Family Housing and so provided a safe and kid-friendly location for this kind of teaching and exploring opportunity for the children of Fort McCoy's Soldiers."

Archaeology team members had pre-placed some "artifacts" for youth to find as they learned about archaeology.

"Seeing the excitement and smiles on the kids' faces as they 'found' artifacts and wondered about them was a real treat," Howell said. "It reminded me of why I got into archaeology and history studies in the first place."

CSU Archaeologist Miranda Alexander also enjoyed supporting the learning events for the youth.

"It was a pleasure introducing the children to the field of archaeology and the military history of the archaeological site we were excavating," Alexander said. "Watching their eyes light up when they found an artifact was priceless. Some of the kids learned that we do not always find



Contributed photo

Archaeologist Ryan Howell shows children some artifacts July 18 during an event with children at the dig site on South Post.

artifacts when performing archaeological investigations and that it is okay.

"They continued digging in hopes of finding clues to piece the puzzle of what happened in this area back together," she said. "There is a good chance that this experience has sparked an interest in some of the children to become an archaeologist or historian one day, and that is a great feeling."

Tyler Olsen, also a CSU archaeologist who supported the dig and the children's events, said seeing children enjoy learning about history was good to see.

"I was excited to have the opportunity to share what we do with them," Olsen said. "Not every child enjoyed the experience, but everyone gave it a shot, and there were many kids who were very enthusiastic. It's great to be able to share the past of Fort McCoy with the public, and it's even better when you can see people really connecting with history."

Learn more about Fort McCoy online at <https://home.army.mil/mccoy>, on the Defense Visual Information Distribution System at <https://www.dvidshub.net/fmpao>, on Facebook by searching "ftmccoy," and on Twitter by searching "usagmccoy."



Contributed photo

Archaeologist Tyler Olsen works with youth July 20 at the South Post dig site for another education event about archaeology.

Fort McCoy ArtiFACTS:

Old Camp McCoy metal detecting finds during 2022 archaeological survey

During the 2022 archaeological survey at the tent pads on South Post at Fort McCoy, the archaeological team found dozens and dozens of artifacts through metal detecting.

Following is a review of some of the items found during the survey.

Coins

Three wheat pennies were recovered from old Camp McCoy while metal detecting near the concrete tent pads dating to 1912, 1918, and 1926, as well as one 1923 Mercury dime.

Wheat pennies were produced from 1909 to 1958, and first issued on Aug. 2, 1909, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Lincoln's birth.

The term wheat penny was coined from the design on the reverse or "tails" side of the coin which features a stalk of durum wheat on each side and the phrases "ONE CENT" and "UNITED STATES OF AMERICA" in between the wheat. The top of the coin has the Latin phrase "E PLURIBUS UNUM," which means "out of many, one." The obverse or "heads" side of the coin features a right-facing profile (head and shoulders) of former U.S. president Abraham Lincoln with the phrase "IN GOD WE TRUST," the word "LIBERTY," and the year the coin was produced.

Wheat pennies were made of bronze (95 percent copper and 5 percent tin and zinc) until 1943 when the composition changed to zinc-plated steel as a result of needing copper for other purposes during World War II.

The zinc-plated steel created silver-colored coins, which were confused for dimes, so a year later the composition changed to brass (95 percent copper and 5 percent zinc).

The brass wheat pennies were produced by melting down used bullet casings until 1946 when they switched back to the original metal composition for wheat pennies. They are 0.75 inches in diameter and about 0.06 inches thick. The metal composition dictates the weight of a wheat penny with those that are mostly copper weighing about 0.11 ounces and those that are mostly steel weighing about 0.10 ounces.

Mercury dimes were produced from 1916 to 1945, and first released into circulation on October 30, 1916. The obverse or "heads" side of the coin features a left-facing profile of Liberty wearing a cap with wings which symbolizes freedom or liberty of thought with the phrase "IN GOD WE TRUST," the word "LIBERTY," and the year the coin was produced. The depiction of Liberty was commonly confused for Mercury, the Roman god of messengers, hence the nickname Mercury dime.

The reverse or "tails" side of the coin depicts a Roman fasces (a battle ax bound within a group of rods) which symbolizes strength and unity, and is surrounded by an olive branch which signifies peace. The phrases "ONE DIME" and "UNITED STATES OF AMERICA," and the Latin phrase "E PLURIBUS UNUM," which means "out of many, one" are also found on the reverse side of the coin.

Mercury dimes are composed of 90 percent silver and 10 percent copper. They are 0.71 inches in diameter and 0.05 inches thick. Mercury dimes weigh 0.09 ounces.

World War I tent rope tensioner device

Six tent rope tensioner devices, also known as a metal tent slips, were recovered from the site. The tent slip, invented by H.B. Thompson, was patented on November 30, 1880 (Patent No. 234,896) and adopted for Army use by the Quartermaster General's Office of the War Department on January 5, 1889. They were used by the U.S. Army from the 1880s through at least World War I (WWI).

A document from the Quartermaster General's Office of the War Department titled, "Specifications for Metal Tent Slips" provides details for the three sizes of tent rope tensioners (No. 1, No. 2, No. 3) used by the U.S. Army at the time. These specifications dictated that tent rope tensioners were to be constructed of red brass (consisting of copper and tin).

They were to be semi-tubular in form, except at one end, which was to be covered. All the tent rope tensioners recovered from the recent investigations are size No. 3. They measure 3 inches long with two holes 9/16th of an inch in diameter for receiving rope and weigh 1.11 ounces.

Captain, lieutenant bars

Military rank is a badge of honor and leadership; not just a means of knowing who salutes whom. As one advances



through the ranks, their level of responsibility increases.

Two military insignia or rank bars were recovered from the site during metal detecting activities, one for the rank of captain and the other most likely for second lieutenant.

Insignia bars are worn by commissioned ranked officers who hold presidential commissions, and their ranks are confirmed by the Senate.

The captain bar consists of two vertical silver bars attached to each other by two thin horizontal silver bars and is a little over an inch squared with a weight of 0.34 ounces.

The second lieutenant bar is one gold (brass) bar which measures 3/8 inch by 1 inch and weighs 0.14 ounces. The second lieutenant wears a single gold bar, while a first lieutenant wears a single silver bar.

The lieutenant bar pictured here is most likely one that belonged to a second lieutenant as it is more tarnished looking, like the other brass items found at the site, and does not have the silver look like the captain bar, so it is most likely not a bar signifying the rank of a first lieutenant.

(Article prepared by Fort McCoy archaeology team.)



Archaeologist Tyler Olsen with Colorado State University's Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands working in partnership with Fort McCoy's Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division Natural Resources Branch works on an archaeology survey on South Post at Fort McCoy on July 14. Olsen has participated in many digs at Fort McCoy. This survey is looking at areas where cement pads were located where troops placed military tents and bivouacked nearly 90 years ago. Archaeology work has been ongoing on Fort McCoy for decades to not only look back and document the post's military history, but also the area's distant past where artifacts thousands of years old have been found.

Archaeologist discusses painstaking work of archaeology, finding artifacts

STORY & PHOTOS BY SCOTT T. STURKOL

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Archaeologist Tyler Olsen with the Colorado State University's (CSU) Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands has worked on dozens of archaeological digs at Fort McCoy over the years, and he said he's found some amazing artifacts. But, he said, that's after lots of hard, painstaking work and research, and more.

"Doing this is never easy," said Olsen as he worked in the shade July 14 while digging out dirt in a grid for placement in a shaker. For several weeks in July, the archaeological team members with the Fort McCoy Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division Natural Resources Branch (NRB) and CSU held a special archaeological survey and dig on Fort McCoy's South Post Housing Area looking at areas around old concrete tent pads that were once part of Camp Robinson. Olsen was using an archaeology shaker screen to search for artifacts.

A shaker screen action, by definition, is a method that consists of analyzing soil removed during excavation and putting it through screen meshes of different sizes. This technique allows archaeologists to recover artifacts, which could be overlooked during the removal of the sediments due to their negligible size.

"We're using quarter-inch mesh, which is pretty standard for finding historic materials," Olsen said while using his shaker screen. "You don't typically find pieces of military regalia or buttons or shell casings or even actual loads still that are going to be small enough to fall through the holes. The other side of that is that you do have plenty of rocks. So, you have to sift through and take out roots or large rocks and see if there's anything among all of these rocks that might be able to help tell part of the story of the area that we're investigating.

"And that's the whole goal," Olsen said. "The goal is to try to dig below the ground surface and see if we can find little bits and pieces that help tell story of what was happening in this area anywhere from 10 to maybe 1,000 years ago."

Steady archaeological work has been ongoing at Fort McCoy for at least the last four decades, and while his 2022 work on South Post didn't yield any ancient artifacts, he said his work with

the Fort McCoy archaeological team has found some interesting items — including a very old fire pit.

"The only thing that we can guarantee at Fort McCoy that's 10,000 years old is a fire pit that we found that we were able to do radiocarbon analysis on," Olsen said. "That of course took some time. But we've also found plenty, and I mean plenty of actual what we call projectile points.

"We've found all kinds of things below the ground surface," Olsen said. "And I would venture to say that probably 90 to 95 percent of the artifacts that were recovered here at Fort McCoy that were found below the ground surface went through something exactly like this screen. Either a version like this with legs to brace while we shake or something that's more portable."

As he continued sifting dirt and sod, Olsen said he was just doing what he's always loved doing. He also said the physical part of finding or not finding artifacts is only a small part of the job. The documenting, researching, cataloguing, and other work related to artifacts can be just as time consuming.

"I think most of us do this because we love it," Olsen said. "It's a labor of love for sure."

Olsen, along with many others on the Fort McCoy archaeology team continued work on the South Post dig throughout July. They'll spend months going over the artifacts they found. Some artifacts, including ones Olsen found in his shaker screen, will go back more than a century to the installation's beginnings.

"Obviously at this location we are chasing just Fort McCoy history, and that only goes back just over 110 years," Olsen said with another vigorous shuffle of the shaker screen. "But specifically, this area, we have a strong inclination that what we are going to find items that date to sometime between 1926 and 1940. So, if we can find little materials we are looking to see if they fit into that category. Even after we're done where we must look up something online or in old journals like the Society for Historical Archaeology, we'll have to probably look at a lot of online material guides that help us narrow down timelines."

Archaeologists at Fort McCoy, including Olsen, have examined ancient quarries where the first people to enter the state mined stone for their weapons and tools, documented the homes and farmsteads of pioneer families, and rediscovered the remains of

the very first infantry maneuvers from Camp Emory Upton in 1909-10.

Additionally, the decades of archaeology work have generated hundreds of thousands of artifacts — some of which are displayed at the Fort McCoy History Center, building 902, in the Commemorative Area. Others are cared for by the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.



Archaeologist Tyler Olsen sets up a grid for digging July 14 as part of an archaeological dig to find artifacts.