

Seeds as Symbols: Reconstructing the Diet and Life of the Early Red River Settlement*

By C. Thomas Shay

I AM HONOURED TO BE HERE AND TO SHARE some thoughts about material culture with a group of museum enthusiasts. Ever since I can remember, museums have been places of inspiration and education for me. If today's museums are to be successful educators, you, the museum community, face a formidable challenge. The challenge is that many of the problems that divide our society—rich vs poor, rural vs urban, east vs west, French vs English, Native vs non-Native—grow more serious daily, partly because of an ignorance of history. Sadly, events such as those at Oka, Quebec showed us that many Canadians seemed to be unaware of the mistreatment of Native peoples by former governments. In addition, we have much to learn about how and why we have mistreated the natural environment. The current environmental crisis apparently has deep roots—roots that we must understand if we are to chart a different course for the future.

Education about our historical development may be the best solution to these social and environmental problems and in this endeavour museums can play an important role. This role would involve teaching about history of all kinds: history that deals with women, labour, minorities, social life, environment, and many other subjects. Museum people appreciate that much of this history is embodied in the material objects of the past. They know that it is vital to establish and maintain the precious threads that connect an object with the past behaviours and values that surrounded it. Like the Olympic torch, the flame of the past must be kept alive. What better place than in a museum?

The educational challenges are made somewhat easier by the growing popularity of museums. Today, increasing numbers of people desire to learn more about the material objects of the past. They wish to know how these objects were made and used and whether they were owned by many or only a select group. These interests lead me directly to my subject matter: seeds as symbols. I hope to show that not only seeds, but fragments of wood and charcoal may represent symbols. These left-

overs of life may reflect the past social status of different groups and the relationships between these groups and their natural environments. Seeds and wood can thus be used to teach social and environmental history.

To a plant, a seed is crucial for survival and reproduction although to a cook or diner, a seed is merely a nuisance, something to be discarded. But to an archaeologist, a seed is an indicator of past life and diet. It may indicate trade with distant places or it may even be a symbol of past social status and represent a so-called prestige food. A prestige food is usually one that is tasty, rare, and expensive. Its rarity and expense signify that it is often reserved for the few who stand to benefit in two ways: to (1) enjoy, and (2) validate their higher social status. What constitutes a prestige food may depend upon the cultural context. I am told that in Moscow, for example, a McDonald's hamburger is afforded great prestige although it is unlikely that North Americans would view this rather commonplace food in the same way. I recall a conference I attended in Newfoundland where those of us from 'away' eagerly anticipated the banquet, our mouths watering as we contemplated the prawns, shrimp, and lobster that we thought awaited us. Imagine our chagrin when we sat down to roast beef! The organizers, being used to seafood, decided to present us with *their* prestige food, beef which is an expensive treat in Newfoundland. The cultural context thus must be taken into account when we attempt to designate which foods may have been prestigious.

Our historical and archaeological research over the past few years suggests that certain plants served as symbols in the early days of Manitoba. We have used the plant evidence from archaeological sites together with historical documents to help reconstruct the social status and environmental relationships of several groups within the Red River settlement. The combined evidence was organized within the perspective of human ecology which views a society in relation to its natural and social environments. Within a society, its' technology, social organization and values are integrated into a more or less

coherent whole. With the ecological perspective, we can ask questions about what people did for a living, what they ate, and how they related to one another and to their natural environment. These questions are applied here to the latter half of the nineteenth century in the Red River settlement, a few decades after 1821 when the two major fur trading companies, the Northwest and the Hudson's Bay, merged until after the region joined Canadian confederation.

The mid-nineteenth century was a time of transition—from the dominance of the fur trade to the rise of agriculture, commerce and transportation. Since 1821 when the Hudson's Bay Company had emerged with a virtual monopoly over all trade in western Canada, the Company struggled to enforce its monopoly and exclude the so-called free traders from the lucrative exchange of furs and goods. Ultimately, these efforts failed. In an attempt to maintain political and economic order, British troops of the Sixth Regiment were stationed at Red River from 1846 to 1848. During their sojourn, the free trade movement subsided only to reappear as soon as the troops left. Two historical events are linked with the archaeology of the settlement: the stay of the Sixth Regiment, traces of which have been found in archaeological excavations at Upper Fort Garry, and the expansion of trade with the United States after 1848 which is reflected in the seed evidence.

In order to appreciate what the archaeological evidence has revealed about life at Upper Fort Garry, let us go inside the walls of the exclusive domain of the Hudson's Bay Company elite. Inside the walls, the archaeological evidence comes mainly from two privy-refuse pits excavated by a team from the University of Manitoba led by Dr. Greg Monks. The two waterlogged pits contained not only the usual glass, ceramic and metal artifacts but also an array of amazingly well-preserved organic remains. Animal bones, leather, cloth and even newspaper were found together with many thousands of seeds and hundreds of fragments of wood and charcoal. Our task was to study these plant remains from the two pits, one dating from 1846–48 and the other from 1848 until perhaps 1882 when the fort was closed. We collected dozens of two-liter sediment samples from the two pits and extracted the plant remains in a flotation tank. A shower head installed in the bottom of the tank agitated the suspended slurry of mud and water and helped to separate the light organic matter from its matrix. The organic matter was caught in a series of fine-mesh soil sieves, then dried and sorted under a binocular microscope. The seeds and wood found were

identified using modern reference material and the results tallied.

Among the more than 12,000 seeds recovered were a rich assortment of wild and domesticated fruits, nuts, and spices. With over 3,000 seeds, strawberry was by far the most common fruit followed by raspberry, high bush cranberry, wild cherry, plum, grape and others. Among the nuts were hazel, walnut, almond, Brazil nut and pecan, an assortment that we still enjoy, especially during the Christmas season. Spices included coriander and dill. Some of these remains reflect the expansion of trade and contact after 1848. For example, the imported nuts such as walnut, Brazil, almond and pecan amounted to 88% of all nut remains in the later pit compared with 33% in the earlier pit. The proportion of imported fruits such as the domesticated plum and grape (probably brought in as dried prunes and raisins) also increased in the later pit. In addition, this pit contained tomato and watermelon seeds, types both absent from the earlier pit. These seeds probably came from plants introduced from the United States where they were becoming popular about this time. The seed remains thus reflected the expanded trade in the Red River settlement after 1848.

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Because many of the imported plant foods were undoubtedly valued as prestige foods, they also reveal the differences in social status between two of the ethnic groups in the settlement. The settlement was home to a number of ethnic groups—English, French, Scots, mixed blood Metis and Native Cree and Assiniboin—each pursuing a somewhat different lifestyle and having a different social status. Some of these status differences can be highlighted by comparing the elite of Red River society who lived at Upper Fort Garry with several Metis families. The imported plant remains from the pits at Upper Fort Garry differ from those found at two Metis farmsteads, Delorme House and the Garden site. Evidence from the Metis sites is scant but our expectations are confirmed. In contrast with Upper Fort Garry, there were no imported fruits or nuts found at the Garden site and only a few turned up at Delorme House.

But seeds were not the only symbols of status and prestige at Red River, as wood and charcoal remains tell a similar story. Wood and charcoal also tell us about the

relationships between the people and their natural environment. To appreciate wood as a symbol, we need to understand that in the mid-nineteenth century, technology at Red River was still very much in the wood age. Buildings, carts, wagons, farm implements, household furniture, tools and utensils were entirely or largely constructed of wood. Wood was also the main source of energy and large quantities of firewood were consumed during the long and cold winters. Among the types of firewood burned, it is likely that oak was the most prized because of its high heat yield. Unfortunately, oak was not naturally abundant in the area and its scarcity would also have contributed to its value. It is thus expected that oak would have been a "prestige" fuel and this seems to have been the case. When charcoal remains from the two Metis farmsteads are compared with those from the pits at Upper Fort Garry, we find that oak made up nearly 30% of the sample from Upper Fort Garry but less than 10% from the other two sites. The latter were dominated

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by woods of lesser heat yield such as ash, poplar and conifer. Social status is even reflected in the kinds of wood burned for heating and cooking.

The uses of wood also reveal how the people related to their natural environment. Wood was an important resource primarily because the settlement was situated some distance west of the main forested region in a belt of aspen parkland and tall grass prairie. The settlement's location had been chosen primarily for its strategic position at the junction of two great rivers, the Red and Assiniboine. It was thus at the hub of some 4,000 km of waterways that connected fur trade posts scattered over the Hudson's Bay Company's vast territory in western Canada. The only forests of any size in the immediate vicinity were confined to a narrow strip of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and their major tributaries. These riverine forests contained elm, ash, and Manitoba maple; on the valley margins, oak and aspen could be found. Oak and aspen also occurred in scattered groves on the uplands. Extensive forests composed of a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees such as aspen, birch, spruce, pine, fir, and white cedar could be found more than 50 km to the east of the Red River.

Given the great demand for and limited supply of wood, how did the early settlers manage this valuable resource? Written records tell us that timber in the immediate vicinity had been largely depleted by the 1840s and wood for building and fuel had to be brought in from a distance. Furthermore, photographs taken of the river banks in 1858 show them to have been virtually treeless. The photographs show scattered shrubs and weeds where once must have been tall, magnificent stands of trees. The archaeological evidence from Upper Fort Garry and the two Metis sites confirms the importance of imported wood. At Upper Fort Garry, for example, over three-quarters of the wood pieces recovered were of coniferous species such as spruce, fir and/or white cedar and pine. Coniferous wood was also found as charcoal at the fort as well as at the two Metis sites. Judging by the probable distribution of forests at the time, these woods must have been brought from the east more than 50 km and probably more than 100 km. Evidence of imports from even further away comes from the recovery of a few shavings of black cherry wood from Upper Fort Garry. Black cherry has traditionally been prized for furniture making. It is not native to Manitoba, and today the nearest trees are found in southern Minnesota over 600 km distant.

The early deforestation of the area surrounding the Red River settlement and the active importation of wood from considerable distances raises disturbing questions about the early settlers' ability to manage this valuable resource. Did they need to cut down all the trees around the settlement? Probably not. Wood was also a valuable resource in Europe at the time but it would have been unlikely for Europeans to have so rapidly decimated their own forests. In England for example, even though most forest land had been cleared by the nineteenth century, there is abundant evidence that management for wood production had been practised for hundreds of years. Various techniques such as pollarding were widely used. In pollarding, young branches are harvested but the main tree trunks are left intact to produce another crop. Pollarding works well with fast-growing species such as willows but, even though willows were common along the banks of the rivers, there is no evidence that anyone practiced this or any other technique of woodland management. In fact, over a century later, we North Americans still continue to savagely exploit our forest resources. In view of the long-standing tradition of European forest management, it is difficult to understand why those who settled in North America consistently ignored their own cultural heritage.

Some say that the future is written in the stars. I suggest that the future is written in the hearts and minds of young people and in the attitudes they learn towards each other and towards the natural environment. Who will help shape these attitudes and allow the next generation to right the wrongs of the past? Is our generation of teachers, museum administrators, curators and supporters up to the challenge? Only you know and only time will tell.

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Endnotes

*Research on the plant remains from Upper Fort Garry and elsewhere in the Red River settlement continues. Material for this paper was drawn from unpublished reports as well as the following:

Shay, C.T. 1984. "A preliminary report on the archaeobotany and history at Upper Fort Garry, Manitoba, 1846-1882." In *Plants and Ancient Man: Studies in Paleoethnobotany*. Ed. by W. van Zeist and W. A. Casparie. A.A. Balkema, Rotterdam, 123-129.

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