

**THE CULTURAL TRANSMISSION OF THE SPIRIT OF
TURTLE MOUNTAIN:**

A Centre for Peace and Trade for 10,000 Years

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Abstract: For more than ten thousand years Turtle Mountain has been a refuge, a home, a base for natural resources, and a crossroads of cultures and trade routes including the Dakota, Chippewa (Aunishanabeg) and Métis and more recently Europeans.

Introduction

Turtle Mountain lies on the international border between Canada and the United States. The “mountain” is actually a plateau approximately 50 miles by 40 miles, with roughly half of the mass lying within the Province of Manitoba (Canada) and approximately half lying within the State of North Dakota (United States).

The Canupawakpa Dakota aboriginal territory lies primarily on the northern side of the mountain stretching into the adjacent Souris Plains. In the early 1800s AD the southeastern side of the mountain-plateau was occupied by the Turtle Mountain Chippewa. European settlers flooded the area during the late 1800s on both sides of the international boundary. In between, geographically, culturally and temporally are found the Cherry Creek Métis.

Each of these distinct cultural groups is also represented by sister communities at varying distances from the centre of the mountain, as well as by related and hybrid communities.

Each of these modern-day cultures: Dakota, Chippewa and Métis are themselves inheritors of multiple streams of cultural history stretching back (in some cases) to the last ice age, fifteen thousand years ago or perhaps even earlier.

Sitting aside a geographical and temporal crossroads as it does, the various communities of Turtle Mountain are in a sense “neither fish nor fowl.” Each has cultural characteristics shared with their close relatives on both sides of the border, however, each community also shares a *Spirit of Place* in common with each other that marks them as distinct from their own relatives. Governments and institutions primarily drawn from European descendants (such as those of Canada, United States, Manitoba or North Dakota) have difficulty placing these communities in context or understanding their international character.

This ancient and continuing aspect of *internationalism* has meant that the area has often been sought as a refuge, and its inhabitants sought out as mediators between their parent cultures and polities.

Watersheds

The so-called “geographical centre of North America” (a point equidistant from the east-west limits of the continent as well as the north-south limits) is Rugby, North Dakota. That point lies within the

larger landform of Turtle Mountain, nestled gently within the “tail” of the zoomorphic interpretation of the landform.

In addition to this continental mid-point, the key to understanding Turtle Mountain’s historical role is the watersheds of the continental interior. It is here at Turtle Mountain that the upper reaches of the Atlantic, Arctic and Gulf of Mexico meet.



Figure 1: North American watersheds. [Adapted from National Geographic (1993)]

Water on the north side of Turtle Mountain flows to the Arctic Ocean; on the south generally towards the Gulf of Mexico. The Red River to the east flows into the Arctic, but only a few hundred kilometers further east the waters flow towards the Atlantic Ocean.

Ice Age Advance and Retreat

At the end of the last Ice Age (sometimes called *Wisconsinian* in the United States and/or *Laurentides* in Canada) Turtle Mountain stood as a *refugia* within a sea of ice. The “mountain” – more properly a “plateau” – is an isolated remnant of the Missouri escarpment level a few hundred kilometers to the southwest. During the advance of the *Laurentides* deep gouges were carved around Turtle Mountain, but the area itself was buffered by a combination of warm springs, high ground and denser rock. (The average level of Turtle Mountain is around 2000 feet above sea level.) As a consequence Turtle Mountain was only thinly covered by ice with minimal erosion, and some parts may not have been covered at all.

The withdrawal of the ice sheets, subsequent re-flooding of the landscape by glacial melt-water, and the consequent erosion changed the shape of the area. The result is a relatively higher isolated plateau and hilly country with broad grassy valleys and meandering rivers on all sides. The rivers became highways for ancient Native peoples, and later for the fur traders and European “explorers” (who were our first tourists.) The broad grassy valleys became highways for migrating herd animals such as deer, elk, moose, antelope, and most importantly of all... buffalo (North American bison.)

A geological crossroads led to an ecological crossroads which in turn would sustain a human crossroads.

Ancient People

The earliest surviving evidence of human inhabitation of Turtle Mountain is a scattering of “Clovis” and “Folsom” style projectile points. Although none of these have been found within this region *in situ* by archaeologists, their occurrence throughout the private collections of southwestern Manitoba and northwestern North Dakota

tends to confirm (by comparison to carbon dated samples from locations further south) than a minimum date of 8,000 to 10,000 BC needs to be assigned to human inhabitation of the area.

This must be understood as a *minimum* date, not a maximum. The pattern of glaciation and erosion also meant that for a period of 10,000 years before that the ridges linking Turtle Mountain to Devils Lake and the Missouri Escarpment could have served as a highway for animals, and therefore hunters. First Nations of the area generally hold within their Creation Traditions origins further south and eastward, but also point to a very early occupation in concert with megafauna such as mastodons, mammoth, giant sloth and bison.



Figure 2: “Turtle’s Back” hill feature on top of Turtle Mountain plateau.
[photo courtesy of Phil Hossack, Winnipeg Free Press 2007]

Ancient to Historical Movements

It is not possible to determine with absolute certainty when the first ancestors of the three groups that are subjects of this presentation (Dakota, Chippewa and Métis) first moved into the area. During most of the 20th century it was the practice of archaeologists to classify the material evidence primarily according to projectile point type – or even less reliably by pottery. Both types of material can be traded and used by more than one culture, and so are not absolute reliable indicators. Moreover, just as today we may employ more than one type of screwdriver, finding a “flathead” screwdriver in one location and a “square” screwdriver in another, the type of screwdriver is not reliable evidence of difference of culture. Its only reliability is that people employed screws and used different types.

There is evidence of changes of lifestyle, or more accurately of the hunting style, in the gradual change of projectile points. However, even these can be quite arbitrary and as the current Canadian Museum of Civilization website states “one person’s Pelican Lake point is another person’s Bessant.” (Both types are found prolifically around Turtle Mountain.)

Of the three groups mentioned earlier, the Dakota (Sioux) are sequentially the oldest, followed by the Chippewa (Aunishanabeg / Ojibway) and then the Métis (or Mechif as many are known locally.)

The Dakota tradition is that they represent an unbroken cultural continuity from the earliest people; and there are no other aboriginal groups extant in this region with an older claim. The Dakota tradition is one of a general movement from southeast to northwest. In present-day land-claim arguments this is represented by the Government of Canada as a relatively recent event occurring in the 1860s AD, but ethno-cultural and archaeological evidence points to movements hundreds if not thousands of years earlier.

The Chippewa movement is better documented having occurred largely after 1800 AD as the culmination of a two-hundred year long period of conflict between the Dakota and Ojibway nations, which began in the 1600s around the shores of the Great Lakes.

The Métis tell a story that the first Métis was born nine months after the first European man met the first Native American woman. Depending on how one interprets this ethno-cultural insight, that origin could have occurred in Acadia on the east coast of the continent, or in Quebec four hundred years ago. (The Métis are predominantly a mix of Francophone and Native cultures, most often Ojibway or Cree. However there are other varieties such as Scots-Dakota. The term Mechif is used for a cohesive subgroup with a distinct language based on French noun forms and Aunishanabeg verb forms. Mechif is one of the languages spoken among both the Turtle Mountain Chippewa and the Cherry Creek Métis.)

In the case of the Turtle Mountain area, *voyageurs* of mixed descent began moving into the area, with or without Jesuit priests, during the early 1600s AD. Since the priests did not always return with their *courier du bois* to Quebec, we can assume that some Métis must have remained in the area.

The Spirit of Place

If we imagine Turtle Mountain at the end of the last Ice Age, we can readily picture a special place. Surrounding it on three sides was a sea of ice, and within this special zone it is even possible that some plants, insects and small animals may have survived from the previous inter-glacial warm period.

The human economy of the Clovis and Folsom-era to the south of the ice sheet was, according to most archaeological interpretations, an economy heavily dependant on mammoth products including ivory. As the glacial front receded the relative value of these products would have increased, and the distance required to procure them would have also increased. The “tail” ridge south of Turtle Mountain (formed by the collision of separate lobes of the ice sheet) would have provided a high ground trail to access this glacial front. In this light the first agricultural export product of Prairie Canada to what is now the continental United States may have been ivory. This would readily account for the small scattering of Clovis and Folsom points. And so, to this era of hunters, places like Turtle Mountain would have begun to assume an extraordinary significance.

With the extinction of the mammoths and mastodons, the ecological niche was largely succeeded to by herd animals such as buffalo (bison). The Dakota define themselves even today as “the Buffalo People” and regard their traditional territories as potentially all those places that Buffalo could comfortably inhabit. This succession of mammoth economy by a buffalo economy would have probably occurred between 9000 and 7000 BC, and would remain fairly stable (barring some temporary hot and cold spells) until the advent of Europeans.

By the standards of most mountains, Turtle Mountain is not very high. Its 2000 to 2200 foot height above sea level is only about 500 feet above the surrounding plain. However, as there is nothing else as high for hundreds of miles in any direction, it means that it stands out visibly on the horizon. More importantly it affects weather on a continental scale, sitting as it does at the middle of what meteorologists call the “continental cyclonic effect.” While many other places in North America have “prevailing winds”, at Turtle Mountain the wind can come and go from any direction at any time of the year. During the winter the wind direction is generally *away* from the mountain in a counter-clockwise spiral, and during the summer the most prevalent direction is *towards* the mountain in a similar spiral.

This combination of unique geography, unique ecology and unique weather has contributed to the apprehension by human beings of the mountain as a uniquely special place. Whatever may be going on “down on the flats”, there is always something else going on up on the mountain. In times of drought the mountain is a refuge because it traps water in its limestone base like a sponge, releasing it slowly in the form of springs on all sides.

Lying as it does on top of what geologists call the “mid continental fold”, its water table is warmed geothermally resulting in a ring of “warm springs” that do not freeze regardless of the severity of the winter. For this reason it could have provided survivable *refugia* even during the height of the last Ice Age.

During hot spells, the mountain is always cooler, and during extreme cold spells it provides shelter from wind as well as the comfort of its warm springs.

Regardless of whether one is Dakota, Chippewa, Métis or European descent, Turtle Mountain is a *living* thing. We speak of it as an old friend, a neighbour, a mentor or grandparent. The mountain figures in all aboriginal traditions as one of the oldest beings; one who knew the Creator when the world was young.

In the regional versions of the legend of Turtle Island – found throughout much of interior North America – the great Turtle saved the people, animals and world from flood by rising up and allowing the survivors to climb upon her back. Its long low profile suggests the shape of a 40 mile long turtle, with its head towards the west and its tail curving around to the south. Landforms within it have zoomorphic names such as: the Turtle’s Brow, Turtle’s Foot, Turtle’s Back and (within the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reserve) the Turtle’s Heart.

Turtle Mountain to all cultures projects a palpable feeling of restful peace, and has for 10,000 years served as a centre of trade, peacemaking and refuge for all cultures.