

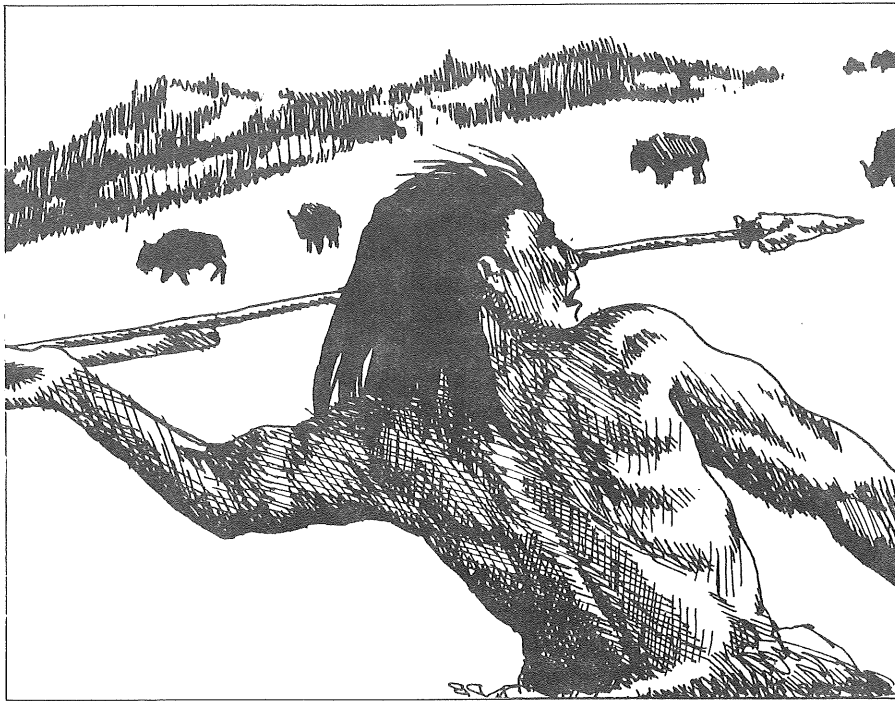
# DISCOVER ITASCA

SERIES



## Itasca's Prehistoric Heritage

*The first "tourists" arrived at Itasca State Park over 8,000 years ago!*



**S**ome 8,000 years ago, Indian hunters pursuing wild animals for food arrived in the Itasca State Park region. These early people ambushed bison, deer, and moose at watering sites and killed them with flint tipped spears. After processing the meat and hides, the hunters tossed the bones and worn stone tools into the lake. Sediment subsequently covered these items and preserved them.

### How Did We Learn About These Early Tourists?

In 1937, during the construction of the Park Drive bridge over

Nicollet Creek, ancient bison bones and human artifacts were uncovered. The University of Minnesota Department of Anthropology investigated the discovery and conducted excavations which produced significant evidence of early camp sites. In 1964 and 1965, archaeologists from the University of Minnesota excavated these sites and adjacent refuse dumps along Nicollet Creek just south of Lake Itasca's west arm.

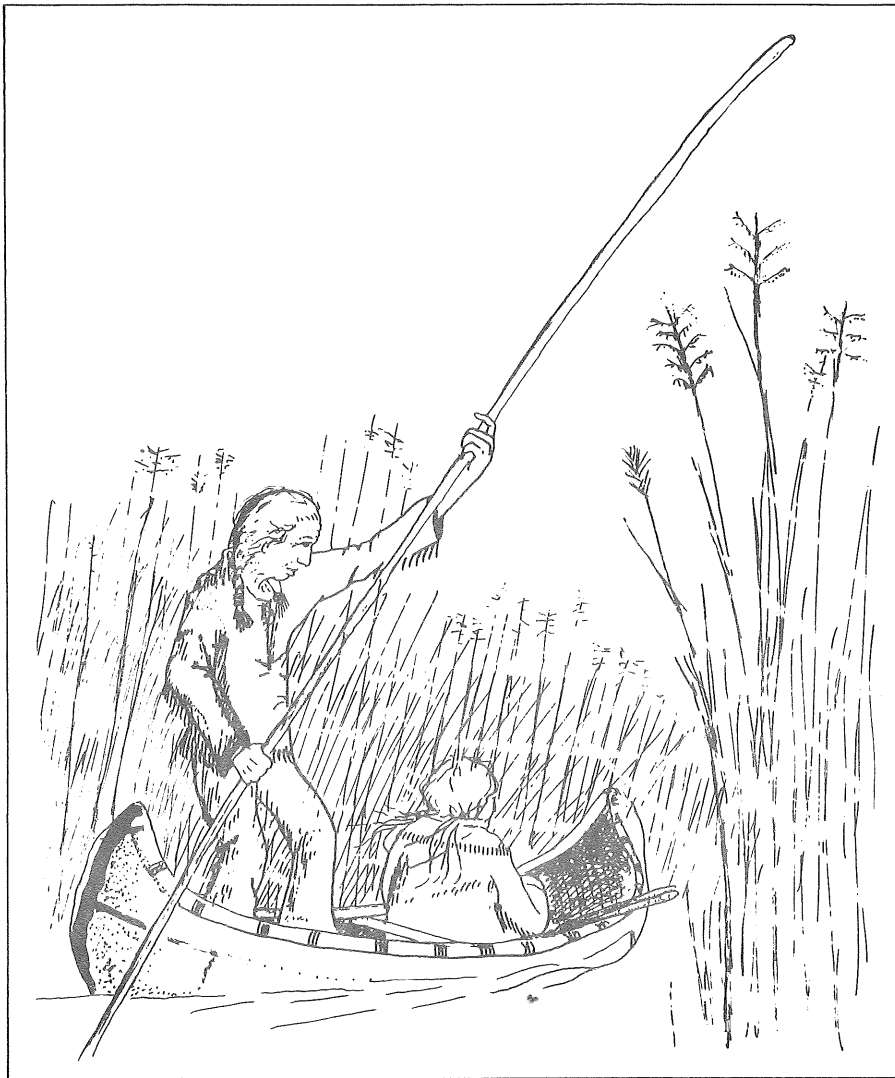
In excavating a suspected site, the scientists used shovels and trowels to remove sediments which conceal likely prehistoric

items. The depth and location of artifacts uncovered were carefully measured, identified, cataloged, and specially packed for safe shipment to distant laboratories. Scientists also collected samples of the embedding soil and remnants of plants, pollen, shells, etc., to facilitate laboratory study and to compare with other excavations. The University of Michigan determined the age of the bone and wood items through radioactive carbon (C-14) tests.

### Giant Bison Uncovered in Nicollet Creek

Growing knowledge from these excavations indicates that these migratory people and the animals they hunted were following the northward recession from the melting of the last continental glacier. The bison bones are those of the extinct *Bison occidentalis*, significantly larger than our modern bison or buffalo. These Indians dried the meat for storage, dressed the hides for robes and housing, and made scraping and piercing tools from some bones.

These early nomadic hunters wandered in groups totaling fewer than a dozen families. They made spear points and tools similar to those made by other Archaic hunters and wanderers. They domesticated dogs, possibly for hunting turtles, birds, smaller mammals, and the big game previously mentioned. Certainly



these people fished in the streams and lakes and searched for edible roots, leaves, fruits, and seeds. Other excavations indicate that wandering groups probably camped in and around Itasca for several thousand years.

#### **Itasca Indian Mounds**

The next tangible evidence of early people so far discovered in the Itasca region are the Indian Mounds, 500-900 years old, in the woods to the right of the Headwaters. Excavation of these burial mounds shows that these later people were of the Woodland pattern, considerably advanced beyond their wandering

Archaic predecessors, even to the extent of developing a philosophy of burial for the dead.

The Woodland people lived in larger, more permanent camps or settlements. They made and used a variety of stone, wood, and bone tools. They made and decorated clay pottery for cooking and storage. Of course, these Woodland Indians still had to hunt, fish, and gather plants for food, clothing, and shelter as did the old Archaic wanderers. But the Woodland Indians had found the bow and arrow which enabled them to kill game at greater distances. Practice with this new weapon allowed them to obtain

smaller, quicker mammals and deer rather than the bison.

However, this change in game pursuits might also indicate habitat development. Did small mammals and deer follow a climatic warm-up northward as the bison were moving out? Through the centuries, many new and useful plants established themselves this far north, a significant advantage for the Woodland Indians. This pattern of life persisted into the historic period.

Our methods of preparing wild rice and maple syrup probably originated among the Woodland Indians who found these foods as valuable and delicious as we do today. Judging from accounts of the Chippewa and other tribes, the Woodland Indians paddled about the lake and river rice beds, beating out the rice grains into their canoes. Then they built fires or allowed the sun to dry the rice. Then they tramped on or hand-beat the husks to loosen them, then wind-winnowed them to blow out the husks.

For maple sugar, they cut through the bark of the sugar maple tree during the spring sap rise and caught the dripping sugar sap. Boiling removed the water and thickened the sap into syrup. More boiling produced the delicious sugar.

Early explorers mentioned groups of Sioux (Dakota) Indians in the Itasca area. However, early in the 18th century, the Chippewa tribes became predominant here when they established settlements at Rice Lake, 12 miles northwest of Itasca, and at Ponsford, 15 miles southwest of Itasca.

This leaflet was prepared from Creighton T. Shay's article entitled "The Prehistory of Itasca State Park."