

## The Ojibwa-Laurel Connection

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A glance at the “Canada Indian and Inuit Communities and Languages” map in The National Atlas of Canada (Fifth Edition, 1980) shows that most of the contemporary Aboriginal communities on Lake Winnipeg and those east of the Red River within Manitoba are denominated “Ojibwa.” For any historian, a standard question that arises is, “How long have Ojibwas lived in this region?” And for most modern-day historians, the answer is simple enough: Ojibwas first moved into southern Manitoba during the final quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century along with the Montreal-based fur trade.<sup>1</sup> If the historians are correct, this would mean that there were people of European descent (the La Vérendryes, for instance) living in the region before Ojibwas were!

Archaeologists tend to be rather more generous than the historians in assigning antiquity to the Ojibwa occupation of southeastern Manitoba. Proceeding on the assumption that archaeologically-discovered Indigenous pottery wares can be attributed to historically known and named Aboriginal nations such as the Ojibwa, Cree and Dakota, various researchers have pushed the arrival of Ojibwas to well before the advent of European exploring expeditions and the fur trade. Kenneth Dawson and J.V. Wright believed that the Indigenous pottery known as “Blackduck” was manufactured by Ojibwas. Since Blackduck pottery was being made in Manitoba as far back as the 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE at The Forks, the implications are that Ojibwas were living here that long ago. An even greater antiquity is allowed for by archaeologist Virginia Petch, who has voiced the opinion that 2,000-year-old “Laurel” pottery found on Weaver Lake near Poplar River First Nation, a nominally Ojibwa community, is attributable to Ojibwas.

It must be noted that there is more than one notion among scholars as to just “who” produced Laurel pottery. In my opinion, the most persuasive argument for Laurel ethnicity comes from J. Peter Denny who in 1992 made a strong case for incipient *Cree* authorship of both Laurel *and* Blackduck pottery. This hypothesis makes eminently good sense since Crees were among the earliest and were certainly the most conspicuous Algonquians of record found to be living anywhere in the southern half of Manitoba, at least in earliest European-contact times.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in his book “Red River Settlement,” originally published in 1856, historian Alexander Ross noted that the local Crees and Assiniboines, the rightful owners of the countryside since the memory of man, were incensed that the Ojibwas were given prominence in the signing of the Selkirk Treaty of 1817. The Crees repeatedly threatened to drive the Ojibwas “back to their old haunts about Lake Superior” and reclaim their lands in the Red River valley. “The earliest date that any Saulteaux found his way into this quarter was about the year 1780,” wrote Alexander Ross.

On learning of the Initial Woodland discoveries on Weaver Lake and the professional opinion that the found Laurel pottery was made by Ojibwas, a local resident of the Poplar River (Ojibwa) First Nation voiced her enthusiasm about the thought that the ancient potters were her distant relatives. But how could an Ojibwa person, whose ancestors supposedly only came into the country sometime during the fur trade era (or, to acknowledge the archaeologists' earliest estimate, by 1400 years ago) claim a descendant relationship with the people who made 2,000-year-old Laurel pottery, especially if the latter was made by Crees, not Ojibwas? Was she incorrect in making this claim?

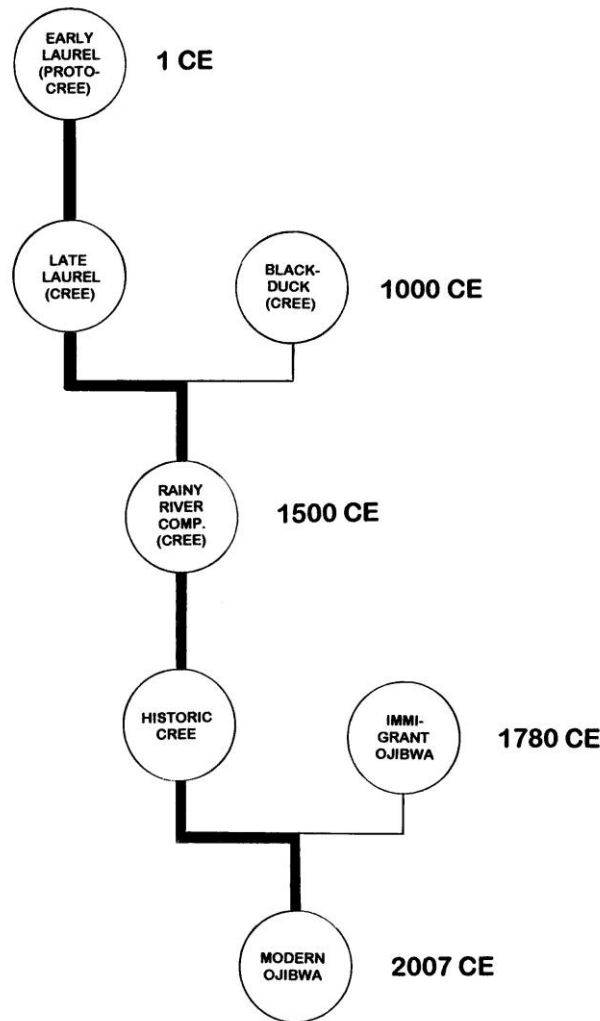
To answer these questions, we have to review the fur trade records that were written when the Ojibwas were making inroads into northwestern Ontario and eastern Manitoba. And one recurrent theme that becomes very important is the *intermarriage* between Cree and Ojibwa people who congregated at trading posts and at seasonal meeting sites. The process is very well described by the North West Company trader Duncan Cameron who, writing in 1804, noted that in the past the Cree and Ojibwa, in consequence of their respective migrations about the North, "began to meet one another in the interior and to intermarry by which *they at length became one people*," quote historian Charles Bishop in 1974.

Other writers have also noted cultural miscegenation, particularly in the area of linguistics: "The Indians found about the shores of Lake Winnipeg, are locally known as Bungees, or Swampy Indians, and are thought to be composed of Saulteaux [Ojibwa] and Cree, as their speech seems to be a mixture of the dialects of both of these tribes" wrote S.C. Simms in 1906. It is interesting (and significant) to note that, according to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (1980), the Poplar River band in particular actually comprised both Crees and Ojibwas.

In sum, it is highly likely that many if not most of the Lake Winnipeg Saulteaux possess dual (Cree, Ojibwa) ancestry, both culturally and biologically. And it is the Cree side of their heritage that is of particular importance here, the point being that if Lake Winnipeg "Saulteaux" can claim to be descendants of the people who made Laurel pottery, then it is by virtue of their *Cree*, rather than their Ojibwa, ancestry that they are able to do so. In the rest of this paper I will explain why this should be the case.

The first thing we must do is assume that Peter Denny is correct in his suggestion that the people who made Laurel pottery in eastern Manitoba were Cree. We must likewise assume that he is correct in ascribing Blackduck pottery to the Cree as well. In other words, the Natives of the eastern shores of Lake Winnipeg from the beginning of the Common Era through to the early fur trade were Crees. "There is no doubt that up until

the eighteenth century the Woods and Swampy Cree were the predominant people surrounding not only Hudson Bay but also Lake Winnipeg” as Irving Hallowell put it decades ago. In his day, La Vérendrye referred to the Crees as “Christineaux,” and it was these people that the Ojibwas encountered upon their arrival in this part of the country, whenever that may have been. This coming together further extended a process that had been ongoing all across the North ever since the Ojibwa had begun their expansion – fusion and cultural convergence in marginal areas. It bids fair to suggest that, under these circumstances, intermarriage was taking place as well, and that the people living along the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg today are of dual Cree/Ojibwa heritage.



*Speculative developmental sequence of Woodland and Recent (21<sup>st</sup> Century CE) culture, southeastern Manitoba. The heavy line is intended to represent the hypothesized direct-descendant relationship between early Laurel (Cree) people and contemporary Ojibwas.*

If, as Denny suggests, the people who made Laurel pottery in the region 2,000 years ago were indeed Crees, then a modern-day person living there would probably be on firm ground in believing that these earliest potters were among her distant ancestors.