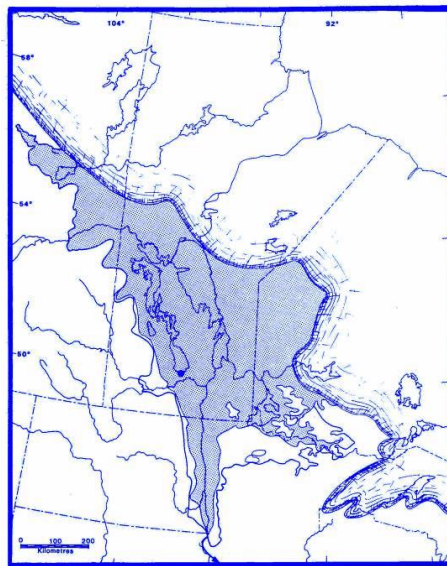


## THROUGH THE AGES AT DELTA

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People have lived around the southern shore of Lake Manitoba for thousands of years. But an important theme in the human history of the Delta area is actually one of total absence: for millennia on end, the land now covered by the Delta Marsh and adjacent lake beaches was entirely uninhabitable. Between 20,000 and 11,000 years ago, the place was buried beneath the massive Ice Age glacier and hence was inaccessible to both man and beast. With the retreat of the ice sheet, the deep waters of Lake Agassiz immediately inundated all of the Portage Plains, and human colonization of the landscape was further delayed.



***When Lake Agassiz (shaded area) was at its maximum 9,400 years ago, the Delta locality (dot) was uninhabitable. After Teller, J T 1983, "Lake Agassiz and Its Influence on the Great Lakes." In P Karrow and P Calkin, eds. Quaternary Evolution of the Great Lakes, pp. 1-16. Geological Association of Canada Special Paper 30.***

Of course, Lake Agassiz did not last forever. Shortly after reaching its maximum extent around 9,400 years ago, it began to drain away once and for all. Over the next thousand years it diminished in size and became increasingly shallow, so that by 8,400 years ago the Lake Manitoba basin became separated from that of the once-massive but now declining glacial lake. At long last, Lake Manitoba was beginning to take on a shape of its own, and plants, animals and human beings, in that order, colonized the former floor of the glacial lake. It was shortly after this that the long-term human history of the Delta locality began in earnest.

Many of the ancient Aboriginal cultures discovered thus far throughout southwestern Manitoba have been identified by archaeologists in the Delta area. This comes as no surprise, because the climate between 9,000 and 5,000 years ago was becoming increasingly warmer and drier. Scientists refer to this period as the "Altithermal," which

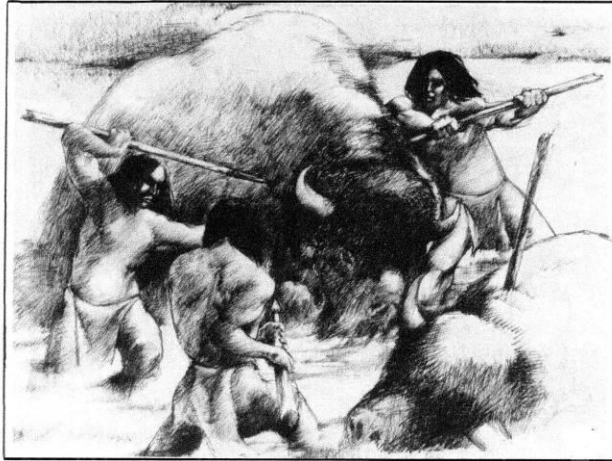
means "high heat." As a result, prairie grassland became widespread around the southern Lake Manitoba basin, and herds of grazing animals, especially bison, were attracted to the Portage Plains. The animals and the people that hunted them were drawn northward by droughts on the high plains to the south and southwest in what is now the United States, and the precincts of Lake Manitoba formed a welcoming oasis for people fleeing the parched conditions elsewhere.



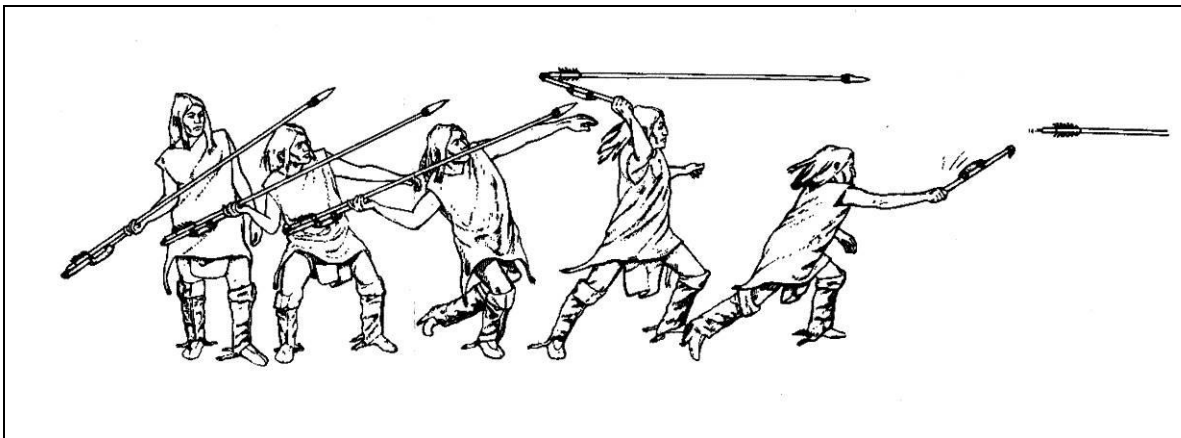
***Seeking to distance themselves from drought conditions to the south, some groups moved to higher latitudes, including the Portage Plains/Lake Manitoba region. Courtesy of Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection.***

This should not be taken to imply that our area did not receive its share of the warmer and drier Altithermal climate. Evaporation was high, and from time to time Lake Manitoba diminished in size and became very shallow, or else patches of the lake bottom became exposed and open to the sky. These conditions were actually beneficial to the bison hunters, because they could chase the animals into the sticky muck underfoot, bog them down, and kill them with spears and lances while they were literally stuck in the mud. They could use the same strategy and hunting methods when the marsh environment behind the main beach was rejuvenated during wetter and moister intervals and when the Assiniboine River flowed northward into Lake Manitoba (between 6,000 and 4,000 years ago), thereby maintaining higher water levels in both the marsh and the lake.

As we noted above, the early peopling of the Delta environment originated in the plains to the south and west, and for many generations afterwards the Portage Plains were part of western Canadian and American prairie culture. This is borne out by the styles of stone artifacts the people made and used, and by some of the raw material from which they made them. From the Knife River of western North Dakota came high-grade flintstone that was brought into the Lake Manitoba district by trade or else by local people making trips south to collect it and bring it back. Otherwise, usable stone could be gathered in abundance from nearby glacial deposits laid down thousands of years earlier by the southward-moving ice sheet.

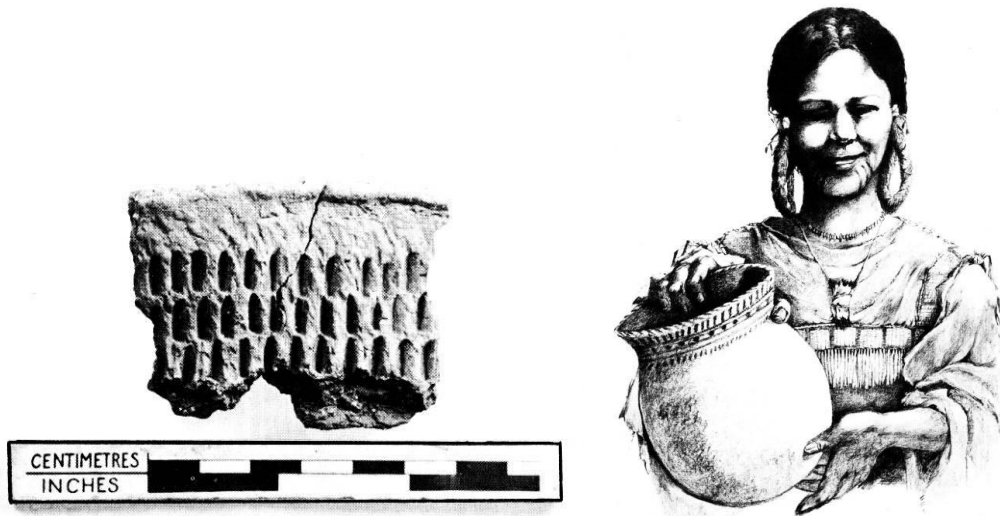


***Miring large animals in the mud and shallow waters of the lakeside and marsh and slaughtering them with spears and lances tipped with stone points was a productive tactic 8000 years ago. Courtesy of Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection; E. Reichert, Winnipeg archaeologist.***



***The spear-thrower was a premium hunting instrument 8,000 years ago on the Portage Plains centuries before the advent of the bow and arrow. Courtesy of The Manitoba Museum.***

Several centuries before the beginning of the Common Era, change was in the wind. The climate was become cooler and wetter, and a new kind of technology made its appearance in the Delta area. Early Cree people migrating in from the Upper Great Lakes region to the southeast brought with them the custom of pottery-making – something that had never been seen before on the Portage Plains.



***Archaeologists' discovery of ceramic fragments (left) on and behind the Delta beach and elsewhere in southern Manitoba enabled them to reconstruct the size and shape of 1200-year old pottery. Left: Courtesy of the Laboratory of Anthropology, University of Manitoba; right: Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection.***

These earthenware vessels were fire-resistant, and soups and stews cooked in them over an open flame were added to the local diet. Ceramic containers remained in use until they were replaced by copper kettles during the Fur Trade hundreds of years later. Another innovation to appear around the beginning of the Common Era was the bow and arrow. Tiny chipped stone points, apparently fixed to slender arrow shafts rather than to larger spear and lance handles, have been discovered on the Portage Plains and elsewhere in southern Manitoba.

The historical reconstructions provided above are based largely on the casual collecting of artifacts along the water's edge of the modern-day beach. However, in 1967 and again in 1969, professional archaeologists from the University of Manitoba conducted scientific excavations at the former site of the University Field Station and on the ridge running through the former Bell Estate property. These studies revealed the remains of ash-filled fireplaces ("hearths"), indicating the use of the general area as a camping ground from time to time between approximately 800 and 1,200 years ago.

The ridge on the Bell Estate is an old beach that became high and dry after the shoreline receded yet again a short way into the lake basin. This well-drained "fossil" beach ridge was an ideal camping spot, especially with the water's edge nearby. A natural soil formed and this served as the campers' living surface. Later, the place was buried beneath wind-blown sand that sealed and protected the cultural evidence from subsequent disturbance – an ideal situation for the archaeologist who seeks to study the ancient material objects just as the people left them centuries ago.

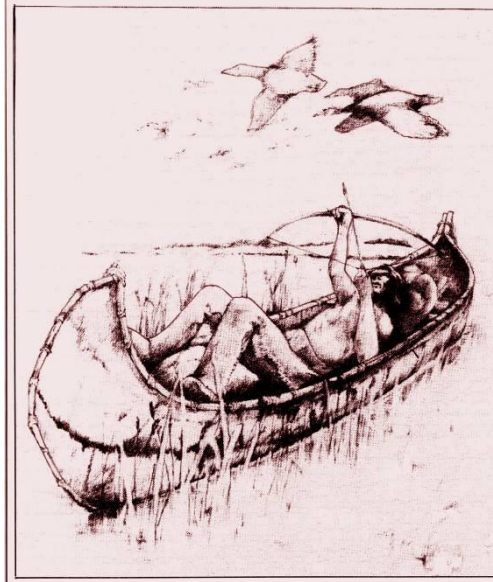
In addition to animal bones, seeds were also excavated, attesting to the seasonal use of wild plant foods available from the rich marsh and lakeside wooded environments. Stone knives, hide-scrapers, and numerous stone chips bore silent witness to the local

manufacture and use of implements for leather-, wood-, and bone-working, food-processing and other daily tasks in and around camp. As might be expected, many of these objects were found scattered around the fireplaces where many camp activities were routinely carried out.

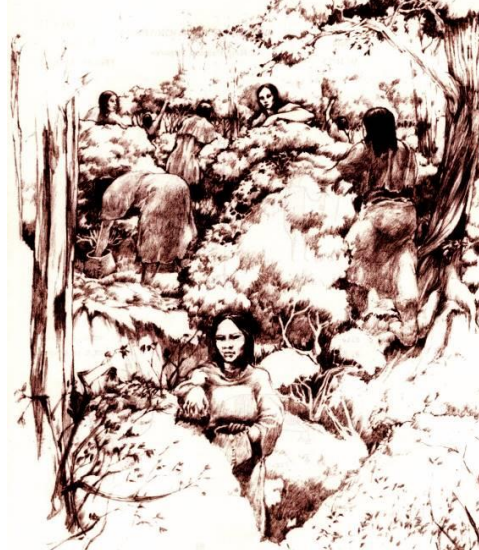
Judging by the decorative designs on pottery fragments (“potsherds”), it would seem that this particular spot was occupied on and off for several centuries – from ca. 1000 to 1600 CE. Some archaeologists would assign the later occupations to Ojibwa and Cree inhabitants, all of whom belong to the same language family known as “Algonquian.” Traditionally, women made the village pottery, and the range of pottery styles found at the Bell site and others like it in Manitoba may be telling us that women from outside groups were marrying into the local community and bringing their decorative techniques and patterns with them.

The natural environment of the Delta area appears to have been more or less uniform over the past 1,000 years. Lake water levels probably fluctuated about as much as they have in recent times before the construction of the Portage Diversion, alternatively flooding and exposing large areas of the marsh. Similarly, seasonal distribution of major resources probably paralleled that of more recent times. Bison would have been available on the ridges and margins of the marsh during the spring and summer but may have sought shelter in the nearby aspen groves just to the south during the winters. Beaver and muskrat could have been taken during all seasons; birds would have been especially numerous during their spring and fall migrations; and fish could have been most easily obtained during their spring spawning runs in nearby streams. The archaeologists unearthed a number of canine bones, possibly those of domesticated dog but it is unclear as to whether or not these were food remains.

At no time in its history was southern Manitoba isolated from the adjacent plains and forested lands to the east, south, and west. Throughout the Common Era, people immigrated from Minnesota and the Dakotas, and one of the things they brought with them was the practice of cultivating and harvesting domesticated crops. In other words, they were farmers as well as hunters and gatherers of wild animals and plants. Thus far, we have found no evidence that the marsh- and beach-dwellers in the Delta area adopted farming. Based on what we have discovered to date, it seems that they were content to adhere to the tried-and-true hunting-gathering lifeways long practiced by their forebears.



***There was more than one way to hunt waterfowl with bow and arrow a thousand years ago. Colourized by Leo Pettipas from original drawings provided courtesy of Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection.***



***The stream mouths and banks would have been ideal places for fishing during the annual spawning season. The lakeside forest and adjacent aspen parkland produced abundant nuts and berries each year. Colourized by Leo Pettipas from original drawings provided courtesy of Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection.***

Between ca. 6,200 BCE and 1700 CE, the Delta countryside was solely the domain of peoples of Aboriginal descent. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century CE, French *coureurs de bois* were probably making inroads to southern Manitoba from forts near Lake Superior, and a European presence was firmly established when La Vérendrye and company made their appearance locally in the 1730s.