

Burial Mounds and Pre-Contact Cultures

Adapted from "The Path of the Pioneers"

The construction of the burial mounds has been the source of wild and fanciful speculation over the decades. In the late 1800's, they were thought by some amateur historians dabbling in archaeology to have been built by a race of "Mound Builders" who were then exterminated by later nomadic Indian peoples. Systematic research by archaeologists has clearly identified mound building with the Indian peoples, a few of whom continued the practice into the 1800's.

The scientific information gleaned from the study of mound materials is every bit as fascinating as the fictional accounts. Most of the mounds were opened in the period from the 1880's to 1913 but a few were opened as late as the 1940's. Manitoba's mounds, of which there are some 200 known, were concentrated in the Melita/ Sourisford area but there were also a number in other areas including the northern edge of the Pembina Trench.

Mounds were usually constructed close to the edge of a valley wall or on high hills such as the Sykes Mound on Medicine, or Signal, Hill; the Sykes and McKay mounds are on some of the highest crests in the Turtle Mountains. These earthen mounds required great amounts of work as the Natives dug up the sod and dug out a burial chamber by loosening the soil and removing it in baskets or other containers. After the deceased had been deposited with important items and gifts and, in some cases, a ritual fire had been burned to accompany the religious rituals, the pit was covered and an earthen mound raised. Many of the mounds are only 9 to 12 metres (30 to 40 feet) across and .3 to .9 metres (1 to 3 feet) high but a few are much higher and have long ridges attached to them, e.g., the Walter Sykes Mound is about 12 metres (40 feet) across, .6 metres (2 feet) high and it has a 98 metre (325 foot) ridge, all constructed by using bone and stone tools and human labour!

The items associated with these mounds tend to be few in number but reveal evidence of a vast continent-wide trade network of which these local Natives were a part. This trade network, which had been active since at least the Middle Pre-Fur Trade Period, now had become much more extensive and included artifacts of conch shells (marine snails), Marginella and Olive shells traded up the Mississippi River from the Gulf Coast, dentalium from the West Coast, obsidian (black volcanic glass) from Yellowstone Park, Wyoming area, and stone pipes made from a red pipestone from southwestern Minnesota and grey pipestone from eastern Manitoba. The conch shell was carved and polished into gorgets, washer-shaped beads, trapezoidal beads, and long spiraling pendants. Other items included miniature ceramic vessels with a variety of incised designs.

These mound materials have been lumped together in recent years and called the Devils Lake-Sourisford Burial Culture. While there are relatively few dates, the materials developed from ideas or people coming out of Minnesota which, in turn, came from farther south in the Mississippi River valley about A.D. 900.

These activities were probably most common during A.D. 900 to 1300 but persisted until the beginning of the historic period among the Assiniboins.

Evidence of other groups and activities can be found in the collection from sites in the region. Early excavation by Chris Vickers at the Avery Site yielded evidence of Woodland groups from Eastern Manitoba. This globular pottery, identified as the Blackduck and Selkirk Cultures, indicates that these groups shared the area with the local Plains groups. The hunters/gatherers who made and used the Blackduck pottery lived here about A.D. 700 to 1400 and hunted the local bison with the bow and arrow. The smaller amounts of Selkirk pottery was left by Cree hunters living in the area or visiting occasionally during the period A.D. 900 to the early 1700's. Both groups made large globular thin-walled vessels.

Little is yet known about the Plains Native groups living in this late Pre-Fur Trade Period. Sites such as the Lowton Site have produced evidence of groups making ornate vessels with incised decorations, decorative patterns made by impressing two-strand cordage into the clay before it dried, and marking the pottery with a variety of notches and other marks. These people also hunted the bison with the bow and arrow and, made large globular ceramic vessels.

We know, from the record of the later periods and from a variety of sources of information, that there were several Native groups who used the area. This was the homeland of the Assiniboin. They were not a single tribe but a nation of numerous autonomous groups, which, in total, probably numbered in excess of 20,000 people stretching from the Winnipeg River to the Rockies. Several of these Assiniboin groups made southern Manitoba their homeland.

The "Sioux," either the Dakota from Minnesota and/or the Yankton/Yanktonai of the Red River and Dakotas states, also are recorded as making seasonal incursions into the local area north of Turtle Mountain. The Plains Cree likely used the valley. In earlier times, one of the village-dwelling Hidatsa groups is reported to have left the Missouri area and moved north into the land of snow and moose; this account is cited in several Mandan and Hidatsa Indian oral traditions. In more ancient times, the ancient ancestors of the Algonquian-speaking Gros Ventre and all the groups of the Algonquian-speaking Blackfoot nation, e.g., the Blood, Blackfoot and Piegan of Alberta, may also have passed through this area after they left their ancient homeland in the East thousands of years ago. Unfortunately, we cannot relate to the movements of these people yet to specific archaeological materials. Linguistic evidence of dividing languages suggests that some of these earlier groups were here at least a couple of thousand years ago.

The Proto-Fur Trade Period

This is the period when the local Native peoples had access to European materials but had not yet established regular trading patterns at near-by fur trade establishments. They obtained materials through Indian middle-men traders or made long trips to forts at distant places such as Lake Nipigon to the east or Hudson Bay to the north. They relied largely on their own traditional technology but obtained some items of which one, the copper kettle, had a fairly major impact since the women virtually stopped making their own ceramic vessels immediately.

This period begins about A.D. 1650 when the Assiniboin are reported trading at Lake Superior and Lake Nipigon through the Ottawa Indian-French trading network. By A.D. 1670, some were leaving their families at the lakes to fish and were making the

strenuous canoe trips to trade at York Factory on the Hudson Bay. The Assiniboin and Plains Cree became powerful middlemen between the distant traders and the Native tribes to the south and west. The period ends about 1760, when the fur trade moves inland across the parkland and prairies. The traders from Montreal established a string of forts along major routes such as the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan rivers in the 1760's and the Hudson's Bay Company followed the same pattern shortly after. During this period, the noted French explorer Pierre de la Verendrye joined an Assiniboin camp of 105 tents (ca. 1300 people) somewhere near Turtle Mountain. It is likely that he passed through or near the Belmont area since he notes in his journal, with considerable frustration, that his guides lead him on a very indirect zigzag trail up and down hills from the "first mountain" (probably the edge of the Pembina Hills) to the "second mountain" (Turtle Mountain) in October, 1738. He was likely the first European to enjoy the local terrain that had been appreciated by Native people throughout the previous thousands of years.

Sites from this period contain traditional Native items and some fur trade items. With the adoption of the copper kettle for cooking, Native women stopped making their ceramic vessels. As more metal became available, there was a decline in the manufacturing of stone tools. However, we do know that the Assiniboin continued to use the bow and arrow well into the 1800's because the trade muskets proved unreliable and difficult to use.

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Sites such as the Kreiger Site near Pelican Lake School have yielded fur trade items. Do these sites belong to this Proto-Fur Trade Period or the later Fur Trade period? The answer lies in careful analysis of the artifacts to determine the frequency of fur trade vs. Native materials and to identify the precise age of those items such as kaolin pipes, makers' marks on knives and axes, and beads.

The Fur Trade Period is considered here to be the period A.D. 1760 to A.D. 1870 although the active fur trade had long since past its zenith by the end of this period. It is a period of fluctuating developments for the fur trade but devastation for the Native peoples.

During the early part, ca. 1760 to 1821, there was a brief flurry of fort construction mainly along the Red, Assiniboine, Souris and Saskatchewan rivers. The competition between the Montreal and Hudson's Bay companies was intense. While the Native peoples enjoyed a brief economic surge in terms of trade goods and horses, these benefits were more than off-set by a series of epidemics, beginning as early as the mid 1700's, which decimated their groups in large numbers, and increased violence caused by liquor which was traded to them to increase their dependancy. The bison herds shifted westward due to increased hunting pressure. As early as 1820, the bison herds no longer came near the Forks area of the Red and Assiniboine rivers.

As the bison herds shifted westward and the epidemics slashed their numbers, the Assiniboin shifted westward. The Ojibway and an occasional band of Ottawa (John Tanners group) started to utilize the area. They occupied various valley portions and one group settled in Turtle Mountain.

During the approximately half-century, A.D. 1822 to 1870, the wheels were in motion to pre- pare the land for homestead. Additional epidemics further reduced the numbers of the Native groups.

Increased hunting pressure on the Canadian bison herds drove them further west and to near extinction. The Selkirk settlement grew. In 1870, the Hudson's Bay Company surrendered its proprietary rights to its vast empire. In the mid-1800's, a number of scientific expeditions were mounted to assess