

The Pre-Settlement Period

The Prehistoric Period: The Land and the Aborigines

By Henry Kazina and Michael Czuboka

Millions of years ago much of North America, including most of the Arctic coast region, was submerged beneath warm, sea water and inhabited by warm-weather plants, carnivorous marine animals, and a variety of herring-like fish and wingless diving birds. However, approximately one million years ago, temperatures in the northern hemisphere began to cool, rain changed to snow and winters became longer and longer. Gradually, thick heavy layers of snow accumulated, changed to ice and began to spread out over the land. This process continued for thousands of years and eventually a huge mass of glacial ice, thousands of feet thick, covered most of Canada. Because so much water was locked up in this glacial ice, the level of the earth's oceans dropped between 300 and 400 feet, exposing millions of square miles of new, dry land that connected North America to Asia across what is now the Bering Strait.

The first Americans were small nomadic bands of hunters who drifted across this so-called land bridge into Alaska. From this peninsula they flowed southward, in ever-extending migrations, until finally, after what must have taken centuries, they inhabited the entire length and breadth of the Americas. When Christopher Columbus landed in San Salvador in 1492, he called these copper-skinned hunters Indians because he thought that he had reached the East Indies. He did not live to realize his mistake, but the name he imposed on the inhabitants of the land at that time has persisted to this day.

Estimates as to how long men have inhabited America vary from as much as 50,000 years to as little as 10,000 years. Because the Indians possessed no knowledge of the recording of history other than the vague story-telling tradition, memories of the first trans-continental migrations were soon lost. Any knowledge of pre-Columbian America must, therefore, be based on archeological evidence, which in the past ten years, has grown considerably due to the discovery of ancient sites in Alaska, in the Yukon, and along the Winnipeg River in Manitoba. The discovery of 27,000 year-old bone tools in the Yukon indicates a very early entry into North America.

More significant is the Sinnock Site, an archeological find along the banks of the Winnipeg River just north of Lac Du Bonnet. In 1980, a research team of government archeologists, led by Dr. A.P. Buchner, discovered the site which has yielded 6,000 artifacts that provide evidence of

human activity dating back at least 8,000 years. Among the artifacts are many spearheads, large knives and scraping tools that are similar to the stone weapon points and tools used by big-game hunters during the Paleo (Old) — Indian Stage on the plains and wooded areas of the United States about 12,000 years ago.

At this time, the southwestern trip of Manitoba was covered by a spruce forest, the southcentral and southeastern portions were flooded by Lake Agassiz and the northern part was buried beneath the ice sheet. Centuries passed, the climate warmed, grassland replaced the spruce forest and the hunters pushed into southeastern Manitoba to hunt the herds of bison that had replaced the now extinct mammoth and big-horned bison. About 8,000 years ago, northern Manitoba became ice free and was eventually covered by a lush coniferous forest that became the habitat for a variety of wildlife.

The Sinnock Site, which contains the remains of Paleo-Indian culture, is located on the forested east bank of the Winnipeg River. According to Dr. Buchner, herds of bison occupied two ecological zones throughout the year. They stayed close to or in the forest in winter and during summer they grazed upon the grassland vegetation west of the Winnipeg River. The Indians would wait for the bison at narrowings of the river and slaughter them.

Complete results of the research on the Sinnock Site have not yet been published but the implications for the Brokenhead River District could be quite significant because of its proximity to the Lac Du Bonnet find and, in general, to the Winnipeg River. Did the bison thunder through the area? Were they slaughtered at some narrow crossing of the Brokenhead River? Did an Indian camp or culture flourish somewhere along the banks of the river? Or will the area continue to be referred to merely as the hinterland to the fur trade posts along the Red River? Archeologists, sooner than time, may provide the answers.

Mr. Eric Bauschke, a life-long resident of the area, recalls unearthing a huge skull with short curved horns and a hammer-like stone with holes and grooves while ploughing on his father's farm along the Brokenhead River. A deeply-corroded copper object was unearthed during farming operations one mile north of Ladywood and was turned over to provincial archeologists in June, 1969. This specimen does not yield any definite information because it was rather severely