

There's a quiet plot of land between the Antler and Souris Rivers south of Melita that caught the eyes of early European Settlers. The settlers were puzzled by two long mounds, one oriented due north-south and the other due east-west. Clearly these mounds were built by humans. But who? And for what purpose were they made?

We now know that these mounds are burial sites. They're part of a series of 200 burial mounds stretching from southeast North Dakota to southeast Saskatchewan. About 70 burial mounds have been found along the rivers south of Melita alone, proving there were complex communities and economies here long before European settlement.

In the early 1900s, settlers and early archaeologists began digging into the mounds to gather clues as to who their builders were. A lot of looting occurred, and without protection, a portion were cultivated. Mid-Century, a new generation of archaeologists began investigating, this time, employing greater care. One was Dr Leigh Syms, who pieced together a theory on the people who built the mounds.

The people who built the mounds demonstrate, through the artifacts they placed in the graves, that they traded with people who lived thousands of kilometers away, near the Great Lakes and down the Mississippi. The builders valued these trade possessions enough to carry them those distances without the benefit of horse or wheel. Some mounds were constructed by bison hunters more than a thousand years ago. Then reused by horticulturalists hundreds of years later.

Present day archaeologists follow strict protocols when investigating sites. Dr Mary Malainey with Brandon University, for example, engages a Knowledge Keeper from Canupawakpa Dakota Nation, Greg Chatkana, when she and her team are digging through evidence of horticultural communities along Gainsborough Creek.

But 100 years ago, there was no such duty to consult. Well, we hear ourselves say, that's how it was. Europeans arrived on the prairies with colonial attitudes. Explorers wanted to find new routes for European traders. Industrialists wanted raw resources. Missionaries wanted

souls for their God. The juggernaut of conquest pushed aside human inclinations toward respect and caution. Dr Syms, and others, spoke forthrightly about the need for archaeologists to get to know Indigenous Nations nearest to any dig site; to negotiate and listen respectfully throughout the archaeological process. Under his leadership at Manitoba Museum, Dr Syms encouraged Indigenous students to become archaeologists and to bring the views of Indigenous Elders into the centre of their discipline.



The distinctive north-south and east-west oriented burial mounds were designated as The Linear Mounds National Heritage Site in 1973. This National Site is open to the public. But through consultations, Parks Canada decided to NOT promote the burial mounds as a tourist attraction. Materials collected from the mounds in the early 1900s are stored at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec. It's helpful to know that there's a movement among Indigenous communities to repatriate stolen items so they can be again laid to rest. There's piece-meal success of repatriation in Canada. But so far Canada lacks legislation to force museums to be more responsive to Indigenous Nations. And so the graves, wait.

***Burial Mounds*** was informed by *Vantage Points 2* and by written articles celebrating the work of Dr Syms.

*Vantage Points Flashbacks* were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.