Minnesota's First Farmers

Much of what we know about early farming in Minnesota we have learned through Native American history. Long before European settlers arrived and long before statehood, the Ojibwe (sometimes called Anishinabe) and the Dakota American Indians were farming. Early Ojibwe peoples lived in the northern lakes and forest regions of what would later become Minnesota. They hunted and fished, and harvested wild berries, fruits and wild rice. They tapped maple trees for tasty treats. Ojibwe people often had small gardens near their homes.

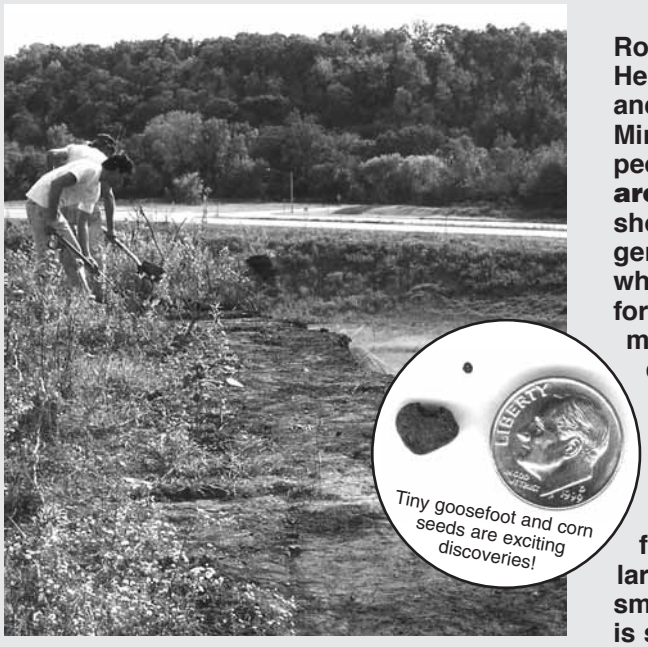
The Dakota lived in the southern and southwestern plains of what is now Minnesota. Their villages dotted the banks of the Mississippi, Minnesota, St. Croix and Cannon Rivers. Dakota women were active farmers, raising corn, squash and beans in patterned fields near the village. Dakota people also gathered many different wild foods.

Fort Snelling was the first farming community by European settlers in the area. (1820s) Native farming had begun hundreds of years earlier. *Original drawing by Peter Rindisbacher, Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society*

Going Back Even Farther

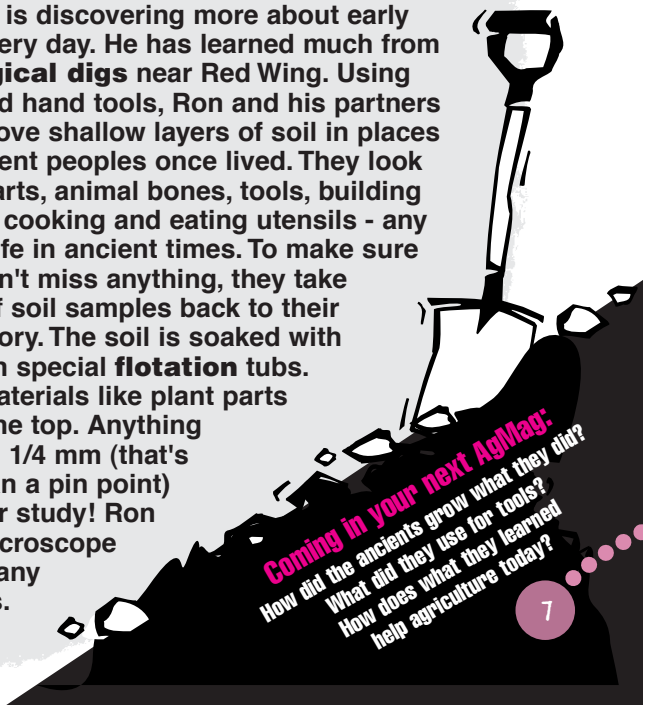
Lately, **archeologists** are discovering fascinating facts about the agriculture of native peoples who lived in the area over 1,000 years ago! Groups known to archeologists as the Late Woodland and Oneota peoples lived in small family groups in winter and gathered together in large villages in summer. Around AD 1000-1200, they started spending less time in the woods over winter and more time in their summer villages near rivers and lakes. At the same time, they were learning to grow more crops instead of depending only on foods gathered from the wild.

What did they grow? Starting with wild seeds, they learned over time to grow giant ragweed, beans, corn, squash, goosefoot (lamb's quarters) and sunflowers. Of course, they still gathered wild foods, like wild rice and different kinds of fruit. With a variety of plants, they had better nutrition and still had food if certain crops failed.



Archeologists Ron Schirmer and Frank Florin carefully clear the ground cover to find subsurface features. Respect for the land and for the history of the people is part of every dig.

Ron Schirmer, Staff Archeologist at Hemisphere Field Service in Minneapolis and a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, is discovering more about early peoples every day. He has learned much from archeological digs near Red Wing. Using shovels and hand tools, Ron and his partners gently remove shallow layers of soil in places where ancient peoples once lived. They look for plant parts, animal bones, tools, building materials, cooking and eating utensils - any clue to life in ancient times. To make sure they don't miss anything, they take bags of soil samples back to their laboratory. The soil is soaked with water in special flotation tubs. Light materials like plant parts float to the top. Anything larger than 1/4 mm (that's smaller than a pin point) is saved for study! Ron needs a microscope to study many of his finds.



Minnesota...*one thousand years ago.*

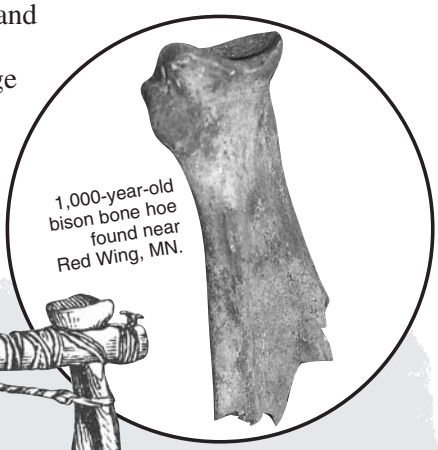
Imagine yourself as a young person living in the hills above the Mississippi River near Red Wing 1,000 years ago—long before the Anishanabe and Dakota peoples. Your people are known to archeologists as Late Woodland and Oneota. You are an ancestor of the Native American tribes living in North America today.

Living in a permanent village is quite new to your people. For hundreds of years, your ancestors traveled throughout the forests and prairies to hunt animals and gather wild plants. They also met and feasted with their neighbors. During this time, they carefully watched how plants grow. They learned to plant seeds from the biggest and healthiest plants, such as sunflowers, squash, corn and lamb's quarters. Now, you benefit from their experience, and you plant small fields of crops using tools made from sticks, sharp rocks and animal bones. Over time, you learn to dry the harvest and you store the dried crops in clay pots nestled inside underground storage pits. You even learn to rotate your fields to grow better crops.

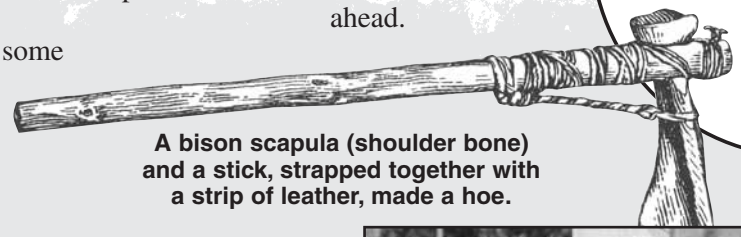
Now that you know how to grow some of your own food, life is quickly changing.

You do not have to keep moving all the time. Families gather to make a year-round village. Small dwellings of wood and animal skins keep you dry and warm, even in winter. A sturdy wooden fence surrounds the village, protecting you from enemies and wild animals.

Feeding the people is everyone's job. Men and boys leave the village each day to hunt and fish. Women plant and hoe the crops. They carry water from the nearby river to water the plants. Family groups walk through the countryside near the village, gathering wild fruits and nuts. At fall harvest time, the whole village comes together to give thanks for the food that will keep the tribe alive through the long winter months ahead.

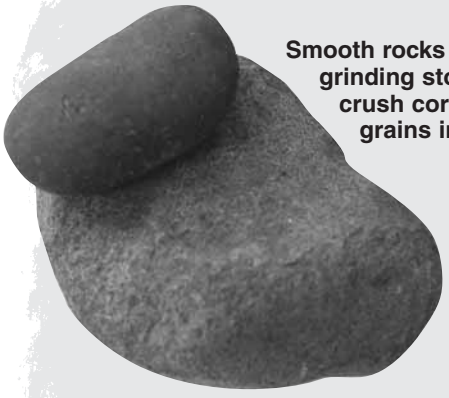


1,000-year-old bison bone hoe found near Red Wing, MN.



A bison scapula (shoulder bone) and a stick, strapped together with a strip of leather, made a hoe.

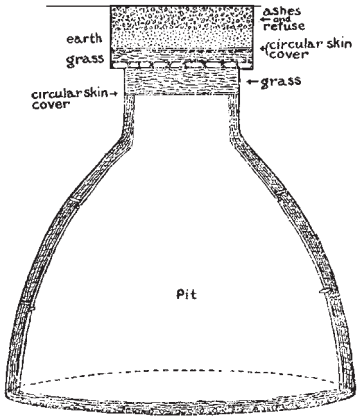
Late Woodland and Oneota peoples looked to nature for tools to help with their work.



Smooth rocks became grinding stones to crush corn and other grains into meal.

Corn, beans, sunflower seeds and squash were dried, then placed in pits to be stored for the winter. The pits, narrowed near the top, were lined with dry grass. Sometimes crops were placed in clay pots before going into the pits. After the food was taken from the pits, the pits were used for household garbage.

Photos Courtesy of Hemisphere Field Service.
Illustrations Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



Cut-away sketch of underground food storage pit.

Ron Schirmer and other archeologists at Hemisphere Field Service in Minneapolis dig carefully to discover where food storage pits were located.

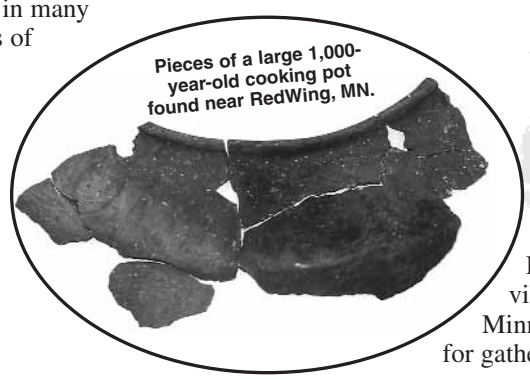
Coming in your next AgMag:
How did Late Woodland and Oneota people use what they grew? You'll find out in your next AgMag!

Minnesota...*one thousand years ago.*

You read about the Late Woodland and Oneota peoples in your last two AgMags. Their villages along the river bluffs near Red Wing about 1,000 years ago were among the first year-round settlements in the area we know as Minnesota today.

Living in a permanent village was a huge change for early peoples. For thousands of years, small groups moved from place to place as hunters and gatherers. Most of their time was spent looking for food.

Learning to grow their own food changed everything. Now they could stay in one place. Their lives gradually began to change in many ways. Bits of cooking vessels found near Red Wing give us some clues.



Pieces of a large 1,000-year-old cooking pot found near RedWing, MN.

Cooking vessels got larger. Because food was plentiful and there were more to feed, people made larger pots for cooking. They also had more social events. Decorations on the pots were important parts of ceremonies.

Cooking vessels improved, and so did nutrition. Early cooking pots were made from clay mixed with grit. (Clay by itself doesn't hold together well when fired.) Later, bits of clam shells were added to the clay. The shells held the clay pot together during cooking and calcium from the shells made the corn more nutritious.

Jobs in the villages became more specialized. Women cooked, made pottery and textiles and cared for homes. Women and children planted and tended the fields. Men and older boys hunted and trapped animals and the men engaged in trade. Everyone in the village joined in harvesting the crops and celebrating the bounty.

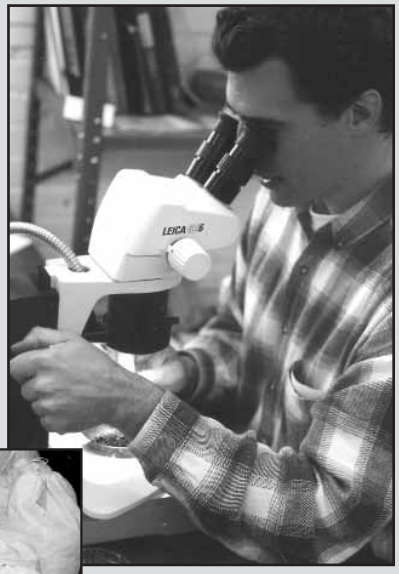
Villagers traded goods and visited with their neighbors. Both goods and knowledge spread rapidly across the region. Visits were marked by social events where songs, dances, stories and games went along with the trading.

Each year, archeologists discover more about these exciting first villages and their people. Scientists at the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul are studying ways to create a special research hub for gathering information about their finds and making it available to all of us.

Puzzles From the Past

Think of archeologists at work. Do you imagine them with picks and shovels digging in search of buried items from civilizations of long ago? This "field work" is just part of the job. A lot of an archeologist's work is done in scientific laboratories and research centers studying the things they find.

Finding whole artifacts is rare. Most often, bits and pieces of things are discovered. Archeologists put the pieces together like puzzles. From tiny bits of cooking pots, seeds, plant remnants, animal bones, tools and household items, archeologist Ron Schirmer discovers much about life in ancient times.



More than 400 bags of soil, brought from a dig site near Red Wing, are being studied for clues about the lives of Late Woodland and Oneota peoples.

Photos Courtesy of Hemisphere Field Service

Think & Discuss

Archeologists are studying sites all around Minnesota for clues to the people who came before us. Why is it important for us to know about things that happened hundreds or thousands of years ago?

What things in your home or school do you think will give archeologists in the year 3000 clues to our lives today?

Did you know? Pottery made in Red Wing, Minnesota is well known throughout the country … and it's all linked to **natural resources.** Pottery has been made in the area for over 1,000 years because the clay soils are perfect for clay pottery. You can see pottery from Red Wing displayed at the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul.