White Pines Prehistoric to Historic Cultures

The White Pines District story is partly silent regarding prehistoric cultures in the region, but artifacts and human remains are in evidence across more than 9000 years, dating to 7500 BC (Archaic Period). There is significant evidence of Late Archaic occupation in the Snake River region near present Pine City, provided by artifacts of what has been called the Old Copper Culture. Copper artifacts found in the region include conical points for weapons, awls, and a small number of rectangular rolled and spiral shaped beads that are more common in sites located in present Wisconsin. The Archaic Period generally represents a technological cultural departure from the earlier Paleo-Indian Period (Big Game cultures) wherein the peoples are known primarily through their distinctive projectile points. Archaic cultures generally precede the use of pottery and can be described as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who engaged in greater exploitation of local resources than had previously taken place, but the small, mobile human groups of pre-ceramic time left little behind that can be examined today.

In the transition from Archaic into the Woodland Period in Minnesota (1000 BC to the Eighteenth Century AD) there was an increase in plant cultivation (as well as some of the earliest indicated use of wild rice), and a related shift to a more sedentary pattern of settlement, a significant increase in the amount and complexity of burial mounds, and the introduction of earthenware pottery. The Snake and St. Croix River region was on the western edge of the Woodland cultural area and therefore maintained some of the Late Archaic Period cultural traits into the historic period, wherein peoples utilized small seasonal camps to better exploit local game and vegetation resources.

Warm weather camps were often located near streams and lake shoree and winter camps took advantage of sheltered valleys, wooded areas, and caves. St. Croix pottery dating between 500 and 800 AD (Middle to Late Woodland Period) has been found in the Snake River region. The pottery is usually dull gray and the vessels are generally rounded, with a small neck and
high vertical rim. Woodland pottery was used for cooking and storage while some pottery found in graves appears to have been made specifically for burial. Along with rather elaborate burial artifacts, numerous skeletons from the Late Woodland Period have been excavated from burial mounds in the region.

Understanding prehistoric cultures relies in part on a system of analysis that classifies time periods by a multitude of traits. In order to develop the stories associated with prehistory in the White Pines District, archaeologists first assume that there is a relation between cultural origins, cultural history, and the artifacts early inhabitants used. When artifacts are compared between nearby sites similar artifacts are grouped and a system evolves that doesn’t rely on chronological and spatial areas to determine cultural definitions but in similarities between their technologies. This approach helps to overcome problems that are common in Midwestern archaeological sites, where the sites are very shallow, do not show clear stratification, are poorly preserved, or the assemblages are mixed together, having been disturbed by the forces of nature or human activity.

Some of the more interesting archaeological features in the region have to do with processing wild rice. These include ricing pits that were used to store the grain, jigging pits used for threshing, and rice parching rings where excavations have found pieces of unburned wood and parched grains of rice. The significance of wild rice in the region appears to have been continuous from the late prehistoric/early historic period and right through the historic period. When the Dakota and Ojibwe peoples negotiated treaties with the United States Government, use of lakes and rivers, making sugar from the Maple, and harvesting of wild rice were rights reserved by the tribes.

It is evident the earliest inhabitants contributed many cultural traits that were adopted into the Dakota, and later Ojibwe, way of life. When the first Europeans came to inhabit land in the Snake and St. Croix valleys they encountered tribes with highly evolved technologies and techniques for utilizing wilderness resources to sustain their people. But European settlement soon brought unfathomable exploitation of resources with the result that a once inexhaustible ability of the wilderness system to sustain people seemingly evaporated overnight. Ironically, many modern descendants of Europeans, who were once the very instrument that helped put an end to the hunting and gathering cultures of the Dakota and Ojibwe, have come to regard the old way of life of the tribes with an iconic reverence. No one event can be said to have caused the loss of the Dakota and Ojibwe way of life but in the annals of written history there are occasionally markers, single events with such great consequences, that from that point on history is altered, forever.

Photos: Osceola Historical Society (page 1, left); Minnesota Historical Society (page 1, right upper and lower)