

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Background

"No wonder the Indian didn't want to leave this country!"

This was the natural and almost involuntary remark frequently made by both workman and visitor during the twelve weeks of the summer of 1934, when we toiled on the terraces of the Oneota in an endeavor to uncover and read the story of Iowa's earliest history. Oneota, the Indians called the river that bends and turns through the rugged northeastern corner of Iowa, and Oneota it would be to-day, except for some accident of name-giving that caused it to appear on our maps as the Upper Iowa. In a setting beautiful beyond description, its broad high terraces were favorite home sites of the first inhabitants of Iowa.

The glory of the Oneota Valley is spread out with dramatic suddenness as one drives northwest from Waukon on Primary Road 13 and reaches the top of the four-mile slope that leads

downward to the river. Many a driver will here pull over to the side of the highway and use his eyes for a while. In front of him forested ravines and prairie ridges drop away to the river gorge, and beyond this they rise again to meet the hills of Minnesota. Far to the west a great bend of the Oneota is partially hidden among the rugged hills of Winneshiek County, on the highest of which the morning sun throws into clear relief the east facade of a distant church. Twenty miles to the east one can see on a clear day the opening between the great bluffs where the Upper Iowa reaches the Mississippi, and beyond the Great River the view is finally closed by the masses of the Wisconsin hills. Or occasionally, if the temperature has dropped suddenly during the night, both valleys may contain banks of fog which writhe and roll, while the green hills tower above.

Arriving at the New Galena bridge, one may travel either up or down the Oneota and discover, soon enough, good reasons why the Indians chose to live here. The high river terraces, or "benches" as the local people call them, nearly level on top, were ideal as locations for Indian villages. There is no need to theorize about such a usage. Since the time when the white man's plow first turned its furrows on these fertile ter-

racés, every one of them has been producing, even to the present day, the evidences of early human occupation: fireplace stones; flint chips and flakes, as well as finished chipped implements; fragments of pottery; stones fashioned for grinding, cutting, and polishing; clam-shell fragments of many sizes and varieties; the bones of many species of mammals, birds, and fishes; occasionally an implement or an ornament of bone, shell, or copper. Nearly every farmer in this valley has a little collection of such things, and for more than half a century collectors from Iowa and Minnesota have here sought the treasures that gradually filled up their cabinets of curiosities.

Among the first of these collectors, and fortunately for Iowa the most careful of them all in his methods of collecting, and the most gifted of all in those instincts that prompt not only the collecting of specimens, but the preservation in written records of those facts that should accompany the specimens, was and is Mr. Ellison Orr of Waukon. With the training of both scientist and civil engineer, Mr. Orr began in the late seventies to devote his spare time and energies to the village sites and other antiquities of the Oneota and to make plats of the numerous earthen enclosures and groups of Indian mounds that stood on the terraces and bluff tops of the Oneota

and the neighboring terraces and bluffs of the Mississippi. For some sixteen years it has been the writer's privilege to know Mr. Orr and to study his collection of some four thousand specimens, the catalogue that records their origin, and the manuscript volumes of descriptions, photographs, and drawings that further explain and illustrate the archaeology of the Upper Iowa and its immediate environment.

When the opportunity came this last spring to conduct archaeological explorations in Iowa on a scale not heretofore possible, the previous work of Mr. Orr pointed clearly to the valley of the Upper Iowa as the place where the digging tools should be put in motion. With the organization of the Iowa State Planning Board, with F E R A support as an important item of its equipment, men became available for the heavy work of excavation. The first years of the Iowa archaeological survey had necessarily been limited mainly to a State-wide search for the archaeological sites. Now there was an opportunity to look beneath the surface of things and do an intensive bit of work. Allamakee County, with its mysterious Oneota and its many miles of majestic Mississippi, became inevitably the scene of our labors.

In the first place, study of Mr. Orr's collection and the accompanying records (title to these hav-

ing been passed by deed of gift to the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1933), as well as trips to the numerous mounds and ancient village sites of the Upper Iowa Valley, revealed a rich and complex archaeology that challenged, indeed demanded, solution. Further, the availability of Mr. Orr himself as guide, adviser, and assistant in a region where, as scientist, he had long since located the archaeological sites and made so much progress in the study of their surface conditions, where also, as engineer, he had become familiar with nearly every section and quarter-section marker in the entire valley, made easy the decision as to where the summer's work should be. It is necessary then to take a closer look at the terraces of the Upper Iowa as the background of a season's work and to consider their advantages as home sites for the early men of Iowa.

Although lying from sixty to seventy feet above the flood plain of the present Oneota, the benches of this picturesque little river are true terraces, built up of sand and gravel, the great deposits of a once mighty stream that issued thousands of years ago from a melting glacier and filled from wall to wall the tortuous valley that led eastward to the even mightier Mississippi. As the valley itself is seldom more than half a mile in width at the flood-plain level, the benches are modest

areas ranging all the way from mere remnants clinging to the hillsides up to terraces of forty or more acres each. After the decay of plant growths for a number of millennia, the upper two or three feet of these great sandbars became a rich sandy loam. Even richer became the deep alluvium in the flood plain below. Both were available as home sites, or fields for the cultivation of corn and other native crops by the Indians, and proof there is that they made much of them.

In time most of the valley walls assumed gentler slopes and became covered with heavy forest; some remained as vertical cliffs of sandstone and limestone; slopes exposed to the full rays of the sun took on a prairie covering or gradually became spotted over with red cedar and masses of low-lying juniper. In shaded areas shrubs of amazing variety took firm hold, many of these furnishing edible fruits or nuts: high-bush cranberries, raspberries, blackberries, choke cherries, wild cherries, plums, crab-apples, wild grapes, hazel. In the forest grew at least three varieties of hickory nuts: walnuts were abundant. The great oaks furnished an endless supply of acorns — good food for people who knew how to prepare them. Ponds with beds of flags, rushes, and lotus furnished materials for mats, or seeds and tubers to increase or vary the food supply.

The small, but very clear and quiet, river formed sandy beds for molluscs and deep pools for bass, pickerel, and channel catfish. Beaver too were at home along the river and the smaller streams, while the forests sheltered the passenger pigeon, the ruffed grouse, the wild turkey, the black bear, and the white-tailed deer. On the uplands behind the valley rim the elk and the bison grazed on the prairies. Any one who doubts the existence of this one-time faunal richness needs only to examine the contents of the old village refuse pits.

The three-hundred-foot hills, with their forest covering, were the best possible protection from winter winds, and of firewood for lodge and open fireplace there was a ready and never-failing supply. Great springs of clear cold water, the largest in Iowa, were numerous both along the Oneota and the beautiful tributaries that come in through deep ravines from north and south. On forest floor, on flood plain, and on prairie slope grew nearly all the wild flowers that once belonged to the flora of Iowa, these quite as necessary to the happiness of our Indian predecessors as to us.

Such was the valley of the Oneota as the Indian knew it. In its major aspects the valley is much the same to-day. The doings of white men have

indeed caused the waters of the little river to run less clear; most of the game fish have become scarce, and nearly all the larger game animals have disappeared; on cultivated areas and along the roadsides the native flora has largely vanished, replaced by the white man's crops or the white man's weeds. One feature of the Indian environment the white man has greatly magnified — the small cornfields of the Indian would be lost in the endless acres of maize that now cover most of the bottom lands.

But great hills with foundations of rock do not change fast; their forest and prairie coverings remain as they were for the good reason that their surfaces can produce nothing else. New men and new methods on terraces and bottom lands have little changed the total landscape. Some faunal and floral features that have vanished from most parts of Iowa remain here. The pink moccasin flower and the fringed gentian are still to be found in the forests; the cliff swallows, as of old, plaster their colonies against the faces of the vertical cliffs; with slow and quiet wing beat, the great pileated woodpecker frequently flew over our heads this summer as we worked on the sunny terraces; in the early morning those great black airplanes, the turkey vultures, sometimes as many as seventeen at one time, soared gracefully above the

hilltops. In spite of constant persecution, the banded rattlesnake, too, still holds his own on the rocky slopes of the Oneota hills. It adds zest to foot travel hereabout to know that one needs to watch his step or give heed to a warning whirr.

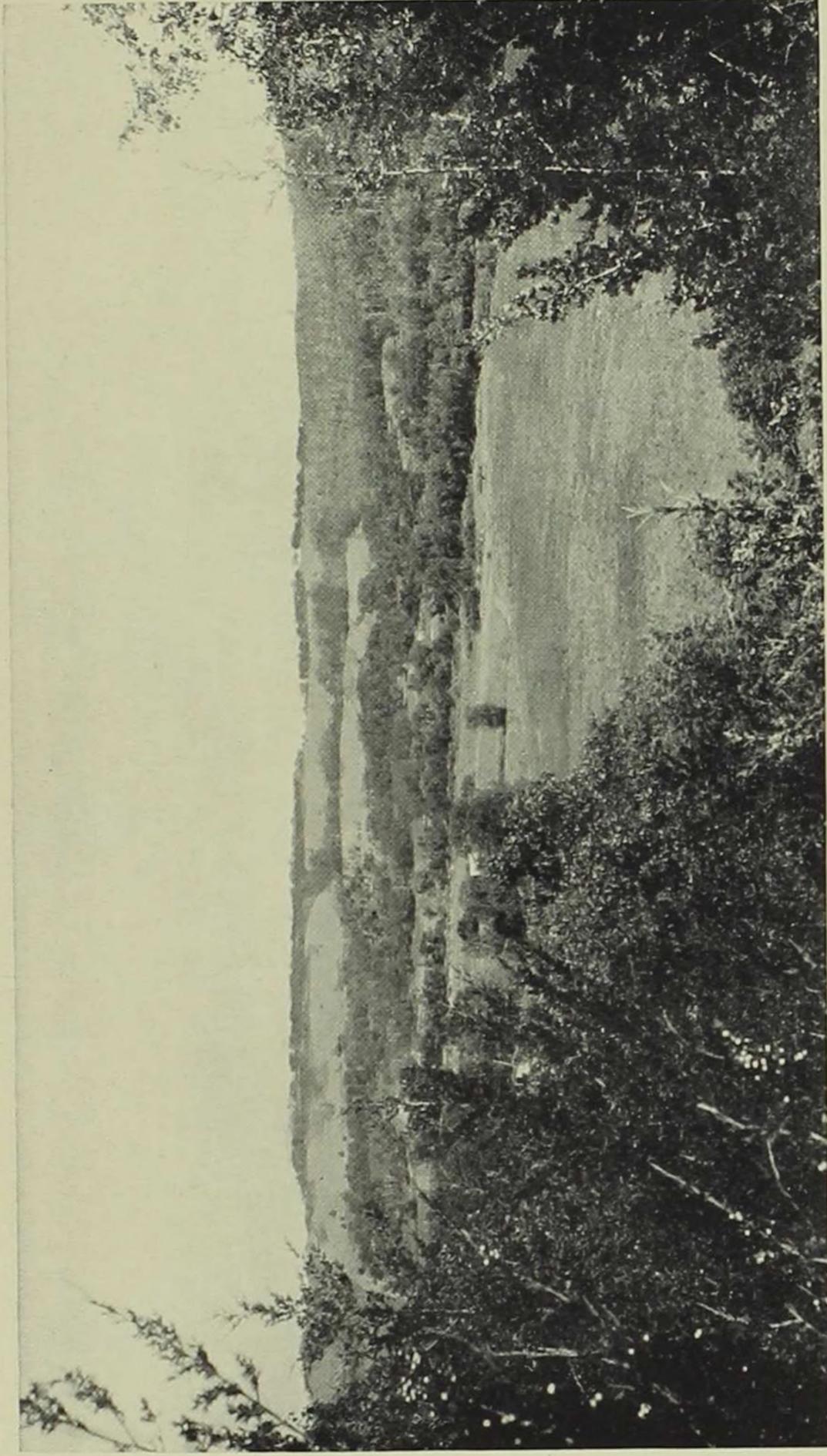
What did this magnificent valley of the Upper Iowa hold for us? We had behind us, of course, a considerable amount of experience and equipment on which to make a forecast. Years of collecting had shown the surface archaeology of the valley to be almost entirely Siouan. One might hunt the terraces for days and find nothing but the fragments of shell-tempered pottery, the little triangular arrowheads, and other markers known to have been developed by people of the far-flung Siouan stock. Some branch of this stock had certainly had its day along the Oneota.

Nevertheless, Mr. Orr's great collection from the Oneota contained a few specimens that set up a question mark. There were a number of rather large arrowheads and still larger spearheads that had notches at the base, forming tangs, shoulders, or barbs; there were a few grooved stone axes. These looked quite like the stone implements found in nearly all other parts of Iowa, but associated regularly with pottery very different from that found on the terraces of the Oneota. The people who made grooved axes and barbed arrow-

heads tempered their pottery with the sharp grit of granite pounded fine in a mortar, and decorated their earthen jars with the impressions of twisted cords. In over fifty years of collecting, Mr. Orr had found, indeed, a few bits of this grit-tempered pottery in the valley of the Oneota, enough in all to fill the hollow of one hand. Could the Siouan tradition possibly include notched arrowheads and grooved axes? Just a possibility, perhaps; but surely no range of Siouan ideas could include a pottery so different in all particulars from its own.

On this narrow basis, might we indulge the thought that perhaps Algonkian Indians too, the Indians of the Woodland, had once known the valley of the Upper Iowa? Could the evidence of their occupation lie hidden somewhere below the plow line or perhaps be tucked away in small timbered areas where the plow had never been? And what about the mounds? Three groups of twelve, thirty-two, and one hundred mounds each, originally impressive monuments but now nearly or quite leveled by some sixty years of cultivation, once stood as round-based tumuli on three fine terraces of the Oneota. In years past, curiosity seekers had done considerable desultory digging in these mounds, but the final verdict was that they contained little or nothing.

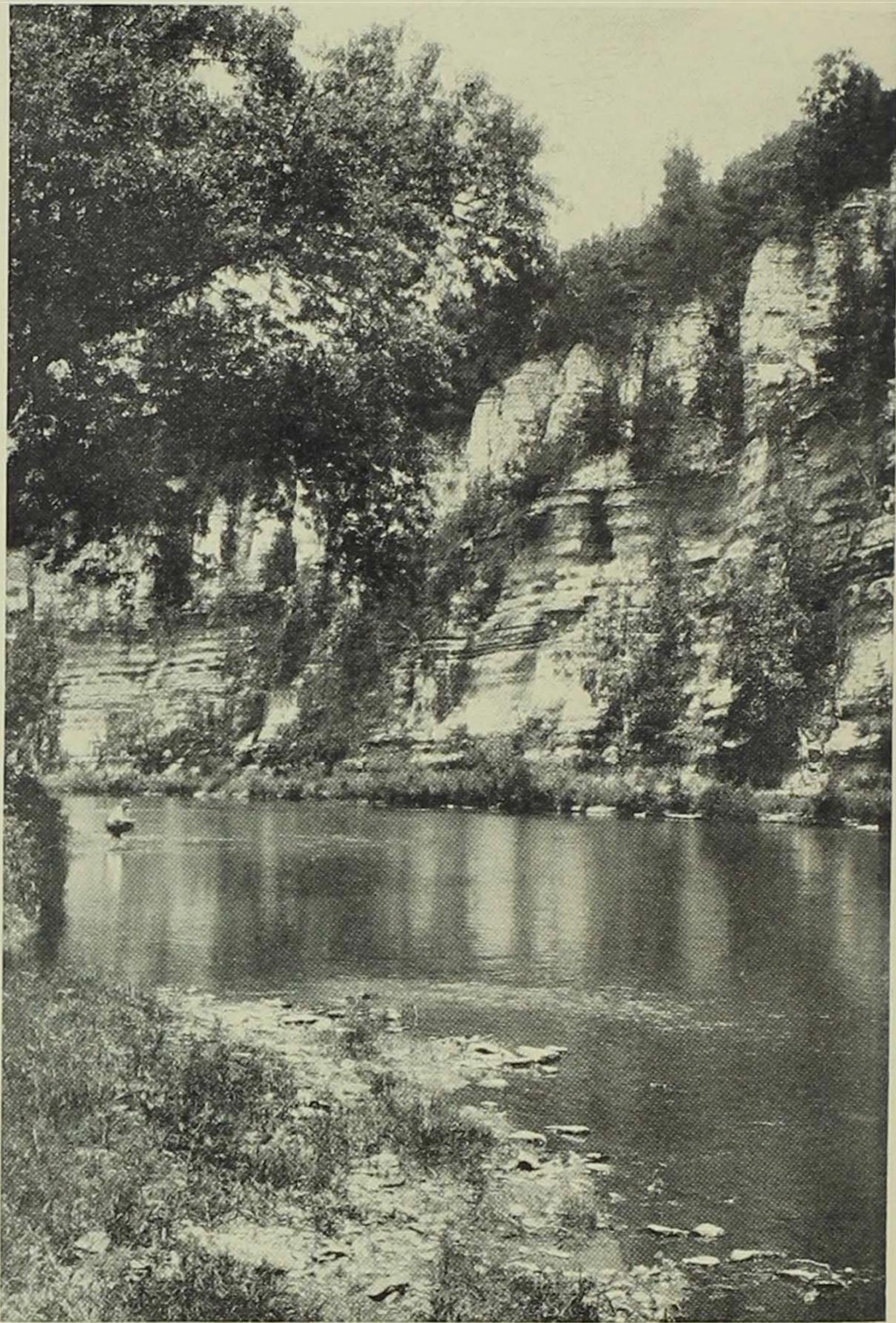
Had the last word been said about these



FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY ELLISON ORR

LOOKING SOUTHEAST ACROSS THE ONEOTA VALLEY

O'Regan Bench, site of an old Siouan village, in the foreground



FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES R. KEYES

THE UPPER IOWA RIVER

mounds? If people of Algonkian stock once lived in this valley . . . well, the thought was more than intriguing, it was exciting! Siouan archaeology so covered the valley of the Upper Iowa that, if an Algonkian existed also, sufficient excavation should find it, and very possibly find it lying directly beneath the Siouan. Culture stratification — the goal of every archaeologist! Up to 1934 not a single case had ever come to light in Iowa. Always the old sites of the five prehistoric cultures known to have occupied Iowa lay in the same general plane, side by side frequently, but never superimposed. If one could only be found directly beneath the other, their time sequence would be established beyond any possibility of doubt. We could then say without reservation, "Thus, in this place, did nation succeed nation."

CHARLES REUBEN KEYES