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Lorain County, Ohio Indians

Paleo to Historic Period

PATHWAYS OF THE PIONEERS

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LORAIN COUNTY'S INDIANS

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Knowing that this article will be read by many laymen, I offer apologies to my colleagues for its generalization and lack of scientific terms. Also due to limitation of space, it was necessary to be brief and to leave much unsaid.

The first recognized evidence of man in this area was the artifacts of the Ice Age hunter or Paleo Indian who existed and hunted here about 15,000 years ago after the glacial ice began to melt and the large prehistoric animals moved in to feed on the lush vegetation which sprang up in the moist and warming climate. The flesh-eating animals followed the herbivorous beasts and man arrived on the scene to prey off both.

Little or no remains of Paleo Indian are found north of South Ridge and Center Ridge for during this period the waters of the glacial lake terminated at the crest of these ridges. Most of early man's hunting was done around the swamp and marsh areas where animal life was most abundant. He followed the ridges and higher ground and here one finds his spear points which are distinctive and easily recognized.

Paleo spear points were not notched or stemmed nor shouldered but contained a longitudinal flute or flaked area on one or both sides depending on workability of the flint. These fluted areas extended to the point or as nearly so as the flint worker could control. The slightly concave bases of these points were sanded or ground to retard the cutting of the lashings which fastened the point to its shaft. Material used was primarily dark gray or black Onondaga chert but other flints were used, even that from Flint Ridge although the Paleo points of highly colored flint from the Ridge are rather scarce. At this time man's most developed weapon was the spear.

About 7000 B.C. a new culture of prehistoric man came into being. Known as the Archaic Culture, their existence was long lived extending to 1000 B.C. The Archaic Culture existed with some changes for about 8000 years, the longest of our recognized cultures of early man in America. Man progressed from the roaming hunter with his spear to man who built shelters, started to become less nomadic and finally developed stone dishes and crude pottery. Man was now on his way, slowly losing many of his animal-like traits.

Archaic projectile points were made of many different cherts or flints, the most common style being side notched and often retaining the polished bases of the earlier Paleo Culture. Many of the projectile points of this culture are created from very colorful materials and man's appreciation of beauty seemed to have awakened.

Grooved stone axes appeared during the Archaic period only to be discarded and forgotten by later cultures who preferred the ungrooved or celt forms for their tools and weapons.

Much bone and antler was used for tools and weapons by the Archaic peoples. All the Indian village sites of Lorain County are multicultural and show occupation by Archaic people prior to use by Woodland and

Mississippian groups. Both the Vermilion and Black river valleys as well as the lesser streams contained village sites occupied by several cultures of early man at different periods of time. What one man found desirable others also enjoyed and used either out of choice or necessity. Most cultures became transitional and earlier cults evolved into new more complicated economic structures with more emphasis being placed on ceremonies and rituals.

As the Archaic periods drew to a close, we find a new highly advanced cultural group evolving. This, archaeologists have classified as the Woodland Culture which is divided into early, middle and late Woodland aspects. The early or Adena people lived in Lorain County as did the Hopewell and other Woodland groups from 1000 B.C. to 1000 A.D. In my excavation of local sites of this culture, I have found charcoal which by carbon 14 tests has given us a date of 1005 B.C.

The Adena people made conical and very symmetrical mounds often with log tombs within and practiced elaborate burial rites. Large stemmed-base spearheads of colorful flint, often Flint Ridge material, were among their remains as were highly polished and well designed gorgets and pendants of banded Laurentian slate. Drilling of the perforations in such ornamental forms was done from one side with only a removal of the burr done on the reverse side. Others of the Woodland Cultural group bored such holes from both surfaces. Such perforations were made by flint drills which produced tapered holes — the drills being driven by bow or pump methods or by twirling the hafted drill by rolling the hands back and forth causing rotation. Tubular tobacco pipes of stone were made by the Adenas.

Remains of the Adena people are abundant in both Black River and Vermilion River Valleys as are those of the Hopewellians and Iroquoians that followed. The Engel-Eiden Site, which I excavated in Sheffield, produced some of the finest Adena remains.

These people made thick walled pots with conical bottoms and tempered with coarse grit and crushed rock. Cloth impressions were on many pottery vessels for decoration and roughening effects.

Late Adena evolved into early Hopewell and at this period the people of the Woodland Culture really advanced to a cultural plane never before equalled in what is now United States. Great mounds were built, containing quantities of grave goods of artistic creations. Objects of copper, effigy pipes of colored Ohio pipestone were numerous. They were great artists and carvers.

Hopewellian pottery was finer ware than that made by the Adena people. The bodies of the pots were often zoned or divided into four areas in which different effigies of birds or animals were incised before the pottery was fired.

Projectile points of the Hopewellians were of several types but most indicative are the forms with notches resembling an inverted comma. Flint from Flint Ridge was often employed in their creation, although both Plum Brook flint from near Sandusky and Plum Run flint from near Alliance were used in making some specimens found in Lorain County.

During the Woodland Cultural era man ceased to be the nomad, built permanent homes and settlements where he practiced agriculture and stored surplus food for winter use. Starvation and hunger were no longer such dreaded enemies of man.

There were lesser groups of Woodland peoples but space will not permit a lengthy discourse on many of Lorain County's Indians.

This brings us to the Mississippian Culture which comprises the Eries and other Iroquoian tribal units, the Fort Ancient people and others.

We are concerned at this time with the prehistoric Eries who lived in what is now Lorain County from 1300 A.D. to 1655 when they were destroyed and the remnants taken into the other Iroquoian tribes, primarily by the Senecas. They passed into oblivion at the dawn of history but their remains are abundant in valleys of all the Lake Erie feeder streams of Lorain and adjoining counties.

Most significant of their artifacts are the triangular projectile points and elbow shaped tobacco pipes of pottery. Usually the projectile points are made from pebble chert found in the stream beds but some high grade flint was used on occasion or when available.

The Mississippian Culture existed from 1000 A.D. to the historic period when numerous tribes roamed over our country.

The Eries practiced agriculture, stored corn, pumpkins and squash in cistern-like pits near their homes and often within. Their dwellings were longhouses of pole and bark construction with earthen floors. Hides and skins were used to make the houses more comfortable, especially in winter. Several fires burned within the homes and often several very large fires were maintained outside, where animals were dressed and other chores performed.

Food was cooked in pottery vessels, which if we may judge by the shards found, were made in great quantities. The pots were well made and decorated by impression and incision while the clay was still green or unbaked. Many persons became ill and some died from food poisoning because of the porous and unclesed cooking pots. Because of this, many pots were smashed to release the devils and bad spirits which they thought caused their illness. This accounts for the thousands upon thousands of potsherds found on the village sites. Only a few whole vessels remain of the thousands once in use.

With the annihilation of the Eries, all of northern Ohio became a no man's land — hunted and fought over but actually owned by none. The Senecas and Mohawks hunted and trapped here. Shawnees roamed about at times and the Hurons or Wyandots fleeing from the Senecas came south across the lake to Sandusky Bay and eventually into the Sandusky River Valley. Slowly some of these Iroquoian people wandered eastward to the Vermilion and Black River valleys and some early settlers in Birmingham and nearby remember these displaced Indians.

The Seneca Indian reservation was located in what is now Seneca County and parts of adjoining counties. Here on the reserve lived more Mohawks than Senecas but it mattered not as both were Iroquoian with similar traits and language.

The last of Ohio's Wyandots or Hurons to remain were the Christian Indians at Upper Sandusky. Their mission (restored) still stands today but they ceded their lands to the United States Government in 1842 and thereby relinquished the last foot of Ohio soil owned by the Aborigines. Yet within the graves at the rear of the mission and in many Indian burial grounds these noble souls still retain their birthright and final resting place.

Note:

For further information see:

"Indians of The Lake Erie Basin" - Vietzen
"The Immortal Eries" - Vietzen