

A SURVEY OF PREHISTORIC NEBRASKA

Campaign of 1934

William Cullen Bryant, America's first poet of nature, wrote his famous poem, "Thanatopsis," more than 100 years ago. Every literary minded American boy and girl 50 years ago knew the poem by heart. It was a favorite "piece" to be spoken at district school exhibitions. For some of us the majestic measures of that noble poem still march down the aisles of memory. Midway in the poem are these lines:

Take the wings of morning,
Pierce the Barcan wilderness, or lose thyself in the
continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon and hears no sound
Save its own dashings—yet the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.

The truth in this American poet's picture of the past comes home with tremendous force to the explorers and writers of the State Historical Society during these modern months. It is a truth that Bryant himself never thought of applying to the plains of Nebraska. The Indian tribes who traveled these plains when the whiteman came, had short memories and scant traditions of the people who had lived in Nebraska before their tribes came here. The first scientific explorers, geographers, engineers, geologists, botanists, seldom saw in the plains any hint of prehistoric men. Travelers on the great transcontinental highways buried their dead along the road with little monumentation and no perception of the dead who had been buried there centuries before. The homesteader and the cattleman overflowed Nebraska and, with a few rare exceptions (among them Robert W. Furnas, J. Sterling Morton and Isaac Pollard) scouted the possibilities of prehistoric men in this region.

About the year 1900, a series of explorations into the evidences of prehistoric man in Nebraska began. The

story of these steps and the gradual building up of both knowledge and interest in this field is a fascinating one. It will be assembled and published in the near future by the State Historical Society.

During the past eight years a remarkable series of discoveries have been made all the way from the Missouri River bluffs to the Wild Cat Mountains on our Northwest border. Interest in these discoveries has reached from American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Smithsonian Institution at Washington to the University of California at Berkeley and scientists from each of these institutions have eagerly joined with those of Nebraska in their explorations.

As reported by Director A. T. Hill this work is summarized.

List of Prehistoric house sites Excavated and Explored:

| County | Number of pre-historic houses | Rectangular | Round |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| Adams | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| Buffalo | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Colfax | 2 | | 2 |
| Franklin | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Frontier | 7 | 6 | 1 |
| Howard | 5 | 5 | |
| Nance | 2 | | 2 |
| Thayer | 7 | 7 | |
| Webster | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Republic (Kansas) | 2 | 2 | |

These explorations represent 17 different village sites in 9 counties of Nebraska and in Republic County, Kansas. It will be noticed that most of these sites are in the west central region of Nebraska. They indicate the presence of an extensive number of aboriginal people in regions (outside of the Loup Valley) where explorations had not previously revealed such settlements.

The sites have been surveyed, the excavated houses platted and photographed, the artifacts marked and catalogued and careful field notes taken of the work in general. In this work approximately one hundred Nebraska people interested in the explorations have assisted in locating the sites and excavating the houses.

These houses are mostly rectangular, some however are round. They are from 18 to 55 feet in diameter and the floor level varies from seven inches to forty-two inches below the present surface. Much valuable and interesting information and evidence has been obtained but further work is necessary for proof of conclusions which are now assumed.

In the vicinity of these sites are other sites in which no work has been done. It is very important that this work be carried forward as soon as possible as valuable evidence is rapidly disappearing by erosion, decomposition, tillage of the soil and in several instances by inexperienced people digging into them.

The Campaign of 1934 in prehistoric Nebraska will begin in May. Director Hill will take the field with a trained corps of workers. Camping outfits will locate at some of the sites which have been selected. Scientific equipment and methods will be employed. New and important chapters in the story of prehistoric peoples in Nebraska will be made known in this campaign. And the evidences of the buried aboriginal empire on these plains will be assembled in the Nebraska Historical Society Museum in the State Capitol.