

## Indian Agriculture in the Fur Trade Northwest

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**ABSTRACT.** Indian agriculture first appeared in the fur trade lands lying to the north and west of Lake Superior more than a century after the earliest European explorations in the region. Introduced by immigrant Ottawa Indians into the Red River valley at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it subsequently spread rapidly among the Ojibwa Indians of the Manitoba parklands and the mixed forest country of northwestern Ontario and northern Minnesota. It became a small but significant part of the economy of many of the Indians in these areas and, until the end of the fur trade period, was conducted for commercial as well as subsistence purposes. One of the most significant aspects of this agriculture was that it was based on the traditional Indian maize-beans-squash complex and, despite the presence of European traders and missionaries, was conducted on Indian terms. It was also a pioneer agriculture that led to the most northerly development of Indian agriculture on the North American continent, extending the limits of native cultivation over three hundred miles to the north of the prehistoric Indian agricultural frontier in central North America.

**RESUME.** L'agriculture indienne fit sa première apparition, dans la région du commerce des fourrures qui s'étendait au nord et à l'ouest du lac Supérieur, plus d'un siècle après les toutes premières explorations européennes dans cette région même. Introduite par les indiens Ottawa qui avaient immigré dans la vallée de la Rivière Rouge au début du dix-neuvième siècle, cette façon de vivre se développa rapidement auprès des indiens Ojibwa des forêts parc du Manitoba et des forêts mélangées du nord-ouest de l'Ontario et du nord du Minnesota. L'agriculture prit une petite mais importante place dans l'économie de la plupart des sociétés indiennes de ces régions et fut conservée, pour des raisons aussi bien commerciales que de subsistance, jusqu'à la fin de l'époque du commerce de la pelletterie. Les récoltes de bases de ces sociétés indiennes furent le maïs, les haricots et les courges. Néanmoins un des aspects marquants de cet échange agricole fut qu'il soit fait à la manière indienne malgré la présence de commerçants européens et de missionnaires. Ce fut aussi l'agriculture des colons qui permit de voir se créer le développement agricole indien le plus septentrional du continent nord-américain. Les limites des cultures des peuples natifs purent ainsi reculer à plus de trois cent milles au nord de la première frontière de l'agriculture préhistorique indienne du centre de l'Amérique du Nord.

At the time of European contact, the Indian inhabitants of the lands lying to the north and west of Lake Superior did not practice agriculture, and subsisted wholly by hunting, fishing and gathering. Not until the beginning of the nineteenth century did any of the native peoples of the Northwest begin to cultivate. Within this vast region, however, only the Indians of the Manitoba parklands and of the mixed forests of adjacent northwestern Ontario and northern Minnesota took to cultivating the soil. Although attempts were also made by Indians to extend cultivation into the purely grassland environments to the west, agriculture failed to take root in this region. However, it persisted in the more humid environments to the east and was most strongly developed by the native peoples living in northwestern Ontario and adjacent Minnesota. Even in this area none of the Indians became dominantly agricultural, and their small garden plots served mainly to supplement a subsistence economy that remained based upon hunting and gathering. Despite its limited nature, the introduction of cultivation into these areas represented a significant extension of Indian agriculture beyond its traditional northern limits in native North America.<sup>1</sup> It also contributed to the livelihood of the Indians who adopted it during a period of rapidly depleting fur and game resources and, in so doing, became a significant component of cultural change toward the end of the fur trade era.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this article is to elucidate the nature of this expansion of Indian agriculture that took place more than a century after the first Europeans had penetrated into the Canadian Northwest. Although this

development was stimulated to some extent by the European fur trade, it was essentially Indian in both initiative and character. It was also the most northerly development of Indian agriculture on the North American continent, extending its limits some three hundred miles to the north of the prehistorical agricultural frontier in central North America. This article documents the development of agriculture in the southern Manitoba lowlands and its subsequent spread into adjacent areas. It also endeavours to explain the diffusion of Indian agriculture into these areas and to describe some of its salient characteristics.

At the time of European contact, the northern limit of Indian agriculture in the western interior of North America was probably at the Knife River villages of the Hidatsa Indians, located near the confluence of the Knife and Missouri Rivers at about 47° 30' north latitude.<sup>3</sup> The agricultural Indians of the Upper Missouri region were the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara, all of whom cultivated Indian corn, beans, squashes, pumpkins, sunflowers and tobacco. The first European to describe the agricultural activities of these village Indians was the French explorer La Vérendrye, who, in 1738, accompanied a party of Assiniboiné Indians on a trading expedition to their settlements.

There is little reason to believe that native cultivation extended beyond the Knife River at the time of La Vérendrye's explorations in the 1730s. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the northern limit of Indian agriculture observed by the French at this time represented a southward retreat from an earlier, more poleward limit. The first to recognize this possibility was the archaeologist, Waldo R. Wedel, who wrote that "it would perhaps have been feasible to grow corn in favoured spots throughout portions of the Dakota-Manitoba mound area in prehistoric times."<sup>4</sup> It is apparent that the Indians were cultivating to the east of the Missouri villagers in the Sheyenne and James River valleys of North Dakota in protohistorical time,<sup>5</sup> while more recent archaeological research has suggested that Indian agriculture occurred prehistorically in the Red River valley as far north as present Lockport, Manitoba.<sup>6</sup> It might also be pointed out that tobacco, which was the most widespread of Indian cultigens in aboriginal North America, was grown in the plains well to the north of the Knife River prior to European contact. The earliest historical evidence for this occurs in the accounts of the Hudson's Bay Company trader, Matthew Cocking, who, in the course of his explorations in western Saskatchewan in 1772, described an Indian "Tobacco plantation. A small plot of ground about an hundred yards long and five wide. . . ."<sup>7</sup> Although some tobacco cultivation continued among the Indians of the Canadian Plains until the reserve period, it was largely discontinued when better quality tobacco became available through the fur trade.

The earliest historical centre of native agriculture in the Canadian Northwest was the Indian village of Netley Creek. Also known as Rivière



aux Morts, Dead River, or Ne-bo-wese-be, it was established by Ottawa Indians at the turn of the nineteenth century near the junction of Netley Creek and the Red River (Figure 1). The Ottawa first began to plant at this site in 1805 and, from there, agriculture subsequently spread among neighbouring bands of Ojibwa Indians. Neither the Ottawa nor the Ojibwa were living in the Red River valley at the time of European contact but, beginning in the 1780s, they began to replace the Cree and Assiniboine Indians to whom this territory had formerly belonged. The Ojibwa who migrated to the Red River valley were part of a general westward expansion of Ojibwa peoples into the prairie-parkland from the forests to the east. The Ottawa, in contrast, were more recent arrivals, who had come to the west from their home area in the Upper Great Lakes. According to Alexander Henry the Younger, they arrived in the Northwest about 1792, "when the prospects of great beaver hunts led them from their country."<sup>8</sup> Initially, the Ottawa scattered themselves widely but, by 1805, many of them hunted in the lower Red River valley and congregated each summer at the Netley Creek encampment.



Figure 1

It was the Red River Ottawa who first began to cultivate north of the Knife River and who played the crucial role in disseminating agriculture among the more populous, neighbouring Ojibwa. According to Lord Selkirk:

The Indians who inhabit the country from Lake Superior to Red River are mostly of the Chippeway [Ojibwa] Nation, who have never been in the habit [of] cultivating the ground. The Ottawas, who speak the same language & reside near Lakes Huron & Michigan have long been accustomed to plant Indian Corn, & some other vegetables tho' on a small scale. A band of these Indians, prompted by the growing scarcity of game in their own country, determined to migrate to Red River where they continued the practice of cultivating the ground.<sup>9</sup>

Although some agriculture had been part of the Ottawa economy in the Upper Lakes homeland, it was only when Alexander Henry gave them seed in 1805 that they first began to plant in Western Canada. As Henry noted in 1808:

The first corn and potatoes they planted here was a small quantity which I gave them in the spring of 1805, since which period they have extended their fields, and hope in a few years to make corn a regular article of traffic with us.<sup>10</sup>

In the same year the fur trader Peter Fidler observed that four or five Indian families had built wooden houses at Netley Creek, and that several acres of land were planted with Indian corn, potatoes and "other garden stuff."<sup>11</sup>

Between 1805 and the founding of the Selkirk Settlement in 1812, the Netley Creek village increased in size, and corn and potatoes raised there were sold there as provisions to passing European traders.<sup>12</sup> The agricultural activities of the Indians at Netley Creek soon became well known and achieved a prominence such that Lord Selkirk viewed the village as an important source of seed for the first of his Red River colonists. In his instructions of 1811 to Miles Macdonell, the first governor of the colony, Selkirk wrote that:

The Cos. [Hudson's Bay Company] establishments at Brandon House, etc., will ... supply you with seed potatoes and perhaps some seed grain ... Perhaps, however, a greater supply at least of Indian corn may be obtained from the Ottawa & Bungee [Ojibwa] Indians at Dead River near the mouth of Red River.<sup>13</sup>

Selkirk's letter is the first evidence to indicate that the small band of Ottawa at Netley Creek had been joined by neighbouring Ojibwa. It also suggests that some of the Red River Ojibwa had taken to cultivating alongside the Ottawa sometime prior to 1811. According to John Tanner, a whiteman who had been adopted by the Ottawa and who was living with them during this period, it was Sha-gwaw-koo-sink, an Ottawa chief at Netley Creek, who first taught the Red River Ojibwa to plant corn. In Tanner's words:

We then went down to Dead River, planted corn, and spent the summer there. Sha-gwaw-koo-sink, an Ottawaw, a friend of mine and an old man, first introduced the cultivation of corn among the Ojibbeways of the Red River country.<sup>14</sup>

The adoption of agriculture by the Ojibwa at Netley Creek permitted these nomadic peoples to live a more sedentary way of life than their purely hunting and gathering economy had previously allowed. The Netley Creek village also emerged as a gathering point for Ojibwa from the surrounding country. This enabled them to strengthen ties with one another and the village soon became something of a regional centre. Large numbers could assemble at this site and the Midewiwin or Grand Medicine Lodge ceremony was elaborated at seasonal meetings there. Writing retrospectively of these developments, the Reverend John West noted in 1823 that:



There was a time when the Indians themselves had begun to collect into a kind of village towards the mouth of the Red River, had cultivated spots of ground, and had even erected something of a lodge for the purpose of performing some of their unmeaning ceremonies of ignorance and heathenism, and to which the Indians of all the surrounding country were accustomed at certain seasons to repair.<sup>15</sup>

On the eve of the founding of the Selkirk Settlement in 1812, events in the fur trade overtook the Indians at Netley Creek and the village fell into demise. The Ottawa abandoned the site and it would seem that several years elapsed before the Ojibwa resumed cultivating there. Tanner related that the Ottawa moved from Netley Creek to an island in Lake of the Woods, where they were observed cultivating in 1813. According to Tanner:

After this, we started to come to an island called Me-nau-zhe-taw-naun [Garden or Plantation Island], in the Lake of the Woods, where we had concluded to plant corn, instead of our old fields at Dead River. . . . we came to the Lake of the Woods, where I hunted for about a month, then went back into the country I had left, all the Indians remaining behind to clear the ground where they intended planting corn at Me-nau-zhe-tau-naung.<sup>16</sup>

The circumstances that led to the break-up of the Ottawa-Ojibwa village at Netley Creek are not entirely clear. Selkirk wrote that the Ottawa abandoned the site "because their corn being frequently pillaged by other Indians they thought it advisable to retire to an island in the Lake of the Woods."<sup>17</sup> More to the point, Selkirk indicated that the pilfering was encouraged by the North West Company which, in his opinion, was loathe to see agriculture develop in the valley. The Reverend John West, however, remarked that the Hudson's Bay Company traders as well as the Nor'Westers had opposed this development as prejudicial to their interests in the fur trade, observing that "fears were entertained that the natives would be diverted from hunting furs to idle ceremonies, and an effectual stop was put to all further improvement, by the spirit of opposition that then existed in the country between the two rival Fur Companies."<sup>18</sup>

Following 1812, agriculture diffused widely among the Ojibwa. To the west of the Red River, a small Indian garden village, known as Grant's Village, was established in 1815 on the Assiniboine River at a place called the Half Way Bank, located midway between Brandon House and Portage la Prairie (Figure 1).<sup>19</sup> Lower down the Assiniboine six tents of Ojibwa were observed fishing and making gardens in 1819.<sup>20</sup> In the following year, Indian gardens were reported along the Whitemud River near Big Point House at the southern end of Lake Manitoba.<sup>21</sup> The Reverend John West, in traversing the area between Lakes Manitoba and Winnipeg in 1822, noted that a band of Indians was raising potatoes and pumpkins on the shores of Lake Manitoba.<sup>22</sup> By the late 1820s there is evidence that Indian cultivation had penetrated as far north as the Swan River valley, where an Indian called the Otter had gardens said to be productive of potatoes and turnips.<sup>23</sup>

For the most part, the agriculture that diffused into the Lake Manitoba region and northward was based upon the potato. The nature of this potato culture, and the role it played in the subsistence cycle of the Lake Manitoba Ojibwa, was graphically summarized by the Hudson's Bay Company trader, William Brown, in 1819. His account is also revealing of the quasi-sedentary living and the ceremonial gatherings that took place at the more important of these agricultural sites.

A considerable number of the Indians particularly those of Fort Dauphin, and the Manitoba, have ground under cultivation, and raise a great many Potatoes, but that is their only crop . . . Those of the Manitoba . . . [cultivate] on an Island towards the North end of the Lake, they have erected there what they call a Big Tent, where they all assemble in spring, hold Councils and go thro' their Religious Ceremonies — The soil here is excellent and each family has a portion of it under cultivation, which the women and old men remain, and take care of during the summer — while the young men go a hunting — In the fall of the year when they are going to abandon the place, they secure that part of the produce, under ground till spring, which they cannot carry along with them — During favourable years, they generally make a considerable quantity of maple sugar, part of which they also put in Cache — The Big Tent is constructed in the form of an arch, and consists of a slight frame of wood covered on the outside with the bark of the pine tree, and lined in the inside with bulrush mats. It is 60 ft. long — 15 ft. wide — and 10 ft. high.<sup>24</sup>

Although some of the agricultural sites that emerged to the north and west of the Red River were relatively short-lived, agriculture persisted among the Indians of this region until the end of the fur trade period. Thus, in 1843 the Reverend Abraham Cowley recorded an instance of Indian cultivation in the vicinity of the Narrows of Lake Manitoba.<sup>25</sup> The Reverend James Settee observed potato fields in 1855 and 1856 on what he called the Potatoe Island, that is, the present Garden Island at the north end of Lake Manitoba.<sup>26</sup> Members of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858 noted Indian potato culture on Sugar Island in Lake St. Martin in the same general area. They also observed "several places on the Dauphin River [the present Mossy River] where the Indians grow potatoes, Indian corn and melons."<sup>27</sup> This latter observation is noteworthy, for it appears to have been the northernmost instance of Indian corn cultivation on the continent.

Of greater significance was the expansion of agriculture to the east of Red River, a movement which began with the removal of the Ottawa to Garden Island in the southwestern corner of Lake of the Woods in 1812. Introduced by the Ottawa, it soon spread to the more numerous woodland Ojibwa around the Lake. Daniel Harmon, for example, who passed through Lake of the Woods in 1816, remarked that "the Sauteux [Ojibwa], who remain about the Lake of the Woods, now begin to plant Indian corn and potatoes, which grew well."<sup>28</sup> By this time, agriculture had also penetrated some distance to the north of Lake of the Woods. Thus, several Indian families about Escabitchewan House on Ball Lake were cultivating Indian corn, potatoes and beans at least as early as 1815<sup>29</sup> and by 1823 the Indians of Eagle Lake, south of Lac Seul, had "good gardens" described



as very productive of Indian corn.<sup>30</sup> The expansion northward of agriculture into this region carried corn cultivation to the outer limits of the mixed forest belt, where further diffusion of this Indian cultigen was precluded by the harsh environmental conditions of the boreal forest to the north. Even at these northern margins, however, corn cultivation could play an important role in Indian subsistence, a circumstance that was appreciated by the fur traders of this country. The lack of big game, especially of moose and caribou, had reduced subsistence levels to the point where the traders came to view agriculture among the Indians as a beneficial development. Thus, lamenting the fact that his Lac Seul Indians were not raising corn, John Davis, the trader in this region, wrote:

could the Indians be brought to dwell more at one place and employ less of their time seeking the deer [caribou] and Moose they might be induced to cultivate the soil and otherwise improve their condition . . . particularly as they have an example shown them by the neighbouring Indians at Eagle Lake.<sup>31</sup>

From Lake of the Woods, Indian agriculture also spread along the line of the Rainy River, but this eastward thrust petered out as the climate deteriorated toward the height of land separating Lake Superior drainage from that flowing into Lake Winnipeg. Indian corn appears to have been grown only as far east as the Manitou Rapids on the Rainy River, where Major Delafield described "a small field of thriving Indian corn" in 1823.<sup>32</sup> Farther east, cultivation was confined to potatoes, a development that appears to have spread as far as Namakan Lake, on whose islands the Indians, according to the Reverend Peter Jacobs, "raised a good quantity of potatoes, which they barter to the traders for goods."<sup>33</sup>

The beginnings of agriculture to the south of the Lake of the Woods cannot be dated precisely, but, in 1821, Father S.J.N. Dumoulin, the Roman Catholic missionary at Pembina, reported that the Indians in his charge were planting at four different localities, of which the main one was on the Roseau River.<sup>34</sup> Although the Pembina mission was south of the 49th parallel, the Roseau site was probably in British territory, but it is likely that one or more of the three unspecified localities lay to the south of the international boundary. If so, this represents the earliest occurrence of Indian agriculture in northern Minnesota. Not until 1828, however, is there conclusive evidence of Indian agriculture in that area. In February 1829, the American Fur Company traders at Rainy Lake purchased corn grown by the Indians at present Red Lake, Minnesota.<sup>35</sup> In 1832 Henry Schoolcraft learned from traders at Cass Lake that the Red Lake Indians were raising considerable quantities of corn. However, travel accounts of the Upper Mississippi region to the southeast of Red Lake make no mention of Indian agriculture before 1832.<sup>36</sup> In that year Schoolcraft visited garden sites on Star Island in Cass Lake and along the shores of Leech Lake.<sup>37</sup> Although he had not observed Indian agriculture in these areas during his explorations of the Upper Mississippi country in 1820, it was well established by 1832, and had spread to the other lakeside sites, including Big Turtle Lake and Lake Winnibigoshish.

Of the different agricultural sites or complexes that emerged among the Ojibwa of the Northwest, the most important and enduring were at Lake of the Woods and Red Lake located some fifty miles to the south. It was in the Lake of the Woods-Red Lake area that Indian agriculture was most prominently developed and played its most important role both within Ojibway society and in their relations with European fur traders. Of the two complexes, that in Lake of the Woods was the earliest and it was following this development that agriculture subsequently spread to most of the groups that cultivated east of the Red River.

The earliest and most important site in Lake of the Woods was Menau-zhe-taw-naun, or Garden Island, occupied by the Ottawa in 1812. Within a few years of its founding a considerable agricultural complex had evolved on this island, which was described as follows by the Hudson's Bay Company factor at Rainy Lake in 1819:

I visited their tents which were pitched alongside of the piece of ground which they [had] under cultivation which from the regular manner in which it was laid out would have done credit to many . . . farmers, excellent Potatoes, Indian Corn, Pumpkins, Onions and Carrots. The women on whom it is a duty to do all the laborious work, were busily employed gathering . . .<sup>38</sup>

The corn culture at Garden Island was strongly commercial in character and, from the outset, part of the corn crop was sold to the fur traders of the Rainy Lake-Lake of the Woods area. As early as 1808, the Ottawa had expressed a desire to trade agricultural produce and commercial opportunities at the Lake of the Woods may well have influenced their decision to locate there. The Ottawa had a long tradition as traders and middlemen in the Michilimackinac area and elsewhere, and had raised corn commercially near parts of Lake Michigan and the southern shore of Lake Superior to provision the fur trade.<sup>39</sup> The "chief part" of Shaw-gwaw-koo-sink's first crop at Garden Island was sold to the North West Company traders,<sup>40</sup> and by 1817 it was widely known that corn could be purchased from the Ottawa in the Lake of the Woods.<sup>41</sup>

Commercial corn production by both the Ottawa and Ojibwa in this area was initiated by the demand for provisions by the fur traders. By this time the country between Lake Superior and the Lake of the Woods had been virtually depleted of the larger food animals, and an often meager and precarious subsistence was derived by the fur traders from fish, rabbits, and wild rice (also traded from the Indians). Corn was purchased, not only to assist in feeding the men at the trading posts, but also to supply the transport brigades with essential voyaging provisions. Garden Island was strategically located in this respect, for it lay astride the main canoe route connecting the Lakehead with the Western Plains. The Indian gardens afforded the traders a small, but fairly dependable, supply of corn. The supply of corn was especially valuable when the more capricious wild rice harvests failed.<sup>42</sup> The traders of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies vied with one another for the corn supply to ensure greater mobili-



ty in the competition for furs and a more assured food supply. Although the amounts traded annually by the Indians to the two companies during the period of competition are not known, the chief factor at Rainy Lake reported in the autumn of 1819 that the Hudson's Bay Company's trade at Garden Island had "been more successful than could have [been] imagined."<sup>43</sup> The post journal indicates that not all of the corn purchased had been transported to the company's headquarters at Rainy Lake; seventy-nine bags of corn and one bag of rice had been cached somewhere between the island and Rainy Lake.<sup>44</sup>

After the union of the two companies in 1821, corn production at Lake of the Woods declined, largely as a result of a drop in price brought on by the cessation of competition. The chief factor at Rainy Lake reported in 1822-23 that during the period of competition the Indians "would never give more than 2 bushels for a three point blanket, which traders, some from competition and some from necessity were obliged to give; as soon as the junction was affected the exorbitant price was reduced to a pint of powder for a bushel. On this the Indians in great parts discontinued their cultivation."<sup>45</sup> However, in 1824 the Hudson's Bay Company "succeeded in trading a tolerable stock of Indian corn" at Garden Island,<sup>46</sup> a total of seventy-six bushels.<sup>47</sup> In 1825 the total traded was 140 bushels<sup>48</sup> and in 1828 the total was one hundred fans (about seventy bushels) of very bad corn.<sup>49</sup>

Although the union of the companies precipitated a falling off in corn production, the decline was both short-lived and limited in effect. The Nor'Westers were quickly supplanted by the Americans, and the old rivalry was replaced by an equally intense Anglo-American rivalry. Corn regained its previous importance in the trade, and the strategic position of Garden Island along the international boundary was fully appreciated by the traders on both sides.

One of the best descriptions of the agriculture on Garden Island is contained in the reports of the Red River Exploring Expedition, which visited the island in 1857.

Garden Island is about a mile and a half long at its widest part. Its western half is thickly wooded, the greater portion of the eastern half cleared and cultivated. A field containing about 5 acres was planted with Indian corn, then nearly ripe. The corn was cultivated in hills, and kept very free from weeds . . . Near the space devoted to Indian corn, were several small patches of potatoes, pumpkins, and squashes. An air of great neatness prevailed over the whole of the cultivated portion of the Island.<sup>50</sup>

The expedition provided the first reliable indication of Indian cultivation on islands other than Plantation Island, and a map produced by its members shows that cultivation had spread to a number of sites along the lakeshore.<sup>51</sup> The widespread nature of this agriculture, and evidence that it persisted into the treaty period, is corroborated by the reserve surveys which, although only partially conducted, show several agricultural islands at the

north end of the Lake near Rat Portage and in Shoal Lake.<sup>52</sup> The number of Indians who eventually took to cultivating in the Lake of the Woods is not known, but in 1854 it was estimated that about two hundred Indians resided on Garden Island in summer and raised on it "large quantities of potatoes, Indian corn and pumpkins."<sup>53</sup>

Like the Lake of the Woods Ojibwa, their neighbours at nearby Red Lake in Minnesota were exceptionally predisposed towards agriculture and sold their corn to both British and American fur traders. As early as 1829, the Red Lake Indians were trading corn to the American Fur Company traders at Rainy Lake<sup>54</sup> and by 1832 Henry Schoolcraft related that the Red Lake band was supplying corn to "the posts on the Upper Mississippi, and even as far east as Fond du Lac."<sup>55</sup> Of these people it was further noted that "They are enabled to sell 3 or 400 bushels in exchange for goods and reserve to themselves a comfortable supply for the winter."<sup>56</sup>

The Reverend Frederic Ayer, who conducted a reconnaissance of the Upper Mississippi region in 1842-43, wrote a detailed description of the Red Lake people at this time. According to Ayer, they comprised about one hundred hunting men and from five to six hundred women and children. He described them as one of the largest bands of the Ojibwa nation and, "as a body, probably more stationary than any other band of Ojibwas." He further observed that "This band raise more corn and potatoes probably than any band of Ojibwas in this part of the country. In ordinary seasons they put up from 15 to 60 to 80 sacks of corn to a family. Their sacks contain a bushel or more each."<sup>57</sup>

The seasonal activities of the Red Lake Indians, including their far-flung trading trips, were described in detail by Ayer as follows:

When the rivers open in the Spring, the men generally leave, and descend the Red River to the Colony . . . They are absent about 20 or 25 days. The principal object of this visit to the Colony, is to traffick sugar with the half-breeds and others, for which they receive clothing and goods. Again in the first part of June, a considerable number start out to hunt buffalo in the plains to the West. A few also visit La Pointe and the Sault Ste Marie during the summer. With these exceptions, they spend the spring and summer at Red Lake. The men only go to the Colony and on their hunts in summer. And in their winter hunts, the men do not usually take their families with them. Fewer families than usual remain at Red Lake this winter [i.e. 1842/43], on account of the small crop of corn there last season. The hunters have taken their families with them this winter on account of the scarcity at R. Lake. There are this winter 35 lodges at the Lake. As a general thing the women and children remain here both summer and winter.<sup>58</sup>

The importance of corn cultivation at Red Lake, especially in relation to that of surrounding Ojibwa bands, was further underscored by Ayer's observation that "Indians from other bands in considerable numbers starving at home come here to winter and live upon the hard earned fruits of this peoples industry."<sup>59</sup>

The Indian agriculture that emerged in the fur trade Northwest varied greatly in extent and significance, ranging from isolated individual fami-



ly plots to large village complexes. On the whole, the larger and more enduring agricultural sites were confined to the southern and eastern sections of the region, while the smaller and often ephemeral ones predominated in the extreme north and west. In some instances, agricultural produce was regularly sold to the fur traders, so that cultivation was undertaken with commercial as well as subsistence intentions by different groups or individuals within them.

Geographically, the most striking feature of this agriculture was its northern nature. Throughout most of its distribution, it was essentially confined to lakeside or insular locations, where micro-climatic conditions allowed the cultivation of corn well to the north of its prehistoric limits. Although it developed following European contact, and incorporated European crops, it was nonetheless a native agriculture derived from the maize-beans-squash complex of North American Indians. This complex remained intact at least as far north as Garden Island, located at 49° 10' north. However, corn, the most adaptable of the cultigens in this complex, was cultivated significantly farther north, reaching its outer limit in northwestern Ontario at Eagle Lake and Escabitchewan and achieving its extreme northern limit on the continent in Manitoba along the Mossy River at latitude 53° 31' north. Indian agriculture thus made its farthest poleward thrust at the centre of the continent along the large north-south trending lakes of the Manitoba lowlands. Beyond this it appeared only under the auspices of church missions, and generally at a later date. It was also confined to crops introduced by Europeans.

Despite the increasing inroads of white traders, missionaries and government officials into the Northwest, the agriculture that spread among the Ojibwa remained essentially native in character. If not entirely based on Indian cultigens, it was conducted on Indian terms, a feature that for some bands persisted into the reserve period. Thus, despite dwindling game resources and persistent attempts by missionaries and representatives of government to convert them to farming, many continued to hunt and fish, and to plant the small gardens of corn and potatoes that had been their custom prior to becoming wards of the new Canadian state.

#### NOTES

The authors wish to acknowledge the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, for permission to consult and quote from their records.

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33. Peter Jacobs, *Journal of the Reverend Peter Jacobs, Indian Wesleyan Missionary, from Rice Lake to the Hudson's Bay Territory, and Returning; Commencing May, 1852; With a Brief Account of His Life, and a Short History of the Wesleyan Mission in that Country* (New York: The Author, 1857), 30.
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40. Miles Macdonell's journal, 23 January 1814, SP, Vol. 63, p. 16, 876.
41. Miles Macdonell to Lord Selkirk, 3 August 1817, SP, Vol. 12, p. 3, 900.
42. J.D. Cameron to George Simpson, Lac la Pluie, 20 May 1829, HBCA, PAM, D5/3, fo. 353.
43. Fort Lac la Pluie post journal, 5 October 1819, HBCA, PAM, B105/a/7, fo. 39.
44. Ibid. The Indian bags or fans, were seven-tenths of a bushel. The bags were made of fawn skins, taken off nearly whole, and consequently they varied with the size of the animal.
45. Lac la Pluie Report on District, 1822-23, HBCA, PAM, B105/e/2, fo. 3.
46. Lac la Pluie Report on District, 1824-25, HBCA, PAM, B105/e/4, fo. 1.
47. Lac la Pluie Report on District, 16 October 1824, HBCA, PAM, B105/a/10.
48. Lac la Pluie Report on District, 1825-26, HBCA, PAM, B105/e/6, fo. 11.
49. J.D. Cameron to George Simpson, Lac la Pluie, 20 May 1829, HBCA, PAM, D5/3, fo. 353.
50. *Report on the Exploration of the Country between Lake Superior and the Red River Settlement* (Legislative Assembly of Canada; Toronto, 1858), 137 (para. 134).
51. Ibid., map following Introduction.
52. Leo G. Waisberg, "The Economy of the Boundary Waters Ojibwa" (unpublished mss. in possession of Grand Council Treaty No. 3, Kenora, Ontario, 1979), 52.
53. Journal of the Reverend Robert M. McDonald, 17 February 1854, Church Missionary Society Records, Film A93.
54. Fort Lac la Pluie post journal, 28 February 1829, HBCA, PAM, B105/a/13, fo. 6.
55. Schoolcraft, *Expedition to Lake Itasca*, 21.
56. Frederic Ayer to David Greene, Red Lake, 12 January 1845, in Grace Lee Nute, comp., *Manuscripts Relating to Northwest Missions*, Division of Archives and Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
57. W.T. Boutwell et. al. [Messrs. Hall, Ayer and Boutwell] to David Greene, Pokegoma, 6th March 1843, in *ibid.*
58. *Loc. cit.*
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