A View of Aboriginal Pre-History Pertaining to Beaumont (in the Canadian West)

The intent of Part 1 in this review is to explore our Beaumont indigenous history, primarily before European contact and before the written word. Much must be extrapolated from information, both archeological and oral, across a much broader landscape than our community's boundaries. It is reasonable to assume similar experiences were shared over the expanse of the western prairies, and Central Alberta in particular.

The author does not extend Part 2 and 3 of this study beyond the collapse of the Papaschase Reserve, located near Beaumont. Including *this* part of local history brings perspective to aboriginal life once there was full engagement with Western newcomers. Pre-history traditional, and millennia-long, prairie lifestyles should be recognized as the focus of this document.

The term "indigenous" comes from the Latin meaning "sprung from the land: native." The word "aboriginal" means existing in a land from the earliest times." These words will be used interchangeably throughout. (22)

For millennia, people have inhabited the Canadian prairies, including around the Beaumont area.

But how did they get here?

And what were their lives like?

Prehistory is recognized as the time before the invention of a culture or society's writing system. For example, the first world written records are thought to be hieroglyphs in Egypt created 3,400-3,200 BCE (Before Common Era- uses the same numbering as B.C. notation system).

Archeological evidence of "modern" man's existence, beginning from 200,000 to 300,000 years ago, provides a perspective into the length of prehistory globally. (23)

Prehistory covers the vast majority of the western plains peoples' story. Their oral tradition preserved and conveyed all manner of past events, collective knowledge, and spiritual tradition.

PART 1A

Let us begin at the beginning.

A land with no people – a vast land:

A mere 18,000 years ago, virtually all of present-day Canada was covered in continental glaciers, which would have been hundreds, if not thousands, of meters thick. (1)

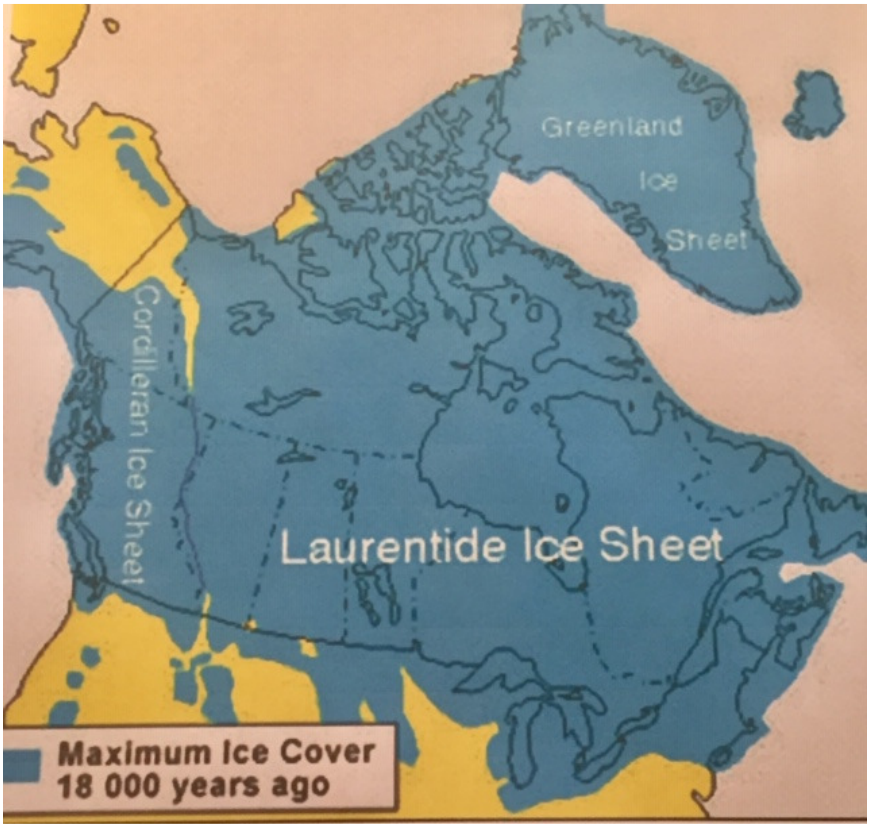

Figure 1: map of full glacial coverage (1)

Glaciers of this magnitude held so much of the earth's ocean water that sea levels were 120 meters (over 400 feet) lower than they are today. Coastlines across the globe were different. Most significantly for us, today's Bering Strait, between Asia (Siberia) and Alaska (the northwest tip of North America), was altered. Rather than a watery passage, sea bottom was exposed as dry land, connecting the two continents. This "land bridge", at some points over 1000 km wide and spanning almost 90 km end to end, is called Beringia. (7)

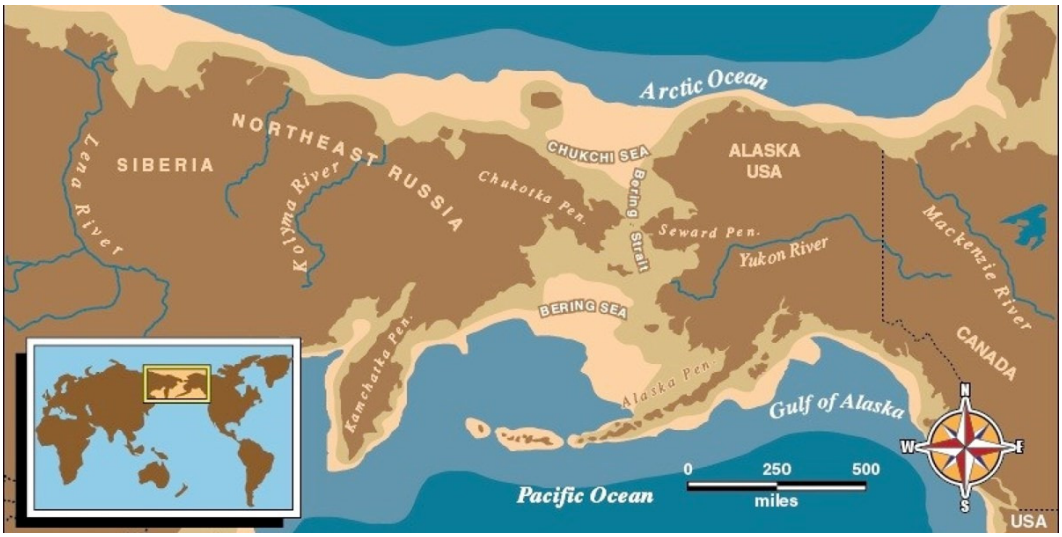

Figure 2: Map of Beringia – light brown borders depict Beringia (7)

Beringia began to emerge about 36,000 to 40,00 years ago as glaciers retained increasing amounts of the earth's water. And a complete connection between both sides is estimated to have lasted from 28,000 to 10,000 BCE. (12)

People lived on the Siberian side of this corridor perhaps as early as 400 centuries ago. These were thought to be the small, mobile, kin-based groups who moved into Beringia. (12) Settlement of Beringia depended upon the invention and perfection of a complex array of cultural and technological skills. Tailored clothing, secure dwellings, control of fire, special methods of food procurement and storage and possibly some form of watercraft to cross large, cold-water bodies, were pre-requisites for human life at those latitudes.

Some writers have suggested that the ancient colonization of Beringia represented an achievement equivalent to the exploration of Antarctica, the deepest oceans, and the moon. (40)

Animals from Siberia such as the giant short-faced bear, scimitar car, woolly mammoth and steppe bison moved onto the Beringia land corridor but ultimately became extinct. Others such as the muskox have survived their eastern migration to this day. (47)

Elk (wapiti) have their roots in ice age Eurasia. Elk bones are quite common in the early prehistoric campsites of Alaska and Yukon. It is possible that groups of humans followed these animals across Beringia and into the Americas. (48)

There is evidence that true camels evolved in the arctic and spread from Beringia east to Europe. (48) Animals would have had freedom of movement both ways across that expansive of land that no longer exists, including prehistoric horses, mammoths and mastodons. (48)

Traveling across and living for thousands of years on this wide expanse of hunting ground, may have been how those Asian and Siberian people became culturally separated, and genetically distinct from their forbearers before ultimately reaching North America. (4)

DNA evidence points to the peoples of Beringia being the direct ancestors of nearly all aborigines, in both North and South America. (62)

Several conditions, including unsurpassable glaciers on Beringia's east side until perhaps 13,000 BCE point to the possibility that these peoples may have inhabited Beringia for as long as 20,000 years. (12) No humans inhabited the Americas side - yet. But the land corridor, Beringia, changed that.

As climate changes created a wetter and warmer environment on Beringia, vegetation changed, animal and plant life changed. It is thought the nomadic people continued to move eastward in search of changing food sources. And, with glacial melting, ocean levels rose and Beringia re-submerged to become the waters of the Bering and Chukchi Seas. Direct evidence of this piece of world history disappeared under water as well, making future study challenging because of scarce or inaccessible remains.

The peoples that continued their eastern and then southern migration onto our continent became the ancestors of Canada and North America's first inhabitants. (4)

Although it is not known exactly when, or where people first set foot in North America, remains of tools and stone weapons have been found dating back 15,000 years. Oldest evidence may even date back 24,000 years, notably at the Bluefish Caves in the Yukon. (4)

The Bluefish Caves, near the Arctic Circle, are perhaps one of the oldest sites showing evidence of migration from Asia across Beringia. Research points to undeniable cultural indictors (specific and deliberate human activity) occurring sporadically as far back as 25,000 BCE. Cut-marked ice-age horse bones, and other traces of human hunters found, differ from random animal activity. Butchered remains of other ice-age animals such as steppe bison, caribou and elk, along with wolf, hare and swan bones have been excavated. (30)

Figure 3: Location of Bluefish Caves (30)

Evidence is emerging that the people of the great plains arrived by migration down from the north and also back up from earlier southern destinations. Movement into the new continent was not linear. (18)

There is newer research to suggest that water travel from Asia, along Canada's west coast, or even land travel along a narrow strip between the Pacific Ocean and the glaciers, contributed to migration onto our continent, And that as long ago as 14,000 years. (20) Seafarers may well have arrived even earlier than land traveler, prior to the ice-free corridor opening up through the Canadian west. (31)

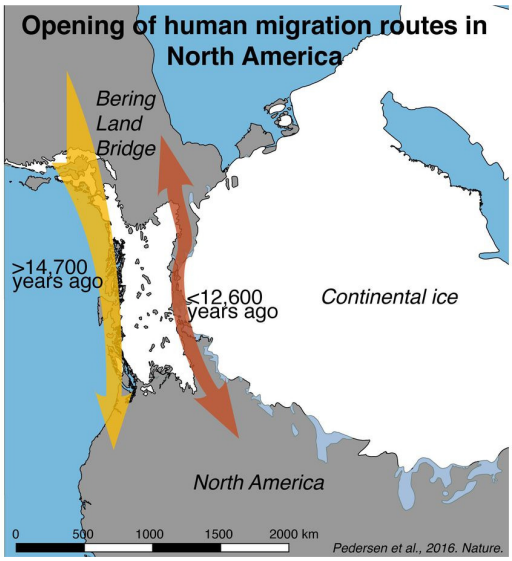

Figure 4: Migration routes from Siberia. (16)

Other theories of migration continue to be explored and researched. (6)
Human beings arrived to a totally uninhabited hemisphere, the intrepid hunter/gatherers who were to become our First Nations people. And at a time in history when the rest of the "known" world had yet to come out of the Stone Age. (46)

Figure 5: An illustration of ancient Americans in what is today called the Upward Sun River in central Alaska. The 11,400 year- old skeleton of a 6 week -old baby girl has been found at the site; the second oldest human genome ever found in North America. (50)

As the ice sheets began to retreat, more of our land emerged. From about 10,000 years ago, Canada was gradually "un-covered" as ice sheets slowly rolled back. This marks what we can consider the real beginning of the history of Canada, as migrating peoples were able to move onto the open land (18)

Edmonton archeological sites suggest southward migration from Beringia began when a long, narrow ice-free corridor opened up right through the Edmonton area (along the eastern slopes of the Rockies at the juncture of the two major ice sheets). Evidence for this stems from a remarkably high number of "fluted points", an early version of arrowheads typically created 13,000 to 11,000 years ago, in our area and on Alberta parklands. (63)

Figure 6: Ice free corridor opens between the two major ice sheets. (1)

Mikkel Winther Pedersen

Figure 7: A sample area of ice-free corridor today (16)

Figure 8: The extent of glaciation in Canada today. (1)

Millennia passed, as small groups of nomads roamed what would become Alberta and the western prairies, not aimlessly but following the seasons and animal migrations. The very earliest land-based peoples lived on game such as muskox, caribou, mammoths and bison and abundantly available plants and berries.

Remnants of prehistoric horse and camel remains, dating back 13,3000 years, have been found at Wally's Beach near Cardston in southern Alberta. Bones have been unearthed with cut marks as well as little packages of bone that appear to have been cut into food-sized parcels. The site could represent some of the first encounters between humans and grasslands animals. The glacial ice sheets from the last ice age likely had kept them separated for thousands of years, the animals to the south and peoples arriving from the north. (8)
Evidence of prairie, prehistory indigenous daily life is found widely.

Stone remains of medicine wheels as old as 5,000 years, predate Stonehenge and the pyramids. There have been over four dozen such "sacred circles" found in Alberta.

Medicine wheels (also called sun dials) are known as "geoglyphs", man-made designs made on the ground with stones or earth. They could take thousands of years to create.

Figure 9: Majorville, Alberta (SE of Calgary) medicine circle, one of 8 styles found in the province. (42)

Their use and significance is interpreted uniquely by different aboriginal cultures. A belief is that they are circles of awareness of the individual self, a circle of knowledge that provides the power we each have over our lives. (11) As "sky calendars" they may have had an astronomical purpose, connected with the rising of one of the brighter stars. And possibly served as indicators of the summer solstice. (24)

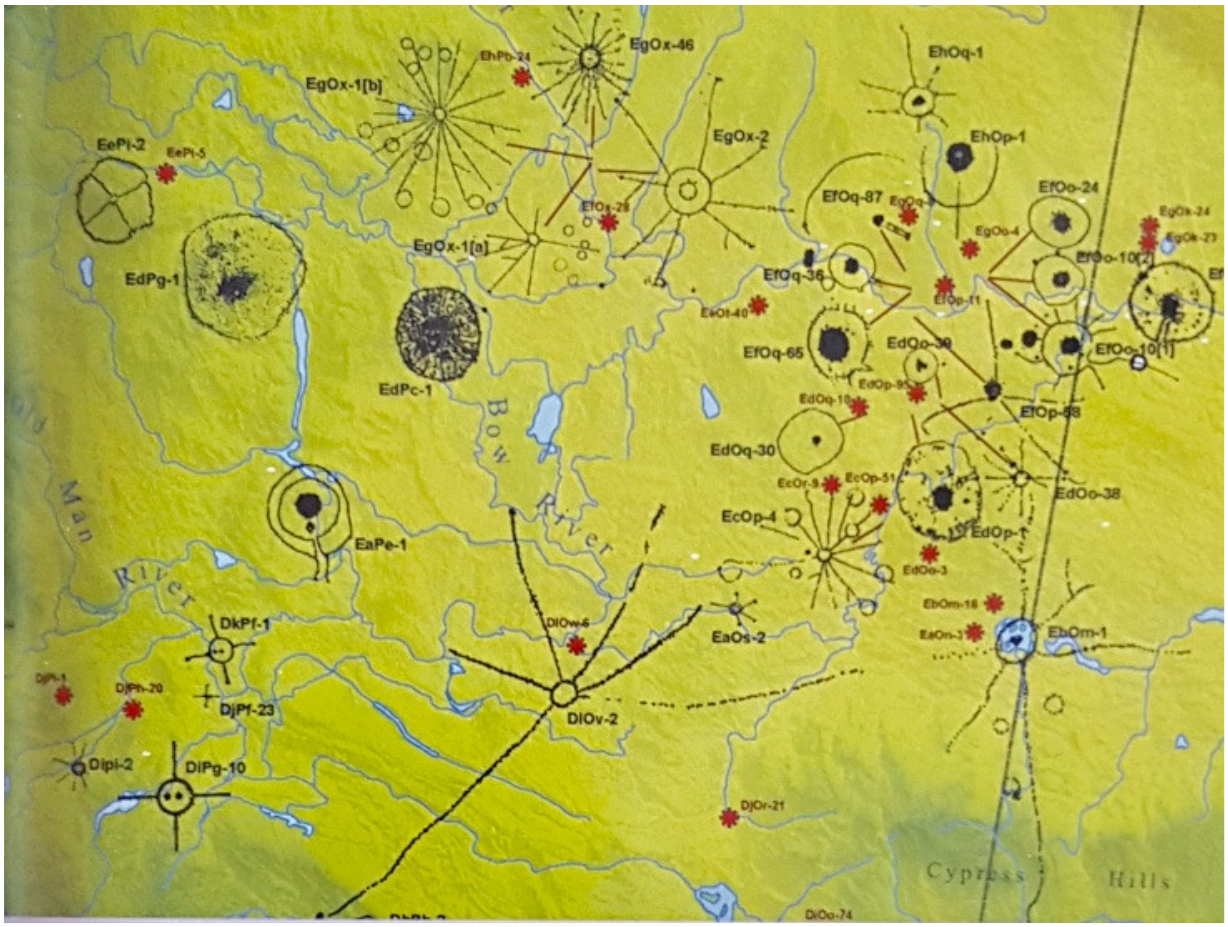

Figure 10: Alberta has, by far, the most of all known medicine wheels on the Canadian grasslands. (42)

Stone circles dot the prairies and are the remains of indigenous communities. Some of them in Alberta contain several hundred circles, indicating use over a considerable length of time. The stones held tipi bison hide coverings in place. The stones were left behind, in place, to be used over and over again with each migrating season. (24)

Figure 11: Tipi circle (42)
Tipis, the homes of aboriginal peoples of the Canadian prairies, evolved in style and design over time and according to the dictates of each individual nation peoples. The original Cree homes were dome shaped. Heated rocks were taken inside for warmth but all fire for cooking was kept outside.

In the prairie Cree culture, “tipi” (“mikiwâhp” in Cree) is a word derived from the Lakota word meaning “she or he who lives in a

sharp pointed lodge". While others used differing numbers of supporting poles to hold the animal (bison) hide, the Cree used 15, starting with 3 support poles. Each pole, put together in succession, signified a cultural value. The hide strip holding each new pole as it was added, was sacred, binding all the teachings together. (144)

And the control flaps at the top to vent smoke allowed for fires inside. Traditionally, the opening faced east. Explanations such as being sheltered from prevailing westerly winds or to signify the beginning of creation have been suggested. The tipi covering has been described by a Cree Elder as "an old woman with a shawl" over her shoulders, embracing teachings, values, and family.

As the domain of women, tipis, often decorated and painted, were erected, dismantled, and owned by a woman. They also cut and sewed the hide to fit the conical frame. (145)
Early tipis were only 12-13 feet tall. Materials were difficult to handle and it did not make sense to have them too high because the winds and storms would catch them. The ground edges were held down with stones.

Twelve bison hides might be needed, cut, and stitched together. There could also be an inner wall of skins about 2 meters high and fastened to the poles on the inside, to prevent drafts. Tipis were warm in winter, cool in summer and dry during rains.

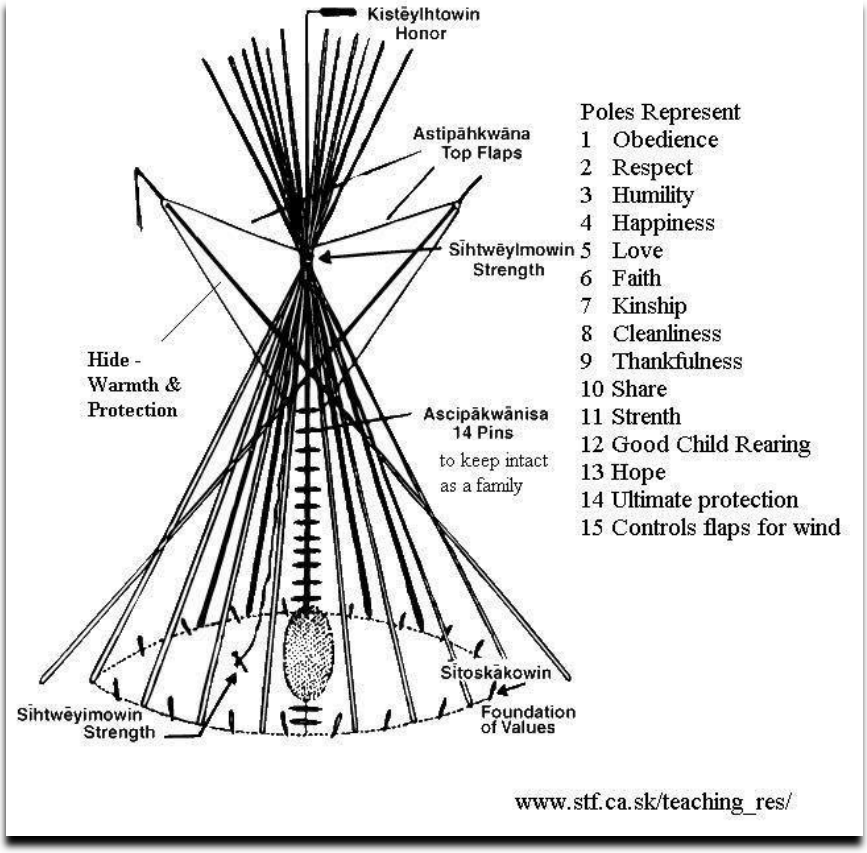

Figure 12: Tipi poles representing Cree cultural values. (146)

The poles, usually of long slender pine, were highly valued because replacements were not easy to find. Hides wore out every year or two, so replacement was an ongoing responsibility. With the arrival of the horse on the prairies, tipis were made larger, with more furnishings, because horses could carry/drag heavier loads than dogs. (19) (144) (145)

Photographer Playle, W. (147)

Figure 13: Hobbema Cree camp. Mrs. Alexander Yellowbird's family near Innisfail/Olds Alberta 1890s. One tipi has been painted for decoration. Glenbow Archives NA-682-6

To date no direct evidence of first nations campsites or home grounds have been found in Beaumont. It can be hypothesized, because of relics and more recent recorded history, that the Beaumont area may well have been a migration path for indigenous tribes living and thriving on the western prairies.

As of April 2020, the City of Beaumont has had no reports of "historical resource impact studies" resulting in the discovery of historic remnants or artifacts possibly identifying past occupancy by indigenous peoples. This type of study is included with environmental studies done prior to a large development permit application.

But it is not hard to extrapolate what life would have been like from areas nearby, across the province and the western prairies.