

## CONNECTIONS

### Leo Pettipas, Manitoba Archaeological Society

To many outsiders, Manitoba's North is a remote, far-away place -- isolated, distant and unfamiliar. Some still consider it a frontier, much of it beyond the fringes of modern-day civilization. This impression is erroneous in many respects: Thompson, for instance, is one of several northern communities that are truly urbanized. You know that Flin Flon is part of mainstream Canada when Wal-Mart moves in! There are communities along the Trans-Canada Highway that are smaller than Churchill.

If we go back in history, it's a bit easier to argue that the North was more of a world unto itself. Two thousand years ago, the Churchill River country was probably unfamiliar to most people living along the Souris far to the south, and vice versa. And yet archaeologists, historians and geographers remind us every now and again that mutual isolation wasn't always the case. Not only are there hints of contact between northern and southern people throughout history; there's also reason to believe that the tundra-dwelling Inuit from even farther north influenced the lifeways of Crees living to the south of them in the spruce-moose biome long before the arrival of Europeans.

Parts of the Shield country were colonized 8,000 years ago by people whose ancestors had moved north from the centre of the continent in the wake of the melting ice sheet. There was northward trade of implements made 4,000 years ago from Lake Superior copper. There have been other finds of foreign-looking artifacts in the North that seem to indicate that outsiders occasionally made their way into the central boreal forest from elsewhere.

For example, for thousands of years people living on the prairies made tools out of stone. These objects were fashioned in different shapes and styles, depending on the period in history in which they were made or the tribe that was making them. A modern-day archaeologist with a trained eye can recognize these "foreign" objects wherever he sees them, and sometimes they have been found a very long way from home indeed. They have been located well within the boreal forest, left there by people who were perhaps seeking refuge from occasional droughts on the grasslands between 3,000 and 6,000 years ago.

It's not only the style of the artifacts that indicates their distant origins. The very stuff they're made of is also a clue. There's a type of stone called "Knife River Flint" that occurs naturally in western North Dakota. For stone-tool manufacture, this material is vastly superior to the locally-available quartzes and basalts common to the north. We occasionally find artifacts made of Knife River Flint in the Churchill River drainage. Obviously, people were carrying or trading this high-quality stone northward from areas far to the south. Other southern imports included beads made from red pipestone quarried in southwestern Minnesota and from seashell from the Gulf of Mexico.

Other unusual commodities we sometimes find in the north are specially decorated pottery shards that also date to wholly Indigenous times.<sup>1</sup> They can be distinguished from locally-made ceramics by the designs that were incised into the clay while it was still soft. These designs duplicate those found on pots made in large numbers along the river valleys of North Dakota. Traditionally, it was the women who made and used pots, so the discovery of southern-style pottery in northern Manitoba may indicate the marriage of prairie women into northern communities a long time ago.

With the European fur trade came more movements of southern people into and through the northern forests. It's a matter of historical record that in the early 1700s, people of the Mandan nation living on the Missouri River made trading expeditions all the way to York Factory on Hudson Bay – a round-trip distance of well over 2400 kilometres! There is also reason to believe that Blackfoot traders from the western prairies made the trip to and from York Factory as well.

If we look at traditional Cree names of lakes and rivers in the North, we find further evidence of southern Native groups venturing into the Shield country, only this time it wasn't for trade. The Crees and the Dakotas ("Sioux") were enemies during the fur trade era, and the presence of Dakota raiding parties far beyond their own territories is commemorated by local place names in the North. For example, the Ballantyne River is known by the local Cree as *Puatsipi*, or Dakota River. The Cree name for Pelican Narrows is *Opowekustikunik*, or Narrows of Fear, so named after a nearby clash between Crees and Dakotas. Following another such encounter, a group of Dakota spent the winter on the shores of Deschambeault Lake. Interestingly, the modern Cree village on this lake is called *Kimosopuatinak*, which means "home of the ancient Dakota."

Archaeological fieldwork in the Southern Indian Lake area has turned up shallow, oval ceramic vessels that look like food-serving platters. However, they have small holes drilled into the bottoms, which isn't what you'd expect if they were used for serving food. In fact, they look a lot like the soapstone lamps made and used by the Inuit, and so the archaeologists have concluded that the Cree ceramic "plates" are actually fish-oil lamps. The little holes in the bottoms likely had wicks stuck in them. So it seems that through interaction of some kind with Inuit people, the northern Crees adopted the idea of oil-burning lamps. Presumably they didn't have soapstone readily at hand, but even if they did, it might have been easier to simply make their lamps out of clay, just as they did when manufacturing their earthenware pots.

The Inuit weren't the only people from beyond the treeline who made their presence felt in the boreal forest at one time or other during the lengthy Indigenous era. The discovery of distinctive stone projectile points in the Churchill River country suggests that from time to time Dené ("Chipewyan") bands moved into the bush in pursuit of the barren-ground caribou during their annual migrations off the tundra. These winter movements

---

<sup>1</sup> "Indigenous times" as used here refers to the multi-millennial span of time, or segments of it, during which only Indigenous peoples lived on the North American continent

sometimes penetrated well into the spruce forest, and this may explain the presence of ancient Dené material culture so far south.

Today, people come from far and wide to work in the mining communities of northern Manitoba. There were no such mines in ancient times, but the region was nonetheless known to the folk in the surrounding regions. Likewise, northerners' awareness of the "outside" was made possible through out-migration, inter-marriage, hunting expeditions, and trade networks that moved in several directions. Were Northerners out of touch with outsiders (and vice versa) until the arrival of trains, planes and automobiles? Apparently not.



***Movements of people, goods, and ideas into/through the North in Indigenous times:***

- 1. Lamp idea***
- 2. Dene hunters***
- 3. Blackfoot traders***
- 4. Drought refugees***
- 5. Knife River Flint, Mandan traders***
- 6. Dakota raiding parties***
- 7. Pipestone***
- 8. Shell***
- 9. Copper artifacts***
- 10. Fur trade Cree immigrants***