2019 Year Book

The First Farmers in Bruce County

A number of my previous history notes have focused on the first Euro-Canadian families that farmed in the immediate vicinity of Bruce Beach. Their pioneering efforts and the friendships they extended to the first Bruce Beachers were gratefully acknowledged. This year, in response to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation calls to action, I am going even further back in time, to the first people who raised crops in Bruce County – the Wendat, also known as the Huron.

The first confirmed evidence of a crop plant in Ontario is maize (*Zea mays*) and it was grown by people archaeologists have named the Princess Point complex. They were situated in south central Ontario. There is some debate about the dates of this culture, but most archaeologists agree that it existed from A.D. 500 to 1100. Only some of the Princess Point sites have yielded the remains of maize, and these sites are on the floodplain of the Grand River, 30 km north of where it flows into the eastern end of Lake Erie, near the modern village of Cayuga.

Radiocarbon dates run on remains of corn itself show that by A.D. 500, the Princess Point people were growing maize as a supplement to their existing regime of foraged resources which included wild rice collected from the western end of Lake Ontario, near what is now Hamilton. Fish, birds, mammals, and plants comprised the diet of these people who over a 500-year time span changed from hunter-gatherer-cultivators at about A.D. 500 to cultivator-hunter-gatherers by A.D. 1000.

These people, who came from migratory groups who moved in seasonal rounds to areas where they could extract different resources, established semi-sedentary settlements near water. Most of the population remained in these settlements year-round, while small groups left to extract subsistence items when and where they became available. For example, people left when fish formed into schools or when fruits and nuts ripened. As time passed and the culture changed, some of the Princess Point people developed into the Huron-Wendat Iroquoian society. The latter group is of particular interest to us here.

Iroquoians were the only Indigenous farmers of north-eastern and central North America. In Ontario, the Huron-Wendat were farmers long before European settlement. They were very successful horticulturalists on the mainly sandy soils between Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe in Simcoe County, the area we now call Huronia. The women were the farmers and they mainly grew corn of the Northern Flint variety but also tobacco, squash, beans and some sunflowers. The corn cobs were twice as large as those found on the Princess Point sites and the kernels were longer, wider and thicker. But the cobs were still of the eight-row variety, not the 12 rows we have now. The Huron-Wendat relied on farming, but they still gathered wild plants, fished, and hunted to supplement their crops. It was the men who fished and hunted. The Huron-Wendat had no domestic animals except the dog, which they rarely ate.

The Huron-Wendat lived in longhouses in villages of hundreds or thousands of people, but they also had seasonal foraging camps with small dwellings. For example, fishermen travelled to Georgian Bay in November for whitefish, and hunters, accompanied by Champlain in 1615, walked south and then around the eastern end of Lake Ontario into what is now New York to hunt deer.

Growing corn has the effect of depleting the soil of nitrogen and other nutrients which was partially countered by the nitrogen-fixing attribute of the beans and fish fertilizers. Even so, every 10 to 15 years, the corn yields would be so poor that new fields had to be prepared and the villages moved to be near the crops. The distances between the villages were not great, except in one unexplained instance.

For some reason(s), in the mid-14th century, some of these people moved their village to the shores of Lake Huron, at what is now Port Elgin. These then were the first farmers of Bruce County. The archaeological site is named the Nodwell village, after the family who owned the land on which the site was located. Radiocarbon dating places the site at A.D. 1340 ± 75 years.

Nodwell consisted of 12 longhouses which sheltered about 500 inhabitants. From the stains in the soil marking the locations of the posts used to construct the house walls, it can be seen that one house predated the others. This house was torn down and sections of two others were built over the area where the first house had previously stood. This first house had very few remains in it of any sort. But when I analyzed the faunal remains excavated from it, I found that the bones were overwhelmingly from fish. From this, I concluded that this structure was used over the warm weather months while its inhabitants built the other houses and cleared the fields for planting the following year. Fish dominated the animals remains in one other house as well and so it seems probable that it too contained members of the initial work party. Two rows of palisades were also constructed around the village. The cutting of the cedar posts and elm bark for the construction of 12 longhouses in addition to the palisade and clearing the fields would have required a large workforce and there were no nearby villages with men to help in these tasks. The Nodwell site was about a 130 km west of Simcoe County. This site is unique in that it is the only Iroquoian archaeological village in Bruce and Grey Counties, although there are a few fishing camps. Like its unusual appearance here, it disappeared, leaving no subsequent village. Unlike us, they did not return to the shores of Lake Huron.

More information on the Nodwell site can be found in my monograph*, Faunal Remains from the Nodwell Site* and in J. V. Wright’s *The Nodwell Site*. More on the first cultigens in Ontario can be found in several articles by David G. Smith and Gary Crawford in the *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*.

Finally, I hope you all have replaced last year’s note in your Yearbooks with the corrected version sent out by Ross. If anyone still wants the correct version, they can contact me at frances.stewart@mail.mcgill.ca or drop in to 34 Bruce Beach.

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