

## DISCOVERIES IN LIFE OF PLAINS PREHISTORIC MAN BY THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXPEDITION OF 1934

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Reported by George F. Lamb

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On April 30, 1934, the State Historical Society sponsored a Scientific Archaeological Survey Party under the Direction of A. T. Hill. Associated with him were five men interested in archaeology—most of whom were specialized in their respective fields. In preference to hotels and long drives to location our party assumed the more economical and convenient mode of camp life once common in the Central Plains region and immediately commenced our field explorations among the ruins of pre-historic man of that area.

### The People

Prehistoric man here was of necessity a foot Indian; that is to say, no evidence was found to indicate that he had beasts of burden, such as the horse—or that he had ever been contacted by white man. In other words—no objects of white influences, such as metals or glass or other trade materials were found. Without horses these Indians were evidently a sedentary people who existed chiefly by agriculture and hunting the buffalo, living principally along spring-fed streams where timber and water were available.

### The Dwellings

The timber supplied not only fuel and material for implements but the posts and timbers for the framework of their homes, which were built in rectangular form, from 10 to 50 feet in diameter, with an additional covered entrance extending usually to the south or east, approximately one-half the house diameter.

After the frame work of the house was completed it was covered with grass or sunflowers or even corn stalks, weeds or brush and then earth or sod heaped over the structure, thus making what virtually was the first type of sod houses in Nebraska,—a warm structure, necessary in this latitude.

The floor levels are found from surface to 36 inches deep. The fire was placed on the floor at the center of the house, the smoke passing through an opening directly above the fireplace. Here the Indian women cooked their foods in earthen pots of crude form, but so well made that today we are able to restore those broken vessels to their original forms.

In our search for prehistoric Indian homes we select those ruins which we feel will yield the most valuable data and information. Certainly one which was destroyed by fire would have been abandoned

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hurriedly, and therefore we find more artifacts and pottery in such house ruins. The charred remains of posts and beams show us the dimensions of the house; and the materials found within the ruin disclose the habits and cultures of the former occupants. These are the evidences upon which we base our studies of an ancient people. Prehistoric man left no written history, but from the data and information found within a prehistoric ruin we are able to assemble facts relating to his civilization.

### Implements and Crops

Their implements, we find, were made of flint, stone, shell and bone. The charred corn, beans, squash stems, pumpkin seeds and other evidences show their crops, and the bone and flint agricultural implements, their methods of cultivation.

We find flint and bone implements used in the hunt and for dressing the hides of which their clothing must have been chiefly made. Some evidence of textiles are found indelibly impressed in the twisted cord forms applied to pottery. Long bone needles are found, evidently used in weaving. Twisted buffalo hair or possibly sinew fibres were used as cordage.

Evidences of buffalo predominate as a source of food, while remains of elk, deer, antelope, beaver, rabbits and many species of fowl are found. The many species of clam shells indicate their use as food, and the shells were also used as implements and for ornaments.

Stone objects such as corn mills and pulverizers, hide rubbing stones, pecking stones, celts and other objects clearly indicating their uses are found. These prehistoric people may have used wooden implements but due to time and decay they have disappeared.

Prehistoric Indian house sites which have collapsed without fire are not easily found, though these at times contain material very valuable to the archaeologist. In some such ruins we find bone artifacts in a wonderful state of preservation. Through some method of removal of the fatty acids of the bone these artifacts are as perfect as when made. Often they were discarded into an abandoned cache pit in association with potsherds, bone fragments and ashes, the latter a fine preservative.

Real ingenuity existed among these people for we find efforts made to mend and repair many objects used in their pursuits.

### Indications of a Peaceful People

We do not find evidences to indicate that the culture in which we worked was that of a warlike people. The quantity and shape of flint objects found is not more than enough to satisfy the needs of the hunt. Further, judging by the types of their homes and the locations of them, at times extending for miles beside a stream, with terraces suitable for their agricultural operations and corn caches located at suitable places for the storage of their crops, we believe that they were a settled people friendly with their neighbors. Later when the

horse was introduced to the Indian, his nature changed as the evidence in the proto-historic and early historic ruins indicates.

### **Pottery the Test of Culture**

The making of pottery varies with the degree of the civilization of these people. The best qualities are found at points of earliest contacts with whites. Because prehistoric man in the region traveled on foot, his migration was slow, and the evidences of his occupancy more plentiful. It is through the chronology of his pottery that we are able to follow his movements.

Starting at the point of historic contact we are able to trace the movements of these early people toward their origin. Occasionally we find an overlapping of cultures, a difference in characteristics that is immediately apparent. Careful note is always made of every detail in the excavation of any house ruin—it is through this data that we are able to identify and follow the culture in which we are interested.

### **A Pertinent Caution**

The importance of making continued investigations while the evidence is still available should be appreciated. Aeolian and alluvial conditions along with the plow of today are rapidly destroying these indications. Marauders and relic hunters contribute to the loss of most valuable data and information. An artifact not accompanied with accurate information as to the locale of its discovery and its relation to other possible evidences of prehistoric man is of no value as an archeological specimen. There are a number of amateur archeologists in the state who have the fundamental training required to make the results of their work of value to science and these should be encouraged.

### **The State Historical Museum**

Here in the state capitol one room of the museum is devoted entirely to Prehistoric man, containing the largest collection of prehistoric pottery and other artifacts of the Plains prehistoric Man of any museum in the world. Other historical societies are interested in entering the field pioneered by our director, Mr. Hill. In the past his business took him to all parts of central and western Nebraska and with his keen interest in archeology and his observation, he took advantage of these opportunities to investigate the entire area. He has a pioneer knowledge of such locations. The collection has attracted the attention of scores of scientific men and students who have visited the museum and marveled at the progress of the work.

This department of the museum is fast becoming the focal point of interest. Visitors seem to linger and inquire more eagerly regarding the exhibit of prehistoric man than about any other. This is possibly due to the growing public interest in archaeology.

### **Report of the 1934 Field Expedition**

The preliminary report of the 1934 Field Expedition will soon be available, for the convenience of the members and other historical

societies who are interested in archeological research and exploration. Members of the Society are grateful to know that the work sponsored by Director Hill has been considered of such importance that the attention of the National Research Council and the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution is focused in the developments of the archeological department of the Nebraska State Historical Society. This department is competent, and is qualified to work in full cooperation with those highest in national scientific organizations, and its research is fully accredited.

Through the approval and support of the Nebraska State Historical Society, and the untiring interest of our Director of Archaeology, A. T. Hill, this work has been made possible.