

Cherry Point



Exploring a seasonal camp and bison kill site on the shores of Oak Lake

The Times * The Land * The People * The Lifestyle

A Research Project

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on the shores of Oak Lake.

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Cherry Point

Cherry Point is a peninsula on the north shore of Oak Lake named for the chokecherries that can still be found on the wooded shoreline. Today it is a quiet green space alongside a cottage development. Some interpretive signs, a few benches, and a small parking lot welcome the visitor. Little in the landscape remains to remind a visitor of the significance of the site.

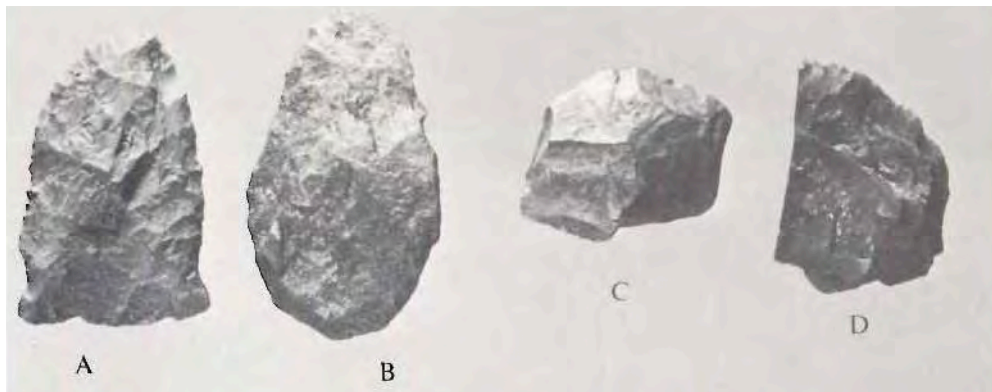


The Times

From 1000 to 2000 years ago the location was a seasonal camp and bison kill site for hunter-gatherers known as the McKean People. Elsewhere in North America during those times Inca, Mayan and Aztec civilizations of Central and South America had erected large cities. The Anasazi, or Ancient Pueblo Peoples were building cliff dwellings in Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico. To the east the Iroquois and Huron civilizations flourished in their large villages.

In Europe both the Greek and Roman civilizations blossomed, peaked, and declined.

These north-central plains were one spot in North America where agriculture hadn't been established. The climate wasn't suitable and the huge bison herds provided nearly everything the people needed.



Some of the numerous artifacts from Cherry Point

The Land

Oak Lake is situated on the flat plain of Glacial Lake Souris. At that time region was probably a transitional area between Parkland and Prairie vegetative zones.

Prior to large-scale agricultural use, brush fires and the grazing of huge bison herds kept wooded area to a minimum. Trees were confined to areas along waterways.



The marshy shore along Cherry Point

The Lake

Oak Lake has provided a welcome refuge to many peoples over the 12000 or so years that humans have inhabited this land. An abundance of resources including firewood, food and shelter, would have been available here, making it especially attractive for habitation during the spring and early summer months.

Archaeological research on this site from 1973 to 1975 indicate that the McKean People used Cherry Point as a seasonal bison kill and butchering site beginning over 2000 years ago.

The report on the excavation refers to, “the power of the lake as an attraction to the peoples of Manitoba, both modern and prehistoric”, and reminds us that over the centuries it has served as “a site for bison drives, the hunting of game, fishing, a centre of trade and trapping, a source of lumber for overland travellers, and most recently, as a summer holiday resort.”



The site of the series of excavations that helped uncover the past use of Cherry Point



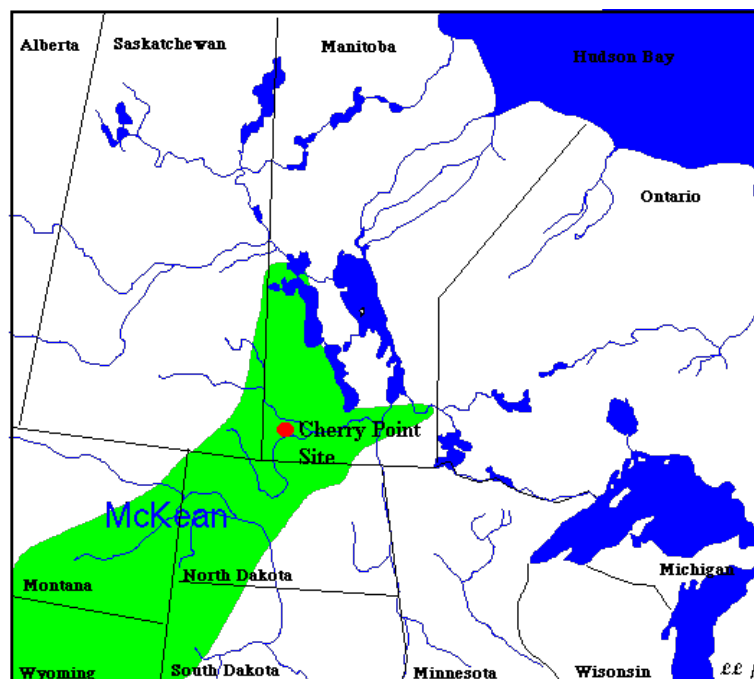
Working the site in 1974

The People

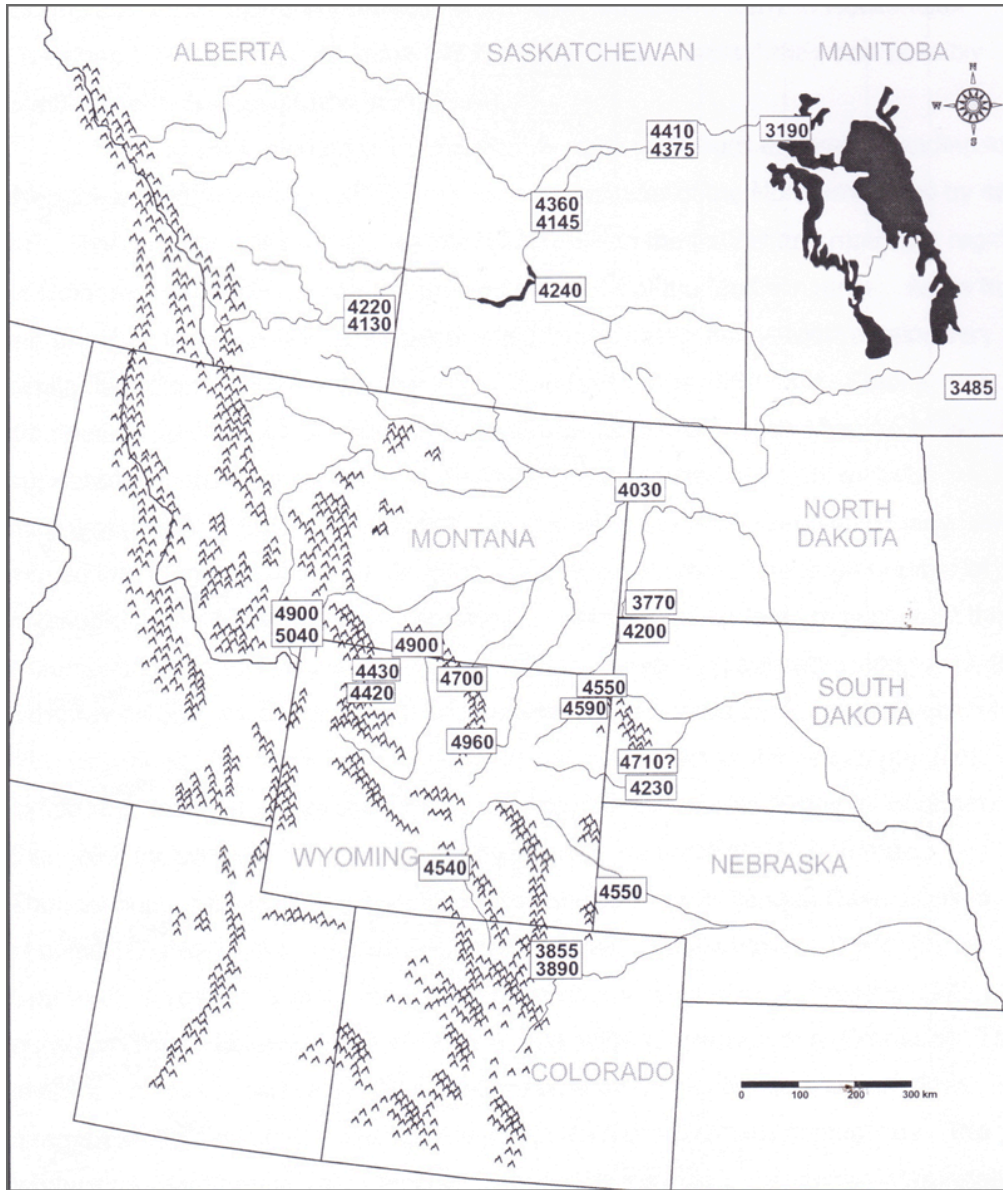
Evidence from the site reveals that peoples of every cultural complex known to southwestern Manitoba have occupied this lakeshore. Artifacts collected here span a range from projectile points left by the earliest inhabitants, to lead musket balls such as those used by Meitis bison hunters or fur traders, and on to pop bottle caps left by holiday campers. Much of the most significant artifacts however, relate to a group that had migrated northwards from the central Midwestern United States called the McKean People.

The McKean People, who used the site beginning about 500 BC, likely sought shelter from the open plains in more forested locales during the winter months but camped here in the spring and summer to make use of the resources. Animals living in this region included fox, wolf, mule deer, prong-horned antelope, modern bison, mountain lion, elk and bear. The marshy vegetation supported reeds, sedges and meadow grasses. But it was the bison that they relied upon.

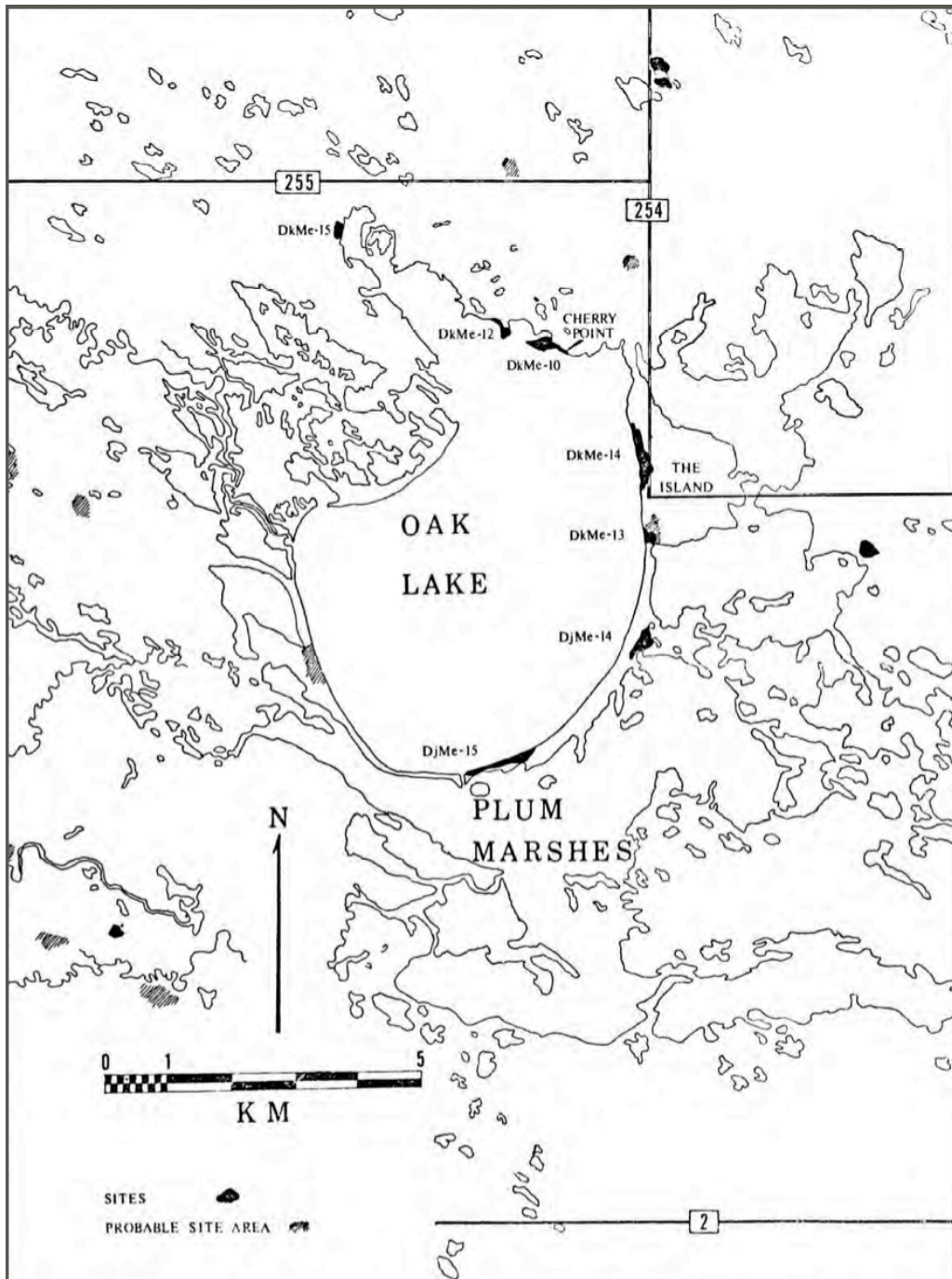
The ancestors of the McKean People are believed to have originated within the Desert Tradition, centered in the American Great Basin. They migrated into what is now Alberta and Saskatchewan before eventually coming east to Manitoba.



Research at Cherry Point confirmed that the McKean & Oxbow complexes survived in Manitoba long after they had disappeared in other areas of the plains. The prehistory of the Northern Plains was shown to be more “complex and dynamic” than otherwise thought. (Reeves 1970:217)



Webster, p96: McKean Sites with radiocarbon dates (BP (Before present))



Several other significant sites exist in the immediate area.



McKean Sites in Southwestern Mb. Syms, 1969

Origins and Adaptation

The Bighorn Basin and Yellowstone headwaters are the likely homeland of the McKean People. They appear in Canada about 500 years after they have been identified elsewhere.

McKean and Oxbow sites overlap. Separate Oxbow and McKean sites found adjacent to one another indicate that the groups co-habited and shared a similar subsistence base. The McKean tradition is particularly well represented in Manitoba at the Cherry Point.

People who produced McKean projectile points were highly adaptable, and had developed strategies to exploit resources in a variety of settings such as the Boreal Forest of Manitoba and the mountain ranges of Wyoming and Colorado.

The spread of McKean People may be related to changing climatic conditions, and to increased population pressure within the 'core region'. Their outward expansion was likely facilitated by the adaptability of the McKean toolkit and a willingness to utilize a wide variety of resources. That they co-existed in this region with other hunter-gatherer societies, some of them seemingly more complex, may indicate that there was a relative abundance of food – notably the bison, or that there were adaptations of which we are as yet unaware.

Lifestyle

Evidence from this and other sites indicates that the McKean People were a highly adaptable culture that developed strategies to exploit resources in settings ranging from the Boreal Forest of Manitoba to the mountains in the western U.S.A.

Sites are found 2500 metres above sea level in mountainous areas, on the short-grass prairie of Montana, and on the Manitoba Lowlands. Hunters occupying the Cemetery Point site in eastern Manitoba relied on the big and small game that the forest provided. At Cherry Point, the diet was predominantly bison.

The occurrence of grinding stones at earlier McKean sites in Wyoming suggests that vegetable foods were ground and used for subsistence in that region. Earlier McKean sites in Montana and Wyoming show evidence of pit houses, indicating a more settled lifestyle. No evidence of either was found at Cherry Point.

The McKean People who moved northwards may have become specialized in bison hunting and reduced their dependence on vegetable food processing and their use of grinding implements (Dyck 1983:101). Of course they took advantage of other available large game, they trapped small animals, and foraged for seeds and vegetables.



An excavation in 1975

But the implication is that they adapted to their surroundings. The hunter / gatherer lifestyle was the logical choice for the time and place. In other places, and at other times, other strategies were required.

Across the northwest they show a preference for locations along large rivers. The Cherry Point site seems an exception to that, but it was only a season kill site rather than a year-round settlement.

The use of North Dakota Knife River Flint at Cherry Point indicates that the inhabitants either had to travel approximately 300 kilometres south or that they traded with other groups who did travel. All evidence points to a quite sophisticated technology. They lived a simple lifestyle based mainly on bison kill, but they were very efficient at what they did.

Harvesting and Processing Bison

The stone tools, projectile points (arrowheads) and scrapers found here, tell stories of how people butchered bison, processed meat, and prepared hides.

The scattered patterns of small bone fragments suggest that bones were smashed to obtain marrow, which is rich in protein and fat. The remains of moose, wolf, fox, badger, turtle, fish and elk were also found indicating that these people subsisted on many other animals in addition to bison.

There are two stages in the butchering process. Light butchering took place at the kill site in advance of transporting the carcasses. Heavy, non-meaty bones were left behind. The relative absence of skulls and larger bones at Cherry Point tends to indicate that the kill site may actually now be covered by the lake and that this campsite was used for those final stages.



Making the Kill

The wave-cut bank that exists today was quite likely not there when the McKean People used the site, but the marshy shore below played a role in the killing process. Animals were likely driven singly or in small groups along the peninsula and into the lake. The initial dismemberment of the carcasses took place along the shore. Quarters, heads, and neck portions of the animals would be hauled further up the shoreline where excavations have uncovered evidence of butchering activity



One excavation site was known as the shoreline site, the main excavation site was further uphill.

The Role of Bone Marrow

An important part of the final stages of the butchering process was the extracting of marrow used for the making of “bone grease” or “bone oil”. To do this, first the meat was removed from the bones and they were left for a day or more to dry. This made it easier to break them, and improved the flavour. The bones were then smashed into small pieces and boiled. The grease was then scooped off the top and stored in an animal bladder. It would keep for up to three years.

Bone grease provided an all-purpose substance. It was full of protein, fat, and flavour. It was used the way we use butter or lard today. It could be eaten frozen, used to improve pemmican, and even used as hair oil.

Breaking the Bones

Two methods for breaking the bones were identified through an analysis of the type of fracturing evident. One method involved striking the middle of a bone which is supported at each end. Another method is to strike a bone directly over the spot where it is supported. Once the bones were broken, the marrow was extracted with a smooth stick or a slender bone fragment. The marrow could be stored but was often eaten fresh, during butchering.



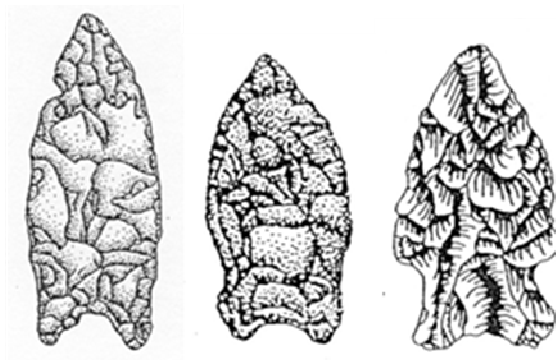
Interpreting The Archaeological Record

Projectile Points

Numerous detachable tips that were used on weapons such as arrows or spears have been collected. Stone points may be unifacial or bifacial and may be manufactured by flaking or grinding.

Because of the variety of forms which these weapons may take, and because of the frequently rigid adherence to a particular style by members of a culture, projectile points are particularly useful time markers for the archaeologist.

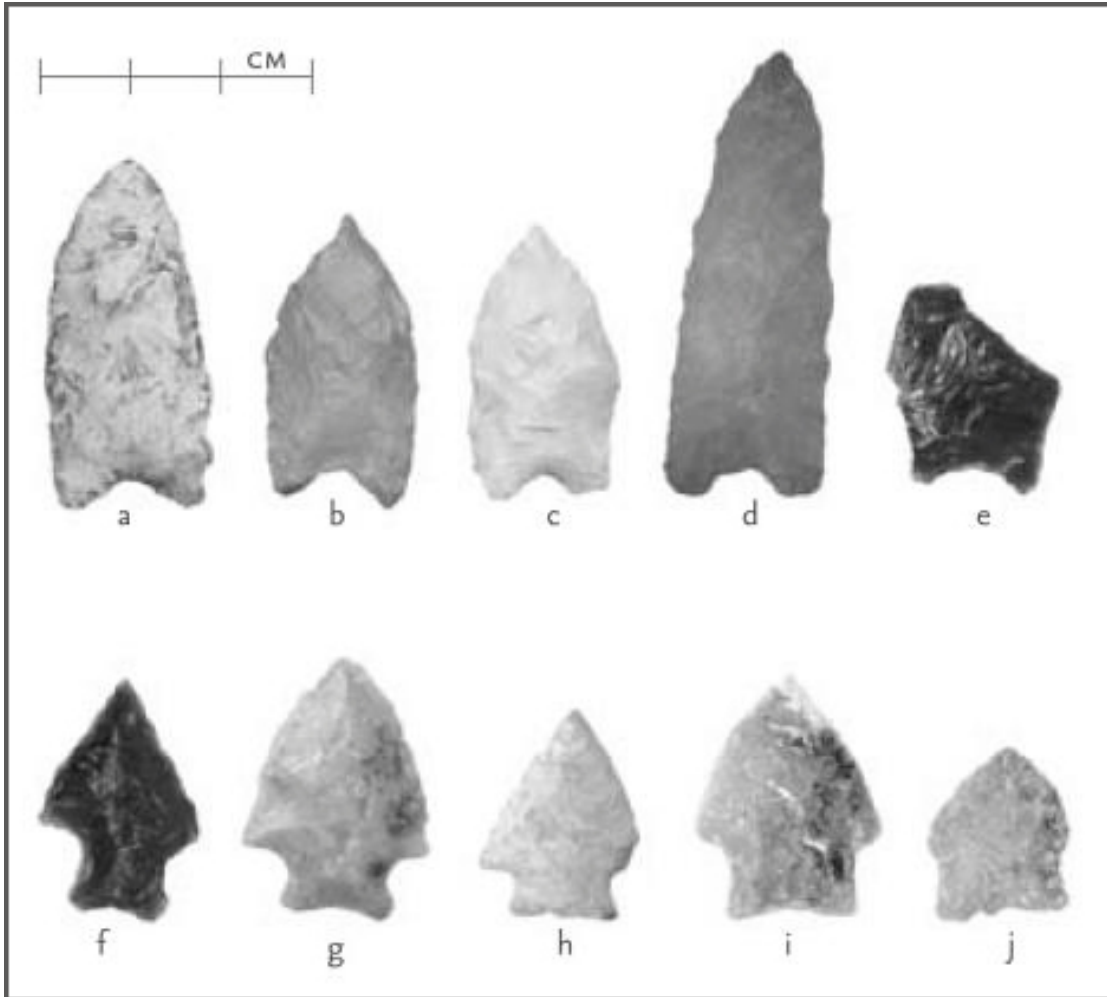
Three styles of projectile points are associated with the McKean culture: McKean, Duncan and Hanna. The McKean has a concave base with no side notching, the Duncan has a similar base but includes side-notching. The Hannapoint has wider corner notches.



McKean | Duncan | Hanna



A sample of the many points collected at Cherry Point



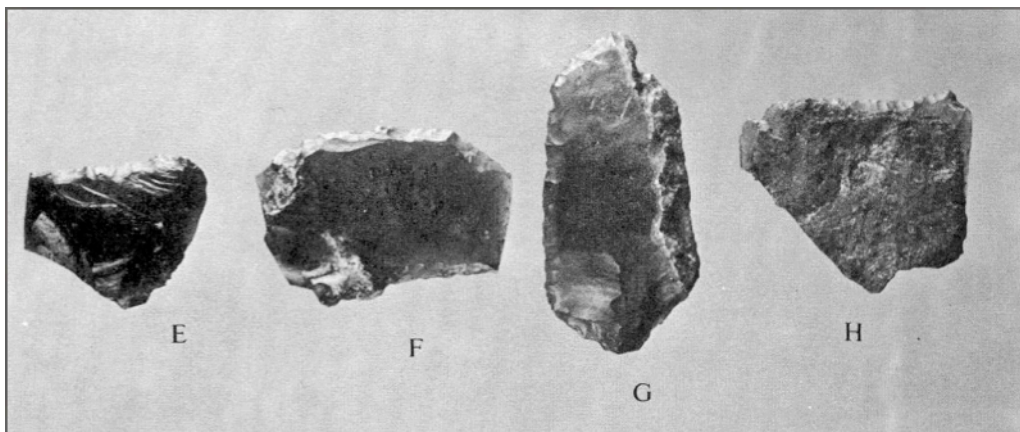
Points found at the site.

Scrapers

Scrapers were also generally made of stone. They are used to scrape hides to remove hair and fat, and to soften skin. They may also be used for cutting skin. The relative scarcity of knives at this site suggests that little cutting took place.

End scrapers use one or both ends of a blade or flake as the working edge; and side scrapers utilize one of the long sides of the scraper as the working edge.

Scrapers are typically formed by chipping the end of a flake of stone in order to create one sharp side and to keep the rest of the sides dull to facilitate grasping.



A sample of the scrapers found at Cherry Point

Summary

The findings at the Cherry Point site are important because they help archeologists develop a more complete picture of an era in our shared history. Because the McLean culture was found to have survived and adapted in Manitoba long after it disappeared in other areas, and because it developed unique features here, we are more aware of the complexity of the societies who inhabited what is now our home.

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The McKean Complex

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