

“The Place Where We Lived:”

Archaeological sites of the Lauder Sandhills

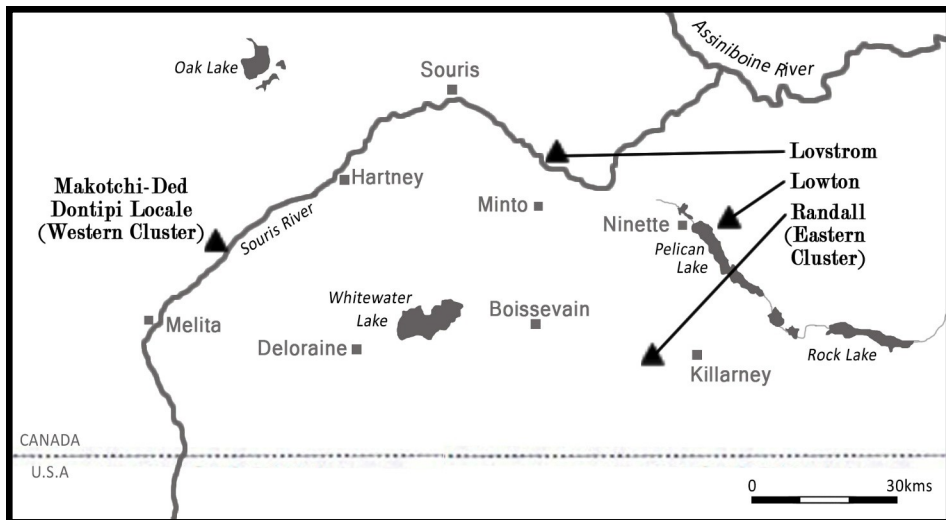
The *Makotchi-Ded Dontipi* sites in the Lauder Sandhills offer information about the Vickers focus culture, the Mortlach culture, and their possible relationship to each other

1550 AD ~ 1600 AD

The Lauder Sandhills west of present-day Hartney were a haven of resources to post-glacial societies. Human occupation of the area is partly reflected in the number of archaeological sites found in the region today. These sites occur in such density that a collection of them have been given the name *Makotchi-Ded Dontipi*, a Dakota phrase meaning “the place where we lived.”

Six sites in the *Makotchi-Ded Dontipi* locale are of particular interest. All located within the space of the same quarter section, the Jackson, Bradshaw and Vera sites belong to a culture identified as the Vickers focus. Three other sites nearby, Twin Fawns, Hollow B and Schuddemat belong to the Mortlach culture. Finds at these sites have spurred a discussion regarding the relationship between the Vickers focus and Mortlach cultures.

Both of these cultures were attracted to the Lauder Sandhills. Three different habitats make up the region: sandhills, grasslands and aspen forest. Several hundred years ago the area was an island of resources in the midst of prairie grasslands. The hydrology of the area then was much different: it was wetter, which supported a different array of plant life than we would see there today. The wetlands also reduced wind velocity, offering protection from fire and decreased evaporation which promoted the growth of a deciduous forest. The sandhills had much to offer human inhabitants: water, shelter for year-round encampments, a wide variety of vegetation and plenty of wildlife



▲ The Makotchi-Ded Dontipi Locale makes up the western cluster of the Vickers focus. The Lovstrom, Lowton and Randall sites of the Tiger Hills/Pelican Lake areas make up the eastern cluster.

(especially bison, either wintering in the sandhills or summering on the surrounding plains).

A conversation about the Vickers focus starts in the 1940s and 1950s with Chris Vickers, an amateur archaeologist who worked in the Pelican Lake and Rock Lake areas. He defined the Vickers focus cultural group from artifacts discovered at the Lowton site and the nearby Randall and Lovstrom sites in the Pelican Lake/Tiger Hills area. These sites are known as the eastern cluster of the Vickers focus culture. Artifacts unearthed from the sites include thousands of clay pot shards, stone tools such as hoes, axes, projectile points, and catlinite (pipestone) pipes. The sites also yielded many exotic artifacts, which indicate a strong trade relationship with peoples to the south. Contemporary archaeologists Bev Nicholson and Scott Hamilton

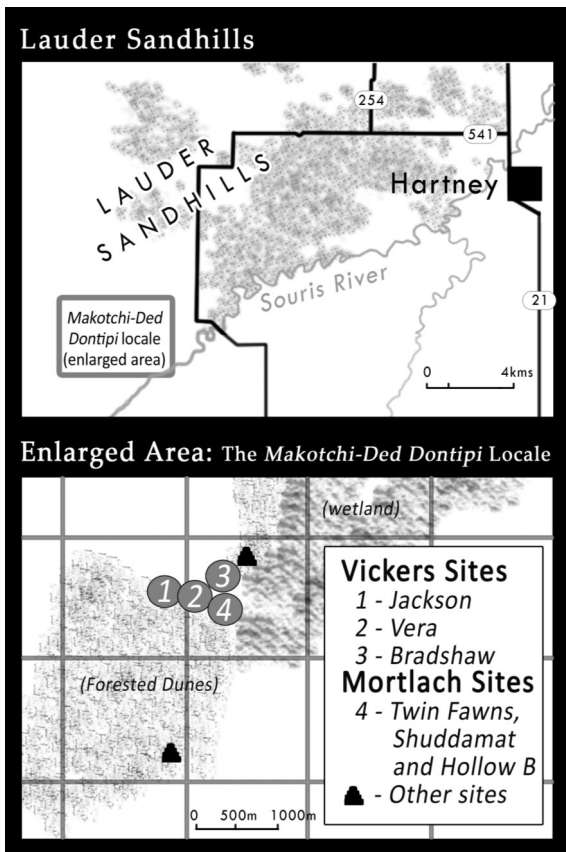
have studied these sites intensively and suggest that Lowton was a large central village which was supported by a combination of hunter-gatherer and small scale horticultural subsistence strategies. It has been concluded that the Vickers focus group practiced horticulture non-intensively, likely small crops of beans and corn.

The Vickers focus culture entered what is now Manitoba to occupy the

The sandhills were an island of resources: water, shelter and bison

Lowton, Lovstrom and Randall sites from the south around 1450 AD. During this time the climate was warm and

wet, making conditions ideal for horticulture. However, between 1400 AD and 1600 AD, comparatively cool conditions moved in, making horticulture difficult. It is likely that after having brief horticultural success in the Tiger



▲ The Makotchi-Ded-Dontipi locale in the Lauder Sandhills, is made up of Vickers and Mortlach sites that are located within meters of one another.

Hills these colder conditions caused crops to fail.

When horticulture practices became unsuccessful, the Vickers people moved from the Tiger Hills west to the *Makotchi Ded-Dontipi* locale in the resource-rich Lauder Sandhills. Evidence of their occupation has been discovered at the Jackson, Bradshaw and Vera sites. These sites make up the western cluster of the Vickers focus culture, which collectively date about 100 years later than the eastern cluster.

Sites in the western cluster differ in some respects from the eastern cluster. The Jackson, Bradshaw and Vera sites do not have the rich assemblage of exotic artifacts that characterise the Lowton site. Evidence of horticultural activities are also absent. There is a greater abundance of faunal (animal) materials, and also hunting tools. These finds suggest that as they moved, the Vickers focus people

abandoned their centre-based settlement structure and horticultural practices in favour of a more transient economy that relied on intensive hunting and gathering in all seasons. The Vickers focus people of the western cluster were highly reliant on bison, though their diet was supplemented by other game. The Lauder Sandhills provided the unique opportunity for winter bison hunting and a bison kill was found at the Jackson site. Minor crop foods were procured either through trade or very limited local production.

It is unknown what became of the Vickers people after they inhabited the Lauder Sandhills. Speculations by archaeologists include the idea that they migrated south and became the ancestors of the Hidatsa and took up horticulture again along the Knife River; or they went west and joined their Crow

kin in a plains bison economy. Another hypothesis is that they merged—or evolved—into the Mortlach culture. This possibility seems credible due to the proximity of Vickers focus and Mortlach sites in the Lauder Sandhills.

With the discovery of the Jackson site in 1993 an extensive survey of the surrounding *Makotchi-Ded Dontipi* area was conducted. A series of other sites were brought to light: the Twin Fawns, Schuddemat and Hollow B sites were found very close to each other, only a few hundred meters west of the Jackson and Vera sites. These three sites fit into the Mortlach cultural identification – a categorization based on an examination of other Mortlach sites, such as the Sanderson and Long Creek sites in southeast Saskatchewan.

Mortlach sites are difficult to date;

the proposed time span connected to the *Makotchi-Ded Dontipi* Mortlach sites are around 1500 AD up until European contact (1600 AD or so). A brass plate was recovered from the Twin Fawns site, an indication that it was occupied during the very early phases of contact with Europeans. Based on recoveries from the Shuddemat, Twin Fawns and Hollow B sites, occupation at these sites occurred for a very short period of time.

The discovery of Vickers focus sites alongside Mortlach sites have caused archaeologists to consider a possible relationship between the two cultures. Especially seeing as the timing and locations of the occupations are so similar, it is likely there was contact between them. Nicholson and Hamilton suggest a series of hypotheses, the two most likely of which are that 1) The Vickers Focus evolved into the Mortlach complex or 2) both groups are part of a larger unidentified group.

Vickers and Mortlach have similarities in pottery attributes and both groups have trade, travel and possible kin ties to the Middle Missouri region. It is suggested that part of the reason for the Vickers focus switched from a horticultural society to a bison hunting one was due to their contact with

The Vickers focus may have evolved into the Mortlach culture

Mortlach peoples in the Lauder Sandhills.

The story of the Vickers and Mortlach peoples significantly add to the story of our region

as a whole. What is today southwest Manitoba was once grassland with pockets of resourceful ecosystems. Humans were part of these ecosystems and learned not only how to adapt to the land and climate, but to each other.

Sources:

- Mokelki, Lorie L. "Vickers Focus and Mortlach - Examining Cultural Connections in the *Makotchi-Ded Dontipi* Locale." Thesis: University of Saskatchewan, 2007.
- Nicholson, B.A, Scott Hamilton. "Cultural Continuity and Changing Subsistence Strategies During the Late Precontact Period in Southwestern Manitoba." *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*. 25:53-73 (2001).

Maps: Adapted from the above sources