

Earliest Man in Iowa

By THOMAS P. CHRISTENSEN

Observations and discoveries made since 1873 have added support to the theory that man has inhabited North America continuously since earliest Glacial or Pleistocene times, if not earlier.¹

In 1873 three crude implements believed to be Pleistocene artifacts were discovered 16 feet below the surface of the ground in the gravel bluffs overlooking the Delaware river. Not long after, other similar relics came to light in the same area, among which were human bones, implements, and a tusk of a mastodon. In 1877 the soil of Minnesota yielded vestiges of Glacial man; and other finds in Delaware, Ohio, and Indiana added proof to the existence of man on this continent in the Glacial Age.²

In the present century remains of early man in North America have been found in the Southwest. A most sensational find was made near Folsom, New Mexico, in 1925, consisting of skeletons of an extinct species of bison and a number of stone javelin points, which gave proof of a superior method of stone chipping. These points were different from any other stone points found in the Southwest. Prominent archeologists and anthropologists in Europe and America believe they may be from 10,000 to 20,000 years old.³

Evidence of later, but also very early man in the Missouri river valley has been discovered recently. In 1936 a 4,000 year old town site on the Niobrara river was excavated by University of Nebraska

¹ John Fiske, *The Discovery of America* (1892), I, 6-14; Armand De Quatrefages, "The Advent of Man in America" in *The Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institute*, 1892, Pt. 1, 518; Mary Austin "Pleistocene Man in America," in *Southwest Review*, Winter, 1934.

² John Fiske, *op. cit.*

³ *Americana*, 1948 Ed., XVIII, 192b.

scientists; and some years later archeologists dug out a 7,000 year old site near Pierre in South Dakota.⁴

Neither in the very distant past, nor in later times, or even in historic times, was Iowa ever a populous Indian country. However, it seems certain that primitive hunters thousands of years ago roamed over the woods and prairies between the Missouri and Mississippi rivers in search of the plentiful game of those regions. The late Dr. Ellison Orr had in his large collection of Indian relics a "point," which he described as a "Folsom" point. Folsom-like points have also been found in eastern United States.⁵ But no very ancient village sites like those of Nebraska and South Dakota have ever been found in Iowa.

MOUNDS HAD DEFINITE PURPOSE

The earliest definite evidence of prehistoric man in Iowa consists of numerous low mounds scattered all over the state, but chiefly along the larger rivers. The total number can only be estimated. One good authority says there "are many thousands of them." Some are mere refuse heaps. But most have been constructed with some definite purpose in view. Some are foundations for the flimsy houses the Indians built. Others were used as burial places. Still others were constructed for religious, ceremonial, or defensive purposes. Most were built of earth, sometimes brought from a distance. Stone was occasionally used, and a few stone vaults for the dead have been found. In shape most of the mounds are circular or conical, only in rare instances do we meet with rectangular mounds. In height they vary from one to ten feet and in circumference from 21 to 75 feet. One fine large mound near New Albin, Allamakee county, measures 250 feet in diameter, but only four in height.⁶

Several large mounds have been located in north-

⁴ *Des Moines Sunday Register*, July 12, 1936; June 10, 1951.

⁵ *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society*, October, 1951, 4.

⁶ Duren J. H. Ward, "The Problem of the Mounds," in *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, III (1905), 20-40.

western Iowa. One near Boone measures 110 by 190 feet and rises 15 feet above the surrounding country. On the top of this grew in 1908 two elm trees and "an oak of great size." Three or four feet under the surface of the mound was found a soil of unusual character. It was very dense and hard and couldn't be penetrated with a pick.⁷

Farther northwest on the banks of the Little Sioux river stood in 1859 a mound covering about an acre and rising about eight feet above the surrounding country. Excavations of the mound disclosed pieces of pottery, human bones, bones of buffalo, elk, and beaver, and arrow points, all mingled with ashes and charcoal.⁸

In the National Monument area north of MacGregor there are "18 animal and 3 bird effigies, 43 conical, 11 linear, and 5 compound mounds." The largest animal effigy, that of a bear, is 70 feet across the shoulder and front legs, 140 feet long, and 5 feet high.⁹

By 1897, mounds had been located in 39 of Iowa's 99 counties. Most of these were in northwestern counties and along the Mississippi river. They were especially numerous in Floyd, Henry, Allamakee, Scott, Muscatine and Louisa counties.¹⁰

IOWA MOUNDS RICH IN ARTIFACTS

The Iowa mounds have yielded artifacts by the tens of thousands. They include broken and some unbroken pottery, arrow heads, axes, pipes, ornaments and other objects. Weapons and implements were sometimes made of bone, but most were made of various kinds of granite. Some articles of copper have been found in the mounds along the Mississippi. These must have been obtained by barter or perhaps by raiding villages farther north where there were outcrops of copper ore. Pieces of hemp cloth have been unearthed

⁷ *Fort Dodge Daily Chronicle*, April 25, 1908.

⁸ *Sioux City (Iowa) Eagle*, Jan. 8, 1859.

⁹ *Effigy Mounds National Monument*, U. S. Department of the Interior, 1950.

¹⁰ Frederick Starr, *Proceedings of the Davenport Academy of Natural Science* VI (1889-1897), 53-124.

in some mounds. Mounds here and there have yielded catlinite pipes. A Louisa county mound contained an obsidian arrow point.¹¹

The mound building tribes in Iowa were hunters, fishers, and agriculturists. They raised corn, tobacco, sunflowers, beans and pumpkins. The men were skillful stone weapon makers and canoemen; and the women were skillful potters.

Seventeen different tribes are known to have lived in what is now Iowa, between 1650 and 1832. The Iowas were here the longest—about 150 years. At times they were sedentary, but most of the time they wandered about.

The so-called "Oneota manifestation" or culture pattern is believed to be of Iowa origin since it coincides better geographically with the locations of the Iowa tribe than that of any of the other four culture patterns which have been studied—Mill Creek, Glenwood, Hopewell, and Woodland.¹²

The Mill Creek culture of northwestern Iowa contains "one of the most remarkable pottery complexes of the Upper Mississippi Valley". It is probably the work of the early Mandans, who then lived in Iowa.¹³

The effigy mounds are believed to be the work of the Iowas or the Winnebagoes or both. These tribes both belonged to the large Siouan linguistic stock.

The oldest Iowa mounds are probably less than a thousand years old. They appear to have been built between 1,000 and 1,500 A.D.¹⁴

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¹¹ Ward, *op. cit.*; Frederick Starr, *op. cit.*

¹² Mildred Mott, "The Relation of the Historic Indian Tribes to Archeological Manifestation in Iowa." in *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXXVI, 227-314.

¹³ *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, Aug. 21, 1936; *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid*; *Effigy Mounds National Monument*, *op. cit.*

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