The Prehistoric Indians of Minnesota

Lloyd A. Wilford

A hundred years ago there were only a few thousand white inhabitants in the area that is now the state of Minnesota—the vanguard of the race that was soon to occupy almost the entire region. Most of them were concentrated in the area about the mouth of the Minnesota River, at Mendota and Fort Snelling, and in the new settlement of St. Paul; a few fur traders and missionaries were to be found in more isolated spots. But the bulk of the population still consisted of Indians—members of the race which for several thousand years had had sole possession of the area.

The exact date of the arrival of the first Indians in Minnesota probably never will be known, but an ancient skeleton found near Pelican Rapids in 1931 indicates that their ancestors were in the region twenty thousand years ago, when the northern and northwestern parts of the state were still covered by the retreating ice of the last glacier. Evidence from other parts of the United States leads some archaeologists to believe that the ancient Indians may have come into North America from Asia before the last southern advance of the ice across Minnesota.

During the long period in which the Indian and his ancestors occupied Minnesota, individuals and communities left evidences of their presence in every part of the state. Although earthworks in the form of mounds, embankments, and enclosures are the most conspicuous remains, there also are rock cairns, ancient trails, pictures painted or carved on rock, camp sites, and village sites. Weapons, implements, and ornaments of stone, bone, shell, or copper are found in great numbers on the surface of the soil or are turned up by the plow. Pottery-making groups have left abundant proof of their art in the potsherds of their villages, and sometimes in the offerings in their graves.

1 This article is intended to serve as an introduction to a series on the cultures of the prehistoric peoples of Minnesota which the author plans to contribute to this magazine from time to time. Ed.
Until rather recently it has been customary to accept all these various manifestations as simply Indian, although Indian occupation is known to have extended over a long period of time and many different groups of varying cultures are known to have come and gone, leaving traces of their presence behind them. Thus all mounds have been designated as Indian mounds, arrowheads as Indian arrowheads, etc., and many of us erroneously have assumed that all Indians know all about Indian culture. Minnesota Chippewa have often been questioned regarding the mounds in their territory, despite the fact that, so far as is known, the Chippewa never have been mound builders.

It is the province of the archaeologist to discover and study as many as possible of these material remains of the prehistoric Indian peoples in order to classify them into distinct cultural divisions or complexes, and to attempt to relate these complexes to one another from the point of view of relative advancement in civilization and of relative place in time. Another aim is to identify these complexes with historically known Indian tribes.

Aided by funds contributed by some generous citizens of Minneapolis, and assisted by the WPA, in 1941 the University of Minnesota completed its tenth season of archaeological research in Minnesota. Excavations have been made in nearly all parts of the state, and it is now possible to classify, in a general way, the cultural complexes of the state and to indicate the areas in which they are found.

Archaeologists working in the Mississippi Valley agree that the late prehistoric Indian cultures of the area can be divided into two major groupings or "patterns," which have been designated as the "Mississippi" and the "Woodland." The chief difference between them is that the Mississippi pattern exhibits a higher degree of advancement in civilization, its superiority resting in large measure upon a well-developed agriculture. Though the peoples of the Wood-

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8 The university's program of archaeological research in Minnesota, which was inaugurated in 1932 under the direction of Dr. A. E. Jenks of the department of anthropology, has been directed by the present writer since 1938. The work was made possible as a result of aid given by the WPA and financial support contributed by a group of Minneapolis citizens, including James F. Bell, Mrs. Charles C. Bovey, Mrs. George C. Christian, Franklin M. Crosby, the late George D. Dayton, G. Nelson Dayton, Frank T. Heffelfinger, the late Frederick E. Murphy, Alfred F. Pillsbury, the late Charles S. Pillsbury, John S. Pillsbury, and Frederick B. Wells.
land pattern were not unfamiliar with agriculture, it did not play a particularly important role in their food economy, often being limited to the raising of tobacco. Their food supply was dependent chiefly upon hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild vegetable foods. The greater emphasis on agriculture by the people of the Mississippi pattern led to more stable communities and more permanent homes, as, for example, the great villages of large earth lodges found among the Mandan. It also led to the use of hoes and milling stones, and to the digging of pits in the villages for the storage of crops. These features are lacking in village sites of the Woodland pattern.

Both groups depended primarily upon stone as the material from which to fashion cutting implements. By far the most abundant of these are the arrowheads, knives, and scrapers, all of which were made by chipping flint or other stone that fractures like flint. For simplicity of classification, the cutting implements which are chipped on both faces are called knives, and those which are chipped on one face only are called scrapers. A difference is found in the arrowheads of the two patterns. Woodland arrowheads have stems and are shoul-
dered or barbed — the forms that are commonly recognized as arrowheads. Mississippi arrowheads are small, simple triangles, sometimes having a notch on each side near the base and, perhaps, in the middle of the base. Toward the end of the prehistoric period, the triangular arrowhead was introduced among some of the peoples of the Woodland pattern and it was apparently on the way to displacing the older stemmed type. Thus the presence of triangular points in a Woodland site indicates that occupancy was relatively late.

Both groups manufactured pottery vessels, and since clay vessels can have a wide range of shape and decoration, the pottery is especially valuable in showing differences in the two groups and relationships within each. In general it may be said that Woodland vessels are simpler in shape, wide-mouthed, with rounded bodies and bases, or elongated bodies and pointed bases. Mississippi vessels have more sophisticated shapes, often having angular shoulders or angularly flared rims. They usually have handles at the rim and never have pointed bottoms. In both patterns the vessels are decorated around the rim or on the whole upper portion by markings made in the soft clay before firing. Vessels of the Mississippi pattern are decorated with incised lines, made by drawing a pointed stick along the surface. Woodland vessels occasionally have incised line decorations, but the characteristic decoration is made by impressing sticks, stamps, cords, or other objects into the clay.

Burial customs were not as definite nor as enduring among the Indians as in our own culture, but they are valuable criteria in determining cultural divisions. Though the prehistoric Indians occasionally employed cremation, their burials were of two main types, primary, with interment soon after death, and secondary, with the exposure of the corpse on a platform for a considerable period and the interment of the bones only. Mississippi burials were primary, but both types are found among Woodland burials. Interments were made in graves or in mounds. Of the thousands of mounds in Minnesota, only a few can be ascribed to the Mississippi pattern, all the rest belonging to the Woodland pattern.

Sites of the Woodland pattern, which presumably began with the
introduction of the idea of agriculture, are found in all parts of Minne­sota; and in the northern three-fourths of the state, this remained the only culture until the coming of the white man. In southern Minne­sota, however, the Woodland culture was superceded by the Missis­sippi. The dates of the introduction of these cultures into Minnesota are unknown, but the last of three divisions of the Mississippi pattern known to have existed in Minnesota endured until about 1700. Thus the Woodland sites of southern Minnesota are all relatively old, while the Woodland sites of northern Minnesota may be either rela­tively old or fairly recent. During the century or two before 1700, the Woodland culture of northern Minnesota and the Mississippi cul­ture of southern Minnesota were contemporaneous.

Since manifestations of the Woodland pattern are found all over Minnesota, it is to be expected that certain areas will exhibit culture complexes that are distinctly different from those of other areas. At the present stage of archaeological research in Minnesota it is possible to subdivide the Woodland pattern on the basis of cultural differences into six major divisions, which are designated as “aspects.” The dif­ferences between them are sufficiently great to lead one to conclude that they are the products of different tribes or tribal groups. They are known as the Effigy Mound, the Judson, the Mille Lacs, the Head­waters Lakes, the Rainy River, and the Red River aspects. In future articles, these aspects of the Woodland pattern and some of their manifestations in Minnesota will be discussed.