

Man Camps of North Dakota

A Humanities Study Guide

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Preface

This circular, prepared by members of the North Dakota Man Camp Research Team, headquartered at the University of North Dakota, was prepared for use in association with a series of public forums organized by the Center for Heritage Renewal (North Dakota State University) and funded by the North Dakota Humanities Council, along with the University of North Dakota. The intent is to provide orientation to the ongoing research being done by the team; to give a preliminary sense of the findings the team is bringing from the field; and to provide basis for public dialogue about the Bakken man camp experience and its meaning in regional life.

It is an honor for me, as director of the Center for Heritage Renewal, to work with the man camp research team and facilitate publication of this study guide. The authorized mission of the center is “to identify, preserve, and capitalize on the heritage resources of North Dakota and the northern plains.” The center applauds the work of the man camp research team in documenting and interpreting a massive manifestation of heritage in the making, the man camps of North Dakota. It thanks the North Dakota Humanities Council for supporting the forums wherein the research team takes its work to the public.

The center also thanks Suzanne Kelley for her expert volunteer service in the final round of copy-editing *Man Camps of North Dakota: A Humanities Study Guide*.

Finally, all of us associated with the center and with the man camp research team thank the people of North Dakota for the opportunity to serve them as scholars. We recognize that the subject of our studies is important to the everyday life and work of our fellow citizens and, therefore, a matter to be treated seriously and respectfully. We invite all citizens to join us in conversation about our lives as North Dakotans.

Thomas D. Isern, Director
Center for Heritage Renewal

1. The North Dakota Man Camp Project and Its Research Team

The North Dakota Man Camp Project began in 2012 with a field trip to the Bakken to document the social and material conditions of the work force housing in the region. On the first trip, the research team consisted of the two project directors, Bret Weber of University of North Dakota's Department of Social Work and Bill Caraher of the Department of History, and some of their friends and colleagues: Richard Rothaus, a historian and archaeologist of Trefoil Cultural and Environmental; Aaron Barth, a PhD student in history and an archaeologist from North Dakota State University; Kostis Kourelis, an archaeologist and architectural historian from Franklin and Marshall College; and John Holmgren, a photographer, also from Franklin and Marshall College.

This motley team was equipped with digital audio recorders, cameras, pens and paper, notebooks, and GPS units as well as a wide range of expertise in social history, architectural history, archaeology, and field documentation. Using a range of paper forms, digital photographs, interviews, and field drawings, the team documented more than twenty workforce housing facilities. It followed US Route 2 from Stanley to Williston and then took US Route 85 south to Watford City, stopping to document camps along a four-day tour of workforce housing sites along the main corridors serving the oil patch.

Since 2012 the North Dakota Man Camp Project has made close to twenty more research trips to the oil patch under the direction of Weber and Caraher. The members of the team have varied depending on the availability of friends and colleagues, but generally our field teams included historians (Robert Caulkins, a PhD Candidate at UND), artists (Kyle Cassidy, a photographer from Philadelphia), and social scientists (Carenlee Barkdull, UND Department of Social Work, and Julie Geigle, UND MSW student). Since the project began, the team has accumulated well over a hundred hours of transcribed audio, taken more than eight thousand photographs, and documented more than fifty workforce housing sites as they have changed over the past three years.

The goal of these trips was three-fold. First, we wanted to ascertain whether historical strategies common to short-term settlement around the world appeared in the temporary workforce housing in the Bakken. Second, we wanted to understand the social and architectural strategies used by folks living in recreational vehicles and other sub-standard housing in the Bakken. Finally, we sought to prepare an archive that documented the extraordinary changes that have taken place in housing in the Bakken over the past five years.

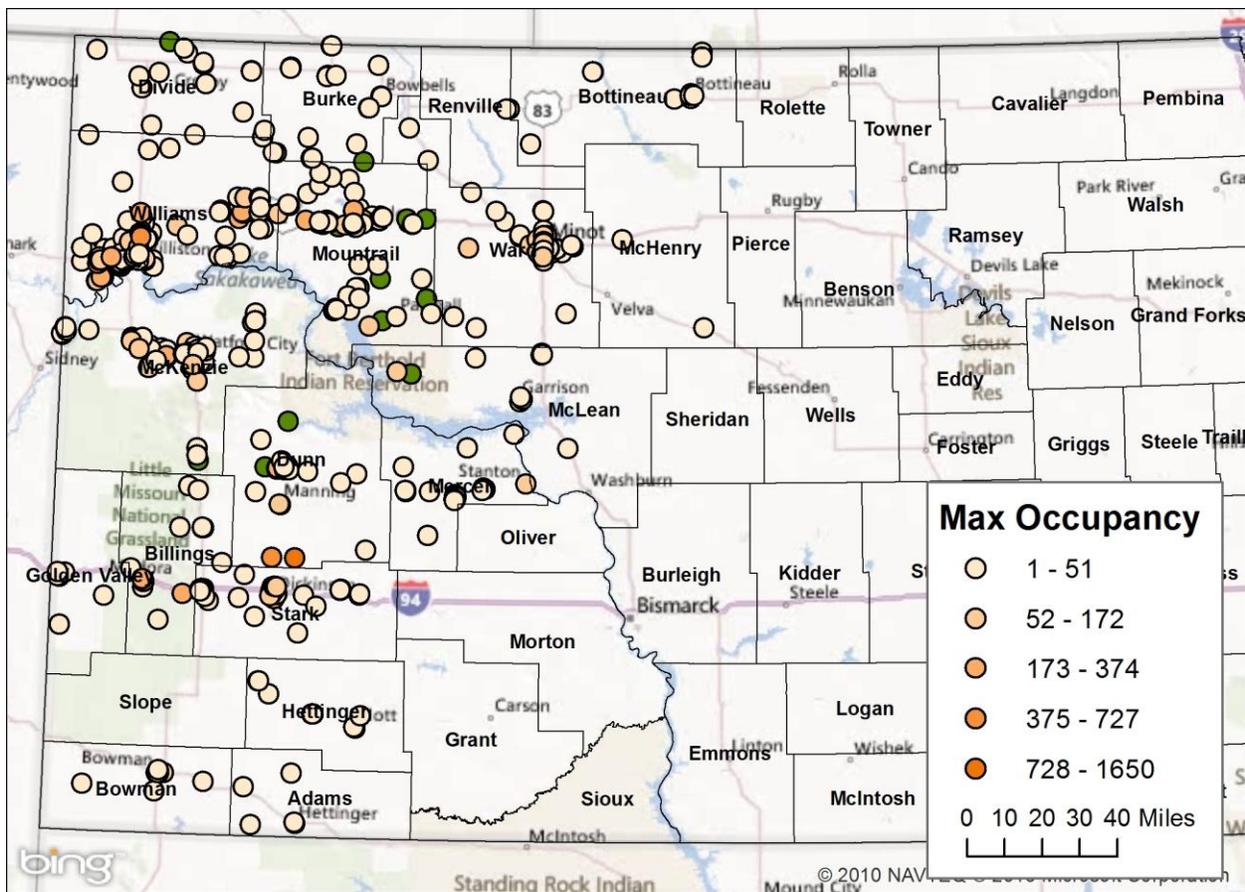
This guide provides a brief introduction to our ongoing research methods and some of our preliminary conclusions. As the oil patch continues to change, so does our work, and so do our perspectives on workforce housing. The goal of the project moving forward is to document the change in temporary workforce housing as communities construct more permanent housing, as the price of oil rises or declines, and as the most intensively exploited areas of the patch subtly shift in response to opportunities and demand. We have a particular interest in the abandonment of workforce housing sites of all types to see what their archaeological and environmental impact will be on the changing landscape of the Bakken.

During the past three years we have given papers around the country on our research, produced a few peer-reviewed scholarly publications including a forthcoming edited volume, and appeared in various media from blogs to newspaper articles, podcasts, television, and radio broadcasts. Our encounter with the media has been overwhelmingly positive, because it has often served to introduce our work to residents of the Bakken and to initiate conversations and collaborations with a wide range of individuals. The raw materials of our research will be deposited in a public archive and made available online.



2. Scholarly Questions and Public Perceptions

Workforce housing is a pressing issue for Bakken communities, for new North Dakotans who come to the Bakken in search of work, and for companies that come to the Bakken to drill for oil. Ideal workforce housing provides comfortable and secure lodging for a largely temporary workforce, makes minimal demands on local infrastructure, encourages a respectful relationship with its neighbors, and has little lasting impact on the environment when it is no longer required. Some workforce housing in the Bakken region conforms closely to these expectations. Other examples, however, appeared to fall so far below the mark in most of these categories as to demand both public and scholarly scrutiny.



The North Dakota Man Camp Project began at the end of the most disorganized period of workforce housing in the Bakken. Local authorities had disbanded the temporary village in the Williston Walmart parking lot, had driven off the squatters in the municipal parks of Williston and other small communities, and had begun to clamp down on RV-choked back lots and other violations of city and county ordinances. Many of the residents in this first wave of chaotic temporary housing

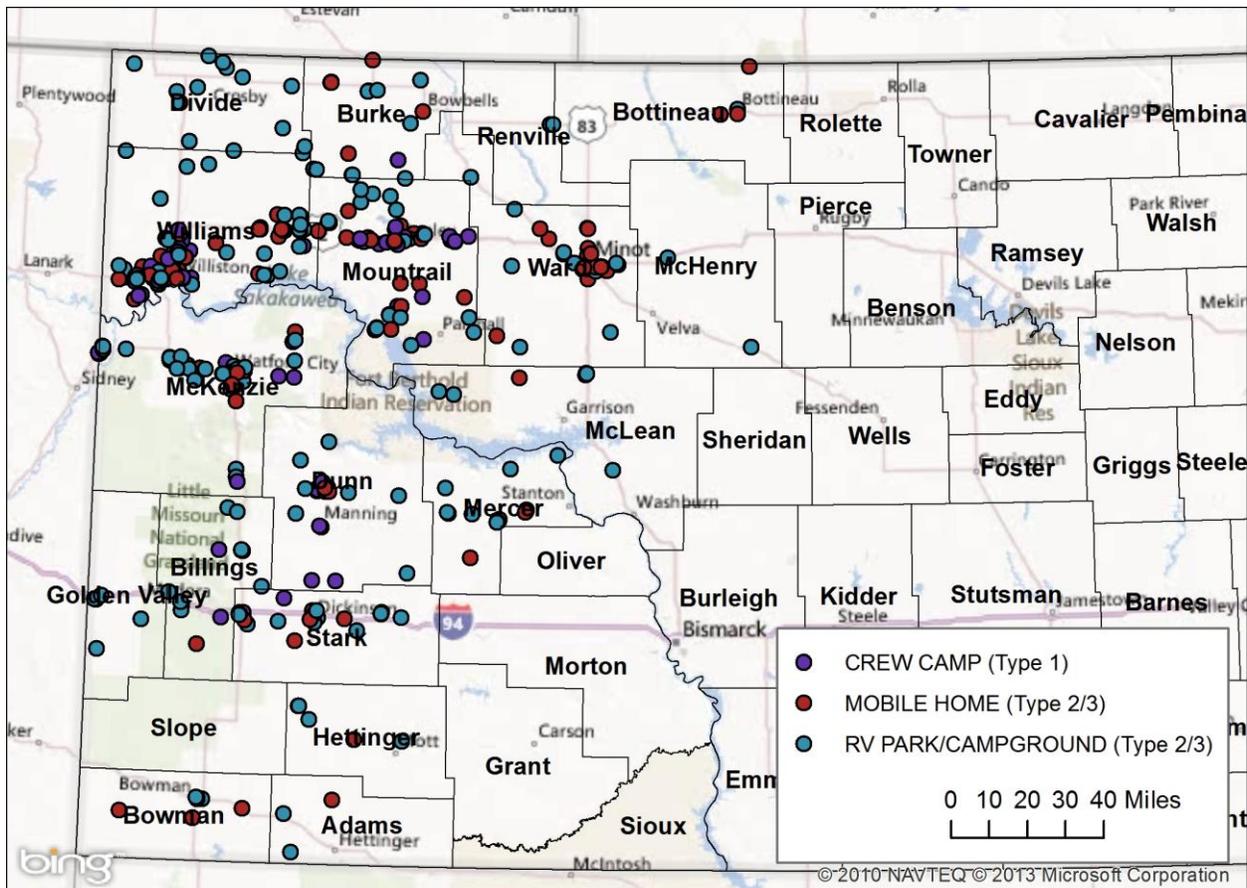
moved on to lots in newly constructed RV parks, employer-subsidized beds in the well-appointed workforce housing facilities, or rooms, apartments, or even homes in oil boom communities. By the time we arrived in the Bakken, only a few continued to squat or make other semi-legal arrangements.

This more settled situation in the Bakken, nevertheless, gave our project plenty of interesting housing situations to explore. We stayed for at least one night in Capital Lodge near Tioga during most of visits to the Bakken, even after several violent episodes at that facility. Capital Lodge consisted of a series of ten-room modular buildings set on a dense layer of gravel and clustered around an inflatable Quonset hut which housed a dining hall and an administrative office. The lodge could accommodate more than 1100 people and at one point had plans to expand to accommodate nearly twice that number. We also visited the Target Logistics facilities and were impressed by their cool functionality. We termed camps of this regular, formal design “Type 1” man camps. These camps had standardized units, included common areas that typically provided meals and some other limited amenities, and were largely operated by global companies that provided workforce housing “solutions” for extractive industries worldwide.



The uniformity and tidiness of the camps made them convenient places to stay while working in the Bakken, but somewhat less interesting objects of study. What captured our attention in the Bakken were the informal RV parks, with the creative and chaotic space of temporary settlement produced at the intersection of a highly mobile workforce, the oscillating demands of extractive industries, and the myriad of support workers who cleaned rooms, maintained trucks, cooked food, and built pipelines. We became fascinated by the life and material culture of what we called “Type 2” man camps. These camps typically featured RVs attached to water and electrical masts and arranged in more or less straight lines in gravel paved lots. The largest of these Type 2 camps accommodated more than three hundred RVs, but there were many small camps with fifty to one hundred units ringed around the cities of Tioga, Williston, and Watford City.

We also documented a small number of “Type 3” camps which lacked electricity and water and were almost certainly holdovers from the earliest days of the Bakken boom when housing and infrastructure were scarce.



We wanted to know how folks survived in these Type 2 (and to a lesser extent Type 3) camps, and this curiosity guided a series of basic research questions:

1. What strategies did people use to make an RV designed for periodic and seasonal use suitable for year-round occupation?
2. What things did the residents of these camps use to define their identity?
3. How did the residents of these camps define their space?
4. Did residents of these camps manage to create a sense of home?
5. Did the residents of these camps develop a sense of community?
6. How did workforce housing in the Bakken reflect larger changes in the twenty-first-century economy, labor markets, and domestic expectations?

Our goal with these questions was to break through public perceptions of the residents of workforce housing as rambunctious interlopers who huddled in squalor around the fringes of traditional settlements in western North Dakota. While we were under no misconceptions related to the challenges associated with living in RVs all year around in hastily organized settlements, we did worry that the mass media's characterization of temporary workers in the Bakken conformed to certain longstanding prejudices against the working class. From as early as the nineteenth century, members of the middle and upper class have characterized the working class—and especially working class men—as rowdy, dirty, and dangerous. The lack of conventional middle- and upper-class housing, dirty and dangerous occupations, and long hours and days away from family, particularly wives and children, created a stereotype that working class men were impervious or unreceptive to the civilizing influences associated with the middle class home and family. These stereotypes were in the back of our mind as we documented workforce housing across the Bakken.

3. Field Methods

The North Dakota Man Camp Project combines practices from field archaeology with those of architectural, oral, and documentary history.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the NDMCP is the use of archaeological methods to document workforce housing. This approach involves using two paper forms to document each camp that we enter. The first form describes the location of the camp using street addresses and GPS coordinates. It also records basic information about the facility including whether it has sewage, water, and electrical hook-ups, how the roads and lots in the camp are paved, and whether the camp conforms to Type 1, 2, or 3 in our informal typology. We also write out longhand a description of each camp with as much detail as we can muster. The goal of this form is to create a snapshot of the camp at a particular moment in time. For every subsequent visit to the camp, we update these forms using an archival quality field notebook.

Our descriptions read like this:

MC 14: Dry lots with electrical. Numbered along the south side and then continued around a leveled, U-shaped lot. The central area of the lot is gravel and the units are arrayed around the edges where the electrical masts stand. There is an office at the west end, near the road, and a trailer set up for showers and bathrooms in the northwest corner. The shower trailer receives water from a tank truck parked next to it. There are a few porto-johns around the camp since the units do not have sewage or water hook-ups. Rent is \$300 per month.

Revisit 5/13: There were only 7 RVs in the camp and it is difficult to know whether they are occupied. Several mobile homes have been moved onto the leveled area and the porto-pots are toppled on their sides along the southern edge of the camp.

Revisit: 10/14: There are 4 mobile homes set up on the north side of the leveled pad and they have water and electrical hook-ups. 2 abandoned trailers are set up on the east side of the camp. Toppled porto-pots are along the southern edge of the leveled pad. The electrical hook ups are no longer used.

We complement these descriptions with detailed photographs and whenever possible high and low altitude air photographs (the latter taken with a kite camera).

Most Type 2 and 3 camps also involve recording using a second form. This form provides space to describe particular units, in most cases RVs, within the facility. We note the lot number (when available) or the location of the unit and then record everything visible around the RV. In most cases this produces a rather lengthy list of objects:

MC 11, H32: Massive built deck, pallet fence, dogs, satellite TV, ramp to deck, potted plants, hanging plants, plywood around the base of RV, planted tree, scrap wood under various garden features, circular deck table, propane, cinderblocks, blue tarp, plastic trashcan.

MC11, A7: Trailer, more than a camper, extensive garden, two grills, picnic table, raised garden area, grass, potted plants, metal landing with a rail and steps, propane tanks, coolers, 1 camp chair, trash cans, kids bikes, some insulation underneath unit, storage tubs, dog, shovels, tools, scrap wood, blue tarp.

Each of these detailed descriptions is accompanied by photographs and sometimes drawings. The purpose of the list is to provide an index of features visible in the field. Once the descriptions are keyed into a database, they become an easy way to access photographs of particular features from these sites.

At present we have collected more than 8500 photographs from workforce housing sites in the Bakken.

While a team of three archaeologists documented the workforce housing sites as described above, a team of two oral historians would circulate the site in search of interviews. At present, we have collected well over 100 interview hours from the Bakken. The interviews are loosely structured around a series of questions, but our interviewers have the freedom to pursue productive lines of conversation:

NDMCP Interview Guide

Where did you live before coming to the camp?

Do you have another residence? Where is it?

How old is the camp that you live in and how long have you lived here?

Have you lived in previous camps?

Where do you do your grocery and other shopping?

What do you do about garbage? Water? Sewage?

What are the expenses involved in living here? (Financial? Personal? Social?)

How are you paid and how do you pay your bills? (Cash? Mail? Online?)

Are you part of a community? (Social? Political? Religious?)

Have you, family members, or any acquaintances ever accessed or made use of any local social services? (Schools? Cash Assistance? Medical or Mental Health Clinics?)

Does your income affect decisions about where you live? How?

What are the rules that govern the day-to-day realities of living here? Who creates those rules and how do they affect your life?

Do you or others ever break those rules?

What type of work are you primarily engaged in? How does that affect your choices and decisions about where you live?

Are there occupational distinctions related to the type of camp or your place you live? Does your work affect your relation to your neighbors?

How would you describe yourself in relation to gender, age, ethnicity, or other things that you think are relevant to this study?

Who do you live with? Are there any children? Pets?

How does living here affect your family life?

What are the rhythms of the camp? How does the camp change during the day? The week? The seasons? In relation to pay days?

The interview answers are recorded digitally and then transcribed to form a substantial archive for first-hand accounts of life in workforce housing during the boom. The interviews are indexed to the various camps so that we can compare the interview with the photographs and descriptions.



Photo by Kyle Cassidy

4. Preliminary Observations

While our research is ongoing, we have been able to offer some preliminary observations drawn from our interviews, field descriptions, and photographs and filtered through a substantial body of scholarship on workforce housing and temporary settlement around the world and over time.



Architectural Innovation. One of the first things that struck us upon entering larger Type 2 man camps like the Williston Fox Run RV Park, just north of Williston, is the incredible range of architectural innovation present. We generally imagine RVs as relatively uninteresting pieces of architecture optimized for their mobility. Once these units become stationary, however, they become more susceptible to modifications that make them more comfortable and functional as long-term residences. The most visually striking modification was the addition of elevated, plywood mudrooms adjacent to the doors of the RV. These provided a kind of air lock for additional insulation at the vulnerable door of the RV as well as space to take off dirty, outdoor clothing before entering the more cramped confines of the RV. More ambitious residents turned these mudrooms into additional living space, sleeping rooms, TV rooms, and storage lockers. They sometimes opened onto well

appointed decks, were painted festive colors, and were recycled by new arrivals to the Bakken when their original owners moved out. As one resident with a particularly elaborate mudroom stated: “It’s almost like home!”

Between Domesticity and Mobility. The modification of individual units in RV parks across the Bakken represents one expression of the tension between expectations of a settled domestic life and the mobile life in an RV and in extractive industries. Residents of the Bakken arrived knowing that employment in the region was likely to be temporary, but also recognizing traditions of domesticity deeply rooted in aspirational, suburban, American culture. In Type 2 camps, the construction of decks for outdoor dining, of gardens, of fenced lawns, and of other commonplace features of middle class, suburban neighborhoods makes clear that workforce housing was often more than just a place to sleep between shifts. The modification of RVs in ways that compromised their mobility in the name of creating a more obviously domestic environment produced a material reminder that residents might identify home elsewhere, but they still carried with them some domestic expectations.

Community and Functionality. The construction of domestic spaces within the constraints of Type 2 settlements in the Bakken created opportunities for community formation. These communities emerged, at least partially, from the challenges faced by newcomers to the Bakken. Neighbors swapped tips on winterizing their RVs, they helped with frozen pipes, and they noticed strangers who passed through the RV parks (especially those wielding cameras and clipboards). In the one Type 3 camp that we documented in detail, a sense of community was even more manifest as residents without electricity, water, or sewage hook-ups found ways to collaborate in the preparation of food, in recreation, and in various forms of self-help including looking after members of their camp who had not found gainful employment. In contrast, the far more functional Type 1 facilities rarely produced the sense of community present in Type 2 and 3 camps. Their formal organization, standardized design, and austere decor provided places to sleep and to eat, but few opportunities for the kind of self-expression at the foundation human bonds.

Adaptive Reuse of Historic Landscapes. Our team also marveled at how temporary settlements sometimes occupied historic sites that had been largely abandoned. The best example of this was the small town of Wheelock, situated about ten miles south of Ray. The town dis-incorporated in 1994, having registered only twenty-three residents in the 1990 census. In 2012, however, the town had at least thirty residents living in RVs parked amid the remaining houses and stretching along the

unpaved main street. Just two years later most of the RVs had departed. Wheelock and two small temporary housing facilities nearby were at less than capacity despite the use of Wheelock's rail siding as a terminal for fracking sand. While Wheelock was returning to abandonment, several other small towns showed signs of rebirth over the past few years, with Arnegard, situated on Route 85, being a particularly visible example of this phenomenon.

Modern Views on a Modern Landscape. Working with artists has had some direct benefits on our work. John Holmgren's mixed-media studies on our work in the Bakken combine cut-outs of oil pumps set against his photographs of RVs, our sketches, and our recording forms. While his works are complex and layered in meaning, his juxtaposition of our research and the Bakken oil pumps serves as a reminder that our fields of history and archaeology draw upon the same modern technologies, intellectual traditions, and practices as the oil boom. Our tendency to stay in temporary housing, our use of digital photography, and our reliance upon standardized forms draws upon the same scientific traditions that have allowed for the extraction of oil from deep below the earth. In fact, our research has focused considerable energy on how to keep pace with the rapid changes in the Bakken, and in that way, we are facing the same challenges that oil companies and their workers face when they attempt to chase the demands of the global market. (As an aside, his work has, in part, inspired a spin-off of the NDMCP project focused on writing a tourist guide to the Bakken. Tourism, like archaeology and history, is a profoundly modern way to engage the landscape, but when deployed to interrogate a familiar landscape or experiences, offers a way to defamiliarize it and open it to new forms of scrutiny.

Humanizing the Oil Patch. If John Holmgren's work reminds us of our modern views of the world, Kyle Cassidy's images evoke something more fundamentally human about our encounter with the Bakken workforce. Unlike Alec Soth's celebrated photographs of oil patch workers covered in grime and exhausted from the labors, Cassidy's portraits from the oil patch capture the humanity of residents in ways that do not privilege their roles in oil production or related businesses. They cut through the uniformity of workforce housing, of corporate uniforms, and of the endless parade of trucks to show folks outside their RVs, on a lonesome dirt road, or having a beer with their dog. These portraits remind us that the anonymous "workforce" consists of individuals who came to the Bakken with their own pain, hopes, and style.

People and Things. The collaboration between a historian and archaeologist invariably led to lengthy discussions about what we can learn from *things* that we cannot learn from just talking to people and vice versa. People most frequently told us about their experience of community and about people and things not visible or present in their temporary homes in the Bakken. Residents talked about missing the mountains of Idaho, their farm in Arkansas, or their families back home. Things provided a way to see how people organized their space of work and life, and the ways residents arranged objects offered insights into how people sought to express their personal identities. A statue of the Madonna in front of a well-kept RV, or a flagpole with a University of Alabama Crimson Tide flag, tells stories of how people want to express their identities. Finally, the scrutiny of things and stories demonstrates tensions between what people say and do. For example, we heard a good bit about crime in the man camps, but people were willing to leave expensive equipment, porch furniture, and even freezers full of meat unsecured around their unit. The things and the stories create a tension between what people wanted us to know and how they lived their lives.



Photo by Kyle Cassidy

5. Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do we mean by temporary workforce housing?

The rugged environment of the northern plains has always attracted short-term residents. Land speculators, homesteaders, railroad workers, seasonal harvesters, construction workers, oil workers, and pipeline cats have come to try their luck at making a living in western North Dakota. Abandoned towns still dot the prairies as a silent testimony to the ambition of earlier waves of workers who followed earlier North Dakota booms.

2. How have the material and practical needs of temporary workforce housing affected communities in the Bakken?

One thing that has struck us about workforce housing is that while these sites are temporary and, to an extent, self-contained, they remain in some ways dependent on pre-existing communities in the area. Some of this dependence is grounded in basic infrastructure like roads and electricity. Other aspects of successful and comfortable temporary housing depend on local knowledge, community support, and access to particular things like the extruded polystyrene foam that insulates RVs through the winter or the seemingly limitless supply of shipping pallets used to create improvised decks, fences, and platforms.

3. How do residents of the Bakken create communities that are both true to the traditional experience of North Dakota while still capable of responding to challenges and taking advantage of new opportunities?

Both long-term residents and newcomers to the state comment on “strong communities” present in North Dakota. As scholars, we are interested in the little things people do to forge these strong communities. When residents identify themselves as people who have lived in the state “since before the boom” or refer to “the way things were before the boom,” they sometimes unconsciously define their community in ways that limit who can and who cannot be members. Considering the influx of new residents to North Dakota, how do communities maintain their strength while still being open to newcomers, innovation, and change?

4. How will we remember the (first?) Bakken oil boom of the 21st Century?

We recently visited the granite obelisk that stands near Tioga at the location of the Clarence Iverson No. 1 well, which first produced oil on April 4, 1951. This marker is one of the few monuments that commemorate the first Bakken oil boom. The history of the late 1970s and early 1980s boom has yet to be written. The twenty-first-century Bakken boom is obviously too recent to commemorate, but we can also recognize how quickly the landscape is changing. Temporary workforce housing, for example, is by its very nature ephemeral. What steps should we take to mark this moment in the state's and the community's history?



6. Further Reading

There is an immense body of popular literature on the North Dakota oil boom, hydraulic fracturing, and rural life that is interlaced with the history of the workforce housing in the state. Elwyn B. Robinson's magisterial *History of North Dakota* (1966) is required reading, although his research concludes amid the first North Dakota oil boom. Much of his analysis of that boom derives from the 1962 master's thesis of Dominic Schaff, "The History of the North Dakota Oil Industry." Schaff diligently compiled newspaper articles, geological reports, and industry statements from the first decade of the first boom. More recently Clarence Herz's 2013 master's thesis from North Dakota State University, "Petroleum Exploration History in North Dakota to 1951," provides a history of the early days for oil exploration in the state. John P. Bluemle's *The 50th Anniversary of the Discovery of Oil in North Dakota*, published by the North Dakota Geological Survey in 2001, provides geological and historical perspectives on the first two booms. Kimberly Porter's *North Dakota: 1960 to the Millennium* appeared in 2009 and catches the first years of the most recent boom.

The World Wide Web provides a vast quantity of information on the Bakken oil boom and western North Dakota. Alex Prud'homme's 2014 book titled *Hydrofracking*, in Oxford's *Everything You Need to Know* series, serves as an accessible start to the technologies and controversies around fracking globally. The state provides interactive maps locating nearly every well in the Bakken, including their horizontal legs (<https://www.dmr.nd.gov/OaGIMS/viewer.htm>). The federal government provides a somewhat less elegant county-by-county map of gas and oil pipelines through the state (<https://www.npms.phmsa.dot.gov/>). *Fracfocus* (fracfocus.com) provides information on particular wells that have undergone hydraulic fracturing during the recent boom, but relies on companies to report their procedure and process. The best way to learn about a particular well is to locate the well using North Dakota's oil and gas map and then reference the well, by name, on the *Fracfocus* page. The North Dakota Petroleum Council, a local advocacy group for Bakken businesses, has an informative website providing the perspective of industry issues related to the boom (<https://www.ndoil.org/>).

For more personal views of the oil boom, Lisa Peters's memoir, *Fractured Land* (2014), provides an intimate portrait of a family's history as the backdrop for the author's struggle to come to terms with profits from oil leases arranged by her late father. Russell Gold's very accessible book on fracking, *The Boom: How Fracking Ignited the American Energy Revolution and Changed the World* (2014), starts with a similar story about a family's experience with gas industry in Pennsylvania

before telling the story of fracking and its role in the US energy industry. There are several documentary films that deal with the Bakken. Of note are local entries into this increasingly crowded field: Prairie Public Media has released a documentary called *Faces of the Boom* (<http://www.prairiepublic.org/television/prairie-public-on-demand/faces-of-the-oil-patch>), and the *Black Gold Boom* radio documentary series (<http://blackgoldboom.com/>) provides local views on the oil patch, as does Forum Communications through its *Oil Patch Dispatches* blog (<http://oilpatchdispatch.areavoices.com/>). A preliminary version of a Tourist Guide to the Bakken Oil Patch is available here: <https://medium.com/@billcaraher/a-tourist-guide-to-the-bakken-oil-patch-86a52bd3779f>.

Finally, be sure to check out the Plains Art Museum's *Bakken Boom!* exhibit that features the art of Kyle Cassidy and John Holmgren.

To read more on ongoing man camp research, check out the North Dakota Man Camp Project home page: <http://www.northdakotamancamps.com/>.

The North Dakota Man Camp Project received generous funding from the Vice President of Research at the University of North Dakota, the College of Nursing and Professional Disciplines at UND, the College of Arts and Sciences at UND, as well as the Department of History, the Department of Social Work, and the Cyprus Research Fund.



Photo by Kyle Cassidy

