

## **Current Thoughts on the Precontact History of Northwestern Ontario, October 2017**

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*Editor's note: This paper was originally a personal e-mail letter that, with some editing, is being posted here in hopes of generating further discussion/discourse.*

I am currently wrapping up my 2017 field work but still have some shovel-testing to get done. Also, I received permission from the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa to borrow their pottery collection that J.V. Wright recovered in 1962 from the Pelican Falls site -- now the focus of my long-term research -- located south of Lac Seul. I am working on an overall vessel count for the site, and I will be entering the rim sherds from that material into my database. The collection has arrived at my office, so that will be my winter project.

I am also working on an outline for a paper titled "The Minontoba Composite" which I propose as a replacement for the Rainy River Composite. It's all about pottery, and still at the very preliminary stages. Just to let you know, I am using the terminology "Early," "Middle," and "Late" Woodland for my research and not the "Initial" and "Terminal" nomenclature. It is interesting to note that even though J.V. Wright utilized (or perhaps introduced) the Initial/Terminal system, his 1967 book is called "The Laurel Tradition and the Middle Woodland Period." I must assume that this publication pre-dated the introduction of the Initial/Terminal terminology into the literature.

I believe the rationale is that the start of the Woodland period is based on the introduction of pottery which, for a large area, did not occur until the Middle Woodland period. So we don't have an Early Woodland period in our region. However, there is an Early Woodland period in adjacent Minnesota, and Brainard ware has been attributed to it. Recently, Brainard ware has been recovered from the MacGillivray site on Whitefish Lake near Thunder Bay. Perhaps, as chronometric methods improve, we may find some pottery dating to pre-Laurel in Northwestern Ontario and in Manitoba. Maybe not, but if we do, we may have to discontinue using the Initial/Terminal system that equates Initial Woodland to Laurel, leaving no wiggle room for potential future pre-Laurel discoveries.

Further to this, the end of the pre-ceramic Archaic period and start of Woodland is equated with the regional advent of pottery, and hence all pre-ceramic cultures are classified as Archaic. However, we know very little about the Archaic period, and my concern is that future discoveries may indicate subtle (non-ceramic) cultural changes (perhaps dietary or other evidence acquired through new investigative techniques) that mark the terminus of the Archaic and the start of an *early* Woodland period.

On another topic, I spent 11 days at Whitefish Lake on a research dig working under Matt Boyd and a contingent from Lakehead University. Prior to, and in preparation for, travelling there I reviewed Ken Dawson's publications on his excavations at the sites on MacGillivray Island. It was interesting to note that the Blackduck sherds found in context with the Historic material were taken by Dawson, the original excavator, as evidence of Blackduck cultural continuity through to the Historic period. Yet Laurel (Middle Woodland) sherds, which are also recovered in the same levels with the Blackduck (Late Woodland) and Historic material, appear to be regarded as intrusive.

Further to this, while doing research for my paper, it was pointed out to me that Brian Lenius and Dave Olinyk had re-analyzed the material from the Pic River site excavated by J.V. Wright in the 1960s. Apparently the material deposits start out thick near the river but then thin out as you move inland which I guess is the nature of a river-type deposit. Therefore, excavating into the thin layers away from the river, the lack of stratification would result in the mixed deposits. These data also refute the idea of Blackduck extending into the Fur Trade period, a hypothesis that was actually published in the Lenius and Olinyk 1990 paper using data from elsewhere.

My interest in all of this derives from a persistent reluctance among most Minnesota archaeologists to recognize any Late Woodland category other than Blackduck. I think even some of their references to Blackduck Plain (Lugenbeal, etc) may in fact be Selkirk. The Wright and Dawson publications are referenced in support of this idea. But I believe that around 900 AD, there was a metamorphosis of Blackduck pottery styles into the high degree of variability that we see in the Late Woodland pottery material being recovered on the Shield. In my opinion, the evidence does not support a long-term co-existence and eventual coalescence of these two entities (Laurel and Blackduck) into a new group. This is the main pillar of the Rainy River Composite, which I will propose to replace with the Minontoba Composite.