

CHAPTER TWO

Ancient Ways Between Two Rivers



The Beaver Hills started to attain elements of their present character between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago. This came about as part of the general series of adjustments made by the western landscape to the retreating glaciers. In time, water courses and lakes took on a certain stability, including the main channels of the North Saskatchewan and Battle Rivers. During those distant millennia many of the ancient faunas of glacial times started to disappear, including a large form of Pleistocene bison. These vanishing stocks were gradually replaced by other forms, and under progressive conditions of warming, the modern species of bison gradually came to dominate the new grasslands. Some 9,000 years ago buffalo pounds, jumps and traps were already in use.¹

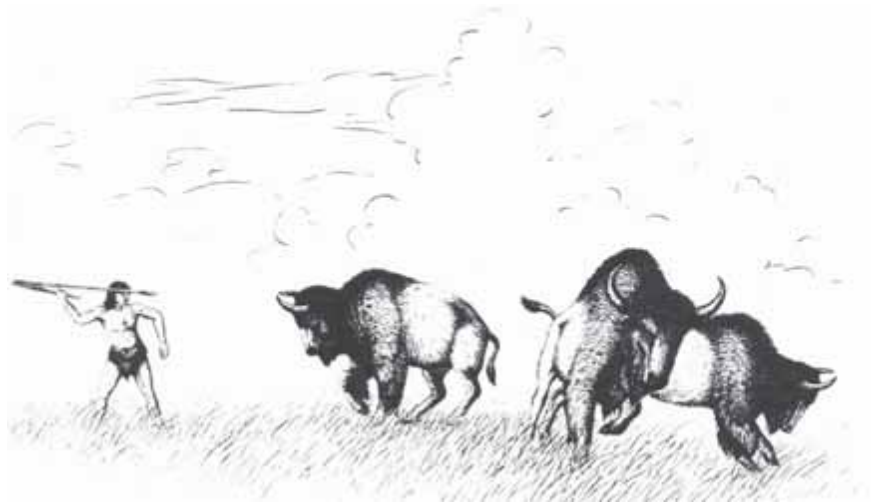
Piecing together a picture of ancient human life in Alberta has been largely a post-war enterprise. In the 1950s, archaeologist Richard G. Forbis and his associates analyzed many local collections, some of which related to the Beaver Hills. Included in the analysis were assemblages gathered from farms around Bruderheim, Pakan, Skaro and Sedgewick.² For the earliest reaches of human time in the Beaver Hills, these local collections provided evidence of big-game

hunters who employed thrusting spears. Such spears were tipped by variations of the long fluted or parallel flaked points first associated with the famous Clovis site in the south-western United States. Points known as Cody are common and a number have been found in ploughed fields in the Beaver Hills region. A spear point of the Agate Basin variety was found in the hills directly north of today's Elk Island National Park. This particular kind of point enjoys a wide distribution and has been found in eastern Wyoming and far to the north at Acosta Lake in the North West Territories. These sites all represent occupation sites active between 10,000 and 7,500 years ago.³ Knowledge of the region's prehistory advanced in the 1970s when the Strathcona site on the western flanks of the hills, close to the North Saskatchewan River, was inspected by archaeologists.⁴

Following an extended period of Atlantic warming (sometimes called the "Altithermal" climatic period), extending roughly from 7,500 to 5,000 years ago, the vegetation belts of the prairies and



This type of large spearhead point has been found in the Beaver Hills. Characteristic of the early Prehistoric period, eight to nine thousand years before the present, it was often placed on the Atlatl.



In this reconstruction of an early Prehistoric period hunt of the now extinct *Bison Occidentalis*, an Atlatl is being used armed with a large “fluted” point. The two-part lance, secured by a thong at the elbow, provided highly leveraged throwing power.

parkland assumed an identity somewhat similar to the patterns in place today. Towards the end of this great warming time a notable trend appears in the archaeological record. A shift occurred towards the use of smaller side-notched and stemmed spear points. These were used in various ways, but most remarkably in a spear-throwing device called the atlatl. This device, already long in use, was able to maximize throwing power and could be used with great accuracy. The appearance of such sites in the lands just south of the Battle River, at Buffalo Lake for example, suggests that there was a slow accommodation being made to the more varied terrain of the parkland and a growing reliance on smaller game and waterfowl, as well as on bison.⁵

Over the next two and a half millennia, many other technological and social adjustments were made in plains society. The identification of the widespread Besant culture by archaeologists revealed the importance which the bison had come to assume in the economy of many groups. Here was a bison hunting culture and its members

appear to have introduced a version of the bison pound to the conditions of the open prairie.⁶

There were still other bearers of culture entering the prairie scene. Archaeologists are generally agreed that significant changes took place on the high plains around the time of the early common era. In those times both pottery and the bow and arrow came into use. The Avonlea peoples, named for a site in southern Saskatchewan where remains of their culture were first described, introduced or adapted from elsewhere the use of the bow and arrow.⁷

How did these advances come about? Debates centre upon the nature and extent of influences originating from very different directions, particularly from the Columbia Plateau across the mountains to the west, from the eastern woodlands, and from the southern Missouri River basin. While it is difficult to keep all of the balls of post-war Plains archaeology in the air at once, some have made efforts to synthesize the evidence.⁸ Reeves has argued that in the high plains region of some 1,800 years ago, “the bow and arrow was adopted by the Tunaxa cultural tradition from Salishan tribes of the mountainous west.” The new technology “rapidly replaced the spear thrower for killing buffalo.” In addition, pottery “was also adopted from neighbouring cultures to the east.”⁹ The conclusion was that peoples ancestral to historically known tribes, such as the Blackfoot and Assiniboine, have long been resident on the plains and parkland. Their manners of arrival, their earlier hearths, and the nature of their interconnections as groups take on greater obscurity as one moves back in time. Piecing together these lines of connection has been one of the main tasks of North American archaeology.

Systematic survey work in the parkland belt did not really begin until the 1960s, usually in provincial and national park settings. Of interest to professional archaeologists were the many locally gathered private collections, such as that of Mary Dunn Tiedemann of Deville, near Cooking Lake. A collector since youth, she developed a small museum on the family property in 1962 and shared the results with students and archaeologists.¹⁰

One focus for survey work was Elk Island National Park in the very heart of the Beaver Hills. Ian Wilson and Thomas Head undertook a formal archaeological survey in 1977 and located some 150 prehistoric sites, mainly oriented towards the water bodies and rivers of Elk Island. These were frequently sites of a quarry or campsite nature, and together they reflected a “wide range of human activities in the prehistoric past.” Subsequent work has amplified knowledge indicating that, in temporal terms, peoples have made use of the Beaver Hills for at least the last 8,000 years and that “seasonal rounds” of resource use have been of a longstanding order. That is to say, over the span of a given year, diverse peoples were accustomed to use the hills for different purposes, depending on the season and according to their requirements. The seasonal round was at the very core of nomadic and semi-nomadic economic life. Elk Island archaeologists noted that the number of sites encountered was “far greater than anticipated” and that they provided sufficient evidence to suggest that “the area was not a peripheral area



Archaeologist Rob Bonnicksen discussing Beaver Hills artifacts with collector Mary Tiedemann of Deville in the late 1960s.

or a prehistoric frontier zone” but was instead “a centre of activities.”¹¹ Ancient ceramics were also found and while they were first considered to be of uncertain origin, new thinking on the distribution of Avonlea sites has suggested that bearers of that culture occupied not just the more open prairies but also the parklands.¹²

The forces driving these changes may have ultimately originated in the area of the Upper Saskatchewan and Missouri and adjacent Rocky Mountains perhaps with certain bison-hunting peoples “ancestral to the western Algonkian and Kutenai tribes.” In the distinctive language of archaeology, Reeves drew a line of connection between these ancient hearths and some of the more familiar social groupings of recent times. Thus, the “Old Woman’s Phase” the “archaeological representative of the three Blackfoot tribes,” is said to have developed out of Avonlea “around 1,000 years ago.” Extending the observation to the local level, he notes that “distinctive Old Woman’s phase pottery has been found in Elk Island National Park.”¹³ In such passages do archaeologists abridge and unfold the centuries.

In the following half-millennium leading up to 1500 C.E., grassland and parkland groups continued to perfect these ceramic traditions. While refinements may have had their origins in the organized villages of agriculturalists further south and east along the middle Missouri, the ceramic traditions of the Beaver Hills may also reflect the northern forest origins of at least some of these folk. It was variants of the Algonkian languages of the north-eastern forests which were spoken by the historic Cree and Blackfoot peoples resident in the parkland belt, the people first encountered by European traders in the late seventeenth century.

The presence of fur traders on Hudson Bay after 1670 slowly changed the ways in which at least some Algonkian Cree peoples viewed their life at the fringe of the forest belt. When the Hudson’s Bay Company traders arrived, the Cree were a widely distributed people extending in a great arc across the boreal forest from Labrador to central Alberta.¹⁴ There were variations within this great patchwork of related peoples. The groups close in to James and Hudson

Bay quickly took on a favoured position in the prosecution of the fur trade, enjoying as they did the sudden benefits of trade goods such as guns. The Cree close to Hudson Bay derived an economic advantage as knowledge of these new goods reverberated down the line, causing groups to move, to alter their territorial ambitions, and enter into new diplomatic and trade relationships. Some have seen in this process the origins of an “invasion” by the Cree of the plains in an effort to extend the interests of the Hudson’s Bay Company. More recently, this undeniable southward movement of the Cree has been viewed as more of a self-directed adjustment by which select groups took to the prairies out of economic self-interest.¹⁵ Certainly adjustments did not always involve a direct thrust of people from the Bay regions down and out onto the prairies. There were many nuances of time and place. Some Algonkians had long been frequenters of the parkland zone, and only slowly mediated an expanded sphere of influence onto the prairies. Bands would have kept a foot firmly planted in the forest until the coming of



Artist John Innes illustrated a comparison of the dog and horse travois showing the relative load capacity of each.

the horse, at which point some committed more firmly to a prairie way of life, becoming the full Plains Cree.¹⁶

Fur trader Henry Kelsey witnessed the last vestiges of “dog days” – the ancient pre-horse world – when he came to the prairies from York Factory in the early 1690s. If the grasslands represented one great “commons,” then the sheltered and well-watered uplands were certainly recognized in somewhat similar terms by those who dwelled in the parkland belt. The gradual shift to horse use was not straightforward or always permanent. Alison Landals has noticed that the care, feeding and use of horses posed a wide range of new problems as opposed to the tasks required with dogs.¹⁷ Nevertheless, much changed in the 50 years after Kelsey’s visit with respect to mobility and extended tribal ranges.

When Pierre de La Vérendrye of Trois Rivières, Quebec, started to explore the plains in the 1730s, he was doing so on the very eve of the arrival of the horse among the northern tribes.¹⁸ In the centuries before 1730, mobility on the plains was measured and divided into the categories of the seasonal round in which knowledge of the movements of the bison was central and in which the strategy of the laborious communal hunt was important.¹⁹ The vagaries of climate meant that predictability of animal movements was, at best, very general. Frank Roe contended that it was “not the buffalo, but the Indian himself [who] was the architect of the Indian trails on the North American continent.”²⁰ Those living in river valley settings were naturally more sedentary. The villages of the Mandan, Manitaris and Arikaries visited by La Vérendrye in the 1730s suggest longstanding occupancy by gardening peoples in the well-watered portions of the Middle Missouri such as the Knife River Valley. In time, the combination of gun and horse soon turned the northern prairie and parklands into landscapes in motion.²¹ The Mandan villages disappeared in the process, victims of the new mobility that unwittingly aided in the deadly spread of contagion, affecting even more strongly those who were clustered in higher density and more fixed abodes.

For centuries the Beaver Hills had been something of a resource frontier for peoples of diverse backgrounds but limited geographic range. This had not come about by chance, but was instead a reflection of the rather unique position of the hills as a boreal outlier in the Parkland belt. As such, it provided a series of windows – north, south, east and west – onto landscapes which the diverse residents had, by degree, either left behind or were reluctant to enter. Within the bounds of the hills were to be found an amalgam of boreal, parkland and prairie resources, providing the best of all previously known worlds. After 1730 the possibilities inherent in increased mobility had wider day-to-day business implications. By 1800, international and cultural circumstances had conspired to pit some of the peoples of this old resource commons against each other more consistently. Thus, between the Battle and Saskatchewan Rivers, a sequence of hill regions traversing central Alberta and Saskatchewan, including the Neutral Hills, came to define a kind of rough dividing line between the newly mounted cultures of the Cree and Blackfoot, so much so that several traditions exist concerning the origins of this boundary.²²

In the nineteenth century, we shall see that the Beaver Hills, traditionally something of a “no-man’s land,” took on increased definition as specific tribal territory associated with the Cree and their allies. Such shifts in regional identity did not take place overnight, but were spread over a period of some 70 years.²³ The Cree, having gained access to European goods and technology and having fostered many kin relationships, gradually forced an evacuation of the Hills by the Sarcee and Blackfoot, establishing more firmly their own identity as the “Beaver Hills People” or the “Upstream People.”²⁴ Many events, legends and tales recorded in memoirs and historical accounts stress the dramatic and bloodthirsty aspects of those adjustments, although for centuries the Beaver Hills had been less a battle ground, more an uncontested resource commons.