

Indian Rock Shelters

The term "rock shelter" is not a particularly happy one; however, it has long been in use with a meaning understood by all students of the early American Indians, and so is likely to continue in service. The name is a general one applied to any place of habitation in, or adjacent to, a cliff where, with or without the addition of a lean-to, protection could be had from cold and rain and snow. Winds were ordinarily taken care of by the natural location of the shelters in timbered ravines with forest-covered hills above them.

In Iowa these shelters are most common in Allamakee, Clayton, Dubuque, Delaware, Jackson, Jones, Linn, and Cedar counties, where the massive limestone cliffs contain or afford many locations suitable for human habitation. They are always open enough for good illumination, the dark, deeper caves, if used at all, having served only as places of deposit for secondary human burials, that is to say, burials of bones only from primary dispositions that had been made elsewhere.

Up to this time about a hundred Indian rock shelters have been verified for this northeastern

Iowa region, and undoubtedly this is a part only of the number that actually exist. It would take a long time to explore all the cliff-lined ravines in Iowa and to make the necessary tests. In smaller numbers the rock shelters are found also outside of the counties mentioned, wherever, indeed, cliffs affording the appropriate conditions occur. Some of these habitation sites are barely large enough to afford protection for three or four persons; others are large enough to furnish good quarters for a small community of five or six families.

Probably the prehistoric Indians chose the shelter of the cliffs as home sites for the same reasons that Captain Minott chose his little cavern in one of the ravines of the Palisades of the Cedar. Such sites were ready for occupation with a minimum expenditure of labor, or none at all, and they were safe and comfortable. Though serving a common purpose, the shelters used show a considerable variety of form and location. No fewer than six different types occur in Iowa, all with their characteristic deposits of kitchen refuse, in which are mingled various objects made by the hands of the occupants, the raw materials for making these, as also the refuse that resulted from the making processes.

There are shelters where a level part of the ravine, or narrow valley, floor lies immediately

adjacent to and so, in part at least, is protected by a vertical cliff. A second type was probably preferred to this — a site also on the level valley floor, but under the shelter of an overhanging cliff. Because of its better drainage and better outlook, a third location, supplied by nature in small numbers only, was probably even more preferable — the summit of a broad talus slope beneath a cliff overhang. For reasons that geologists could no doubt explain, nature was especially prodigal in producing a fourth type of shelter, quite the most common one used by the early Indians — caverns in the cliff walls at the tops of talus slopes. These were well lighted through a broad arched opening, the level floor of the shelter forming the chord of the segment. A small shelter of this kind at the Palisades of the Cedar has already entered our story as Minott's Cave. Such shelters would surely provide a maximum of living space and comfort, along with a minimum need for any added protection, indeed none at all during a large part of the year. A fifth shelter type is known by one example only — a picturesque level shelf running along the face of a vertical cliff and partly overhung by the cliff wall above it. And finally, the massive cliffs of the Maquoketa contain a sixth kind of shelter, two examples only — little rooms that are situated high in a vertical

cliff wall and, except for a few precarious finger and toe holds, quite inaccessible.

Did the prehistoric Indians (for evidence is lacking that the later Indians known to white men ever occupied these shelters) choose their cliff homes with reference to their facing, as away, for example, from the prevailing winds of winter? There is no evidence whatever that they did this. The known inhabited shelters face in all possible directions. Since they were situated deep in the ravines, with forest protection both in front of them and above them, and often with an opposing cliff wall as an additional buffer, it probably didn't make a great deal of difference whether the rock-girt home faced in this direction or in that. Apparently just two main conditions had to be met — the cavern or cliff overhang had to be well lighted, and it had to be high and dry above the usual level of high water.

What evidence of former human habitation is found in the rock shelters, and what about the amount of this? As the shelters were home sites, where people built fires, ate, slept, made needed tools, weapons, utensils, clothing, ornaments, and the like, some proof of these processes will remain, but only, of course, to the extent that some of the products, or by-products, are not subject to rapid decay. Few things are less destructible than the

ashes and charcoal of campfires, and these will be found from top to bottom of the refuse deposits. As stone was used for the making of many of the weapons and domestic utensils, the refuse chips and spalls will be found in large numbers, and even good specimens of the raw material that never saw use. Much of the kitchen refuse will endure for long periods of time, especially as the soil becomes mixed with ashes, the alkaline reaction of which helps to counteract the acidity that promotes disintegration.

It is to be expected, therefore, that the bones of animals, birds, fishes, and reptiles, and the shells of mollusks, will remain to tell at least part of the story of food resources. Even a few nut shells may be preserved. If the inhabitants had pottery, as all the known prehistoric peoples of Iowa did have, the fragments of the broken vessels will make up a large and very important part of the finds preserved for careful laboratory study. So important are potsherds, indeed, differing, as they do, from one culture boundary line to another, that they take first place in the thinking of every archaeologist whose labors have to do with pottery-producing sites. Fortunate it is to find at the ancient places of habitation objects of such pre-eminent diagnostic value.

A few things found in the shelters may be

whole instead of broken: domestic implements or ornaments, such as flint knives, scrapers, drills, milling stones, abraders, bone awls, or an occasional bead or pendant. The flint arrowheads are few in number, and stone axes are rarely found. These were generally used abroad and lost there. Neither will such articles as were buried with the dead, or placed as offerings in or near some sacred shrine, ordinarily become a part of the shelter refuse. Thus it is seen that, if one is in search of beautiful and perfect specimens for a showcase, a rock shelter is hardly the best place to find them. If, however, one wishes to learn about the daily lives of those who preceded us in this land, then the rock shelters become a primary source of information, along with the larger village sites. Clues to the life processes of people of a remote past will here be found in considerable variety and, because of their concentration within a small space, in an astonishing abundance. The Iowa rock shelters often have deep deposits of refuse, from a depth of two feet up to as many as six or seven. But of course it takes some diligent digging and sieving, as well as some careful planning and organizing, to separate it out properly.

What Indians occupied the rock shelters? Excavations and tests in about half of the Iowa shelters show that they belonged to tribes pos-

sessing an Algonkian type of culture. Were they not then actual members of the far-ranging Algonkian stock? They may have been such, but in the Middle West some tribes not Algonkian are known to have adapted themselves quite fully to the Algonkian ways of life, even to their pottery traits. In the present state of knowledge, caution indicates the use of some general descriptive term. For the forest dwellers with a certain group of traits the name Woodland Indians has come into quite general use, and their culture pattern too is known as Woodland.

When did the Woodland people occupy the villages and rock shelters which today are the most common and most widely distributed features of our Iowa archaeology? There is no certain answer at present to this often asked and very natural question. The seventeenth-century explorers of the Iowa country mention a few tribes of Woodland Indians, such as the Peorias and the Miamis, but these were temporary sojourners only in the region west of the Mississippi, fugitives for a short time before the fierce eastern Iroquois. The Indians who were well established in Iowa in the seventeenth century, and who left an archaeology very different from that of the Woodland, were members of the Siouan stock, Ioways and Otoes, and possibly a few others.

Sometime in the prehistoric past, before the seventeenth century, the peoples who left a Woodland archaeology in every corner of what we now call Iowa lived here for a long period of time and then departed. Traditions are lacking as to the time, the reasons, or the direction of their going. Strange facts these, apparently, but American archaeology is today too young a science to furnish us with any total picture.

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