

The Many Worlds of District 1, Part IV: Contact

In the human mind are two realms: us and them. Us is the daily landscape encompassing our people, environment and possessions. It is a world that seems embedded in a providential pattern. Them is an alien presence. It might be a tornado, drought, or plague of locusts. It might be human. At least initially, it's perceived as threatening.

[art of warrior's face]

Pre-historic Us

The people who lived in and near District 1 twelve thousand years ago did not remain here. They may have followed melting glaciers north, where caribou and other prey emigrated to maintain their habitat. They may have fought a suicidal war or encountered a disease for which they had no immunity. What happened to the mammoth-hunters is a mystery. We do know that early human groups throughout the Americas frequently moved as season, climate and food supplies fluctuated.

In the course of twelve thousand years, it is probable that a succession of peoples came to our locale, most likely using river routes that served as the highways of prehistory. Some newcomers may have relocated for more space, leaving warmer enclaves that were densely populated. Dakota legend speaks of ancestors who came from a place north of Lake Superior. Anthropological evidence suggests the Dakota migrants reached the area of District 1 by canoe from the land we know as Ohio, where the population might have grown faster than the resources of the community could support.

Who might have been here before the Dakota people, over ten to twelve thousand years, we don't know. For part of that time, District 1 may have been devoid of human life altogether. But patterns could yet emerge: with the help of DNA technology, anthropologists may eventually untangle the chromosomal strings of early American migrations in our area, as elsewhere. For now, the biological history of human culture in District 1, and its relation to culture throughout Minnesota and the rest of the continent, remains a partially-assembled puzzle.

Pre-historic Them

Change was constant in post-Pleistocene America. People moved in all directions and, like future pioneers, did not encounter empty space. They pushed into territory already occupied by others and fought for hegemony, often maintaining relationships with far-off ancestral villages. In examining artifacts from a thousand or more years ago, anthropologists have found evidence of darker contact, including massacres, slavery and even cannibalism. A prehistoric rock shelter discovered near Stillwater in the 1930s revealed human bones unrelated to the group that inhabited the spot. The bones were found in a storage container and bore cut marks similar to those of devoured prey.

If strife with neighbors was frequent, even in years when the spirits and the weather were kind, it was surely more deadly when they were not kind, when drought or flooding or over-killing or disease in animal prey created shortages. Then, over many centuries, the increasingly refined techniques of the hunter were turned against fellow hunters from competing groups. As technology improved, projectile

points from spear and arrowhead eventually reached the lethal zone of bone penetration, making human adversaries each other's greatest threat.

Yet, much contact was peaceful. Disparate peoples negotiated with each other, traded goods and arranged marriages, often after long journeys. Pottery has been found in our area that originated in the ancient Hopewell culture of the Ohio Valley. Jewelry made of pearls, seashells or shark teeth made its way here from the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. Minnesota copper knives may have been exchanged for foot-long obsidian points from Yellowstone. It is likely that soft buffalo skins were a particularly prized object of barter, as was kinnickinnic, a fragrant tobacco.

Given the proximity of District 1 to Mississippi waterways, people here were actively connected to other cultures for thousands of years, at times copying or sharing customs and technologies. Burial mounds are a common thread. It is estimated that at one time, there were more than 100,000 such mounds, built over centuries, in the 20 states lying in the Mississippi/Missouri/Ohio drainage area. The plethora of mounds suggests that related groups or even enemies sought new ideas wherever they could find them, especially if a custom gave added significance to monumental events like death or provided a framework for rites that unified a people.

Culture and food

The evidence of prehistoric culture in the Great Lakes region reveals a varied diet. Bone fragments include those from a variety of fish, such as sheepshead, pike, buffalo-fish, sturgeon, gar pickerel, and catfish, as well as dogs, birds and turtles to supplement the meat of deer, bear, moose, elk, beaver, muskrat, raccoon, otter and other small animals. Many different kinds of stone, bone, and iron implements have been discovered and usually display a local character that ties them to a specific group. Pottery made out of earth was used to cook and serve food. Birch bark had abundant uses: women used it to make buckets, fish traps, snow shoes and as string to tie tripods for cooking. They even fashioned birch dishes. They boiled the bark in long strips and passed it over fire to make it foldable.

[drawing: birch snowshoes]

Spears were used for hunting until, sometime between 200 and 500 A.D., the bow and arrow made their way south from Arctic cultures. Clovis points on spears were gradually refined from ever harder, finer-grained stones, chiseled to create the sharpest edges possible. Superior weapon-making skills and intimate knowledge of animals and their habits were the marks of the professional hunter, who may have been male or female. As one species became rarer, another would take its place, and the hunter had to be constantly aware of his mercurial environment. When warriors were gone from the village, those who were left would have fended for themselves, women as well as children. It is likely that roles became more defined as millennia passed, but certain essential skills had to be universal.

Giant loss

Megafauna had disappeared. The largest prey---mammoths, mastodons, giant sloths, giant beavers, bears twice the size of the grizzly---all became extinct in what ecologist E. C. Pielou calls "one of the most important and mysterious ecological events in the last 100,000 years." Even horses, which originally evolved on the North American continent and emigrated across the Bering Strait into Asia, faded into memory with the mammoth, not to be seen again until the species returned with the Spanish conquistadors.

Climate change was probably the deciding factor in the dramatic rearrangement of flora and fauna 10,000 years ago. It was an era of global warming as glaciers receded further north and out of sight. As usual, humans adapted. Life became less precarious. Generations passed down wisdom regarding animal behavior, hunting techniques, the cultivation of plants, the cooking and storage of food, the rituals and relationships required to recognize and renew the various cycles of nature. Favorite habitats were places that facilitated travel, such as the shores of lakes and rivers, including the slender thread of the Mississippi that skirts District 1.

The Archetype

A pivotal creature remained from the world before the great melt: buffalo. The American bison not only survived but thrived in the warming climate and the new shorter grasses that emerged as the glaciers disappeared. Buffalo meat became a critical source of protein in the human diet, whether fresh or stored. As pemmican, a combination of dried meat, hot melted fat and, sometimes, berries, it could be kept for months in bags made of buffalo hide or gut and used on long journeys or to supplement diminished food available during the winter.

Herds of buffalo came together during the summer and early fall, and people trekked long distances on foot from here to the Dakota plains to join in the annual hunt. During the rest of the year, the buffalo scattered in search of food and water, especially if the population grew too dense for the central plains.

At times, buffalo seemed to be everywhere, from the northwest of Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Communal hunters burned grasses selectively to encourage the animals to move this way or that, sometimes to accomplish massive kills. They used corrals, sinkholes, manmade traps and cliffs as their ancestors had used them for thousands of years. They walked many days to reach the places where they knew buffalo would congregate and coordinated with relatives from other groups. They honored the hunt as a sacred ritual and institutionalized hunting techniques: the arts of preparation, lure, artifice, timing and slaughter. Then the messy work began.

A dying buffalo was valuable, but its value was fragile. Surplus meat, in particular, had to be stored and transported properly. Women did the butchering and processing. They used stone knives that required great muscular power and refined motor skills as well as intimate knowledge of the animal's anatomy and an understanding of the effects of conditions, such as weather and terrain, on the harvest. They needed to work quickly, often teaching as they skinned and cut, to keep the meat as fresh as possible during processing, to salvage the skins for tanning, to separate the sinews for thread, to extricate intact bones for tools and weapons. Bladders became jugs, dung firewood. The operation was so efficient, the skills and technology of dressing buffalo changed very little in eleven thousand years.

When the hunt and its aftermath were done, the hunters walked home to those who had not left. They came back to children learning to hunt, to the old ones wrapped in buffalo skins and the women who had stayed to tend the fires and nurture the infants and the almost warriors not yet permitted to make the journey. They brought back the buffalo meat and hide, both needed to survive the coming winter, and they danced and rejoiced in thanksgiving to the Great Spirit. In the celebration ceremony, hunters also thanked the animal, whose individual spirit had given permission for its killing as part of the sacred flow of nature back and forth in all the forms of a living earth.

Over tens of centuries, a belief system emerged among many Native American cultures, with variations, in which all of creation was seen in layers: the top layer of the sky world above, where resides Wakon-Tanka, the Great Spirit and guiding force of the Universe; the middle world of nature, inhabited by

humans and animals and all that they see and feel; and the underworld, a murky place entered through the deepest lakes and rivers, from which human ancestors once emerged. It is the constant duty of humans to mediate among the spirits of living things, animate and inanimate, so that there is balance and harmony among the worlds.

Healers, in particular, have the power to mediate. Healing often involves the use of a sacred pipe. People can be physically and emotionally healed by the power of the pipe, or calumet, whose smoke has a connection to the Great Spirit. The power of the pipe is passed on to succeeding generations. The healer acts as a tool and is chosen by the spirits, who educate the living through dreams.

“Ours is a much more holistic idea of time. It is the omnipresence of time. The creator can move in the past, the present and the future, and we believe spirits are not bound by time. We are only bound to the present by our physical being.”

~ Professor Tom Peacock, University of Minnesota-Duluth, is a member of the Fond du Lac Ojibwe community and a leading national Indian educator.

This belief system prevailed in District 1 and the surrounding hunting grounds of the Dakota for many generations. The history of thousands of years was preserved in oral tradition, through memory, in the recounting of events understood in the context of dreams and visions. Past, present and future were perceived as a unified form of being, which is perhaps why, in Dakota legend, the warrior does not worry about death.

Altered landscape

The water level at the eastern edge of District 1 fell dramatically after the draining of Agassiz, the enormous freshwater lake that once covered much of southern Canada, the Dakotas and northern Minnesota. No village could have been set down in the roiling river that had filled the entire canyon separating District 1 from downtown St. Paul. As the water level fell, the Mississippi took closer to its present shape, and marshy banks emerged.

Recent evidence suggests that Agassiz quite suddenly broke through its ice dams, which had been created by the melting of the glaciers and then disappeared as the melting continued. The outpouring happened over several months about 8,200 years ago, resulting in centuries of chilled air in North America and Europe as the icy water flowed eastward into Hudson Bay and then into the Atlantic Ocean, where it disrupted warm Gulf-stream currents.

Without the torrents of water coming from Agassiz, Pig's Eye Lake became a relatively shallow part of the Mississippi. The soil at its edges was rich and alluvial, an ideal medium for vegetation. Mother Nature sowed the first seeds. We don't know what those seeds produced, but at some point humans intervened in the process.

During Dakota habitation, a small encampment arose in District 1 about where the waste treatment plant is now. It may have been there because the rushes made a good hiding place for canoes. It may have been there so that a nearby crop could be watched. It may have been a point of reconnaissance, in case an enemy tried to swoop down the river. It may have been there for all three reasons.

The arrival of corn

Elsewhere on the continent, for thousands of years, people examined seeds and put the ones with the best appearance into the ground. That also was largely women's work. By a process of experimentation and error, plant forms were grown, observed, replanted, shared and then planted in new locations, the ones able to make the adjustment surviving to be shared again. The trajectory of innovation was northward, beginning with original plants in South America or Mexico. Movement was slow because biological adaptation takes time and luck and more. It could not have happened without human action. Some seeds needed to be buried deeper than others, earlier or later than others, in brighter sun or protected from wind, with fish or other sacrifice preferred by the spirits of the plants. Contact between groups, including betrothal and intermarriage among related peoples who had migrated in different directions, made possible the sharing of many things, including, in all probability, gifts of plants and knowledge of what to do with them.

The earliest form of "maize" dates to approximately 5500 B.C. in the Tehuacan Valley of Mexico. Corn, in a much refined, cool-weather version, arrived in our region about 900 A.D. Other edible plants took a similar journey. In the American Southwest, a civilization developed around the development of many forms of corn---the divine crop---as well as squashes, gourds, melons, beans and sunflowers. These plants too reached the Great Lakes region.

Unfortunately, plants do not become artifacts. Clay pottery can be dated, as can stone, copper and bone tools. But not plants. The accomplishments of the first American agricultural experts went largely unrecorded. One can imagine a group of women picking berries from bushes on the hills of District 1 or pulling swamp roots from the peat under Pig's Eye Lake. During Wicatawi, the Moon of the Raccoon---February---they tapped maple trees for the sweet sap that flows as the sun begins to warm the earth again. They cultivated corn and squash when the seeds or seedlings arrived from elsewhere with the hope of adaptation to early September frosts or an occasional drought. They were the first farmers of District 1. Their success with corn gave rise to a more sedentary life for the Dakota people.

Europeans

It happened on April 11, 1680, on the Mississippi River near the present-day border of Minnesota and Iowa. 33 bark canoes, containing a war party of 118 Dakota warriors returning from battle, encountered a canoe sent out by the French explorer La Salle to inspect the country north of Illinois. In the French canoe were Father Louis Hennepin and two scouts. After some debate, the Dakota decided not to scalp them. Instead, they took them further north, along the Mississippi, on a 19-day river journey. They finally arrived, according to Father Hennepin's journal, at a point in a bay, where they "broke our canoe to pieces, and secreted their own in the reeds."

One of the warriors, a chief, pulled up grass in piles to form three seats, and Father Hennepin and the two scouts sat down in District 1. They were shortly to start a six-day walk to Mille Lacs, where the Dakota tended wild rice. The Frenchmen did not appear dangerous to the two Dakota chiefs, Aquipaguetin and Narrhetoba, and their arrival did not seem to disturb the balance and harmony of the Dakota world. But it did.