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Ohio's Prehistoric Inhabitants

Focusing on the North Central, Amherst, Ohio Area

Col. Matthew W. Nahorn, Director

New Indian Ridge Museum

Amherst, Ohio

As the giant mile high glaciers receded by melting back, a temporary meltwater lake formed in the troughs that they eroded out of the ground. The land around it slowly drained into this lake, its southern bounds at what we now know as roughly State Route 113 (or formerly 59). About 12,000 years ago, Paleo man came into this area and hunted the giant mammoths and mastodons roaming this land. The lake however did not remain here. The glacier continued to recede, and as it melted back, new outlets allowed the southern boundary to slowly march northward, and at each major interval, a new, temporary, terminal beach ridge boundary formed, the final being the "North Ridge" as we know it today. Meltwater collected in front of these melting glaciers, forming small lakes. As prehistoric man continued to hunt and gather in this area over the years, the changing geography was used to his benefit. The ancient beach ridges were used as travel routes, as they are high, having a good general visibility and well-drained with their composition of sandy soil. On either side, a swampy area contained rich hunting grounds. These Indian pathways were found by the early white settlers to be useful as well, and we see this today as this history has persisted into modern day – our "ridge roads" occupy these ancient beach ridges. At about 4,000 years ago the present-day outlet at the St. Lawrence River was opened, and the glacial lake, within the bounds of its Icelandic Trough geologic feature, was at about its present level that we see today – Lake Erie's current level.

The northern Ohio area has been home to all types of people for several thousand years. Some of the earliest people to live here were of the Paleo culture. About 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, the area from today's immediate southern shore of Lake Erie south to roughly the boundary of Ohio State Route 113, was under water and known geologically as Lake Whittlesey. This area had been under about a mile-high

thickness of glacial ice. Our “ridge roads” of today are actually beach ridges left behind by ancient lakes that formed from melting glaciers. When the glaciers finally melted and receded, the land rebounded through isostatic rebound, and it was allowed to drain via consequent streams (streams that formed as a consequence of their surrounding topography), through to the St. Lawrence River. This drainage and erosion has formed much of the landscape as we know it today. This allowed the Great Lakes to lower to their current level, and actually somewhat lower at one point. Ancient lakes that covered this area is the reason that there is an overall absence of artifacts suggesting Paleo inhabitation, in this immediate area. There was however a cache of about thirteen Paleo spear points plowed up in a field in South Amherst just south of Routes 113 and 58, on the East bank of Beaver Creek.

The Beaver Creek watershed is the largest watershed located entirely within Lorain County, having its mainstem flowing directly into the Lake Erie. Thousands and even just hundreds of years ago, the Beaver Creek flowed more reliably and was more powerful and able to support powering early saw and grist mills – these were however still known as “thundershower mills.” Much of the rain water had the opportunity to soak into the ground when it rained; no impervious cover was present. This “impervious cover” includes anything from asphalt and concrete to rooftops. Impervious cover forces water to run off the land and does not allow it to soak in and percolate through the soils. Naturally, water percolation into the soils recharges groundwater levels for creeks and rivers. Particularly, the Russia Township and Oberlin, Ohio areas were historically swampy, where water could slowly percolate through the ground, recharging the Beaver Creek and nearby Black River.

Many fur bearing animals, such as the beaver for which the stream is named, were quite prominent in the area. The Amherst Historical Society is currently preserving a man’s top hat that was fashioned many years ago of beaver fur.

The property contained within the 1811 Historic Shupe Homestead in Amherst, was a prehistoric site, used by these peoples. A small number prehistoric artifacts have been recovered in and around this area, but the landscape itself simply speaks to being quite hospitable for prehistoric inhabitants. High cliffs along the Beaver Creek, creating protections through peninsulas and the like characterize this area, in the northern part of the watershed. This landscape allowed these people to utilize the Creek’s resources, while at the same time these places added the comfort of a secure,

high spot to inhabit. Col. Vietzen always said that if you think a landscape is beautiful, the Indians thought it was beautiful.

Who were our prehistoric neighbors? Who lived in this area of Ohio a few thousand years ago? This section will attempt to answer these and other important questions. There are hundreds of local archaeological sites that provide an important glimpse into Ohio's prehistoric history. These sites have provided a rich record of the people who lived in the Lake Erie Basin. A few will be explored here.

Col. Raymond C. Vietzen (1907-1995) was a prominent archaeological scientist and anthropologist who was born and raised in Elyria, Ohio. He operated the Indian Ridge Museum on a portion of his family's property located at the corner of West Ridge and Fowl Roads for about sixty-five years (1930-1995). Between 1997 and 1999, the contents of Col. Vietzen's Indian Ridge Museum were sold at auction.

It is important to become enlightened on Col. Vietzen. He was not only an archaeological scientist, but also an artist and an author, having published seventeen books. He was the last living individual who was associated with the founding of the Archaeological Society of Ohio (at the time of its founding, it was the Ohio Indian Relic Collector's Society). Today, it is the largest archaeological society in the United States. As the last living founder of the Archaeological Society of Ohio, he was a charter member, served as president, secretary, treasurer, and editor of the society's bulletin in the first years of the society. He worked alongside the founders and was good friends with many of them. He gave his all to the society over the years. For many years, he and his wife Ruth hosted the Archaeological Society of Ohio's picnic on Father's Day at his Indian Ridge Museum. He kept the society together during hard times and published a fine bulletin throughout his tenure. Ruth Bliss Vietzen, his wife, served as the first female officer of the society.

Col. Vietzen later decided to put all of his efforts on the Indian Ridge Museum and Lorain County Historical Society (of which he also served an office). To build his Indian Ridge Museum collection, Col. Vietzen worked on numerous local, prehistoric, archaeological sites. At one time, he estimated that his museum preserved over one million artifacts. This estimation was later affirmed.

Pleasant reading.

Chronology in Ohio

Chronology in Ohio is basically straight forward. The chart below has been generally accepted for the Ohio area. The first people to come to this area are known as the Paleo culture. Next, in order are, Archaic, Woodland (including the highly advanced Hopewell), Erie (in northern Ohio; Fort Ancient in southern Ohio), then the historic American Indians (at the time of the contact period between the prehistoric Native Americans and the European settlers). Of course these early people are “prehistoric” and thus did not have contact with white man or European settlers. Thus, we do not know what they called themselves. Therefore, the names you see here are simply group names that archaeologists and anthropologists have assigned to these native peoples. They of course left not written records, &c. The only evidence they left behind are their village or camp sites and the tools they used.

<u>Time Period (circa):</u>	<u>Name of Prehistoric Peoples:</u>
12,000 B. C. to 10,000 B.C.	Paleo
7,500 B. C. to 2,500 B. C.	Archaic
1,000 B. C. to A. D. 600	Woodland (including Hopewell)
A. D. 1,000 to A. D. 1,600	Eries (Fort Ancient in southern Ohio)
A. D. 1,600 to A. D. 1,700	Historic Period (Contact Period). Prehistoric peoples had disappeared from Ohio. At circa A. D. 1700, several Native American Indian groups moved into Ohio. There were very few Native Americans here when the first European settlers came to the Lorain County area.

How did these people get here, one many ask. This is an interesting question, and continues to be the center of much debate. This question and others will be attempted to be answered here.

The Paleo people were nomadic, ice-age hunters, who followed the herds of “food” – the mammoth, mastodon, and caribou. They did not live in permanent village sites such as the later culture of the Eries. The climate in the Bering Strait area was turning quite cold. As the mammoths and mastodons decided to follow the sun, in search of more food, they wandered closer to what we now know as Alaska. As a result of this freezing weather, much of the water in the area had become locked up in ice. This aided in the formation of the “land bridge” that formed with ice and land to connect the Old World and the New World. As the mammoths and mastodons moved this way (into

the Americas), so did the Paleo people. These animals were the people's main source of food but were not native to the Americas. So, there they came, the prehistoric Paleo people entering the New World, about 12,000 years ago.

The **Paleo** peoples used fluted or unfluted projectile points, spears, uniface flake knives, and square knives to hunt, cut, and for all other utilitarian purposes. The fluted point is the most ancient form found. The flute or channel was utilized to hold the shaft in place when projecting or throwing the point forward. Large, thick fist axes of chert were used as well as finely fashioned chert square knives. With their nomadic lifestyle, these people maintained a small tool kit and could not carry much.

The majority of all prehistoric tools were made of varying qualities of chert (flint). This material occurs all over the country. Flint Ridge material, occurring in Southern Ohio, is some of the finest. It is Ohio's state gemstone. Flint is a glass, mostly silica. Flint is like our window glass of today. Old flint, that is, flint that has been quarried and exposed to the air for a time, is very difficult to cut and shape (just like old glass). Glass manufactured years ago is much more difficult to work with, compared to glass that was made recently. The Flint Ridge area comprises of about three counties in Southern Ohio. The material is found in all colors, basically from black to white.

Next, the **Archaic** culture is evidenced. The Archaic peoples created a unique side-notched point that was more reliable and easier to fasten to the shafts. The Archaic people's tool kit included the grooved axes and other ground stone tools. Dr. H. C. Shetrone, formerly of the Ohio State Museum (now Ohio Historical Society) once stated that all grooved axes are of the Archaic period. This holds true; Col. Vietzen also agreed with this statement. Celts, an ungrooved axe, were the successor to the fully-grooved, three-quarter-grooved, and half-grooved axes. These tools ranged greatly in size and shape. Overall, they were a heavy-duty tool crafted of a hardstone, often of granite or other hardstones. Sometimes celts were of slate or even chert. Later in the Archaic period, some sites suggest that these people had seasonal locales they would often return to, each year. These people were beginning to settle and become somewhat less nomadic.

The **Woodland** culture came next. These people are characteristic of developing a much improved form of pottery. Generally, the thicker the pottery, the older the pottery. The Woodland group is subdivided into two groups: the Adena (Early Woodland) and the Hopewell (Middle Woodland). The Adena peoples had developed a stemmed projectile point or spear. The Hopewell people were highly developed. Their use of exotic materials such as mica (from the Carolinas), copper, and highly sought after obsidian (volcanic glass) for ceremonial pieces is characteristic of this

culture. Throughout Col. Vietzen's more than sixty-five years in archaeology, he came to believe that this culture, the **Hopewells**, were at the pinnacle of prehistoric peoples. With the more settled lifestyle of these cultures, time was available for creation of ornaments to wear, ceremonial objects, and other related items.

After the Woodland period, in the late prehistoric era, the **Eries**, Heries, or "Cat Nation" occupied Northern Ohio, on the southern shores of Lake Erie. They were called the "Cat Nation" because these peoples wore furs of cat-like animals – probably raccoons. These animals were always abundant in the area. On an early map that the author located and studied, the area located along the southern shore of Lake Erie was labeled as "Nation du Chat" or literally "Nation of the Cat" (French). Numerous remains of raccoons have been recovered on local Erie sites, some items having been ceremonial in use. In the southern part of the state, the Fort Ancient peoples inhabited that area. These two groups of peoples evolved to live in sizeable agricultural villages, rather than being nomadic hunters. The Erie's style of "arrowhead" was a more or less equilateral triangular point that is often numerous on their village sites. Several village sites were located in Northern Lorain County. The Eries were ultimately defeated by the Iroquoian peoples in 1654. Why and how?

The English and Dutch had begun trading with the Iroquois for furs in the East. Large trading posts had been established. With the "richest" hunting and trapping grounds being located to the West, along the southern shores of Lake Erie and belonging to the Eries, the Iroquois needed control of this land to fulfill their orders at the trading posts. The Eries wanted to retain their land and therefore this commenced a long, bloody war.

Much of the evidence of the Eries inhabitation has been documented by the Jesuit priests who visited this area. The range of the Eries has long been believed to have extended from Erie, Pennsylvania and Ripley, New York to approximately the Maumee River at Toledo, Ohio. We maintain that this range of territory is still valid and true. Disputes have always been noted as to whether the Eries inhabited this extensive area. But, with the documentation that Col. Vietzen uncovered and further research, along with the Jesuit records, it is only right to recognize and acknowledge that the Eries did inhabit this area. We must not forget what previous archaeologists have uncovered – this will light the way to the future and provide all of us with better knowledge. "A backward glance in history will light the way to the future," Col. Vietzen once stated.

After the Eries were defeated by the Iroquois, about 1654, Ohio was void of Native Americans. This was a period in Ohio's time when the northern portion of the state was again without human inhabitants. Then, Native American groups from out-of-

state, moved into the area. When the European settlers came to this area, there were very few Native Americans; they had gone. The Native Americans who had contact with the Europeans, during this “Contact Period,” are now known as Historic Native Americans. These peoples had come in to the area to use the southern shores of Lake Erie and surrounding spaces as hunting and trapping grounds. North-Central Ohio was used as an important hunting and trapping grounds, but no permanent settlements were here when the first settlers from the East arrived.

Local Prehistoric Sites and Their Inhabitants

There are numerous prehistoric archaeological sites that are located within the bounds of Erie, Huron, and Lorain Counties. Many of these were excavated by the late archaeological scientist, Col. Raymond C. Vietzen. Most sites in this area are multi-cultural, showing evidence of several prehistoric cultures having used the same site but at varying times. Some sites to be reviewed include the Franks Site and Brownhelm site (Lorain County), the Seaman Fort Site (Erie County), the Burrell Fort Site (Lorain County), and the Cascade Park Site (Lorain County). Highlights of these archaeological sites will be described here.

Obviously there are numerous other sites in the area that are worthy of inclusion; however, the author has chosen these to highlight in this work. The **Franks Site** has been classified by Col. Vietzen as an “Erie village” because of the extent of archaeological material recovered at the site, related to the Eries. “The Franks Site is by far the largest and most extensive [Erie] site ... in northern Ohio,” stated Col. Vietzen in his *The Immortal Eries*, a 1945 publication. The site is located in the Brownhelm area of Lorain County. Further description takes us to the eastern bank of the Vermilion River, on land that is approximately one hundred fifty feet above the river – a perfect place to live. It is believed that the site encompasses about eighty acres of land.

The **Seaman Fort** site is located in Oxford Township, two and one-half miles west of Milan, in Erie County. It is further described as being on a high piece of land that has Hunt Creek and the Huron River bordering their respective sides, about one foot high. This 500 B. C. fortified village site has earthen stockades and ditches, referred to as ‘earthworks.’ Some of these features still exist. The author has visited the site several times. The site is one of the safest places for prehistoric peoples, and its orientation can be compared to the Burrell Fort Site in Sheffield.

The **Burrell Fort** is similar in shape to the Seaman Fort as it is located on a high promontory with the French Creek and Sugar Creek, on their respective sides, at the base of the site. The defensive uses that are found at many of these sites were

characteristics of the Erie's places of inhabitation. This too is a multi-cultural site with evidence of Erie inhabitation as well.

The **Cascade Park Site** is located at Cascade Park in the Black River valley and upland areas now preserved by Lorain County MetroParks. The prehistoric peoples took advantage of the natural "caves" under the waterfalls of the River. When the Cascade Park system was being formed, Col. Vietzen worked on the prehistoric site to investigate the site and preserve its prehistory. Frank Wilford, an Elyria attorney (Amherst native and Oberlin College graduate) and friend of Col. Vietzen's was instrumental in the formation of the park. A burial site was found to be located near Furnace Street. Archaic and Erie artifacts were recovered from the Cascade Park area. Col. James Smith, who had been captured by Native Americans (Wyandots) in the 1700s, spent a winter in the "big cave" under the West Falls. They called him Smith "Scoouwa," and the Black River was known as Canesadooharie or "River of Black Pearls" or "River of freshwater pearls" by the Wyandots. Let's explore more about the Cascade Park area here:

"Elyria's Beautiful Natureland" (Termed by Frank Wilford)

Col. Matthew W. Nahorn, Director, New Indian Ridge Museum

Once termed as "Elyria's Beautiful Natureland," the land in and around Cascade Park has been a scenic spot enjoyed by people for thousands of years. Located at the confluence of the East and West branches of the Black River (known as the 'Canesadooharie' or "stream of freshwater pearls" by the Wyandot Native Americans), this green jewel is situated in Lorain County's seat of Elyria, Ohio. The River is a direct tributary to Lake Erie and drains more than four hundred square miles of land. The park was largely developed and enlarged by Elyria Park Commission member and local Attorney, Frank Wilford.

Atty. Wilford was born in Amherst, Ohio in 1874 (then known as "North Amherst"). He was a graduate of Oberlin College (1898). As a member of the Elyria Park Commission for more than 25 years, he was responsible for the publication: *Cascade Park: Elyria's Beautiful Natureland* (1936). In 1944 he passed away of a heart attack in his law office.

The majority of the land comprising Cascade Park was donated by Heman Ely, the founder of Elyria, Ohio. Wilford gives much credit to the founder, Ely, for the planning of the City which allowed for the park's development. Wilford states in his publication:

"Then Heman Ely, the Second, William A. Ely, and George H. Ely as Administrator of Albert Ely's estate, set apart and gave to the City in 1894 the nucleus of our present

Park. This was a fifteen acre tract...Six years later, the balance of the West Gorge with its Caves and Natural Bridge was deeded to the city by the Ely heirs...Then, later, William A. Ely and George H. Ely, through their gifts, counsel and active public service proceeded far in establishing our park as it exists today” (55).

Today the park encompasses about 135 acres.

During his work in the park, Atty. Wilford collected artifacts left by the prehistoric inhabitants. Many of these artifacts were acquired by Col. Raymond C. Vietzen, a friend of Atty. Wilford. Col. Vietzen operated the Indian Ridge Museum in Elyria, Ohio from 1930-1995. Years ago, he conducted some archaeological explorations in one of the park caves. In his *Prehistoric Americans* (1989), Col. Vietzen states that there were burials of the Adena people near what is now Furnace Street. He also states that:

“No Paleo artifacts were found in the park as the Black River Valley was deep with glacial lake waters which covered the caves and falls in the park. We know Early Woodland (Adena) people lived on what is now Furnace Street and later (Hopewell) Middle Woodland and Iroquoian (Erie and Seneca) resided here” (113).

He continues by stating that this landscape, with its caves and shelters, has always been appealing to people of many cultural backgrounds. It continues to be enjoyed today as a park.

The Indian Ridge Museum was sold and artifacts dispersed after Col. Vietzen’s death. These Elyria artifacts are now preserved by Col. Nahorn at his New Indian Ridge Museum.

After a study of thirty-two flint projectile points collected by Wilford, we see that people of the Archaic and Adena traditions inhabited this site, which includes several small “caves” naturally carved out of the local sandstone. Local flint and chert sources, with some Flint Ridge material, are represented in this collection. An early excavation of one of the caves by Col. Vietzen revealed the presence of approximately three feet of midden material. Evidence of the Eries calling this land home was also found during excavations, by the presence of triangular points.

Interestingly, the “caves” (or geologically known as *plunge pool features*) on this site were used when James Smith (later Col. James Smith) was captured by and lived among the Wyandots for a time. Col. Smith’s accounts of the Canesadooharie, recorded in his journal during his captivity with the Indians from 1755-1759, are the first writings of the Black River.

Of the collection of thirty-two flint artifacts found by Atty. Wilford, Col. Vietzen stated that, "These I now own and treasure and hope such will remain in the Elyria area, forever" (113). We are pleased to be able to keep them, along with their unique story, preserved in the area in which they were crafted and later found.

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A Paleo-era fluted projectile point found in Lorain County, by Irving Rathwell, Sr. This piece is quite unique, as it has a double flute on the reverse side.