



Indian Beads and Artifacts
Supt. Markin in Harlan County

ARCHEOLOGIC EXPLORATIONS IN HARLAN COUNTY

By J. Wyman Markin, Superintendent Naponee Schools

The Indians that spent their life hunting, fishing and warring on the plains of the Missouri Valley region have left some of the history of their culture buried in the ruins of their camp sites and in their burial places.

In this short story, I shall refer to Sioux and Arapahoe in particular because a letter, the picture of which appears herewith, found in Harlan County refers to the burial of the Indian killed in a battle between Sioux and Arapahoes. The letter was excavated at a depth of some eight feet below the surface, enclosed in an ink bottle. The soil at the point where the bottle was found had settled and could be removed only in large chunks, indicating that the soil had not been disturbed for several or many years.

A Remarkable Bottle Burial

The date, April 10, 1868, of this letter seems to be much later than is generally assigned to these burial places, and some state that such burials are in a prehistoric burial ground rather than a burial with the bead ceremonial rites. Yet beads were found around the bottle in the same manner as were found in this ossuary and others farther

east. Then we may conclude that these Indians were buried with the regular ceremonial rites.

Parts of skeletons—finger bones, vertebrae, and ribs—were unearthed here at a depth of five to eight feet. Many of them were in a good state of preservation. This promontory would shed practically all water, keeping the soil at a depth of a very few feet quite dry. This would prevent the decay of bones, perhaps for a few centuries or many years at least.

Many beads were found in this ossuary. Some appeared in a regular order as if worn as a necklace; and many were scattered thru' the soil in the excavation as the custom of the Indian funeral rites.

The Indian Beads of Harlan County

The thing that impresses me most is the similarity of the beads found in Harlan County and the beads of the Algonkian and other eastern Indians. Of course it is an historical fact that the Arapahoes are an off-shot of the Algonkian tribe. Some Algonkian hunters coming west into the Missouri Valley to hunt buffalo united and formed the Arapahoe tribe living in the Republican river valley and hunting as far west as what is now eastern Wyoming.

At a very early date, no doubt, the Indians developed the art of bead making. It is quite true that they developed likes for certain colors in their ornaments, for among the tribes of the Atlantic region we find black beads, called sacki, made from the "eye" of the black hinge part of the clam shell found there, and white beads called wompi, made from the rim of shells. One black bead was worth two or three white ones in exchange.

There is no doubt in my mind but that the art of bead making traveled westward with the Indian migration and became a part of the culture of the Indians thru' trade and intercourse. The hinge of the clam shell in Nebraska did not furnish material for the black beads as we found in the east. Therefore, I am of the opinion that the black beads found along the Republican river were colored by some process of heating. Many red beads are found, colored with some iron ore deposit. This gave the Indian a distinctive value for the difference in color of his beads, perhaps for exchange or for personal adornment.

I have black beads from Sacramento County, California; Arizona; Tennessee; and Nebraska. And red beads from California, Kansas and Nebraska. Since black and red are found so widely scattered is some evidence that the coloring process was an art and not an accident as some suppose.

Who Was John K. Jones?

If John K. Jones, who wrote the letter found in Harlan County, is a reliable person we may feel assured that either the Arapahoe or the Sioux Indians kept in their possession an heirloom of shell beads,

handed down for several generations.

I believe the shells from which these beads were made came from a body of water larger than is known to have existed in or near Nebraska. The shells must have been found in the Republican Valley during an early period and we may believe they were found here because no trace of them has been found elsewhere. These facts lead one to believe that a large lake existed somewhere in the vicinity of the Republican Valley and disappeared by some natural process, leaving no trace of such shell fish as furnished the Indians with material for their beads.

The Arapahoes spent much time in the Republican Valley and if these shell remains do not date farther back than the Arapahoe we may infer that the Arapahoe left them in this burial site and not the Sioux. The letter dated April 10, 1868, does not tell which tribe-Sioux or Aparahoe-the slain belonged and we may even infer Indians from both tribes were buried in this site together. I believe that the Indians buried here were Aparahoes for the Sioux hunted and carried on war from Kansas to the Dakotas and as far east as the Missouri river. No beads like these are found except in the proximity of the Republican River from Guide Rock to Cambridge. The Sioux undoubtedly, would leave shell remains in many places over this territory, if they possessed them.

Necklace of Thousands of Beads

In the picture of the beads found in the same excavation as the letter and the bottle you will observe round ones and many that are irregular. The irregular beads, by some authorities are called unfinished beads, yet, we found in one grave a complete necklace, beads in a regular position and every bead was of the irregular type. Nearby we found a necklace containing some three thousand beads of a very small type. The necklace was doubled around the neck. Each necklace was still around the neck of a portion of skeleton. We were unable to get a picture of these necklaces owing to it being late and too dark.

Since beads denote wealth and distinction, we may easily infer the position each of the above held in his tribe. The better the beads the higher the rank among the tribesmen. And again, the gorgets found here ranked accordingly with the quality of the beads. One made of solid bone was highly polished and shows signs of much wear. One made of shell, triangular-two holes, is a piece of art. Some were long slim pieces of shell, having one hole drilled in one end. Nothing particular about them to attract attention to any special workmanship.

Republican Valley Indian Culture

I have many prehistoric beads found in Indian camps and burial sites in several states, yet I find only a few beads as interesting and attractive as the Republican Valley shell beads, since these show a

distinctive work of art and yet are confined to so small a territory.

The ink bottle, you may note, dates back many years. The letter is presented to you as it came to me. I shall try to verify its history in the near future and pass all I find on to interested readers.

The editor of Nebraska History Magazine has authentic report that the glass bottle and enclosed note from "John K. Jones" found in a prehistoric grave was a practical joke by some present day explorers. We have omitted pictures of the bottle and its writing from our illustrations. We are indebted to Supt. Markin for several fine pictures which have place in our photograph collection.