



Turtle Mound, Cass County, from photo by Dr. G. H. Gilmore

TURTLE MOUND In Cass County, Nebraska.

By Dr. G. H. Gilmore, of Murray, Nebraska.

(For over forty years Dr. Gilmore has been a practicing physician in Cass County. His personal friendships include most of the residents of the region. His intimate knowledge of the Missouri river front of Nebraska makes him a valuable aid in historic exploration.)

The study of prehistoric man in Nebraska is made possible only from the non-perishable debris of his places of habitation, which includes house ruins, burial and ceremonial mounds, shop sites, bone and flint implements and the various types of pottery.

The rough scenic bluff lands along the Missouri river in Cass county, as well as the broken lands along the Weeping Water and its tributaries, are rich in the evidence of occupancy by an ancient and unknown people.

In the region of Rock Bluff, an old steamboat town on the Missouri river well known in the early history of the state, many valuable archeological discoveries have been made, studied and recorded. In June, 1911, the writer and Dr. T. P. Livingston, of Plattsmouth, opened the first house site in eastern Cass county, on Squaw Creek, at the western boundary of the town. This earth lodge proved to be rectangular and had at the center a large cistern shaped cache containing many flint implements, a clay pile and a small mortar for grinding paint material.

In 1909 Dr. R. F. Gilder, of Omaha, made drawings and gave written description of the painted rocks a mile north of Rock Bluff. Since then these rocks have been removed for building purposes.

Each summer archeologists are attracted to and explore the Walker-Gilmore buried village. This village, one mile south of Rock Bluff, is located in the valley which opens to the east into the bottom land of the Missouri and through which a ravine has cut to the depth of from twenty to thirty feet. In the walls of this ravine at a depth of from ten to twenty feet below the surface are strata of ashes from two inches to a foot in thickness. These are house sites and are rich in artifacts.

Dr. Fred H. Sterns from the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, excavated several of these house sites in the summers of 1914-15. Along this ravine for an eighth of a mile Dr. Stern and party located seventeen house ruins. Since then five additional house sites have been exposed. Dr. Stern found in the houses opened, the usual flint and bone implements and pottery. In addition to this, charred maize, pumpkin and squash seed, also the bones of antelope, buffalo and the antlers of elk were found.

Dr. Sterns, in his description of this village, in his "Stratification of Cultures in Eastern Nebraska," claims that this valley was thickly populated at different periods and that a thousand years is ample time to account for all these human evidences.

On the steep bluff just south of this ravine is a row of mounds, two of which were opened by Dr. W. D. Strong, but proved to be ceremonial mounds and yielded but little archeological material.

The cemetery of Rock Bluff village is located on a high bluff just south of the town and in the heart of a prehistoric village. Seven house sites have been located, but only three could be worked without disturbing graves. Dr. Strong, with a party from the Nebraska State University, opened two of these houses at the south edge of the cemetery. Each proved to be a rectangular house with a south entrance. From a cache holding fifteen bushels of ashes, several large pots were removed with bone and flint implements.

From this cemetery, running northeast, is a narrow ridge of a high bluff which at the north end dips down into the town. Along this ridge are many dome shaped mounds. July 6, 1932, in company with Walter Furlong and Joe Shera, residents of Rock Bluff, we sounded several of these mounds with a two inch auger. At a mound near the northeast corner of a strip of school land the auger was stopped by a stone at the depth of thirty inches. This mound which was twenty-four feet in diameter was then platted in three foot squares and carefully worked.

By means of three trench north and south it was ascertained that the mound contained a floor of lime stone slabs. To make

a thorough study of the mound all earth was removed. The upper four inches was black loam underlaid with a grayish yellow clay packed. Several broken arrow points and three complete points were found. All showed inferior workmanship excepting one which was made from a blue and white stratified flint unknown to this part of Nebraska and which showed superior workmanship. Parts of scrapers, mullers and celts were found.

At the eastern border of the stone slabs a mass of human bones was excavated. There was no regularity regarding burial. The long bones were strewn about the stone floor and one stood upright in a crack between the stones. The upper right jaw showed the teeth worn smooth to the jaw bone which would indicate a grain eater. The teeth and bony sutures of the calvarium showed this man had lived to a very advanced age.

When the mound was cleared of all earth the figure of a turtle in stone was evident to the most casual observer. This turtle figure measured thirteen feet and 9 inches in length and ten feet in width.

The circular outline of the shell with four legs and tail were on the same level. A large flat stone surmounted the slightly elevated center. The head of the turtle was absent or retracted into the shell.

The stones were water and weather worn and possibly taken from a ravine near by where the lime stone ledges were washed out.

What may be interpreted from this effigy of a turtle in stone? Dr. Strong says it is the only mound he has seen in the plains area that has had a meaning.

Francis LaFlesche, in writing of the Omaha, says: "For instance, amongst the Omaha, Osage, Kansa and Quapaws a turtle group is found as a subgens of each tribe, and in each instance its members are keepers of the turtle rites of the tribes."

The turtle rites were observed by the agricultural class and practiced prior to 1500. The form of a turtle was outlined and the sod cut out. The ceremonies connected with this figure were to secure rain and dispel storms.

In the town of Rock Bluff, on Fourth street, a house site has been worked out and below this two large caches were found with many potsherds of the incised type.

The Rock Bluff region abounds in house sites and mounds which have not as yet been touched.