

Nose Hill Artifacts

Vivian Hansen

Cf Fidler, HBCA E.3/2, 10 December 1792: "These hills run in a parallel direction with the Rocky Mountain from their Northern termination near the Devil's head (near Lake Minnewanka) & their South end terminates at the banks of this river [Bow R] — they are high & run in Parallels with the mountain, they are covered with Pine & Fir & very deep vallies between each parallel ridge." ¹

20 November 1800. "Lat 51/33/23N ... Bow Hills in Sight S12E 12 M where we put up at a spring ... We go in a line parallel to the Mountain. ... The View is grand in a high Degree: on our right we have the Bow Hills, lofty in themselves and Brown with Woods, above them stately rises the Rocky Mountain ..." ²

a nose for secrets.

a nose for news.

The nos have it.

cut off your nose to spite your face.

who knows?

a woman's way of knowing.

a cut-nose woman.

she whose face is cut.

Like looking down the wrong end of a double-barrelled shot gun. To know, perceive, apprehend as fact or truth. To Know simply is—like the Hill, the impending glacial drumlin that wraps around northwest Calgary.

A Blackfoot woman, caught in the act of adultery, was condemned at this site to have her nose cut off as a penalty for her actions. We do not know her story. The tribe cast it on the ground. And so She, Nose Hill, was named. John Laurie Boulevard holds her mound in a circler of asphalt, defining the map of her *terra incognita*. She is a park for the lost and disturbed, for those who seek peace.

Her face is marked with the lines of paths, the ridges and bridges over

which a way was made. She has been accessed over, across, through, around. She has been beaten and trodden by feet. Some call her Nose Hill. Spy Hill is her westward slope.

Here, the wind holds power and Medicine. Nose Hill is home to 130 bird species that take the wind seriously. Twenty-five species of mammals live here. They need the wind for warnings of an encroaching city, or any human motion that might have the capacity to expunge them from the urban landscape.

The official story is what others say about her. This process involves mapping her site. Like those cook book pictures of a cow that is segmented and butchered, she is divided into Aspen Grove, Porcupine Valley, Rubbing Stone Hill, Mule Deer Plateau, Wintering Hill, Many Owls Valley and Meadowlark Prairie. She is a park; an enclosed piece of ground for public recreation, a snatch of mother earth.

She doesn't look like much—a dull drumlin, a few loose sandstone points, clumps of trees, and grassgrassgrass. She reveals only a few material artifacts and sites for which meaning is contended. Some lithic scatter here and there, old Indian campsites, a cairn, some tipi rings, bison kill, erratics.

Archeological research on Nose Hill has discovered material culture; the bones, stones and arrowheads of an indigenous past. But there are also auditory artifacts, the stories that corroborate, or challenge, the ways in which land and place is mapped and converted to *cognita*: that which is known. Three dimensions of archeology: patterns of form, space, and time contribute to what we think we know. These dimensions include memory and story, both of which can sometimes elude the pen. Nose Hill Park has little to offer through vision. Re-vision is the only way to reveal her memories.

The kids in my neighbourhood knew her as Spy Hill. In the late sixties, we were still correcting newcomers to northwest Calgary who insisted on using her formal name: Nose Hill. That formality was unsuitable for She who defied definition, her wilderness where, as yet, no paths existed. She was a landscape, not a cityscape, still a place of escape.

I have so many stories. Clippings of the past, memories that image behind my eyes, which I use to re-vise what I have seen and know. My archeology distinguishes sedimentary layers by their laughter, colour and texture, comparing the places of form, space, and time.

* * *

My brother and his friends invite me to go tobogganing on Spy Hill. It is a half hour walk from our house in the district of Brentwood. I am cold and disinterested. The freezing wind exhales from off a distant mountain glacier, halting living things in whatever path they choose to follow toward the Hill. A long trek up through the coulees. Toboggans are dangerous, but we stifle our fear as we shove downward, hoping to hit a bush and fly.

“Have faith!” shouts my brother after the lunge. He can walk on top of the wind-crusted snow. We all love the fly, the thrill of hitting the bottom and counting coup of our cuts and bruises. War wounds. Spy Hill encounters.

In the spring, my brother makes a fort up there out of the materials and artifacts of unsuspecting carpenters who are constructing the new district of Charleswood. The fort is isolated and nestled in the profuse poplars that form the nose hair of Spy Hill. The boys try to hide out here, knowing that she will protect their sacred sites.

Years later, he hikes up the Hill to see if debris of his fort still exists. Before Edgemont swallows up the more northerly slopes, he finds a slab of particle board; the location of his secret site is revealed by an old piece of plywood.

* * *

Our neighbour had a Bren gun carrier that he bought from a collector. It is an infantry transport vehicle that was designed for impassible dips and valleys. We plague him to take us for a ride in the “tank.” He loads us inside and drives ever so slowly over and along the rolls of the Hill. She seems unaffected, yielding gently to the tracks that attain the great speed of 45 m.p.h.

* * *

Shots are fired in the 60s, when no law in Calgary prohibits gopher hunting, especially on Nose Hill. Pete has a .44 colt, circa 1850, a muzzle-loaded collector’s gun. No bullets, no flint-locked pistol. It needs powder and a patch to hold the powder in place, after which a projectile ball is inserted. The end of the cylinder is gelled by some sort of vaseline. Pete aims at a gopher, pulls the trigger, the flint ignites the powder in the chamber, and sends three balls exploding from the gun. The gopher leaps free. A terrible blast, and Pete has what looks like charcoal all over his face. “Ooops, forgot the vaseline.”

* * *

My last childhood memories of the Hill were on her Spy side, under the eroded sandstone abutments. Eleven years old, I climbed the Hill with some friends. After that, I didn’t return for twenty-five years. Nose/Spy Hill changed during that time. I continued to observe her from the periphery of the city that grew from Brentwood to Dalhousie, then Edgemont, Ranchlands, Hawkwood. The cityscape encroached on her landscape. She was marginal, keeping the secrets of Her past and insisting on the sacredness of Her present. I read about her now and then:

News Clipping: ‘History on the Hill,’ Roman Cooney, The Calgary Herald, April 11, 1992. An alderman once described it as bald-ass prairie. True, it doesn’t look like much from a distance. But there’s history on Nose Hill, witnessed by

centuries-old tipi rings, buried with the bones of bison at kill sites, whispered by the wind-blown grasses... Within two years the park will be surrounded by houses and some 350,000 Calgarians. ... The city has no specific plans to protect archeologically sensitive areas because most of them are quite difficult to find." Why must all parks be all things to all people?... there's no logic in the argument that Nose Hill needs an extensive artificial path system to be accessible. ... Opinion cards are available at park entrances. ... It's a good day for a walk in the park. Take a pen.

She started to call me. I knew her voice, even over the distance of time.

I'd been having this dream where I would struggle to get to Her top. In the dream, I can't find the switchback paths that will get me there. I always seem to remain at the bottom of Her folds, looking up toward the Spy Hill look-out point. I can access Her in a car or Bren gun carrier, but when I reach her plateau, she is covered with houses, community playgrounds, Bingo Halls. I am devastated. How could She have come to this while I wasn't looking?

News Clipping: "Hot On Their Heels" The Calgary Herald. April 12, 1994. Youths flee a grass fire which charred a large portion of Nosehill Park Monday afternoon. Smoke and flames were visible from several parts of the city. A large area of the park between 64th Avenue NW and Berkeley Gate along 14th Street NW was blackened.

After the fire, her sun-and-wind-scorched old winter grasses die off, but She sends out new shoots, and by the time the first cold prairie rains arrive in spring, the scorched areas green up more jeweled than a sculpted lawn. Blackened mounds renew, setting a new sedimentary base.

At the top of her mound, you are high. High enough to see the mountains. Sound, or rather the lack of it, defeats the encroachment of the city, but never the bubble of earth that is Nose Hill. The largest municipal park in Canada, Nose Hill is 1127 hectares in size. Indigenous prairie plant species punctuate her: rough fescue, parry oatgrass, crocus, golden bean, bed-straw, sage.

Nose Hill is something of an accident, for a variety of reasons. No buildings were permitted here until the 1970s because of Nose Hill's proximity to the airport. And any plumber will tell you that human waste doesn't run uphill.

A walk here will take you past the ruts of old farm carts, the dilapidated forts of boys reliving their exploratory inclinations, and the site of the sandstone mining pits that were the formation of buildings in early Calgary. When I come upon these pits, hardly healed, nor grown over from the original mining activity, I grow oddly, and intensely, uncomfortable. In attempting to reconstruct this stone echo, it is significant to note the historical ravage of this place:

The area around Nose Hill itself played a significant economic role in Calgary's subsequent physical transformation from police fort to prairie city. Much of the

sandstone used to construct the imposing public buildings that became Calgary's hallmark after 1886 came from quarries local entrepreneurs operated on Nose Creek. Stone from the J.A Lewis quarry provided the entrance to the Imperial Bank and part of the new city hall erected in 1909. Masons used materials carted into the city from Nose Hill to build James Short School and Calgary's old courthouse as well.³

How do you remand a mining site, restore it to its former sandstone sleep beneath the prairie grasses? The silent scream from the Hill, which continues to sound after its rape and pillage from this sandstone mining, is audible in the wind. Nose Hill is paradox and core, a lookout where time releases story and landscape and memory, and a paradigm of urban landscape. It attains significance only because of its marginality to the city.

I pull my imaginings back to the original prairie encountered by Peter Fidler and David Thompson. Here, in that exploratory past lies the Nose Hill escarpment that predates Calgary; the Hill with formations that extend to Cochrane. Thompson left his Bow River camp in late November 1800. He spent four hours in a high place, where he describes his astonishing view:

Our View from the Heights to the Eastward was vast & unbounded—the Eye had not Strength to discriminate its Termination: to the Westward Hills & Rocks rose to our View covered with Snow, here rising, there subsiding, but their Tops nearly of an equal Height everywhere. Never before did I behold so just, so perfect a Resemblance to the Waves of the Ocean in the wintry Storm. When looking upon them and tentatively considering their wild order and appearance, the imagination was apt to say, these must have been liquid, and in that state, when swelled to its greatest agitation, suddenly congealed and made solid by power omnipotent.⁴ *November 24, 1800*

A little more than a century later, Nose Hill overlooked the construction of a new city. In the early 1900s, Nose Creek became the site of popular bordellos. Always on the margins, that Hill, and always seeing the trade of a city. She makes her only comment in a thrum of silence and impression.

Navigating downward from Nose Hill's western slopes, I stop to pick black-eyed susans, bachelor buttons, long grasses—the flora I picked as a child. I encounter a woman who is on a trek upward. She stops me, asking brusquely “what do you know about this park?” Smiling, I reply “almost anything you might want to know,” thinking her a foreigner eager to learn the ways of the prairie.

In a British accent, she demands: “Don't you know that you're not supposed to pick flowers in a Park?” She is indignant, surly, self-righteous in her anger. I am a prairie woman, but in London England I have seen the manicure of green collage against brick and memory. People like this woman have insisted that I call gophers *Richardson's Ground Squirrels*, and refer to them correctly, thank you very much. This is just another way of demanding to hear the names of the species in the Garden. Such an act presumes that she, and

I, must have dominion over this place; must articulate its accident, its meaning and sensuality in order to project its natural state.

My confusion at her hostility gives way to rebellion. I smile blandly, sniff the bachelor buttons, and move on down the hill. A few steps later, I turn to watch her shaking her head, rage still clutching frantically to her shoulders. I hope that whatever seizes her will drop into the grass, where Nose Hill can absorb yet another artifact of humanity.

The fur traders who encountered the Plains People exchanged mirrors for furs. The mirrors had a dual purpose: image display and message delivery. Those people signaled history from up there on Spy Hill. The Hill is both Spy and Nose. She is either and both, her/histories.

When the fur traders came with blankets and guns to exchange them for the furs brought by the Indians, they also brought beads and mirrors. The mirrors were popular with the women, and with the men, because they used them for signaling. Spy Hill, a westward continuation of Nose Hill, has a small “peak,” altitude 4200 feet. This was often used for signaling, hence the name “Spy Hill.”⁵

It may have been the early spring—March or April, when traders mounted the Paskapoo Rocks on Nose Hill and sat down to flicker mirrors onto the far horizons of the Plains. The flash told the native traders “We’re here again, and ready to trade skins and furs.”

On a cold day in March I climb that same escarpment to experiment with a small mirror. The only difference between my experiment and the 18th Century call to trade is the era, which is now the 21st Century. The mirror’s astonished light ricochets off the east side of the Social Sciences building at the University of Calgary. Professors live and work in that building—historians, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, linguists, some English professors, graduate students of any discipline. Layers of empirical knowledge embedded in people. Do they see this sign today, this mirror’s roar of silver flash? Do they know that it is a signal to trade, to call on human endeavour to encounter Nose Hill?

I tickle the wide light against the LRT station at Brentwood—simply because the grain elevator architecture begs a scratch in the armpit of its glass. It yawns. The grain elevator signifier is a prairie cliché rerouting its origins from wood to glass to a place of journey and possibility—even if only north/south along an LRT track. The elevator still wants the coulee of east/west to snuggle with, to remind it of flexing boundaries and borders. In the cast light of a mirror-signal from Nose Hill, Brentwood Station becomes an ignited being, one that houses a dynamic of people if only in patterns of travel.

These C-train travelers create a modern presence from their boundary that “operates, is at work, between various entities, mutually constructing them and itself in the working...furthermore, as *practices* they are generative, instigate new directions, turn moments into events.”⁶ From this boundary at Nose Hill, I can escape the events that comprise the great city, reduce my

consciousness to a moment outside of its citizens. In the summer I can observe the material green value of trees that wash over brick schools. The insane pace of a great city is observable from these heights, and the muscle of social organization that is realized in the bricollage of human institution.

This practice of Calgary is the traffic of the 21st Century that risks abandoning its prairie significance. We hold an ancient glacial drumlin to the thrall of its past—making a boundary between what is then and what is now. We practice saving a demographic identity under glass, for example: The Brentwood Station LRT terminal. This social and economic enterprise is the movement that represents the modern city and generates its clarity in the present time. The past relapses swiftly, to artifact:

The body of a young Indian man was found in Nose Creek, in March of 1897. The doctor found the Indian to have been a young man about 30 years old, who had died from natural causes. The Indian prisoner identified the body as that of Running Weasel, who died across the Bow last fall, the remains being placed in the position in which they were found, by the well-known Indian, Deerfoot, at the request of the deceased, when dying. He, it is reported, to have asked “to be put where he could see the great city grow beneath his feet.”⁷

Running Weasel never got his wish to see the city grow beneath his feet. He could not have imagined what it would become, how its boundaries would sprawl and grow over those feet, inducing the dance of a new people in a culture called a city.

City management of the boundaries and natural areas of Nose Hill has been fraught with challenges. The Nose Hill Park Natural Area Management Plan⁸ cites the following recommendations to the management and preservation of Nose Hill as a municipal prairie park:

- Re-introduction of natural disturbance processes such as fire, which are essential to grassland communities, in a controlled manner.
- Implementation of vegetation management strategies to enhance wildlife habitat.
- Identification of two key areas that are considered priorities for restoration
- Rehabilitation of eroded trails.
- Investigation of the erosion problem created by drainage from the gravel quarry.

Up here, the prairie fires are grand. The aftermath is an immense, blackened reminder of what tinder-dry grass can become. When I was a kid, it was just an exciting prairie fire. Sooner or later, it would hit a slough and slide into a hot sigh. Now, in the 21st Century with the City of Calgary surrounding the island of Nose Hill, a prairie fire is an aberration; a threat to home and property. We don't count the cost of staggering porcupine, fleeing deer, running rabbits, or mice caught in a well-burrowed infamy of grass.

Vegetation management is a visible notation in that same grass. The track I walked on a month ago has been rerouted to salvage the natural grasses, to detour me from nests. But every morning I drive by the south slopes of the Spy side of Nose Hill, noting the old wagon ruts that seem to rise like linear ghosts from the charter borders of the chain-link fence.

I have to question the utility of well-managed buffalo beans and brome grass. At a level of movement in psychological and spiritual space, walkers need the path. In *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit says:

Walking as art calls attention to the simplest aspects of the act: the way rural walking measures the body and the earth against each other, the way urban walking elicits unpredictable social encounters. And to the most complex: the rich potential relations between thinking and the body; the way one person's act can be an invitation to another's imagination, the way every gesture can be imagined as a brief and invisible sculpture, the way walking reshapes the world by mapping it, treading paths into it, encountering it; the way each act reflects and reinvents the culture in which it takes place.⁹

Calgarians need the treading path as encounter; as the boundary in which we are constituted as citi-zens, as observers of prairie space. Nose Hill is the place where we materialize as urban prairie folk, mirrored by the clichéd grain elevator and re-created as artisans of survival in this harsh place.

Katherine Govier alludes to this creation: "Prairie cities are an acquired taste. Some people moving to Calgary feel disappointed at first. But then they get to know the Bow River and discover that the city has more kilometers of bike trails than any other metropolis in North America. They learn that the bare hill covered with short brown stuff in the northwest quadrant of the city is Nose Hill Park. Calgarians love Nose Hill."¹⁰

The Hill is actively defended by The Friends of Nose Hill Society. Anne Burke, the current President of the Society, considers her role in the protection and management of Nose Hill's resources. "Nose Hill has always been, for me, a microcosm of the macrocosm which is our society. The land, it is safe to say, has not been treated well, depending on your perspective."¹¹ She asserts her perspective clearly, in arguing the challenges that face the "management" of the Hill.

I could write here of the deer, the baird's sparrow, ground squirrels (endangered on the hill), porcupines, jack rabbits, coyotes (protected). I could also write of the fescue and rough fescue grasses, the undisturbed teepee rings left by First Nations; the Native Heritage Site, the Sunrise Ceremony; spring crocuses, aspen groves. Say the *word*, it generates, regenerates, with Nature in tow. The old gravel pit, redeeming itself, teeming with life. Instead, say the *other* words, brome, invasive species, Round-Up, defoliation, botched and sporadic attempts at re-seeding. Add multi-use pedestrian overpasses; expanded and additional parking lots; public washroom facilities (one recommended for the plateau); and an encircled bio-sphere or "island" for land animals, which can no longer migrate, except across John Laurie Boulevard.¹²

It is a frightening proposition to manoeuvre, manage and manipulate the natural and cultural geography of an urban landscape of this size. How do we do it correctly? Should we be engaged in this sculpturing at all? What does an urban dweller expect of an elected and mandated body of green-space handlers? Sensitive progress, we hope, through a multiplicity of strategies. Perhaps through open-ended query and proactive movement, or as Emily Hiestand suggests: “It may be that the poet (or city planner) who emulates the open-ended, resilient, and mutable qualities of nature is best able to generate sounds and shapes, images and patterns that can aid and abet a sustainable culture.¹³

This aiding and abetting calls us to literature; to *write*, as Burke entreats us, of things green and living. It calls us to cast Nose Hill in poetry, music, and open-ended fictions that emulate the dip and curve of nature, in a high hump of urban prairie. The accretions of time and space and prairie artifact as it is manifested on Nose Hill, now belong to urban muscle and trajectory

I slip the mirror back into my pocket; I have no wish to capture time itself inside the body and cache of the mirror. This tool is merely a method of tease for me—a reminder of silent communication in the days of the fur traders. I tease the buildings; flutter the light around the distant mountains. If I stir this butterfly of light against the human wind of this city, will it create an aberration of breeze that is robust enough to announce the presence of Nose Hill—the accretion of its past and its living, immediate boundary?

Soon I will disappear from these sandstone rocks, lest the seekers find me and chastise me for the experiment. I have been careful to avoid flashing the mirror at the snake of traffic on John Laurie Boulevard. I have bounced the beam completely across the sight of northwest Calgary. The artifacts are the flash of memories and their accretions into the present. These sedimentary memories have concreted a living and dynamic urban green site.

Notes

- ¹ Fidler, Peter. “A Look at Peter Fidler’s Journal.”
- ² Thompson, David. “Journey to the Bow River.” Thompson is travelling south, roughly along Highway 22X. Barbara Belyea, editor, comments that both these references from Fidler and Thompson likely refer to the foothills east of the Front Ranges, and not Nose Hill. (Electronic communication: March 28, 2007). Fidler and Thompson certainly visited the area of present day Calgary, and thus the area of what is now Nose Hill in the era of pre-European contact.
- ³ Nose Creek and Nose Hill Park. *The Applied History Research Group/The University of Calgary*.
- ⁴ Thompson, David. “Journey to the Bow River.”
- ⁵ Hallworth, Beryl. “Archaeology and History of Nose Hill and Nose Creek,” 14.

- 6 Klaver, Irene J. "Boundary Projects vs. Porder Patrol."
- 7 The Calgary Herald. March 13, 1897. Hallworth, Beryl. "Archaeology and
History of Nose Hill and Nose Creek" *Nose Hill: A Popular Guide*. Calgary Field
Naturalists' Society. CFNS. Calgary, 1988. p. 15.
- 8 Executive Summary. *Nose Hill Park Natural Area Management Plan*.
- 9 Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust. A History of Walking*.
- 10 Govier, Katherine. "A Young City in an Ancient Landscape."
- 11 Burke, Anne. "A 'post-post' Modern Fable: being some 'words' about Nose
Hill."
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Hiestand, Emily. *Urban Nature—Poems about Wildlife in the City*.

References

- _____. The Calgary Herald. March 13, 1897.
- _____. Executive Summary. *Nose Hill Park Natural Area Management Plan*. 1994.
- _____. Nose Creek and Nose Hill Park. *The Applied History Research Group/The University
of Calgary*. The Applied History Research Group. 1997.
- Burke, Anne. "A 'post-post' Modern Fable: being some 'words' about Nose Hill."
Unpublished essay. 1996.
- Fidler, Peter. "A Look at Peter Fidler's Journal," in *Journal of a Journey over Land from
Buckingham House to the Rocky Mountains in 1792 & 3*. An HRC Limited Edition Series.
Edited by Bruce Haig. Lethbridge: Historical Research Centre, 1991.
- Govier, Katherine. "A Young City in an Ancient Landscape". 2006. [http://www.limperiale.ca/
Canada-English/thisis/publications/2006Q1/pdf/youngCity-eng.pdf](http://www.limperiale.ca/Canada-English/thisis/publications/2006Q1/pdf/youngCity-eng.pdf).
- Hallworth, Beryl. "Archaeology and History of Nose Hill and Nose Creek" in *Nose Hill: A
Popular Guide*. Calgary: Calgary Field Naturalists' Society (CNFS), 1988.
- Hiestad, Emily. *Urban Nature-Poems about Wildlife in the City*. Minneapolis: Milkweed
Editions, 2000.
- Klaver, Irene J. "Boundary Projects vs. Border Patrol," in *Rethinking Nature: Essays in
Environmental Philosophy*. Edited by Bruce W. Foltz and Robert Frodeman.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Viking, 2000.
- Thompson, David. "Journey to the Bow River," in *David Thompson: The Columbia Journals*:
Edited by Barbara Belyea. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press,
1994.