

Who Where the First Farmers on the Plains?

In Southwestern Manitoba, sites such as the Snyder II Site south of Melita offer rare evidence of pre-contact agriculture

The first Europeans to visit this part of the Great Plains made some assumptions about the people they met here. The communities they saw didn't consist of permanent villages surrounded by cultivated farmland, and from the European point of view the people here simply hadn't "progressed" to the sort of settled agrarian society that was the norm back home. To them, "progress" was a natural transition from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a society based upon domesticated and cultivated food supplies. They also assumed that what they saw was the way it had always been, and that the people here didn't farm because they didn't know how!

The evidence to the contrary was buried beneath the sod.

Remains found in pottery residue from several sites scattered across southwestern Manitoba tell us that cultivated crops were part of the local diet. Digs at places like the Snyder II Site have revealed storage pits: an indicator of plant cultivation

activity. The concept of planting, tending and harvesting crops was widespread across North and South America. In fact the horticultural knowledge of many North American people was sophisticated and productive.

Corn, beans and wild rice were present in the Gainsborough Creek/Souris River region. Corn is native to North America and is completely domesticated: it cannot reproduce on its own. It was grown here or imported.

We have long known that agriculture was extensively practiced in North Dakota by the Mandans, and we now have evidence of agriculture from the Snyder II

and the Lockport Site north of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

By the time of contact, however, European visitors didn't perceive signs of either village life or domesticated crops on these plains.

What happened?

Climatologists now know that a succession of cold periods, in what was already a short growing season, made gardening difficult. In addition, the increasing

sophistication in both the harvesting and processing of bison, along with their abundance, encouraged a specialization in that direction. The Plains Hunters were in fact "managing" the buffalo herds rather than simply hunting them in an opportunistic manner.

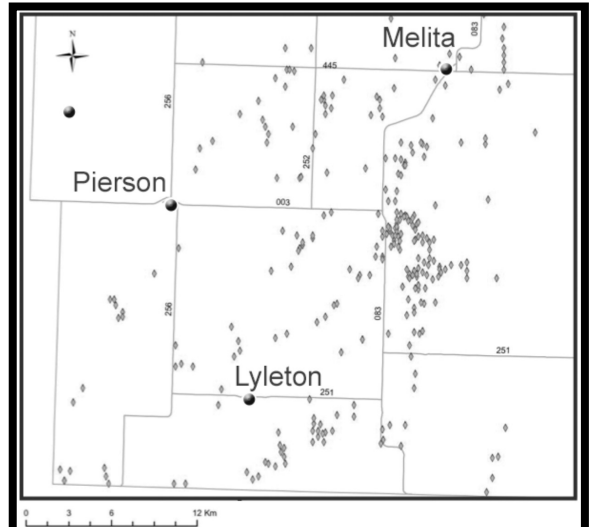
Today, with the right infrastructure, we can grow bananas and other warm-climate fruits here in Manitoba. We have greenhouses, we know how, but it is smarter to trade for those items, and focus on producing crops that do well here.

The same was likely true centuries ago. Growing corn and living in permanent villages just didn't mix with the buffalo economy and the new climate reality.

Sources:

Hamilton, Scott; Syms, Leigh; Gibson, Terry "Re-examination of the Plains Woodland Snyder II site, SW Manitoba." Lakehead University Manitoba Museum Alberta Western Heritage.

Wiecek, Matthew; Syms, Leigh. "Culture Contact and Diversity at a Site of the Northeastern Plains: An analysis of the ceramics and lithics at Snyder V (DhMg-6) in southwestern Manitoba." Manitoba Archaeological Society.



▲ Evidence of burial mounds, teepee rings, bison kill sites, and other pre-contact sites are abundant in the southwest corner of Manitoba. This indicates that this area was home to a wide variety of people over a long period of time.



◀ Uncovering evidence at the Snyder II Site, south of Melita in 2007.