

Ready to Dig (at Gainsborough Creek)

A VANTAGE POINTS FLASHBACK

Finally! I can tell my story. It was Autumn of 2018 when Eric Olson was walking South of Melita - in Pierson Wildlife Management Area. He found me beside Gainsborough Creek. I'd been washed out of the bank.

You see ... I started as a shoulder blade – a scapula – in a Bison. Soon after my Bison was killed, I was made into a garden hoe.

How is a bone made into a hoe? Well, a bison shoulder blade is wide and thin on one end and narrow and thick on the other. A human took me to their tool making area and shaped me with a sharp stone. My wide end was sharpened so I could cut into the soil and a strong wooden handle was attached to the narrow end - using sinew. A hole was carved so another piece of sinew could be used to brace the blade to the handle. Pretty resourceful eh?

That's how I got a new life about 500 years ago - as my people farmed in Southwest Manitoba. They farmed the same fields beside the creek for over 200 years – growing corn, squash and beans. Corn uses nitrogen from the beans, the beans grow up the corn stalks, and squash provides ground cover. This keeps the soil rich - so they didn't need to add fertilizer!

Who were these clever people?

To me, they were just - my people! Since I was found, I hear the word “Dakota” mentioned most – always with a question mark though. Scientists aren't totally certain. Evidence suggests they were part of a Siouan speaking Nation – related to those who farmed in Minnesota and at Lockport, Manitoba - with tools just like me.

Siouan speakers – like the Dakota and Nakota - thrived throughout the plains, mostly by hunting bison. But it appears some communities did both – hunt bison and farm.

I've become close to Dr Mary Malainey from Brandon University. She's an Anthropology professor. She gives me clues - where I come

from and what I did. She informs Indigenous elders of her “digs” to find more clues. The elders tell stories of much death and difficulty over the past 200 years.

My people, were, their ancestors. So, knowledge keeper Greg Chatkana came out to bless the project and the site. There's so much more to learn. Dakota elders speak of their ancestors having grown corn. Did they have permanent villages above their fields? How did they store food over winter? Why did they leave?

Dr Malainey treats me with great respect. I'm apparently unique - being in such good shape! But I need to break it to her – I'd really rather get back to work. Hey! I could help her with her digs!



Photo courtesy CBC News.

Written by David Neufeld

“Ready to Dig” was inspired by the Olson site and by similar stories in Vantage Points.