



## Explorations in Nebraska Archeology

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society).  
You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: John L Champe, "Explorations in Nebraska Archeology," *Nebraska History* 18 (1937): 116-126

Article Summary: Champe summarizes the activities of state archeologists in 1937. He explains how their work has improved our understanding of the earliest residents of Nebraska.

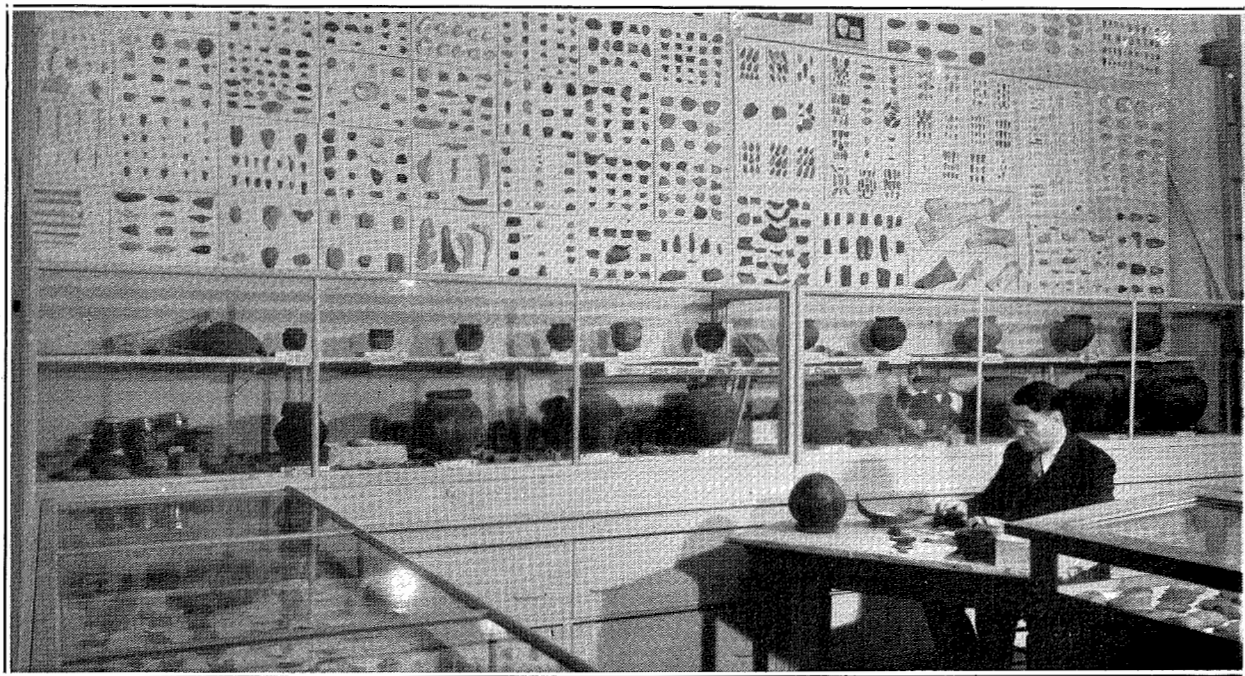
### Cataloging Information:

Nebraska Archeologists: E E Blackman, M R Gilmore, George R Fox, A E Sheldon, A T Hill, W R Wedel, George Lamb, Paul Cooper

Sites Discussed: Stockville, Lincoln, Yutan, Rulo, Genoa, Bellwood, Ashland, Meadow, Peru, Brownville, Superior

Keywords: Nebraska Culture, Woodland Culture, Oneota Culture

Photographs / Images: George Lamb in the archeology room in the State Capitol, prehistoric earth lodge near Ashland



Archeology room, First Floor, West Wing, State Capitol.  
George F. Lamb, archeologist, restoring prehistoric pottery.

## **EXPLORATIONS IN NEBRASKA ARCHEOLOGY**

Address by John L. Champe at the Annual Meeting  
Nebraska State Historical Society, October 1, 1937.

The purpose of this report is to summarize for you the activities of your staff of Archeologists, particularly for the season of 1937; to comment briefly on results attained and progress made toward a better understanding of the history of the earliest residents of the state of Nebraska.

The study of history, whether white man or Indian, is our particular province and our major objective. Perhaps the use of the word "history" to include data secured by the archeological method, may be criticised, but our Encyclopedia Britannica says in part: "All things which happen, or seem to happen, are history in the broader sense of the word." It is evident that the founders of this Society were men who took this broader view of the term "history" and planned the Society's activities to include research into the remains of our Indian predecessors as well as in the written records of the white man.

Our founders in 1879 evidenced their interest in archeology by incorporating in the original constitution the following words:

"The general object of this society shall be to encourage historical research and enquiry, spread historical information, especially within the state of Nebraska, and to embrace alike aboriginal and modern history."

and again in paragraph 2:

"Third, to encourage investigation of aboriginal remains and more particularly to provide for the complete and scientific exploration and survey of such aboriginal monuments as exist within the limits of the state."

The list of original members and officers reads like a Roll of Honor in the history of Nebraska; names like Furnas, Garber, Morton, Crounse and many others. It is a tribute to the vision of those men — our founders — that the plans they outlined nearly sixty years ago are being carried forward today with undiminished vigor.

Perhaps the best evidence of the foresight of these founders lies in the fact that in 1879 little was known of the archeology of the North American Indian. The Plains Area, of which our state is a part, was believed to be barren in archeological remains. It was generally accepted that this area was not suited to Indian agriculture and its only inhabitants were nomadic buffalo hunters without permanent villages.

Subsequent research has shown that this belief was far from correct. After the Indian got the horse from the Spaniard, he was able to follow the buffalo on long hunts, but we now know that this state was well settled hundreds of years ago by people who lived in small villages of earth lodges clustered in convenient river or creek terraces. It seems certain that there are more of these prehistoric villages than there are towns today in Nebraska. We do not think that these villages were all occupied at the same time, but there is good evidence of a surprisingly large population of Indians who lived in small communities with agriculture as their main support and hunting secondary in their scheme of living.

It should not be inferred that we believe this sedentary people to be the earliest inhabitants of the state. The University of Nebraska and this Society have uncovered much evidence of at least two earlier groups equally interesting but whose archeological remains are even more rare and difficult of access.

The first study of these villages and collection of the remains therein for the Society was done by Mr. E. E. Blackman about 1900 and 1901. It is hardly sufficient to say that enough credit has never been given Mr. Blackman for his contributions to archeology during

thirty years of association with this Society. He pioneered the field without adequate funds or means of rapid transportation and painstakingly laid the foundation for more widely known work of the past several years. As a matter of fact our own secretary, Dr. Sheldon, actually antedates Mr. Blackman in archeological work. Dr. Sheldon's many accomplishments in strictly historical research have overshadowed his archeological work and perhaps he is content to rest on those well earned laurels. The truth is that his abiding interest in things archeological always has been and still is a major factor in the Society's success in that field.

From 1911 to 1915 Dr. M. R. Gilmore was curator of the Museum, later going to the North Dakota Society, and for many years he has been the ethnobotanist at the University of Michigan. His specialty was the study of plants used by or known to the American Indian. His contributions to this science are important and it is no small credit to the Society that he was associated here for so long a time.

Following Dr. Gilmore the work was carried on by Mr. George R. Fox, Dr. Sheldon, Mr. Blackman and others down to 1933, at which time the man now in active charge of field work joined the Society's staff. In 1933 Mr. A. T. Hill, then living at Hastings, met with the Executive Committee of the Society and plans were worked out for archeological reconnaissance in western Nebraska. The following year, 1934, Mr. Hill directed a party for the Society which worked out a prehistoric problem near Stockville and conducted a preliminary survey at Minneapolis and Lindburg, Kansas, all of which were reported in the Society's publications by Dr. W. R. Wedel who assisted Mr. Hill.

In 1935 sites near Lincoln, Yutan and Rulo were investigated. Detailed reports of these excavations have already been published in our own publications by Hill and Wedel and Hill and Cooper.

1936 was a banner year for our party. An extensive excavation of sites near Genoa and at Bellwood shed much needed light on the relation of material found at these sites to the artifacts of the historic Pawnee. It seems reasonable now to ascribe these villages to some branch of the Pawnee tribe resident there just at the time of the first white contact. If final analysis confirms this view it will add a definite contribution to the science of archeology and no small feather in our cap as an Historical Society.

Let me take this opportunity, as a member, to express my satisfaction that our Society has associated with its official personnel a man of A. T. Hill's proven ability as a business man and as a scientist. His business success speaks for itself and I am happy to testify to the extremely high regard and respect he commands from the best professional archeologists in the United States. The fact that he is closely associated in archeology with men of the highest standing, such as McKern of the Milwaukee Public Museum, Gladwin of Gila Pueblo in Arizona, Drs. Guthe and Griffin at Ann Arbor, Strong of Columbia, Bell of Nebraska, Keyes of Iowa and Wedel of the U. S. National Museum at Washington, evidences the esteem in which his work is held and the respect commanded by the Nebraska State Historical Society as a scientific institution.

Mr. Hill has chosen his assistants very wisely indeed. George Lamb, whom all of you know, has devoted his time for the past four years to the service of this Society as a field assistant and manager of the work. In addition to his excellent field work he has personally restored nearly all of the large pots on display in the Museum. Many persons do not realize that these pots when found are invariably shattered into many — perhaps a hundred — fragments and these in turn scattered and mixed with hundreds more fragments of similar pots. The task of sorting and identifying the bits of pottery — potsherds is the technical name — which belong to one

pot is actually appalling. Then these sherds must be fitted together to reproduce all or a sufficient part of the original pot to permit a complete restoration. If any member is a jig-saw puzzle fan here is an opportunity to test your abilities to the last degree. The last step in producing the restoration is to replace any missing portions of the pot with plaster. Mr. Lamb has originated a method of his own by which he employs an inflated balloon as a core around which the pot fragments are assembled and the restoration built up. While George is too modest to admit it, I can recommend an hour in the Museum with Mr. Lamb as your conductor. Every article there has a story and an interesting one if you can get him to tell it to you.

About April 1, 1936, Dr. W. R. Wedel joined Mr. Hill as his archeologist, but a few months later received and accepted the appointment as assistant Curator of Anthropology at the U. S. National Museum. In looking about for a successor Mr. Hill was fortunate enough to secure Paul Cooper, present archeologist of the Society. Mr. Cooper holds degrees from the Universities of Wisconsin and Nebraska and has had active field experience in Wisconsin, Illinois, Tennessee and the Southwest, as well as several seasons in Nebraska. Prior to joining our staff he was in charge of a party working in the Tennessee Valley. A sudden illness forced his resignation from this work and Mr Hill was able to induce him to join our staff after his recovery. His wide experience in associated fields is proving invaluable in the interpretation of data recently secured.

Mr. Cooper must accept joint responsibility with me for the report of the season just past. He very kindly turned over a report he had compiled for this season with permission to rewrite it in a brief form for presentation today.

The general plan of the 1937 season was determined in advance after correspondence with the U. S. National Museum. Mr. Hill decided on a fairly intensive survey

from Ashland on the Platte to the Nebraska line on the Missouri. The U. S. National Museum party worked in sites from Kansas City north to the Nebraska line and so a preliminary survey of that entire area has been accomplished.

The field season of the Archeological Survey began March 29, when excavation commenced on a large village and burial site just east of Ashland, Nebraska, and to the right of the highway south and west of Salt Creek. Work continued from March 29 to May 10, during which time four earth-lodges, eighteen caches or storage pits, and seventeen burial pits, containing in all about 50 individuals, were completely excavated. This site presents an extremely interesting but puzzling problem. The earliest French maps from 1684 to 1757 show the historically known Otoe tribe to be resident at that time at the mouth of Salt Creek on its south side. A few — very few — references are known which further indicate the location. High hopes were entertained of identifying this Otoe village by Indian artifacts of a particular type plus a small amount of historic material. Interpretation of the data accumulated is not yet finished and it is certain that more work will be required in this area before a solution can be found. It now appears that there have been two and probably three successive occupations of this site by quite distinct Indian tribes, and these occupations may be separated by considerable periods of time. The site, particularly, is easily accessible and your staff expects to put in more time on the site as well as in research in early French documents and maps before the next digging season begins.

On May 10 the party removed a few miles southeast of Ashland to the mouth of Pawnee Creek where two earth-lodges and a hilltop burial pit were uncovered. A preliminary analysis of the traits presented here indicates that these people were affiliated with what is known as the Nebraska Culture. Since the larger part of the excavations of this last summer were in the remains



left by this group of people, a very general statement may be in order to define what the term "Nebraska Culture" means to the archeologist.

The Indians lived in Nebraska at a time before the advent of the white man or of the horse, or in round figures 400-600 years ago or perhaps more. A large number of these lodge floors have been excavated but no article of white man's goods nor any horse bone has ever been found. They are known to have lived along the rivers and creeks of eastern Nebraska and western Iowa in earth-lodges built on natural terraces or second bottoms of the rivers and along the highest ridges and bluffs near the Missouri. Their remains indicate agriculture as first and hunting as second in importance.

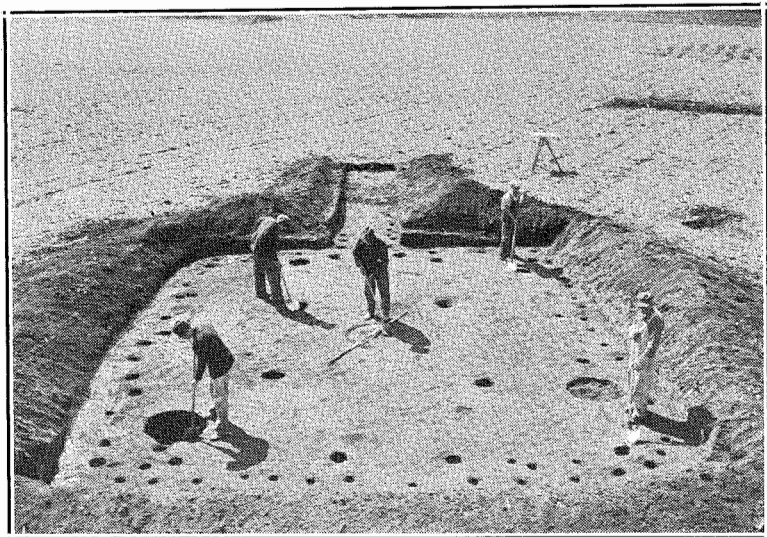
There is no direct evidence at this time that they are ancestral to any of the historic Plains tribes, although further research may show such affiliations. This is the people who left the remains in which Dr. Gilder of Omaha has worked so long. Detailed descriptions of individual sites can be found in articles by Hill and Cooper in the Society's publications, by Dr. Bell and Gilmore in "Chapter in Nebraska Archeology" just published by the University of Nebraska, and in "An Introduction to Nebraska Archeology" by Dr. W. D. Strong.

From May 27 to June 7 the survey party was at Meadow, directly across the Platte River at Louisville. Here a very large and deep earth-lodge was excavated with extremely satisfactory results both as to data and specimens.

The party then moved to Bellevue where a very similar house ruin was investigated. Both houses were of the Nebraska Culture type and provided exceedingly interesting data to be reported formally at a later date. On June 25 the party began excavation of another house floor of the same general type on the south side of the Platte near Plattsmouth. This excavation was completed by July 3rd when camp was moved to a location about three miles northwest of Peru. One house site was com-

pletely excavated and another trenched. Both appear to belong to the Nebraska type but certain differences in the pottery appeared. Near these remains but deeply buried in the walls of a ravine was found evidence of what is known as the "Woodland" Culture. This is a quite different type of pottery, first defined in Nebraska by Dr. Fred Sterns of Harvard in 1915 at a site near Rock Bluff on the Missouri and much like the material from the Bakenjus site dug in 1936. It is quite widely spread over the eastern half of the state but almost invariably buried at such depths that the difficulty of clearing the sites has been too great for the limited means of any of the Nebraska institutions.

At Peru, for instance, one level of material is exposed in the wall of the ravine at a depth of 11 feet 6 inches and another at 13 feet and still a third at 16 feet. The first and third contained fireplace charcoal and occasional fragments of pottery.



Prehistoric earth lodge near Ashland, Nebr.  
Excavation by Nebraska Historical Society  
Archeological Survey, spring of 1937.

In addition to the house sites and Woodland material just mentioned, a burial pit containing the remains of ten individuals was uncovered, but cultural association was lacking and the condition of the skeletal material itself was unsatisfactory.

Leaving Peru on July 28 the party worked near Brownville, where another Nebraska type house floor and a number of burial pits were excavated. These burials are uncommonly interesting by reason of the associated material. Two pottery vessels and fragments of others of a type not common in this area were found, as were a considerable quantity of shell beads and some bone bracelets. The area near Peru and Brownville presents a very complex problem and will require much further exploration before an interpretation would be justified. Leaving Brownville on August 24, the party devoted its time to a surface survey and study of local collections. Numerous sites were located from Brownville to Rulo near the Kansas line and a similar reconnaissance was conducted on the Big Blue River.

From September 9 to 25 two sites near Superior were thoroughly tested and two houses and a number of cache pits were excavated. These sites are remarkable for being the only places so far west where the Oneota Culture has been found. This Oneota material is like that found abundantly at the Leary site near Rulo and in a small amount at Ashland as well as at scattered points in northeastern Nebraska.

During the season a total of 13 houses and about 80 burials that are prehistoric were completely excavated; much mapping and location of further sites was accomplished. The Museum has been enriched by several thousand artifacts — far beyond our capacity for further display. Another successful season has been added to those reported to you in previous years — some of the old questions have been answered. New and perhaps more far-reaching problems are now presented for solution. Mr. Hill, Mr. Cooper and Mr. Lamb are to be con-

gratulated for the completion of five months of hard work in our pleasantly warm Nebraska sun — but work which has been amply rewarded by the material and data I have described so hastily.

In conclusion, it is evident that work of this character and achievements of this distinction can only result from close cooperation within the Society. Mr. Hill has asked me to thank every member of this Society, whose loyalty has meant so much to him, and particularly to commend President A. B. Wood, Secretary A. E. Sheldon and the members of Board of Directors, whose encouragement and support have been vital to the completion of the 1937 program.

---