

Precontact Ceramic Pot from Crow Wing County

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT artifacts in the MNHS archaeology collections is a fired clay pot dating to nearly 1,300 years ago. What makes it unique amid the thousands of fragmented ceramic sherds housed at MNHS is the fact that, in this case, the container is completely intact.

Frithiof T. Gustavson (1883–1947) recovered the ceramic pot in 1930 from the remains of a collapsed Indigenous earth lodge at an archaeological site in Crow Wing County in central Minnesota. The wood and other natural materials used to build the house had rotted away long ago, leaving a noticeable depression on the landscape. Differences in soil color and texture about three and a half feet below the ground's surface identified the original floor and entranceway of the house. The pot was found inverted along one side of the

entrance, amid large ceramic sherds from two other pots.

Gustavson was an enthusiastic amateur archaeologist, but no detailed notes, maps, or photographs exist that document the excavation. Still, the significance of the find was not lost on Gustavson. For years afterward, he toured the state exhibiting the pot and giving lectures at schools and universities. In 1997, the Gustavson family donated the pot and other ceramic sherds to MNHS, along with the F. T. Gustavson and Family Papers, which contain correspondence and newspaper articles documenting the extensive public outreach he conducted.

Archaeologists categorize the pot as St. Croix Stamped based on diagnostic features related to how it was made, its shape, and its decoration. The rough, cord-marked texture on the exterior surface likely was

created by the application of a thin, finger-woven textile bag. A dentate stamping tool, possibly made from bone or wood carved into small rectangular “teeth,” was pressed into the wet surface of the clay to create the delicate linear pattern decorating the upper portion of the jar.

When it arrived at MNHS more than 60 years after its removal from the earth lodge, it remained unbroken and brimming with research potential. Both inside and out, areas of charred organic material still clung to the vessel walls. Archaeologists took samples from these patches of crusty black residue with the goal of determining when the pot was made and what kinds of foods were cooked inside. Radiocarbon dating suggests the St. Croix pot was in use around 600–700 CE. Residue analysis identified wild rice inside, in the form of microscopic plant remains called phytoliths. This large pot holds more than five gallons, and likely was used to boil the ancient grain. The earliest archaeological evidence for wild rice use in Minnesota dates to around 2,000 years ago, and beginning around 500 CE, people living in central Minnesota began to harvest it more intensively.

Indigenous people have lived in the area now encompassing the state of Minnesota for more than 10,000 years. Wild rice remains deeply embedded within Dakota and Ojibwe cultures, and is spiritually important to the Native communities living in Minnesota today. This pot is currently on exhibit in *Our Home: Native Minnesota* at the Minnesota History Center.

—Katy J. Mollerud

St. Croix Dentate Stamped ceramic vessel found intact at archaeological site 21CW07
(MNHS COLLECTIONS)





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