



The Archeological Exploration of 1938: Foreword

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Article Summary: This is the introduction to a special Archeological Number of *Nebraska History*, the sixth issue devoted to prehistoric life along the Missouri shores. See also the article "[Report of Explorations \(1938\).](#)"

Cataloging Information:

Photographs / Images: pictographs carved in the rock wall of a canyon near Blackbird Hill

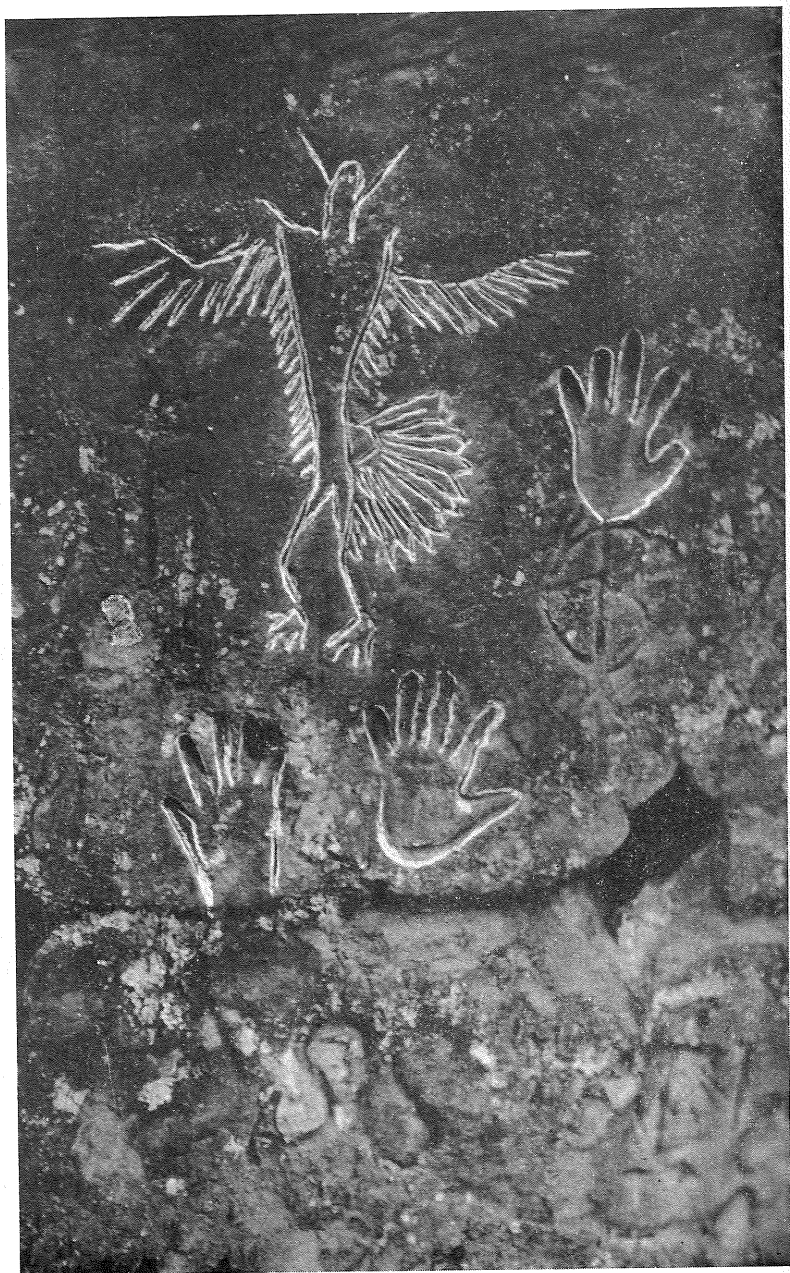


PLATE I.

Pictographs carved in the rock wall of a canyon near Blackbird Hill. The winged figure may represent a dancer in some ceremony.

Foreword

By ADDISON E. SHELDON

Five planets — Venus, Jupiter, Uranus, Saturn and Mars — held a convention with our Moon in the southwest Nebraska sky Tuesday evening, February 6, 1940. It was a remarkable, brilliant gathering. A patch of cloudless sky as big as a mill-pond held all six celestial visitors. Pursuing different paths, in different planes of distance around our central Sun, these planets “happened” in the same sky with our Moon on the same evening. Astronomer O. C. Collins, of the University of Nebraska, answering my question, said such a convention of planets would not occur again in the lifetime of any living person.

The Pawnee Indians in Nebraska looked at these planets hundreds of years ago. Their Medicine Men wove into their folklore wonderful stories of the Morning Star and the Evening Star. These stories have come down to us. What emotions stirred the soul of the Medicine Man as he looked at such an assembly of planets in the centuries gone by!

The Prehistoric People of these Plains looked upon the planets for thousands of years. Their lips are dust. Their dreams are departed. Their folklore is unrecorded. But they looked at the stars. They saw them moving in their courses, saw their assemblies in the sky. They were men and women as we are. Their minds wrestled with the eternal questions of man's origin and man's destiny as ours do now.

Can we, who fly with wings across these plains where the Pawnee and prehistoric pilgrim traveled on slow moccasined foot, ever know more of their life? That is one of the present quests of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

The founders of the State Historical Society named the search for aboriginal and prehistoric origins as one of the objects of their work. The first recorded observation of prehistoric evidences in Nebraska was made by Isaac Pollard, a Vermont immigrant and early member of the State Historical Society, who settled at Nehawka in 1856. It is now forty years since the first systematic study of Nebraska prehistoric evidences began.

Enough has been found, photographed, given systematic order in the Historical Society Museum and put in printed form, to give Nebraska permanent place in the records of the Smithsonian Institution at Washington and in the world literature on the subject.

This issue of NEBRASKA HISTORY is the sixth devoted to prehistoric life in this region. Preceding issues were as follows:

Vol. 10, No. 3 — A. T. Hill's Own Story

Vol. 13, No. 3 — Earth Lodge Ruins of Indian Habitation on Rose Creek, Thayer County
The Ruins of a Prehistoric House in Howard Co.
An Ancient Indian Village on the Stinking Water
The Picture-Rocks of Table Rock, Nebraska
Remarkable Finds of Western Plains Explorers.

Vol. 14, No. 1 — Explorations in Harlan County

No. 2 — Explorations of W. D. Strong
A Grand Pawnee Village

No. 3 — Medicine Valley Archeology
Archeological Explorations in Nebraska in 1933
Nebraska Prehistoric Sites—Survey of 1934
The Prehistoric Collections of George F. Lamb

Vol. 15, No. 1 — Discoveries in Life of Plains Prehistoric Man

No. 3 — Contributions to the Archeology of the Upper Republican Valley
Prehistoric Village Sites in Kansas

Vol. 17, No. 1 — Excavations at the Leary Indian Village, Richardson County

No. 4 — The Schrader Site — and others

Vol. 18, No. 4 — The Archeological Campaigns of 1937

In Volume X (Second Series) of the *Publications* of the Society is a notable report by E. E. Blackman, archeologist, covering the years 1906-1908.

The Missouri River shores furnish the field for this study of prehistoric life. In this region the first observations and the most frequent fugitive explorations through the years have been made.

It is fortunate that a union of circumstances, including federal aid, experienced leaders, previous training, and the co-operation of the Smithsonian expert staff, have made it possible to conduct extensive surveys, assemble the data and make an enduring contribution to knowledge of the people who have made their homes on the Missouri shores.

A time comes in the exploration of prehistoric places when the finds are more than mere curiosities or "specimens" to be handed about, lost in some local collector's exhibit, or traded for other specimens. Put together in proper sequence and situs they

make parts of a story of human life. Like Wordsworth's description of a child at play, they tell a story:

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pygmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art:
 A wedding or a festival,
 A mourning or a funeral;
 And this hath now his heart.

In Nebraska the time for the translation of aboriginal house sites, graves, and the objects found therein arrived some years ago. History, in its own right, took up the task of interpreting these fragmentary remains of people who lived and left all that is known of them in Nebraska soil. What are some of these interpretations of former Nebraskans?

Prehistoric people lived in family groups in earth lodges, partly excavated, generally on hills.

Bathing was limited. They often carried water half a mile or more, and they had no bath-tubs.

Tools of stone, bone and wood enabled them to cut large trees and dig deep cellars.

Fire they knew how to kindle and keep.

Pottery they made of different kinds, materials and ornamentation. This pottery is one key to their culture.

Food remains show that they ate animals, birds, fish, corn, wild fruit and nuts.

Dogs were their only domestic animal—their bones endure.

Belief in a future life is indicated by burial of weapons with the dead.

They made clothing, weapons, tools, games and ornaments—of skins, wood, bone, flint, stone and shells. They knew how to sew, paint, draw, cut, cook, hunt, fish, farm and fight.

Details of this sketch of prehistoric life in Nebraska are filled in with new discoveries and reasonings.

The editor is glad to commend this issue of NEBRASKA HISTORY and the fine work of Mr. Paul Cooper and Mr. A. T. Hill, with their helpers, in its production. It marks a high point in the re-discovery of Prehistoric Nebraska.