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The Mystery of the Crosses

BY OTTO KNAUTH

Mr. Knauth is presently assistant city editor for the Des Moines Register. He was an active participant in nearly all of the excavating of the Indian burial site described in the following article, and covered most of the story for the Des Moines paper.

A fascinating glimpse into the life of past inhabitants was provided residents of West Des Moines in July of this year when an Indian burial ground was discovered in their midst.

The extensive site, close to the heart of the Des Moines suburb, first came to light in middle July when construction machinery used in excavating for a rest home uncovered bones near the earth's surface.

The site is at the top of a hill on the south side of Ashworth Road and just west of Ninth Street. The hill, one of the highest points in West Des Moines, rises in a gentle slope westward from nearby Walnut Creek. To the south, it slopes toward the Raccoon River, about a mile away.

Earlier this year, the tract was purchased by Cosmopolitan International, a service organization, as the site of a large retirement home to be named Crestview Acres. Because the home was to be located on the eastern slope of the hill, a portion of the eastern slope had to be cut away.

Excavating began early in the summer. Bulldozers, huge earth-movers and power shovels dug into the hill. Much of the dirt was hauled in dump trucks to a low-lying area just west of Stilwell Junior High School at the corner of Grand Avenue and Vine Street.

Several days after the first bones were uncovered, the contractor, Joe A. Swift, notified the Polk County attorney's

office, which in turn called in Dr. Leo Luka, Polk County medical examiner. Dr. Luka examined the bones and determined that they were ancient.

It was not until three days later, Sunday, July 21, that the find came to the attention of Jack Musgrove, curator of the State Department of History and Archives.

By that time, excavating had been nearly completed and, as it was later discovered, only the western-most line of graves remained. It is probable that over 75% of the burials had been destroyed before museum personnel arrived on the scene.

The delicate task of investigating the remaining graves was begun the morning of July 22. Assisting Musgrove were Richard Boyt, museum director, Fred Voitel, administrative assistant, and several amateur archeologists.

Bones which could easily be seen protruding from the face of the excavation were the first to be removed and they in turn, led to additional graves.

The exploration was considerably hampered by the fact that most of the graves discovered were within a few feet of a 15-foot dropoff into the rest home excavation. A mishap or even a small dirt slide would have tumbled one of the men working onto the concrete foundations below.

The first complete burial to be uncovered was that of a young woman. She had been buried lying on her right side, her knees drawn up to her chest. As the bones were carefully uncovered, it was found that an infant had been buried with her, apparently cradled in her left arm. The flattened skull and a few rib bones of the infant indicated it had died at an early age, quite possibly at birth.

Curiously, the mother's skull had no teeth. In fact, she apparently had lost them long before death since the tooth cavities in both jaws had grown over.

It was decided to attempt to move the mother and child intact to the Historical Museum and to this end, a trench was dug around it. The sides and base of the now free-standing burial were then encased in burlap soaked in plaster. When this had hardened, the whole was undercut and a piece of $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood was slid under it, forming a platform. Two



EXCAVATING THE MOTHER AND CHILD

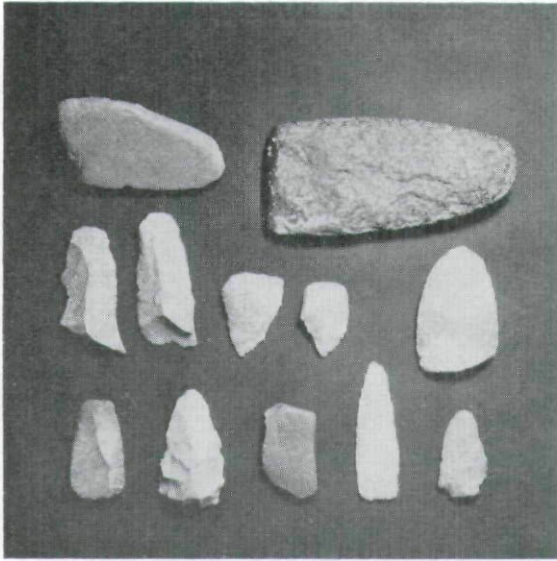
pieces of 2x4 lumber then were worked under the plywood to be used as handles and the entire burial was lifted out for transport to the museum.

News of the discovery had quickly spread among the populace of West Des Moines and Des Moines and many spectators watched the excavation from behind a makeshift rope barrier.

Further cursory probing revealed nothing more of archeological interest and the site was abandoned.

A stone celt, flaked from diorite, a small chert scraper, a few pot sherds, and a large number of human bones were found in searching the fill dirt that had been dumped on the school grounds. Many young diggers also were active at the fill site, dodging among the bulldozers and trucks in search of bones or pottery. Finally, the area had to be closed off by police.

At the museum, the mother and child burial was prepared and placed on temporary display in the Indian Room on the third floor. Newspaper accounts of the find and a pictorial rendition of the burial by Frank Miller, editorial car-



STONE CELT AND TOOLS FOUND AT THE SITE.

toonist for the *Des Moines Register*, accompanied the display and added much to its effectiveness.

This marked the end of the first phase of the West Des Moines find. But more was yet to come.

The news of the burials had attracted the attention of a number of amateur archeologists who continued probing the site after it had been abandoned by the museum. Among these amateurs were a 15-year-old Des Moines high school student, Kevin Binns.

The following Saturday, July 27, young Binns was digging close to the edge of the drop-off when he uncovered another burial. In the course of excavating it, he found the remains of a broken pot.

It was late afternoon, but he continued to dig. Then, what appeared to be a piece of shell appeared in the dirt. He carefully uncovered it and, to his amazement, saw that it was in the form of a Christian cross. Soon he uncovered another and found, incredibly, that it was the first in a stack of six, neatly placed one on top of the other, all almost identical.

Young Binnes realized at once that he had made an important find and notified Musgrove, who drove over immediately. In the gathering darkness, they found one more cross, for a total of eight.

Fifty small, snail-like shells, ground to facilitate stringing for use as a necklace, also were found with the crosses. Twenty-four of these shell-beads were found arranged in a semicircle across the chest cavity of one of the skeletons, only a few inches from the crosses.

The chance discovery of these unprecedented objects suddenly lifted the West Des Moines burial ground out of the realm of the ordinary into one of national importance.

Musgrove, on the basis of the burials, speculated that they represented a Mississippian culture of about 250 to 400 years ago. The discovery of the crosses however precipitated almost unlimited speculation as to the origin of the people.

The shape and number of the crosses seemed to rule out any but Christian influence. Crosses of this particular shape were unknown to the Indians before the coming of the white man.

Yet, here in the heart of the prairie country, were not one, but eight beautifully shaped little Christian crosses, found in conjunction with beads which at least suggested the Catholic Rosary. All of the crosses found were uniform in size, being about 2" in length and 3/4" in width.

There simply was no ready explanation for them.

Young Binn's discovery naturally led to the reopening of the burial ground for further exploration and it began at dawn the following day, July 28.

The area was staked out in three-foot squares so that each new discovery could be plotted for future reference. Photographs were taken of the objects uncovered and copious notes were taken as the excavation proceeded.

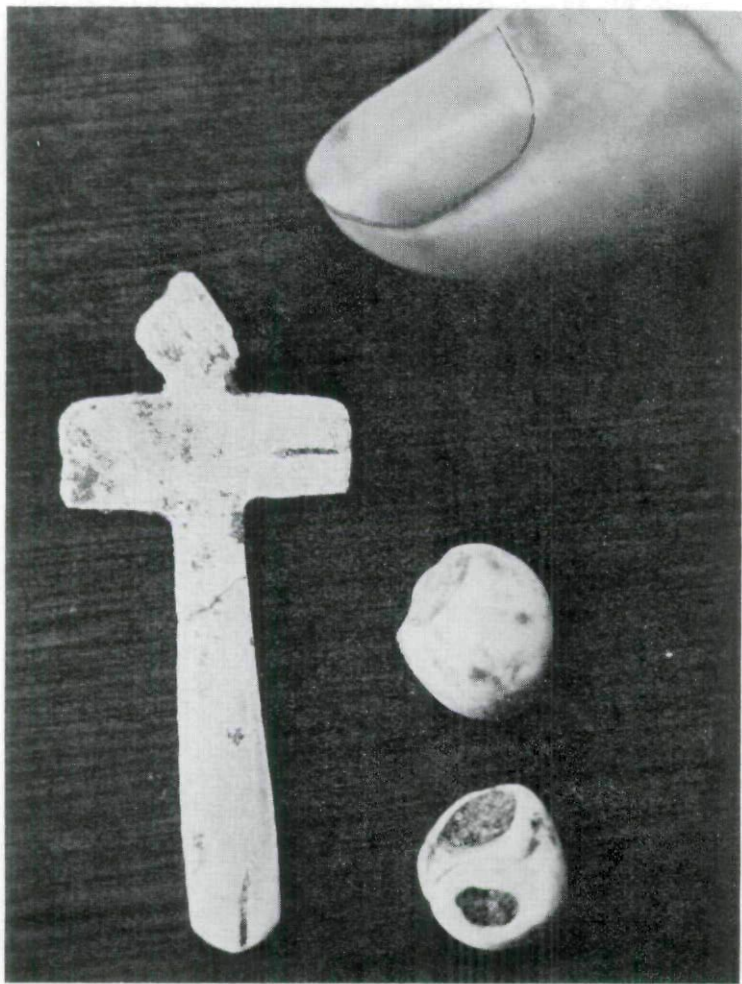
The soil in the immediate area and the soil which had sifted down into the construction excavation was sifted through quarter-inch screen mesh.

As news of the new find spread, many hundreds of spectators again gathered at the site and many of these, from

youngsters on up to the elderly, supplied volunteer labor at the shakers.

Assisting in the dig were Mary Musgrove, Elizabeth Boyt, John Phipps, Paul Doggett, Don Venasek, Jim Schneider and Bernard Rippenger.

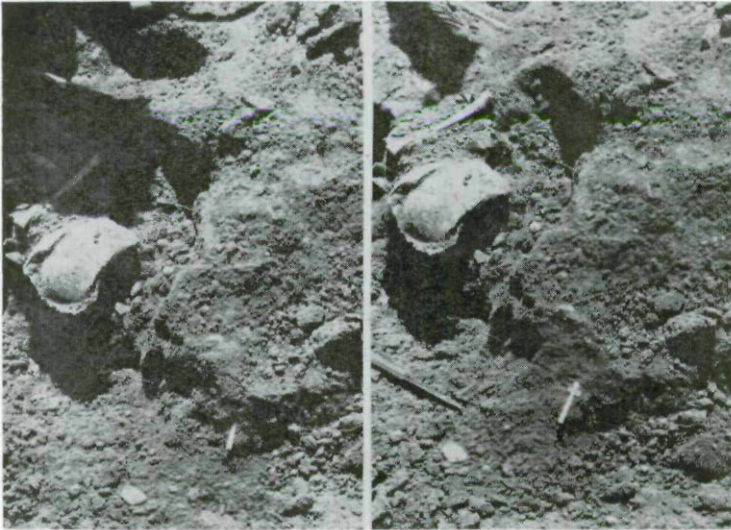
In the course of that day and the next, the sifters yielded so many beads that a new discovery became commonplace.



SHELL CROSS AND BEADS

Courtesy of Des Moines Register & Tribune

Pieces of crosses, as well as a few small implements, turned up in the shakers. A complete cross was found nearby by this writer. It was later learned that a cross had been found several days prior to this by Jeff Parker, a Des Moines high school student.



CROSS EXCAVATED BY OTTO KNAUTH

The continuing dig soon turned up another multiple burial, this one containing two juveniles and an infant. It was prepared for removal to the museum.

A skeleton, this one of an adult male, was found within a few feet of a pine tree which stood at the north edge of the burial area. It too was a flexed burial, its bones so well preserved that it was prepared for removal to the museum.

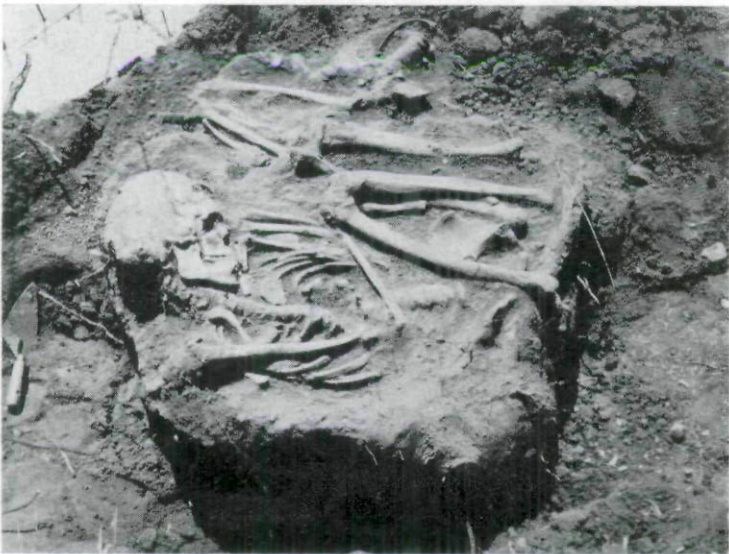
A curious object was found in connection with the male skeleton. A clamshell, lying hollow side down, covered the skull of a mink. The skull had been placed upright, so that its nose touched the inside of the shell.

By each nightfall, so much of archeological value had been exposed, that it was necessary to guard the site.

The last complete burial to be found was yet another male skeleton, this one so close to and entwined in the roots of the pine tree that it was decided to leave it in place.



MULTIPLE BURIAL—JUVENILE AND TWO INFANTS

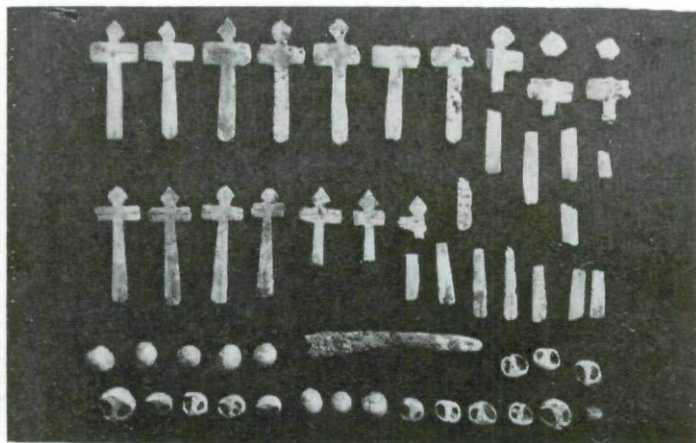


FLEXED BURIAL—ADULT MALE

Further digging into the site seemed to indicate that all the burials present had been uncovered. The borders of the site were then completely explored by means of cross trenches dug by a power shovel. The top layers of soil were scraped away with a tractor blade without finding anything more of archeological interest.

The site was closed for a second—and final—time.

Speculation on the origin and significance of the crosses and beads of course continues. The crosses are finely made, the tops of the best preserved ones being of a diamond shape. They apparently were cut from clamshells, which were readily available in the nearby Raccoon River.



SHELL OBJECTS INCLUDING BEADS AND CROSSES

All of the crosses show short incised lines at the bottom and on the crossarms. In all, there were found nine complete crosses, eight partial ones and 16 fragments.

Curator Musgrove inclines to believe that the crosses are of Indian manufacture but were inspired by or copied from Christian crosses. But *who* induced the Indians to form shells into that particular shape?

Historically, the first missionaries in this general area were Marquette and Joliet, who traveled down the Mississippi River in 1673, after crossing from Lake Michigan. It is entirely possible that individual missionaries preceded them who left no written accounts.

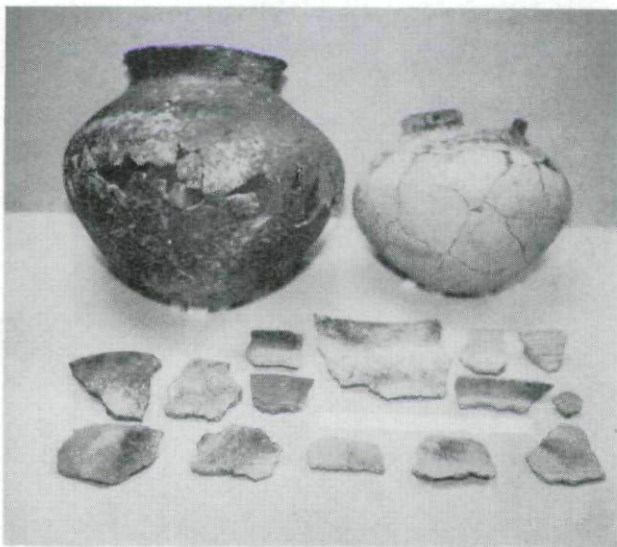
Perhaps the veneration of the cross by one of these missionaries persuaded an Indian tribe to adopt it.

Or perhaps members of this tribe had traveled across the Mississippi into present-day Indiana or Kentucky and learned of the significance of the cross there.

In any case, an eastern rather than southwestern contact with Christianity is indicated by the beads. These have been identified by Musgrove as moonshells of a variety commonly found in the Gulf of the St. Lawrence River and along the eastern U. S. coast. It might be coincidental that French missionaries traveled up the St. Lawrence on their way to the west. In all some 200 of the beads were found, many of them directly intermingled with the buried bones.

Pieces of two restorable pots and a number of miscellaneous sherds were found with the burials. They were made of grit-tempered native clay, beautifully formed, with incised rims and rounded conical bottoms and from more than 1/4 to less than 1/16 inch thick.

Preliminary examinations of the pottery by John Vincent, director of the Sanford Museum in Cherokee, Dale Henning of Wisconsin University, and Rex Hansman, of Humboldt,



TWO RESTORED POTS AND POTSDHERDS

have indicated that the culture may be the Great Oasis, which is believed to have existed around 850 A. D. to 1000 A. D. A date this far back would make even more mysterious the origin of the crosses.

In the course of the investigation, other facts were established that make the burial ground one of particular interest. One of these is the comparative lack of working implements. No bone tools and very few stone implements were found. No buffalo or other large animal bones were found associated with the graves. On the other hand, numerous teeth of small mammals such as gopher, muskrat, mink and beaver were found.

Unusual, too, was the fact that many of the burials were multiple. Also out of the ordinary was the shallowness of some of the graves. Most of them were less than two feet below the surface; a few were 2½ feet. That the bones were comparatively well preserved was perhaps due to the fact that the bodies were placed just above a layer of gravel, which provided good drainage.

A survey of the excavation notes indicates the complete West Des Moines burial ground may have been laid out in a large circle or ellipse approximately 60 feet across. The few days before the museum staff heard about the site, all but the western-most graves were destroyed. Unquestionably much valuable archeological material was lost. Remains of about 18 burials were found in that small area that had not been destroyed by the construction machinery.

Studies aimed at more closely identifying the culture to which the West Des Moines group belonged are continuing under the direction of Musgrove.

Bone samples from the site are to be subjected to radioactive Carbon-14 dating in hopes of establishing a more definite date for the burials.

The skeletons are being examined and research is being conducted into the use of the cross by other Indian tribes in hopes of turning up some clue to this fascinating archeological mystery.

The museum is now preparing a scientific report on this excavation which will be available in the near future.

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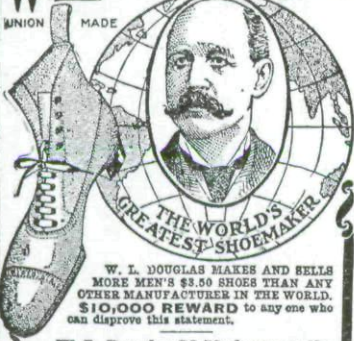
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