

Why Didn't "Clovis Man" Live in Thompson?

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In the June/July 2008 issue of the published-in-Manitoba magazine *Northroots* I told a story about the Hairy Hearts of ancient Cree tradition. An astute reader asked the Editor if the Hairy Hearts, aka the "Ancients" or "Ancient People," were perhaps a northern extension of an Ice Age population known to archaeologists as "Clovis Man." It's a very good question, but the answer has to be "no," and what I want to do here is explain why "Clovis Man" could not have lived where Flin Flon, or Thompson, or Gillam stand today.

But first of all, who was "Clovis Man"?

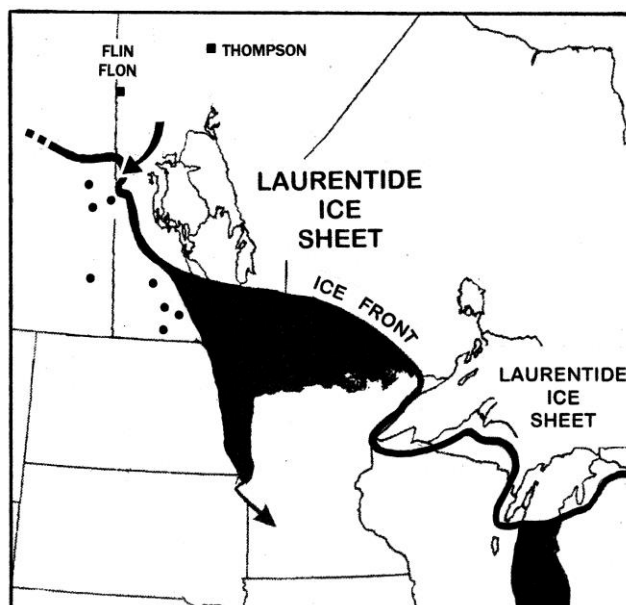
The collective proper noun "Clovis Man" refers to Indigenous peoples who occupied the southern half of North America near the end of the last Ice Age. In 1932, archaeological excavations began at a gravel deposit near a place called Clovis, New Mexico. There, scientists found the 11,000-year-old skeletal remains of mammoths, or Ice Age elephants, along with fluted stone spear points that were obviously used by human hunters to kill the mammoths.

The archaeologists called the place the "Clovis site" after the nearby town, and the long-ago people who killed the mammoths are identified by the archaeological expression "Clovis people" or, to be politically **incorrect** two times over, "Clovis Man." Their way of life is referred to as the "Clovis culture," and the fluted spear points they used in hunting wild game are called "Clovis points." Thus far, this type of point comprises the oldest evidence of human occupation in Manitoba.

Now, the kind of people who left behind the butchered mammoth remains at the "Clovis" site didn't live only in New Mexico. They were just a small part of a larger population that was spread across almost all of North America that wasn't covered by glaciers or glacial lakes. And 11,000 radiocarbon years ago, when people were hunting mammoths in New Mexico, most of Canada and nearly all of Manitoba were buried beneath the gargantuan sheet of ice several kilometres thick. Only the extreme southwestern corner of our province was open to the sky and therefore habitable by the "Clovis people," and the animals they hunted and the plants they gathered for food; all the rest of the land surface was either covered by a barren, lifeless glacier or by Lake Agassiz, a huge freshwater "sea" fed by torrents of meltwater from the ice sheet.

People don't generally set up campsites or build villages on top of or beneath glaciers, nor do they live in lake basins that are full of water. As the accompanying map implies, 90% of Manitoba was a no-man's/no-person's land 11,000 years ago. No human beings could have been living in the vast ice- and lake-covered expanses, and that definitely encompassed all of the northern half of our province.

It wasn't until some 3,000 years **after** the "Clovis" era, or around 8,000 years ago, that key parts of northwestern Manitoba finally became free of the diminishing ice sheet and the receding floodwaters of glacial Lake Agassiz.



Cultural and natural geography c. 11,000 RCYBP, with locations of modern-day communities referred to in the text. Round dots – isolated "Clovis" point finds in Manitoba and adjacent Saskatchewan; upper arrow – Porcupine Hills, presumed northernmost range of "Clovis people" in Manitoba; lower arrow – outlet of Lake Agassiz; black areas – proglacial lakes. Note that the future site of Thompson is well north of the ice front.

By then, the colonizing "Clovis" culture of Manitoba's southwestern uplands had long since disappeared, as had the mammoths and other Ice Age animals that had formed part of the contemporary subsistence base. In all likelihood, the people who pioneered northern Manitoba 8,000 years ago were descendants of an earlier "Clovis" population, but the culture itself had changed over the intervening generations: the distinctive type of fluted spear point had long been replaced by newer styles that are readily distinguishable from the ancient form. It comes as scant surprise, then, that archaeologists have never found material evidence of the 11,000-year-old "Clovis culture" anywhere on the Precambrian Shield of Manitoba.

Thus far, "Clovis" points haven't been found in Manitoba beyond the latitude of Riding Mountain, and I predict that the Porcupine Hills will prove to be the northernmost limit of the type in the province.

And so when Cree people first moved into the Churchill River country around 2,000 years ago, there's no way that the indigenous folk they found already living there – including those who came to be known as the Ancients or Hairy Hearts – could have been members of a "Clovis" population, whose particular way of life had passed into history on the plains and woodlands to the southwest almost 100 centuries before when the future site of Thompson lay in slumber beneath the still massive ice sheet.

And that's why "Clovis Man" didn't live where Thompson stands today.