E. E. Blackman: Pioneer Nebraska Archeologist

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Article Summary: Blackman was the first Nebraska State Historical Society archeologist. He established a tradition of publicly sponsored archeology which has few parallels in other states.

E. E. BLACKMAN: PIONEER NEBRASKA ARCHEOLOGIST

BY DELORES GUNNERSON

E. E. Blackman, the first archeologist for the Nebraska State Historical Society, was born in 1862 at Davenport, Iowa, and died on September 13, 1942 at his home in Lincoln, Nebraska. He attended an academy at Davenport and later became a teacher. It was in this capacity that he came to Nebraska, teaching first at Raymond and then at Roca, where he was the school principal. Mr. Blackman had been interested in the history and prehistory of the Plains region for some time when, during his first year in Nebraska, he heard a lecture on the state's history and archeology given by the Reverend William Murphy, of Ulysses. The lecture so aroused Mr. Blackman's enthusiasm that he began methodical research of these subjects and undertook an archeological reconnaissance of the area around Roca. Occasionally he contributed articles based on this type of work to newspapers and other periodicals—among them J. Sterling Morton's *The Conservative,* published at Nebraska City. It was through his acquaintance with Morton, stemming from their mutual interest in Nebraska's past, that Mr. Blackman was later to become associated with the Nebraska State Historical Society.

In 1898 Mr. Blackman was still teaching at Roca and spending his weekends studying in the rooms of the Historical Society in the basement of the University Library (now Architectural Hall). At that time J. Amos Barrett, Assistant Secretary of the Society, was literally building a historical library, as in his spare time he was constructing book shelves as well as collecting books and periodicals with which to fill them. In the course of Mr. Blackman's visits the two men became friends and their pleasant association continued for some years until Mr. Barrett left the organization.

In 1899 Mr. Blackman decided to give up teaching and devote full time to writing and research. Shortly after he had refused re-employment for the following year J. Sterling Morton invited him to visit Arbor Lodge. There he and his host spent many hours before the fireplace discussing archeology. Morton believed that the State Historical Society should have an active archeological program and he was willing to use his influence to achieve this goal. Mr. Blackman was willing to undertake archeological work although at that time he doubted that there was sufficient archeology in Nebraska to provide him with a life-time career. No decision as to Mr. Blackman's future activities was reached at Arbor Lodge. Shortly after his visit, however, when he entered the Historical Society rooms at Lincoln to do his customary reading, Mr. Barrett handed him a letter written by J. Sterling Morton which read: "This introduces E. E. Blackman. You will please arrange a desk for him as he is going to do some work for the Historical Society." Mr. Blackman has recorded in regard to this episode, "Barrett and I laughed over the letter when he found out that I knew nothing about it, but he showed me the desk."

In the spring of 1901, at a meeting of the Historical Society's Executive Board, $300.00 was allowed for archeological work. This was accomplished chiefly through the influence of J. Sterling Morton. Much depended upon the results which Mr. Blackman would be able to obtain from this expenditure, for funds were not abundant and the Executive Board felt that the importance of archeological work should be proved before it became a regular part of the Historical Society's program. Mr. Blackman met the challenge. During the remaining months of that year he was able to explore eighteen Indian village sites, map four areas showing village locations, and make twenty-five test excavations. He also made trips to Minnesota and Kansas where, in the company of local collectors, he was able to get some idea of the aboriginal material found in these adjoining states.

The fact that archeological activities were put on a permanent basis in 1902 was undoubtedly due to Mr. Blackman's initial explorations. In this year he was employed as archeologist for the Historical Society and charged with the care of the museum. During the next five years he accomplished a great deal in the way of field work and in the development of the museum, especially when the limitations imposed by transportation difficulties and the need for economy are considered. He was fortunate in obtaining passes on most of the railway systems, so that sites near railroads were not difficult of access. Otherwise he had to depend for the most part on team and wagon. Nebraska archeology has its "horse and buggy" tradition, as the following excerpt from Mr. Blackman's report for 1902 indicates.

> On Sunday, July 20, as we neared the Platte River at Louisville we found very soft roads; the soil had washed from the surrounding fields until it lay two feet deep in the roadways; this was so soft that the ponies went through it at every step and the hubs of the wagon often nearly touched the top of the soft mud. After pulling a few miles in this condition of roads we were informed that the Platte was over the road near the bridge and were given directions how to get across. "You must keep the middle of the road while in water; if you get too far to the right the water is twenty-five feet deep; to the left it is seven or eight feet deep. You can make it, but be careful." With these instructions still ringing in our ears we came in sight of the water, at least a quarter of a mile wide, one sheet of rapidly flowing water with only fence posts on one side sticking a few inches out of the great lake to guide us. Cross we must, as the river was constantly rising and there was no place for a camp on account of the water on every side. We live to tell the story, but the experience was anything but pleasant.

By 1906 Mr. Blackman had explored the eastern third of Nebraska with special attention to the valleys of the Blue and the Platte. He had made a beginning on the study of sites along the Missouri River. Altogether, fifty village sites had been visited and reported. Surface collections had been made for purposes of comparison and study, as well as for display in the museum.

Very early Mr. Blackman conceived the idea of interesting local collectors in the archeological work of the State Historical Society. He was able to induce many collectors to make surveys of the areas in which they lived,

and report the results to him. He expended a great deal of time and effort in keeping these informants interested and active, even circulating a privately printed progress report concerning archeology. Through these activities he not only obtained valuable information at little cost but acquired new members for the Society from among those primarily interested in archeology. Some of the collectors donated or loaned material to the museum so that the number of catalogued items increased very markedly under Mr. Blackman's curacy. Actually, the quantity and quality of this material, which soon filled the museum and all available storage facilities, was a strong argument in the campaign for a new Historical Society building. The growing interest in archeology resulted in an increasing number of requests from over the state for lectures on the subject, and such talks became a specific part of Mr. Blackman's work.

In addition to discharging the duties of archeologist and curator, Mr. Blackman was engaged, during his early years with the Society, in a number of research projects. He compiled a list of Nebraska's better known Indians, with information regarding each. On his lecture trips he had found that instructors attempting to teach the history of Nebraska were handicapped by the lack of readily aavailable information. Therefore he undertook to assemble data on Nebraska's history and prehistory with the intention of writing a text. He attempted to locate the Lewis and Clark campsites in and near Nebraska and establish their legal descriptions.

In 1910 Mr. Blackman left the Nebraska State Historical Society and went to Kansas City. He remained there until 1917, at which time he rejoined the staff of the Society as curator of the museum. Although his efforts from 1917 until his retirement were devoted largely to the care of the museum he continued to report new archeological sites and do further work on some of those already known. In the summer of 1924 his investigations in the Loup Valley brought out evidence which tended to confirm the presence in that area of the Villasur expedition. This group of Spaniards was

massacred somewhere in what is now Nebraska in 1720. In the spring of 1926 he spent three weeks at the extensive Leary site, in Richardson County, Nebraska.

Besides his archeological work Mr. Blackman took part in some other interesting activities. On September 13, 1924, he gave one of the first radio talks on historical subjects when he spoke over Radio Station WOAW, Omaha, on "The Exploration of Aboriginal Remains in the Loup Valley." In 1928 the Burlington Railroad Company and the Nebraska State Historical Society sponsored a traveling museum—a railway coach in which were displayed relics of pioneer Nebraska. With Mr. Blackman in charge it traveled across the state to Alliance where it was one of the attractions in the celebration of the town's fortieth anniversary.

Mr. Blackman retired from active work at the Historical Society in May, 1934. Even after his retirement, however, he continued to be sought out by young people interested in the Indians of Nebraska.

Although he neglected no opportunity to preserve material of a purely historical nature, Mr. Blackman's chief contributions were in the field of Nebraska archeology. He was able to accomplish a large amount of survey work because he was willing to supplement meagre funds with a greater expenditure of time and energy. Much of the later archeological work of the State Historical Society consisted of testing or excavating sites which he reported. Although he himself was never able to carry out extensive excavations on any one site because of lack of funds, he was able to obtain some information as to the construction and artifact content of aboriginal dwellings, caches, and mounds by trenching through them so as to expose a cross section. A good brief evaluation of Mr. Blackman's achievements is presented by William Duncan Strong in *An Introduction to Nebraska Archeology* (Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. 93, No. 10, 1935), pp. 47-48.

His various annual reports contain references to a great number of historic and prehistoric aboriginal sites both in Nebraska and just beyond the State boundaries. In his first report may be found a good brief account of the Indian tribes known, or believed, to have occupied Nebraska within

the historic period. His early classifications of Nebraska cultures and ceramic types (1903, pp. 310-314; 1905, p. 5; 1906, pp. 394-395) are perhaps not so fortunate, though these were made at a time when lack of data made adequate generalizations impossible. Particularly valuable are his brief references to such historic sites as the Oto village near Yutan (1903, p. 296; 1907 a, p. 355), the Omaha village on the forks of the Papillion (1906, p. 391), the historic Pawnee villages at Linwood, Horse Creek, Clarks, Genoa, and the McClaine site near Fremont. He explored the remarkable protohistoric Pawnee villages at the Schuyler or Gray site and at the Burkett site (1905, p. 5; 1903, p. 297). Later he carried on excavations at the Burkett site, deciding that it was a Skidi Pawnee village dating from around 1341 A. D. (1907 a, pp. 339-344; 1924, pp. 1-8). Blackman also examined the Republican Pawnee village near Republic, Kans., reputed to be the one visited by Zebulon Pike, and pointed out that the local topography was not in agreement with the maps and descriptions of Pike's exploring party.

It might be added that Mr. Blackman, from his study of ethnohistory, had come to the conclusion that the valley of the Des Moines River should be explored as the locality most likely to yield archeological evidence of Omaha migrations. He wished to do this work himself but could find no sponsor for the project.

Although Mr. Blackman had no formal training in archeology, he was conversant with scientific method and in his official reports he differentiates between his actual observations and his interpretations. Thus, even though his theories, with those of other investigators of his time, have in some cases been superceded, his clear statements of fact continue to be of value to students. Following the trend of the times, for instance, he tended to overemphasize the value of stonework for identifying archeological complexes. This does not, however, affect the importance of his comments on the types of stone artifacts found at particular sites.

Mr. Blackman recognized the importance of photographs as evidence. In his report for 1908 appears this comment:

> It is very important that photographs be taken in almost every excavation if the work is to stand the test of scientific investigation. It is not enough that the work be described in all its details—scientists require the additional proof of the camera.

He bought a moderately priced camera with his own funds, meanwhile petitioning the Historical Society for one

which could handle detail work, but this was not granted him. Lacking photographic equipment he attempted to describe his work in greater detail.

Mr. Blackman considered it his duty to the public and to those who had cooperated with him in archeological work to report the results of his investigations. Since, after 1907, no provision was made for the publication of his reports, his work was publicized for the most part in newspaper articles which were too often re-phrased by journalists so as to amaze rather than inform readers. On a clipping of one especially bizarre article concerning the "Spanish massacre," Mr. Blackman made this notation: "I never authorized or sanctioned this disgraceful 'crazy' yarn."

Mr. Blackman brought to his work the honesty and conscientious attitude which he displayed in other aspects of his life. He had been reluctant, in 1899, to go into archeology because he was not sure that there was enough such work in Nebraska to provide him with a life-time career. With him financial remuneration was not the primary objective. He was seeking some work worthy of diligent and long-continued effort—work in which he might make a significant contribution. This attitude, maintained through years in which inadequate salary and lack of funds for research and publication might have disheartened another, kept him at his work for the Nebraska State Historical Society. And it was his work for the Society which established in Nebraska a tradition of publicly sponsored archeology which has few parallels in the history of other states.

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