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# **The Archaeology of Poverty and Human Dignity: Charity and the Work Ethic in a 1930's Depression Era Itinerant's Camp on the Toowoomba Range Escarpment, Queensland**

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## **Abstract**

This paper outlines the ethnohistory and archaeology relating to a Great Depression camp for unemployed men, established at Toowoomba, Queensland, in 1932. The camp was self sufficient and highly ordered. We interpret the material signature of the camp, its construction, layout, artefacts and activities recorded there as a symbol of main stream middle class Australian values. Thus the camp is also a material symbol of the work ethic which is central at this time to notions of human dignity, respect and the moral development of individuals. We conclude that the archaeology of the camp demonstrates not only a strong work ethic among the 'inmates' but also a degree of visible charity enabled by the historical concept of the 'deserving poor'

**Key words:** Australia, Great Depression, Deserving Poor, Work Ethic

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## **Introduction**

The Eagle's Nest camp was established in 1932 at the height of the 1929-1938 Great Depression, to house and feed unemployed men for a period of approximately 8 years. The five hectare site on the edge of the Great Dividing Range escarpment in Toowoomba, south east Queensland was rediscovered in early 1994 after the clearing of thick scrub by unemployed workers on a 'work for the dole' scheme. Archaeological field work was initiated soon after.

The Great Depression of 1929-1938 had a significant, long term impact on Australian Society, not only shaping individual worldviews but also bringing about profound change to some of the nation's core institutions. Although considerable historical scholarship has focussed on the Great Depression and its effects on Australian society, this issue has been almost entirely ignored archaeologically. The reasons for this are varied but include a prevailing view that the Great Depression left behind very little in regards to an archaeological signature, and that the event was so recent that archaeology would have little to add to the extensive and detailed historical record which already includes oral accounts of still-living participants. Indeed, one of the obstacles to getting local funding (Toowoomba City Council) for this project was the notion that the event was too recent to be studied archaeologically and that it had little or no cultural heritage value for the city.

The theoretical framework relating to the archaeology of the contemporary past - that is, the archaeology of places and events that have occurred within the space of recent or living memory - provides an underpinning for understanding the relevance of the archaeology in relation to sites such as the Eagles Nest depression era camp. Buchli & Lucas (2001:page) state that contemporary archaeologies "challenge the 'taken for granted' of recent experience, bringing to light that which has been left hidden and unsaid, thereby serving as a critical intervention for re-describing and contesting the exclusions and inclusions of experience that shape modern life". This is especially pertinent to the depression era which, although a relatively recent event in our history, was so unique and profoundly different to the normal functioning of Australian society, and so far outside anything any Australian has experienced since, that perceptions of what life was like at this time are shaped, for a younger generation, not from experience but through the transformative lens of partisan political and class based historical interpretations, individual oral accounts and myth.

## **The Great Depression 1929-1938**

The impact of the Great Depression in Australia was most severe in those states with large urban-based manufacturing centres such as NSW and Victoria. Queensland was in many ways the least effected in terms of rates of unemployment, and it was the only state which from the beginning of the depression had a systematic government controlled program for the relief of unemployment. Most people engaged in relief work in Queensland were under the intermittent relief scheme, and by March 1932 there were 13,742 men in Brisbane alone engaged in the construction of roads and channelling, laying drains, reclamation, flood prevention and forestry work (Costar 1974). The ruling Country Progressive National Party refused to consider a

welfare system on the grounds that it 'was morally degrading for a man to receive charity in lieu of work', insisting that men be paid out of public funds only if they performed some type of work (Costar 1974). That is not to say that there was no sympathy for the plight of honest men undergoing extreme hardship through no fault of their own. But this was heavily mitigated by deeply held beliefs in the redemptive qualities of 'work', and 'work' as being integral to individual development and the 'shaper of character'. Significantly in terms of the Eagles' Nest site, the Moore Government (CPNP) did all in its power to prevent camps of unemployed men springing up. For example, Moore refused a request from the Unemployed Workers Movement to use immigration depots and military barracks as hostels for the unemployed. This was on the grounds that the government did not wish to see the unemployed concentrated in large camps because this would contribute to the notion held by many that the unemployed constituted a threat. The unemployed who set up temporary camps in many Queensland towns (in parks and other public areas), were often met with considerable hostility from the local population (Costar 1974).

### **The work ethic and notions of the 'deserving poor'**

The social and psychological impacts of mass unemployment on individuals was exacerbated by deeply held views relating to the central place of work as redemptive and a moral obligation to not only family but in terms of service and obligations to wider society. Theological doctrines developed during the Protestant reformation brought about significant changes in attitudes to work. Calvin taught that all men must work, even the rich, because to work was the will of God. The norms regarding work, which developed out of the Protestant Reformation, based on the combined theological teachings of Luther and Calvin, encouraged work in a chosen occupation, to be undertaken with an attitude of service to God (Applebaum 1995). From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward in Europe, the idea of 'work' as a pursuit necessary for redemption, generated a renewed antipathy towards those who did not work. In Britain, in 1537, Henry VIII amended regulations which on the one hand sought to raise funds to support the poor, but simultaneously drew up clear categories for the different types of poor people and beggars (Huey 2001). Thus the category of Deserving Poor was developed, referring to those people who wanted to work but were unable to find suitable employment, as well as those who were too old, young or too ill. These people were given help in the form of clothes, food, sometimes money, and from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, they were given shelter in Almshouses (Huey 2001:128). The Undeserving Poor, was a category for those individuals who were seen to be able to work but chose not to, and were not to be assisted in any way.

Later 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century views of the work concept were developed by Marx, Hegel and John Paul II among others in which work is viewed as a concept where 'man' makes himself through work - "man combines his deepest human identity with membership in a nation or a community and that, through his work he comes to understand his obligation and service to his own people and in addition his service to all people on earth" (Applebaum 1995:65). In this view work is an obligation to society and community and the foundation for individual respect both as a person and a worker.

Notable archaeological work focussing on charity or relief institutions includes the work of Sherene Baugher (2001) on the 18<sup>th</sup> century English Almshouse in NYC, and that of Elizabeth Peña (2001) on the Dutch colonial almshouse in Albany. Both researchers propose that the work conducted by the ‘inmates’ constituted constructive contributions, such as work in the gardens, the orchards, and landscape construction work. This, they argue, was in contrast to the punitive, meaningless work found at a minority of American relief institutions. This work, and public attitudes to this work, is viewed as the product of a work ethic and assists in the construction of the category ‘deserving poor’. Thus, they interpret material culture items at the Almshouses as being the product of ‘visible charity’, generated by a sympathy for the ‘deserving poor’, which has its background in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. We propose that the archaeology of the Eagle’s Nest Depression camp demonstrates not only a strong work ethic among the ‘inmates’ but also a degree of visible charity accorded to the men by the surrounding townspeople and businesses, which was enabled by the historical concept of the ‘deserving poor’.

Many of the writings relating to the depression years in Australia speak of ‘work’ and the pursuit of it, as embodying much more than just the immediate need for food and shelter; indeed the shame of the unemployed in regard to their position is expressed in many oral accounts and is clearly reflective of this deeper cultural construction of the importance of work as a moral underpinning of Australian society. As Applebaum (1995:47) states “work is the cooperative effort of humankind, the sharing knowledge and skill to create our human made world. Work is still associated with self-esteem, social progress, and quality of life and is associated with maturity, self-discipline and moral values”. Indeed, a loss of work can represent one of the severest forms of anomie in western society as a result of the ensuing “shame, embarrassment, humiliation and anger” (Gamst 1995:29).

The degree of shame people felt in regard to their position during the Great Depression is clearly illustrated in a personal account by Archie Collins - an unemployed man who eventually ended up at the Eagle’s Nest Camp. Collins moved from Brisbane to Rockhampton, walked the stock routes of northwest and western Queensland and finally reached Charleville in search of work before walking 370 miles from Charleville to Toowoomba in the “greatest nightmare trip we had experienced, arriving starving, really starving”. Upon entering Toowoomba they saw:

“a lovely baker’s shop with bread and cakes staring at us in the face. Bluey said “Try that baker Bob”. We kept out of sight, but Bob came back with nothing. He said “I could not go on with it, she was a lovely young girl and I felt a tramp”. Bluey and I fully understood how he felt. A man passed us and told us there was a place called Eagle’s Nest, where a nice old man was giving a helping hand to the unemployed. We thanked him, and went on our way gasping for food” (Oral account, Toowoomba Historical Society n.d. cited in Swarbrick 1994:2).

Another account from a Toowoomba newspaper of the time describes a scheme for unemployed men who cut firewood for themselves, for other unemployed, and for the “incapacitated and

widows". In this account it is stated that "The scheme did not embarrass the worker as direct charity might; he exchanged his labour in the paddock for wood he himself had cut" (Cohen 1934:12). Another scheme launched from the Eagles Nest Camp itself involved road repair work by men on the Toowoomba range road, who collected a voluntary road toll from passing motorists in lieu of wages. "The scheme is a great success. The road has improved tremendously; the men collect about two pounds per week each. The road has proved a great help to many. Only the best men from the camp – the men who have proved themselves are chosen. Perhaps the best example of the practical benefit of this work is of the man who came to the camp absolutely down and out. After some time at the camp he recovered his strength and gained what was worth far more to him than money – a hopeful outlook and self-respect" (Cohen 1934:13).

### **The Eagles Nest Camp**

The establishment of the Eagles Nest Itinerants (swaggies) camp came about when Thomas Price a local doctor discovered a number of 'swagmen' (travelling unemployed) camping 'rough' just below the escarpment of the Great Dividing Range in the early 1930's. Dr Price invited the men to establish a more permanent and comfortable camp in the area promising to provide some materials and other assistance (Talbot 1994). Eventually the layout of the camp consisted of latrines, a mess hut (including a small library and a gramophone), a kitchen (including storerooms, a fly-proof meat house and a bakehouse) and sleeping quarters for 50 men in huts with three bunks each; the huts were all set 30 yards apart with doorways facing east. According to visitors at the time, they appeared well-made with bush timber framework, walls of cornsacks or flattened kerosene tins, and were painted with a cement wash (Loveday 1994). These structures were built on elevated earth platforms edged with white-washed rocks (Figure 1). At various stages there were also tents and 'bush huts'. An immaculate vegetable garden was located in the north-east corner of the camp. It was half an acre in area and contained cabbages, potatoes, cauliflowers, pumpkins, beans, carrots, white turnips and beetroot (Figure 2). Further down the hill was a fowl house, a cow shed and yard with three milking cows, and a pig sty. An agricultural plot containing lucerne, oats and pumpkins, presumably to feed the stock, was also maintained. Water was supplied to the kitchen, the shower and vegetable garden from a dammed spring about 100 metres northward of the central structure, which was a mess hall. Eventually the camp formalised a set of rules of behaviour which stipulated among other things, that no alcohol was allowed and that occupants must be sanitary and clean and keep the camp tidy.

Several newspaper accounts describe the level of community support for the camp. For example the Toowoomba chronicle (June 1931) has a photograph of a tent which was presented to the camp by the Toowoomba Girl Guides. The Matron of St Andrews Hospital also received and distributed clothing and bedding to the camp and "tea, sugar and meat were supplied by the generosity of the business men and public of Toowoomba" (Ferguson 1966:4). Ferguson states that "since the inception of the Eagle's Nest over a period of 14 months over 600 men had passed through the camp" (Ferguson 1966:4). It is also worth noting the impact that 100s of unemployed, homeless men would have had on the psyche of the Toowoomba townspeople and

the associated problems this would have posed for people in everyday life. The Toowoomba city Council Health Committee complained that the large number of unemployed men in town was “inimical to the best interests of the city both from the standpoint of health, and the good order of the community”. Thus, the establishment of a camp for these men just outside of town and over the edge of the range, must have been welcomed by the council and local townspeople (Toowoomba Chronicle 1932).

## **The Archaeology**

Prior to extensive clearing of the undergrowth in 1994, it was thought that no physical remains of the Eagles Nest camp remained – it being assumed that the structures were probably too ephemeral and thus leaving no permanent mark on the landscape. However substantial surface remains of the foundations and stone outlines of several buildings were exposed during clearing, enabling identification of buildings with the help of photographs taken of the camp at the time of its occupation. In all, 19 huts including the kitchen/mess area have been identified. The rubbish dump for the kitchen/mess was also located as was the dam just below the spring which provided water for the camp, and the probable location of the vegetable garden and the cattle pen. Numerous path-ways, tracks and stone lined ‘flower beds’ were also recorded.

The broad objectives of the initial excavations were to confirm that the site was indeed the Depression era camp known locally as ‘Eagles Nest’, to confirm the veracity of historical accounts both oral and text based related to its use and function, and to ascertain the site’s suitability as a potential cultural heritage resource relating to local manifestations of a global event.

Four 4m<sup>2</sup> excavation squares separated by baulks of 1m were gridded out over the visible features of the largest structure which was tentatively identified from photographs as the mess hall (Figure 3). Baulks were employed to facilitate the presence of large numbers of volunteers from Toowoomba schools either visiting or working on the site. The orientation of the squares was such that a horizontal representation of at least half of the structure would be exposed. This layout was arrived at from examining the visible surface features, and from a careful study of the photographic record. The four squares were termed B1, B2, C1 and C2, respectively (Figure 3).

Excavation proceeded with the intention of exposing the stone structures (dry stone walling) which marked the perimeter of the structure, some internal walling down to the base, as well as excavating the internal floor surfaces. A test trench was also started in square C1 in order to determine if the earth surface on which the dry stone walling sat was a natural surface or part of a fill deposit. Artefacts encountered during excavation were plotted *in-situ*, and bagged separately. All sediment was weighed and sieved through 10mm and 5mm mesh, and any artefacts found in the sieves were bagged separately.

The rubbish dump was situated approximately 20m to the south of Square B1 in a deeply cut creek ravine. Although seasonal flooding had to some extent washed away many of the artefacts in the very bottom of the ravine, the northern bank was visibly littered with a range of artefacts

associated with the camp. Consequently, a series of ten 2 x 1m squares was gridded out up the precipitous bank. Excavation proceeded from the bottom, creating a stair from which to begin excavating the next square above it. Artefacts were not plotted in-situ but bagged separately in each square.

The excavation succeeded in identifying the general layout of the mess hall structure. However, because of time and personnel limitations, it was not possible to excavate the entire site. Thus, features which extended outside the plotted squares could not always be progressively followed as they were exposed. It was possible, however, to match the location of each square with photographs of the structure and to determine activity areas within and just outside the structure, from the artefacts retrieved. The mess hall was built on an earth platform within dry stone walling 14m long by 9m wide, and raised above sloping ground level to approximately 1m. The main built structure measured approximately 8m by 6.5m. The mess hall had an entrance on the eastern and southern side featuring flower beds to the left and right of their respective doorways (Figure 4). Attached to the northern end of the main structure was a cookhouse which housed the stove, and a small lean-to next to that. Squares C1 and C2 encompassed the actual mess structure itself, with Square B2 lying outside the structure but within the dry walled earthen platform. B1 lies outside the mess hall precinct, to the south.

#### *Square B1*

Excavation of Square B1 revealed a well established and reasonably complex cobbled path which may have been one of the major access routes into the mess hall (Figure 5). Artefacts found within this square reflect its position outside the mess precinct, with a high proportion of faunal remains relative to the other squares. It is considered likely that the building itself would have been kept clean of food scraps, which were more likely to be thrown or swept outside the precinct.

#### *Square B2*

Excavation of Square B2 exposed the southern end of the mess precinct stone wall, as well as the eastern rock border of the entrance pathway into the mess hall. Artefacts from this square are few in number, a possible reflection of the fact that it served partly as a flower bed with minimal human activity.

#### *Square C1*

Square C1 is largely inside the major structure of the mess-hall and incorporates part of the eastern stairway. The major feature in C1 is a cobbled path along the southern end of the square which must have been just outside the southern wall. A 50 x 400cm test trench was put down along the northern edge of square C1, in order to expose the earth platform built for levelling the ground before construction. This was excavated to a depth of 80cm. The section of this trench shows a number of horizontal profiles of different soil types confirming the cultural origins of the earth platforms. A hearth was found 15cm down the trench, which must have formed during earthworks construction. Artefacts recovered from this square include a relatively high proportion of bottle tops, but no food scraps. The large number of nails are probably attributable to discard after removal of the iron from the structure after abandonment.

### *Square C2*

Square C2 was wholly inside the main structure, and also included part of the kitchen which was an addition to the northern end. C2's main features were the flag-stone hearth in the north western corner and the ceramic piping and drain along the eastern wall. The large number of artefacts found in this square is clearly attributable to its obvious use as a kitchen. These include, food scraps, cast iron stove pieces and drainage pipes.

### **Discussion**

A total of 5.7 tonnes (5777.4kg) of sediment was removed from the four squares along with 169 artefacts. It is considered that the artefacts in all four squares can be divided into three categories. The first consists of artefacts which are probably a result of deposition from everyday use during occupation of the camp (rubbish). The second consists of construction fixtures such as ceramic drains, and the third and most common type of artefacts are those that were probably deposited at the time of the dismantling of the structure and post occupation activity, such as nails, wire (used to tie beams to pillars) and bolts. The latter two categories are, therefore, probably not linked to the everyday activity of camp life. The presence of nails, wire and bolts in certain squares and not others does however, suggest where the built structure was and where it was not. For example, 94% of all nails, are found in squares C1 and C2, the two squares within the area of the built structure (Table 1).

If we take the construction fixture and post-occupation artefacts away from the total number, the horizontal distribution of the artefacts fits in a general sense with activity areas suggested from the excavation and the photographs. For example, 94% of food scraps in the form of bone was found outside the built structure (in Squares B1 and B2) where less attention was probably given to cleaning. Square C1 within the built structure, on the other hand, has no evidence of food scraps and contains evidence that part of it may have had a linoleum floor suitable for sweeping, and thus was easily kept free of rubbish deposition. Table 1 shows that Square C1 has by far the lowest discard of artefacts present, once construction fixture and post occupation artefacts are discounted. It seems likely from the distribution of artefacts within the built structure (Table 1) that the southern half of the building contained the dining area and that the northern end consisted of the kitchen/serving and dish washing area, as seen by the presence of piped drainage system and the number of 'kitchen' type artefacts found in square C2.

A number of the ceramic and bottle artefacts have inscriptions either of manufacturers or of local businesses. For example, "Lambs Cafe" and the "Cafe Alexandra" were both prominent cafes in Toowoomba through the 1930's and feature prominently in inscriptions on crockery. The origin of manufacturers of bottles and crockery include Brisbane, Sydney and England.

The historical accounts of the hygiene and cleanliness of the camp appear to be borne out by patterns of rubbish deposition in the four squares. If construction materials and other post occupation debris (such as parts of the cast iron stove in C2 and ceramic drainage pipes etc.) are not considered, only 82 items of rubbish (which included just one piece of bone) were deposited

in 16m<sup>2</sup> over a period of at least 8 years. The very dense artefact accumulation in the steep ravine directly to the south of the mess hall also indicates the systematic and orderly disposal of rubbish debris at the one location over a period of years. Interestingly, a large number of artefacts found in the rubbish dump, and some from the excavated squares, are recycled. These include buckets and pots made out of tins with wire handles, glasses cut from bottles, trays (baking trays?) made from sheets of tin with wire rims, salt/pepper shakers made from tins with holes punched in the lids, an extensive range of bottles (including whisky, wine and beer bottles) and a variety of other utensils recycled from some other product.

The large number of alcohol related artefacts which also included bottle tops and bottle openers is suggestive of illicit alcohol consumption at the camp, but could also be explained as recycled artefacts and may not necessarily relate to the consumption of alcohol at the site. The 16 pieces of bone found within the main excavation, as well as 39 fragments from the dump, are all either beef or mutton with a higher proportion of beef bones, mainly represented by fore quarter cuts with a relatively high representation of limb bones. It could be suggested that this assemblage represents lower quality meat cuts from these animals, reflective of their origins as charitable offerings. Interestingly there was no evidence that any native fauna was eaten by the men at Eagles Nest, which was a meat source of last resort for non-indigenous Australians at this time but often turned to in lean times.

### **Eagle's nest and expressions of the work ethic**

The archaeological excavation confirms historical accounts of Eagles Nest as being a model camp; and indeed the archaeology further reinforces the idea of an established and sustained work ethic, through the exposure of carefully cobbled pathways, stone lined paths, whitewashing, stone delineated flower beds and well presented and maintained vegetable gardens. The mixture of 'town' artefacts including donated crockery from various cafes in town, with a diverse range of improvised and recycled material culture items clearly shows the degree of charity given to the men, as well as the degree of poverty that people experienced. Overall it is clear that the site represents more than just a place to find shelter and sustenance. Indeed, the Eagles Nest site is a material symbol of order and control, providing in its physical manifestation, reassurance that although unemployed and poverty stricken, the people were adhering to the comfortable norms of decent society. The presence of ornamental garden beds and paths, immaculately maintained vegetable gardens and the name of the site spelt out in whitewashed stones (Figure 6) is clearly an attempt to mimic mainstream middle class Australian values of the time. Holmes's (2003:173) paper on Australian gardens as material manifestations of cultural history, states that the transformation of the landscape into gardens was 'civilised', a public display of industriousness, of family productivity and respectability'. The people of Eagles Nest had thus established their credentials as the 'deserving poor' and were accordingly tolerated and supported through charity, albeit at a comfortable distance, off the edge of the range.

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**Table 1: Artefact types in Squares B1, B2, C1, C2**

ARTEFACT TYPE	B1	B2	C1	C2	TOTAL
Glass (fragments)	9	13	7	7	36
Glass bottle				1	1
Button	1				1
Metal pieces	3	1	1	15	20
Tin	4	1	1	12	18
Pipe (metal)	2			1	3
Bone	13	2		1	16
Nail	2		14	16	32
Bottle Top	2	1	8	2	13
Ceramic (crookery)	3			2	5
Linoleum			1		1
Wire	3	1	6	2	12
Clothing item	1			1	2
Bolt			1		1
Coin			1		1
Pipe (ceramic)				6	6
Mortar				2	2
Brick				3	3
	43	19	40	71	173



Figure 1: Sleeping huts. Note whitewashed rocks and  
ornamental flower beds



Figure 2: Immaculately laid out vegetable garden

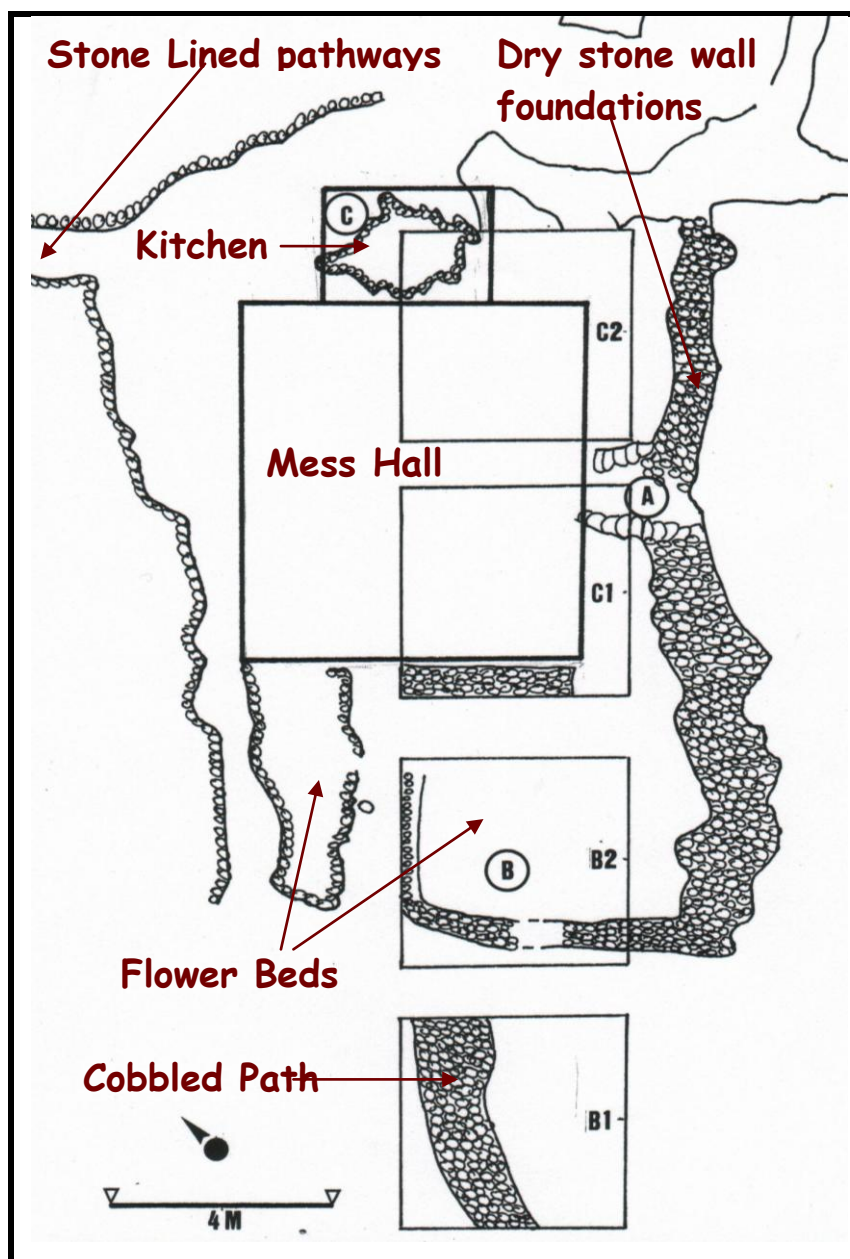


Figure 3: Plan of Excavation Squares B1, B2, C1 and C2, incorporating communal mess hall and dry stone wall foundations, pathways and flower beds exposed during excavation.



Figure 4: Eastern side of the Mess Hall. Note ornamental flower beds on either side of doorway



Figure 5: Cobbled pathway in Square C1.

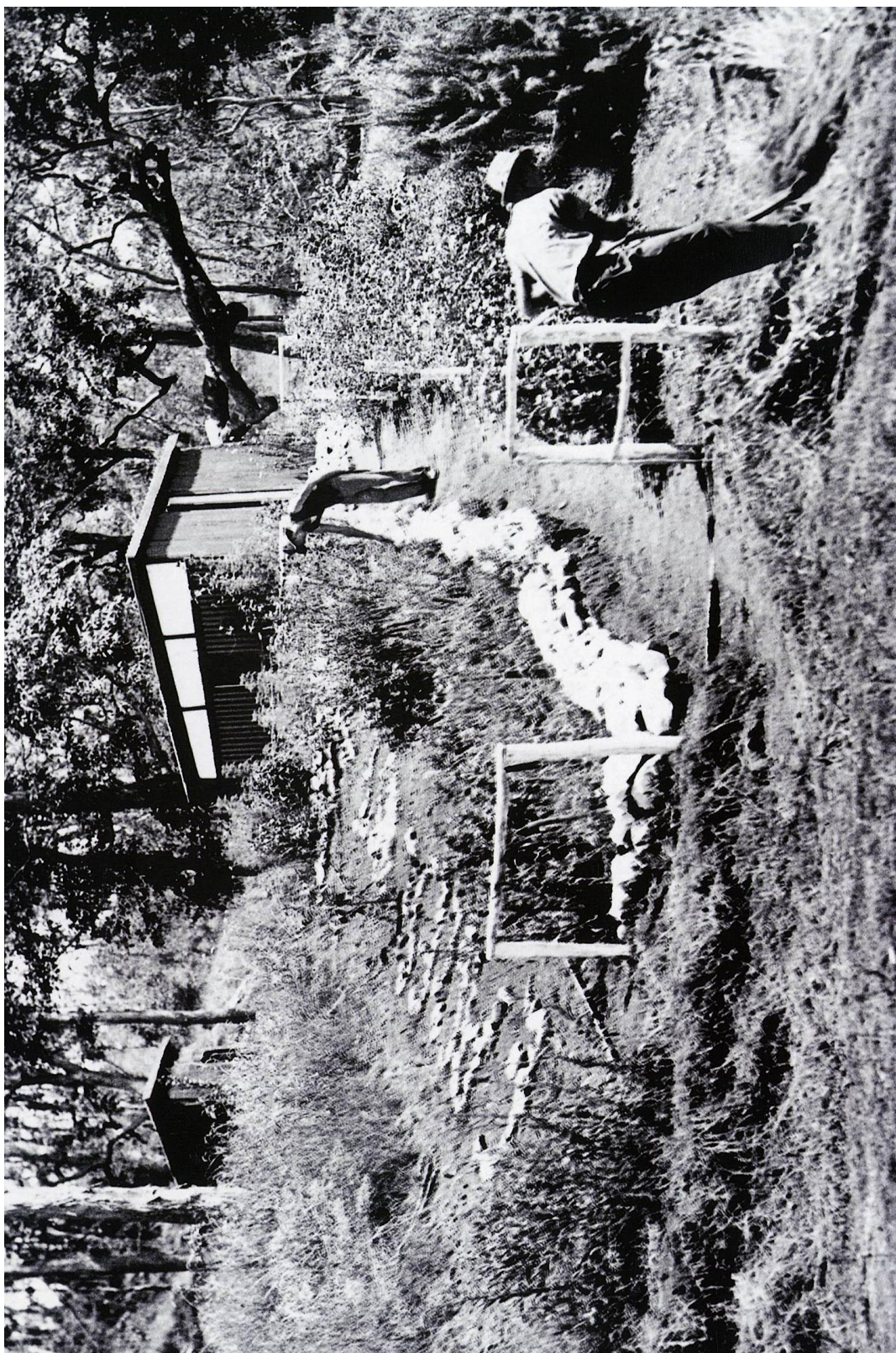


Figure 6: Entrance to the Eagles Nest Camp. Note the name of the camp spelled out in whitewashed stones on the left of the path.