

THE FIRST CREES

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How long have the Crees been living in northern Manitoba (“NorMan”)? The traditional Cree answer is, since time immemorial, which is perfectly correct and perfectly adequate for the traditional Crees.

Next question: how long ago was “time immemorial,” reckoned in terms of hundreds or thousands of years? And this is where the answers are much harder to come by.

Initially, historians thought that the first Crees to inhabit Manitoba moved westward from northern Ontario in the late 1700s and early 1800s along with the European fur trade. Game animals and furbearers were becoming scarce in Ontario, and a westward migration to where resources were more plentiful was one way of dealing with the problem.

Now this might lead us to think that the Crees were relative newcomers to Manitoba, and I don’t think there’s much question that a goodly number of Ontario Cree people did move west with the fur trade. However, I don’t think they were the first Crees to migrate into Manitoba’s North; in fact, there’s reason to believe that Cree-speakers were already living here long before the coming of the European explorers. So we’re back to our earlier question: how long have Crees been living in northern Manitoba?

You’ll notice that I used the term “Cree-speakers” in the preceding paragraph. In 1993, writer Freda Ahenakew wrote a book titled *The Cree Language Is Our Identity*. People often identify themselves by the language they speak, or at least by the language their ancestors spoke. To my way of thinking, “Crees” and “Cree-speakers” in a purely Aboriginal setting mean the same thing. Historically, if you were of Aboriginal descent and Cree was your mother tongue or your first language, you were Cree.

To make the most of our story, let’s go right back to the beginning, starting with the basics. Language experts (linguists) tell us that Cree belongs to a large family of languages known as “Algonquian.” Blackfoot, Cree and Cheyenne, to name a few, belong to the Algonquian family by virtue of their having descended from a common ancestral language that was spoken thousands of years ago. The experts call that ancient tongue “Proto-Algonquian,” the prefix “Proto” meaning the earliest stage of the language.

According to one theory, a series of events got underway around 3,800 years ago far to the southwest that would have important implications for the Aboriginal history of northern Manitoba. Drawing upon traditional Ojibwa and Delaware migration stories (the Delawares and Ojibwas are speakers of Algonquian languages) and studies of contemporary Native languages, historians have proposed that the high country of present-day Idaho – the Columbian Plateau -- was the birthplace of the Algonquian language family.

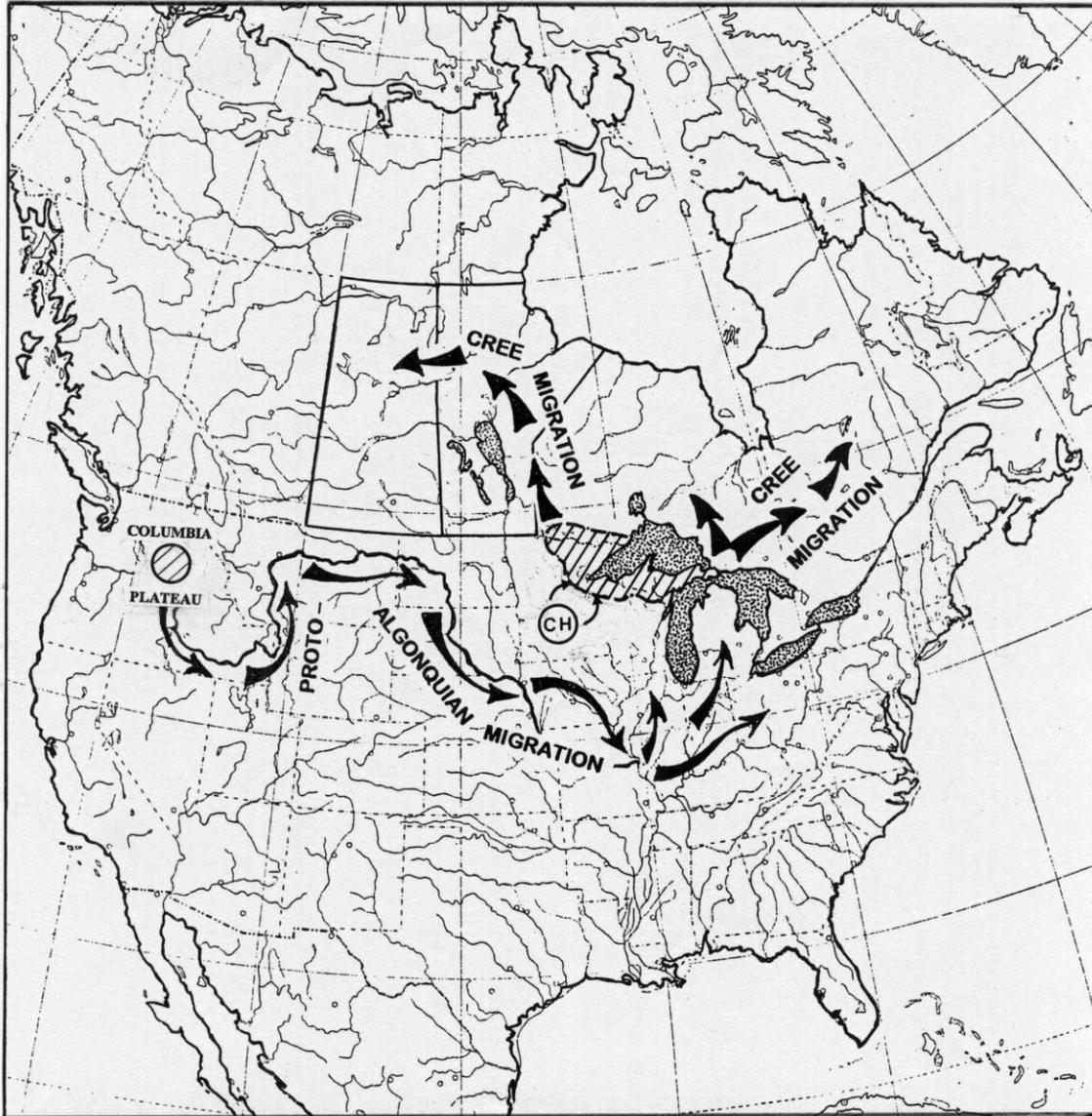
Professor Peter Denny of the University of Western Ontario has hypothesized that 3,800 or so years ago a large and well-organized group of Proto-Algonquians moved in an easterly direction off the Plateau. Over the course of several generations, they made their way across the grassy plains and prairies, perhaps via the Missouri River, to the forested country south of the Great Lakes. Their journey took many generations and some 400 years to complete, but in the end they arrived in their new home still as a single nation.

Between 3,000 and 2,500 years ago, the Proto-Algonquian language became widespread as the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region and beyond adopted it in place of their own. Following that, the original language gave rise to a number of separate “daughter” languages before it became extinct. One of the earliest of these new languages was the original version of Cree.

Cree speech itself (“Proto-Cree”) is believed to have originated some 2,500 years ago somewhere between Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. A few centuries later it was being spoken within an area extending from the Boundary Waters area of the Ontario-Minnesota border eastward along the south shore and hinterlands of Lake Superior. From this southern homeland it was carried northwards in several directions across the Canadian Shield, as shown on the map below. Note that it spread to the northwestward around Lake Winnipeg, all the way to the Churchill River drainage west of Hudson Bay. Actually, it is likely to have become very widespread in two ways: (1) through the actual migration of Cree-speakers themselves, and (2) through the adoption of the Cree language by indigenous peoples of northern Ontario and Manitoba with whom the immigrant Crees came into contact.

Now, a logical next question is, what prompted those long-ago Crees to move north in the first place? Why didn’t they simply remain in their homeland south and west of Lake Superior? Well, it just so happens that around 2,000 years ago a very vibrant and aggressive culture was developing in places like Illinois and Ohio, i.e., just to the south of the Crees’ territory. These more southerly people were probably getting a bit too close for comfort to the Crees’ liking. Of course, one way to deal with worrisome neighbours is to simply move away from them. And that, apparently, is what many of those early Crees did.

Some archaeologists believe that we are able to track the northward movement of the Crees and their cultural influence by noting the far-flung distribution of the pottery that they made. The earliest form of Aboriginal pottery found in Manitoba and northern Ontario is thought to have originated around 2,200 years ago within the southern Cree homeland area adjacent to Lake Superior. Putting two and two together, Professor Denny reasoned that it was the Crees who made this early pottery, since both the language and the pottery seem to have entered the picture in the same place at the same time. The pottery became very widespread after that, and its earliest appearance north of Lake Winnipeg may very well mark the very first movements of Cree people and their language into the NorMan region.



Speculative Proto-Algonquian and subsequent Cree migration routes. CH + striped lines = Cree homeland.

But pottery wasn't the only new thing that the early Crees brought with them: they also possessed other customs that the local peoples were pleased to adopt. The Crees' influence would have been further enhanced by intermarriage between themselves and the northerners. We don't know what language the local peoples spoke to begin with, but the Cree influence seems to have been strong enough to encourage the adoption of the Cree language far and wide. Linguists call this process "language-switching." After several generations and almost a century of time, the descendant populations were fluent Cree-speakers. By 1,000 years ago (i.e., around 1000 CE), dialects of the Cree language were being spoken across much of the Canadian Shield.

If these theories are correct, then we have an answer to our original question: Crees/Cree-speakers may have been living in northern Manitoba as early as 1,800 years ago, or since 200 CE.

And 1,800 years ago in this part of the world qualifies as “time immemorial” by anyone’s standard.