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The Bakken Hundreds

William Caraher and Bret Weber

The Bakken Hundreds describe seven seasons of archaeological fieldwork in North Dakota's Bakken oil patch (2012-2018). The North Dakota Man Camp Project focused on workforce housing through archaeological documentation and authorized interviews. Here, the co-authors alternate 100-word statements from project notebooks, interviews, and publications loosely following Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's composition style in, *The Hundreds* (2019). Our assemblage reveals the material and social conditions of the Bakken by emphasizing the frenetic, dreamlike, precarity of boom times. For entries with specific dates, we also include the West Texas Intermediate Crude oil price per barrel as a rough indicator of Bakken prosperity.

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Publication

Bret Weber, Julia Geigle, and Carenlee Barkdull, "Rural North Dakota's Oil Boom and Its Impact on Social Services," *Social Work* 59:1(2014), 62.

Over the last five years, North Dakota has experienced an oil boom based on high oil prices and hydraulic fracturing technologies. This has brought economic expansion and population growth to rural communities that had previously experienced decades of depopulation and economic struggle. Although the state has enjoyed many benefits—especially in juxtaposition to a sluggish national economy—the boom has also meant ... dramatic impacts on largely rural social service systems. In the midst of a rapidly changing situation, available information tends to swing between euphoria over economic success and hysteria about rising crime and shifting cultures.

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Interview

Camp 65: Riker Brown, Camp Owner, 21 August 2013, (\$106.42)

RB: Right. So we went with the RVs and actually, this is like a family park. We have kids on bikes and dogs. We promote families, dogs, kids. So it's temporary housing but some of these people bring their families for the summer and they'll go back for the winter, but they'll stay here.

Bret Weber (BW): Mom and the kids are here when school's out?

RB: Right.

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Notebook

Caraher Notes on Blaisdell RV Park
Camp 40: Camp Manager, 31 July 2015 (\$47.12)

The owner was interested in transitioning the RV park to a more permanent mobile home park. This involved fixing significant code violations - especially the water and sewage pipes being in the same trench - and installing a \$500,000 septic system. Camp makes no money. Despite the optimism, the camp appears rather rough with abandoned RVs, lots of abandoned equipment, and a run-down playground. Some trash. Owner noted the difficulties in keeping the camp clean. Thinking of installing wind breaks, trees, and snow fences.

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Interview
Camp 75: Diane Skillman, camp resident, 4 October 2014, (\$89.74)

DS: Well I think everybody keeps a bit of water running just to keep it from freezing. Although, they did freeze up there at the other end.

BW: Is that the water tank over there?

DS: No, that's the poop tank. [laughs]

BW: Oh, so where do you get your water from then ... it's ground water?

DS: Yeah, he has a well and everybody is pumped into that, and then he's got, well last year that froze

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Publication
W. Caraher and B. Weber, *The Bakken: An Archaeology of an Industrial Landscape* (NDSU Press 2017), 41.

To enter Stanley proper, turn left from old US 2 onto Main Street. About a half mile south, Main Street passes beneath the Highline, which is carried on a deck-girder concrete bridge dating to the 1930s. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, reflecting the importance of rail to this part of the state. Today, Amtrak's Empire Builder continues to serve Stanley from a small, modern railway station on the east side of Main Street. Farther south on Main Street is the Two Way Inn and Bar, which offers a delicious patty melt in authentic surroundings for the oil patch.

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Interview
Camp 14: William Nelson, camp resident and 'fisherman,' 11 August 2012, (\$85.38)

WN: I'm a consultant and my specialty is fishing. When they lose things in holes, I fish it out. It's not everybody's favorite but... people on rigs don't want to see me coming but when they need me, then there it is.

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Interview

Camp 14: Don Ashton, owner of the land under the camp, 28 October 2016 (\$48.70).

DA: Well, I bought the land in '85. I've been living here since '81. All the investors come out of South Dakota, Rapid City, to see if I wanted to do kind of trailers ... they said they were gonna put in water and sewer for 'em, and that never happened ... They had big dreams and everything. I gave them a longer term lease, cause they said, oh they wanted long, you know, maybe do it a motel or a hotel, so they figured maybe 10 acres or so ... Then I found out they were trying to sell this 110 acres out from underneath me and I got pissed off and took them to court.

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Interview

Camp 77: Juan Gonzales, camp resident, 2 May 2015, (\$59.15)

JG: It's not easy, you know, living out here, but, I mean it is a good way- me, for example, I'm young, I started out at a young year, it's a good way so I can get a good start at life and then, invest in a home where I'm going to be able to live and move on later as soon as everything calms down here. I think a lot of people are taking advantage of it and making the best of all this stuff and they're gonna-whoever's taking good advantage of it is gonna be making- is gonna have a good future.

~

Notebook

Camp 29. Indoor RV Park. W. Caraher. 10 August 2014 (\$97.65)

The indoor RV park seems filled with a large number of RVs not in the garages or bays, but ringing the outside of the garages forming a camp around the electrical masts. Unlike our last visit in the winter, there is some evidence for cooking and even socializing outside of the garages with tables, lawn chairs, and coolers set around the garage doors. More distinctly, there are propane tanks and gas canisters which are not permitted in the bays set outside around the garages with chains securing them. It is clear that the spaces inside of the bays are also used as living areas as well with pallets and chairs set up inside.

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Photo

Camp 77. Abandoned Mudroom. W. Caraher. 6 March 2015 (\$49.61)



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Interview

Outside the camper of Isaac and Carol Douglas February 10, 2013, (\$95.72)

BW- You're headed for church, yes? Which church will you be attending?

ID- First Assembly in Watford City—And it's an awesome church—And people have been real nice, and I mean I go to the grocery stores and they're real friendly, and the laundry and we made blankets, 750 blankets the church did. The four churches joined together for the abused children in this part of the world, so it was real neat—

BW- Are the people in the church, mostly locals, or mostly oil folk?—

ID- A little bit of everybody—

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Interview

Camp10. David Donaldson, camp resident, 11 July 2015, (\$52.74)

DD: I heard there used to be a lot of meth out here, but you know, nothing that I ever really had a problem with [it], so. But yeah, you know, just a million different personalities and people living

with their kids and family, and a lot of drinking and fighting, just, I've seen pretty much everything you can possibly think of out here, that just random stuff. You come home and everybody's just got chairs set up around your camper having a fire outside your camper, and you can't get any sleep and, blowing flames out of their mouth with alcohol in front of the little kids...

~

Interview

Gene Veeder, Executive-Director McKenzie County, Jobs Development Authority, 11 August 2014 (\$97.65)

GV: Your law enforcement and your sheriff's department are all transporting so it's pretty hard for them to, if they have to go to even Bismarck, you know, it's an all-day trip and their entire trip is spent transporting prisoners so it's way more costly than we originally thought.

BW: What's the local police force, the size?

GV: We have city and county. We have gone from 6 sheriff deputies to 19. Police force went from 2 to 9. We've always got openings of course too.

~

Interview

Camp 40. Donny Bringwatt, camp resident who just arrived from Texas, 16 January 2016 (\$29.42)

BW: Right. So when the work starts what will the work cycle be? How many days on, how many days off?

DB: [inaudible]

BW: I don't know what that means.

DB: It means you start in the mornings, and you work till, however many hours a day you can work ... seven days a week

BW: Yeah

DB: We're here to work, we're not here to, you know

BW: ... well right now, you're not working, so you're cooking a ham, what else do you do when you-?

DB: [inaudible] [laughs] I'm just cookin' a ham, I'm gonna eat it [laughs] Play dominos, play poker.

~

Interview

Camp 28. Will Oldman and his roommate, 9 February 2013, (\$93.13)

WO: As long as you don't go to the strip clubs from what I hear (laughs) I've heard some pretty horrible stories about some strip club, I think it was in Watford, closed it down because guys were getting raped in the bathroom, viscously I mean—

Roommate: Crime has gone up almost 100% around here, compared to what it ever was, just a quiet town where you could leave your keys in your door open, keys in your car and stuff like that, nowadays you can't do that and uh not only that but the women that are here fear for their lives ...

(Authors' note: there is no, and there has never in recent memory been, a strip club in Watford City.)

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Caraher Notebook

Description of the material outside two units in Camp 11, 10 August 2012 (\$92.87).

Massive built deck, grill, plants, fence, dog run. stone, satellite tv, ramp leading to deck, potted plants, hanging plants, plywood around the base of a planted tree. Scrap wood underneath various garden features, propane tanks, table set on cinderblocks, outdoor bed, tarp, pallets, trashcan. Pallet deck, kids toys, wading pool, small table, camp chairs (some kids sized), potted plants, plywood, small fence between unit and road, toy truck, strange tubs, propane tanks, water jugs, grill, cooler, satellite TV.

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Interview

Camp 11. Angela and Bob Williams, 13 December 2014, (\$57.81)

AW: Lots of insulation. That, you'll find a ton throughout the park. Any insulation, any wood. If you can get their hands on it they'll take it. So many people skirting and mudrooms are built from recycled materials. You know, it's just used over and over and over.

Ben W: It's like, 'well I'm moving if you want it, and make a little modifications,' you know.

AW: If it's coveted, everyone wants a mudroom. If you leave behind a mudroom...

Ben W: But now they knock the mudrooms down, they don't give people opportunity to take them anymore.

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Publication

W. Caraher, B. Weber, K. Kourelis, and R. Rothaus, "The North Dakota Man Camp Project: The Archaeology of Home in the Bakken Oil Fields," *Historical Archaeology* 51 (2017), 271.

Our approach to documenting workforce housing drew on recent directions in archaeology and architectural history. First, archaeology of the contemporary world informed our work, and particularly this subfield's interest in sites of short-term or ephemeral occupation. Zimmerman's (2010) archaeology of homelessness, the archaeology of contemporary protest sites, photographic documentation of graffiti, and the archaeology of tourism collectively demonstrate how archaeological approaches to contemporary sites of contingency have the potential to inform

issues of immediate social and political concern (Schofield and Anderton 2000; Graves-Brown and Schofield 2011; Kiddey and Schofield 2011, 2014).

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Document

Camp 11. Mudroom Guidelines. 10 August 2012 (\$92.87).

1. Mudrooms require plans be submitted to Park Management.
2. Mudrooms smaller than 5x10 may be made and will require no deposit.
3. Any Mudrooms larger than 5x10 will require an additional \$300 clean-up deposit.
4. Maximum Mudroom size is 20x8.
5. Maximum height of Mudroom is no higher than the RV.
6. No Mudroom additions may fully enclose the trailer (may not extend over the top).
7. RV must be able to be removed from lots without obstructions (no part of any mudroom may extend behind or in front of RV).

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Interview

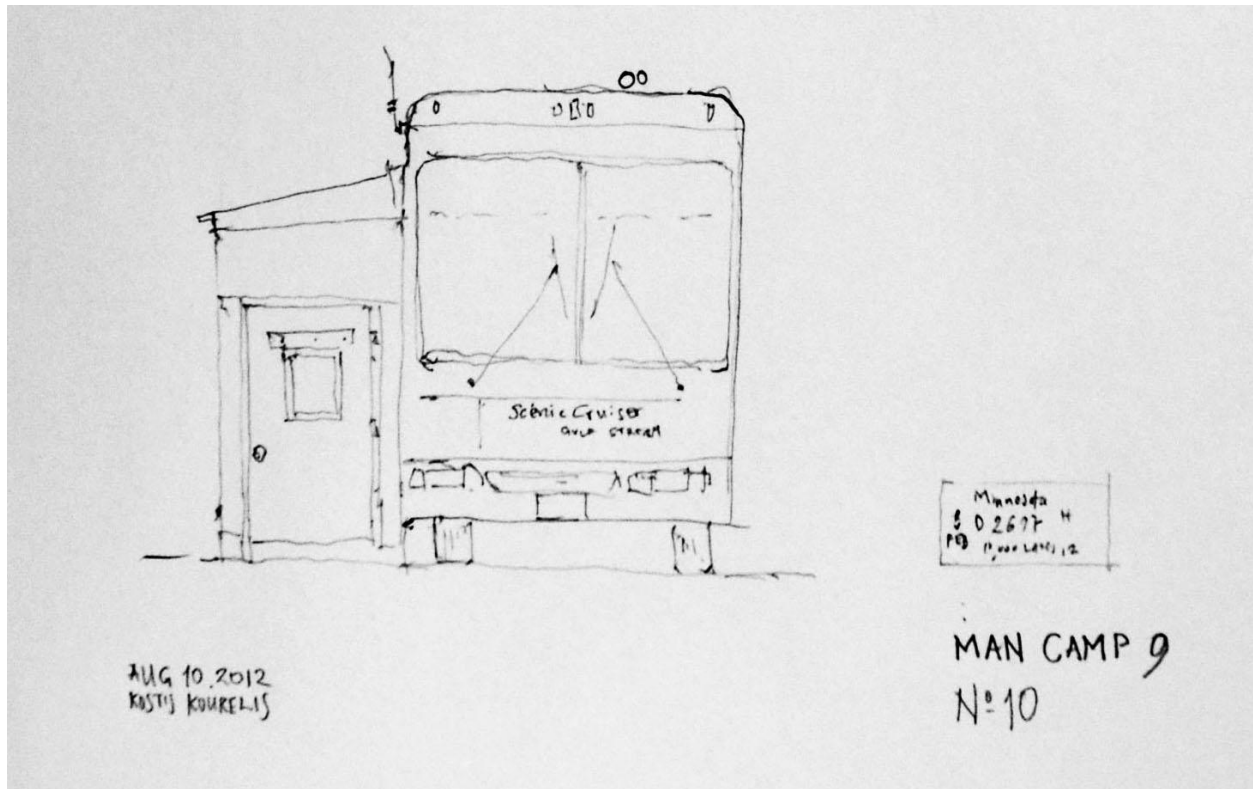
Camp 11. Barb Bendle, 10 August 2012, (\$92.87)

Mudrooms yeah. We do check them out and make sure they meet the fire code and that they're not built shoddily, so that if the wind comes up 80 mph, it's not going to blow away. That's what we do. Right. So it's safe for people. So it's not blowing down and hitting the next trailer or anything. My husband looks at their plot plans that we have them draw. Little plan telling us what they want to do and then we usually okay it because you know, we want them to have a little piece of land. (trying to light a lighter for a cigarette in the wind)

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Illustration

Camp 9. Unit 10. Kostis Kourelis. 10 August 2012 (\$92.87)



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Interview

RV Graveyard: Roy Harrison & Garfield Washington, 11 July 2015, (\$52.74)

BW: So you're bringing trailers when people abandon them?

RH: Yeah, when people abandon their vehicles and whatnot... We had other things we were doing, but this was the most cost effective way. We were taking an excavator and we were crushing them and cycling the metal and the wood out and putting them in different dumpsters and just having them hauled off that way, just picking them all up at once and just shoving them in a dumpster and trashing it.

MW: Well during the wintertime if we are lucky we burn them.

BW: Who- Does the county allow you to do that?

MW: They did let you burn, when you know, when you can, with the snow, and (when) the wind's not gonna affect it, and the land around it...

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Photograph

Battery Tank Explosion near Alexander, ND. W. Caraher. 7 March 2015, (\$49.61)



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Notebook.

Bret Weber. First trip to the Bakken, 31 January 2012 (\$99.56)

We drove west out of town on Hwy 23, went south on 22, and then looped back west (probably on hwy 73), then north eventually turning east again on hwy 23. We seemed to pass a number of smaller, ad hoc 'man camp' areas with various vehicles and RVs. The main thing that we witnessed was the night sky illuminated by dozens of flares—15-20 foot flames that burst straight into the air to burn off the natural gas that wells produce.

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Photograph.

McKenzie County, ND. Memorial set up to Brendan Wegner who died in a well blow out in September 14, 2011 (\$87.96). W. Caraher. 1 August 2015 (\$47.12)



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Interview

Camp 4. Clark Brewsman, camp resident. 9 February 2013 (\$95.72)

CB: The longest I ever worked was 57 hours, with a two-hour nap. You don't want to do it, but when the oil's coming out of the ground it won't stop and it needs to be tended to.

~

Interview

Camp 16. Sally Burnick, camp resident. 28 October 2016 (\$48.70)

SB: When the oil, when the oil tanked up there, and the oil went away, I lost my job, his overtime got cut, so our primary home, we couldn't afford the big mortgage on it anymore, so that got foreclosed on, and we had another little rental house that we sold at a huge loss.

BW: So, how much stuff did you bring with you?

SB: We got rid of a lot of our stuff, like almost, we had a 3,000 square foot house, we got rid of almost all the furniture, almost all the artwork ... Most of our stuff is in a storage shed packed into our horse trailer, um, we kept a couch, TV, entertainment center, DVDs, you know, knick

knacks we were really fond of, family heirlooms ... Everything else went, so we're down to what's in the horse trailer, our storage shed, our boat, and our camper [laughs]

~

Interview

Camp 8. Mark. 9 Aug 2012 (\$92.87)

M: They guaranteed 60 hours a week and holiday pay.

BW: You've been here a month, have you ever worked 60 hours a week?

M: No. I've only worked 1 week so far. One full week. I can't stay much longer because I'm going broke. When I show up every morning, they give me 2 hours for showing up. And this week, so far, I have 6 hours. So I can't make it. I'm buying my own food and paying rent and trying to pay bills at home ... I'm getting the hell out of North Dakota.

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Photograph

Camp 11. W. Caraher. 25 August 2013. (\$97.26)



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Interview

Camp 10. Claudia Nielsen, camp resident, 10 August 2012, (\$92.87)

CN: He's from San Antonio, Texas. I met him while I was bartending, of course, I wasn't drinking but I was working. What else do you do out here besides work and drink? So we just hung out a couple times and actually he proposed to me after about a week so, it happened really really fast. But when you know, you know. We're both out of 6-year marriages and I have actually, my kids are in Helena, Montana. Yeah he's a very successful man so it's going really well. He was in a mancamp actually so he's enjoying the freedom of sharing my camper with me now.

~

Interview

Camp 65. Riker Brown, camp owner near Watford City, 2 August 2015, (\$41.80)

BW: Are you seeing changes in the people who are living here now from a couple years ago?

RB: I'd say a lot of change. A lot more families, a lot more couples.

BW: More permanent?

RB: More permanent. Or there's, like the guys been out here so the next time he can bring his wife out, he's kind of got it figured out, he's got it like, he's got an RV park, so then they bring, or have their wives come on out. Yeah. But first it was way more, you know, single guys, three guys living in a trailer, you know, but now, we're seeing way more families.

~

Interview

Camp 6. Sue Christiansen, camp resident. 9 August 2012, (\$93.36)

SC: Like the living conditions are terrible here. Like people are shitting behind, in the trees, past the trees right there. There's flies everywhere... We're like brothers, like a family, brothers and sisters out here, like a family. We're close, tight-knit family. Like all my men, like I owned, I own a construction company called Christiansen Construction so we were working, we were all contracted in Idaho but a bunch of just got together. My husband and his boss decided to uh come up here by themselves in the winter last year. It was terrible in the winter too. Terrible fricking conditions.

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Publication

W. Caraher, "The Archaeology of Man Camps: Contingency, Periphery, and Late Capitalism," in W. Caraher and K. Conway, *The Bakken Goes Boom: Oil and the Changing Geographies of Western North Dakota*. (The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota 2016), 190.

C. Hailey's exhaustive study of the camp as an architectural form both locates this within the history of vernacular architecture, the rise of leisure activities, and the emergence of substantial, mobile populations displaced by war, natural disasters, or economic need (Hailey 2009). Like the midcentury tourists who towed their RVs to parks of the American West, the lack of infrastructure associated with camps, their contingent residents, and their temporary status have marked these spaces as peripheral no matter where they emerge ... The use of "blue tarp," modular housing units, shipping pallets, and other mobile, readily available, and ad hoc approaches has produced a common form of temporary settlement suitable to accommodate diverse situations and populations around the world (Hailey 2009, 377–83).

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Interview

Camp10. Richard Scrum, camp owner in Wheelock, ND, 10 August 2012 (\$92.87)

RS: Well I had to put in power and water and sewer. The campers had full hookups here. It took me a while. I did it all by cash. I don't use credit so I did everything in cash. Anything you do is really expensive out here. They want, for example, my well is bad here. They messed it up, the previous owners messed it up one night and I uh put \$6,000 into fixing it and didn't get it fixed yet. They said I have to put another \$10,000 into just drilling a new well. I haven't done it. I just put in a holding tank and I haul my water from Ray. It's uh, there's no city services here. The power's the only city service and gas, I guess, we do have natural gas which is nice. But as far as water and sewer, you're on your own.

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Publication

W. Caraher, B. Weber, R. Rothaus, "Lessons from the Bakken Oil Patch," *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 3.2 (2016), 200.

With the collapse of oil prices in 2014, our work in the Bakken has come to focus increasingly on various forms of abandonment, as the number of temporary workers in the Bakken declined concurrently with the oil-rig count. Numerous coffee-makers in an abandoned RV revealed signs of methamphetamine use, trashed trailers smeared with human feces showed frustration and anger, and squatters' occupying empty rooms at defunct crew camps reflect a shifting reality.

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Interview

Camp 17. Shana Berritt, newcomer and camp resident, 28 October 2016 (\$49.72)

SB: Um, don't count on the oil field.

BW: Don't count on an oil field?

SB: Don't count on it, um, when it's good it's great, but when it tanks, it affects an entire community, if you haven't been smart about it, you haven't squirreled any money away, you're

going to be in trouble when it all drops off. [laughs] we learned the hard way, um, you know, my dad has seen the oil field rise and fall a couple times, and he kinda tried to warn us, but, you know, we said the oil field is so big, it's going to last forever [laughs].

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