Ancient Sites

A "site," in the language of archaeology, is a place where prehistoric man is known to have lived, where he left his works, or where, as in the case of a trail or workshop, he unconsciously left his mark. Nearly all the Iowa counties have ancient sites of one kind or another; even the few counties in which definite archaeological sites have not thus far been found produce scattered stone relics which prove the existence of prehistoric man as a hunter, at least, if not as a settled resident. The number of known Iowa sites now runs well into five figures, and little more than a beginning has been made in the search. Indeed, as it is already clear that Iowa, on account of its central location, is peripheral to a number of different prehistoric cultures in its archaeology, as it is in its botany and its zoology, the state may possess some special interests as an archaeological field. A brief annotated catalog may have value, perhaps, in serving as a guide to the many varieties of our ancient sites.

Village and camp sites. The difference between the two is only in size and what appears to be permanency. The camp site shows enough evidence of occupation to make certain at least a temporary

home: some fireplace stones, some kitchen refuse, and probably some chips of flint. The village site shows rich evidence of occupation through a considerable period of time: generally a well-defined area covering from one to one hundred acres, more or less sharply outlined in some cases by a moat-like ditch; plenty of refuse in the form of flint chips and other stone fragments indicating that stone implements were made there; a few flint arrowheads, spearheads, and knives, or ground-stone mortars, hand mullers, and axes, all lost during the day's work or abandoned at the desertion of the village; pottery fragments, clam shells, and broken bird and animal bones, the refuse of food preparation; sometimes circles or ellipses of small boulders used to hold down the edges of skin tepees; in other instances numbers of circular depressions a foot or two deep and from twenty-five to fifty feet in diameter, showing where large earth lodges once stood. Continuous cultivation of the site will have obliterated some of the criteria, but the large amount of refuse over a considerable space will ordinarily tell the story.

Favorite locations of the villages were the second terraces of streams or, less commonly, the broad summits of bluffs overlooking streams. At least one good spring was a requirement, and nearly always there was surrounding forest to protect the inhabitants, and near-by timber to afford shelter for game. In northwestern Iowa a number

of the old villages were situated in oak groves on the lake margins. Permanent, or semipermanent, villages were apparently located on the smaller streams more frequently than on the larger rivers, a number of the most prolific old sites having been found on small, but perennial, creeks some miles removed from the rivers. In all Iowa more than five hundred habitation sites are known, and so many of these are still above the plow line that it is not difficult to collect the evidence of the old community life. Strange to say, fewer than ten of the known village sites in Iowa are proven positively to have been occupied both before and down to historical times. No trace of the Peoria villages visited by Marquette has been discovered.

Caves and rock shelters. Over a large part of northeastern Iowa, where the country has been little ironed out by glaciers, and where, therefore, the river gorges and creek ravines are margined to a considerable extent by abrupt and massive limestone cliffs, primitive man is found to have made extensive use of the shelters afforded. The shelters used as homes were generally wide-mouthed and well-lighted caverns, usually just above a talus slope, or the space under a cliff overhang, also at the top of a talus slope, or otherwise protected from possible high water. These rock shelters, as students call them, face in all the cardinal directions, and in all the directions in between. The shelter of the ravines and the cliff walls was always rein-

forced by the original forests that towered above both. These natural refuges could be made warm and comfortable, even when winter winds whistled across the valley rim. The writer knows an eastern Iowa scout master who regularly takes his scouts for a night's outing in one of these ancient shelters facing the Maquoketa, when December or January is offering its worst.

Up to this time over seventy of these rock shelters have been recorded; but, as diligent search has been made in only a part of the likely territory, and as only a few have been thoroughly examined, it is probable that the study of Iowa's cave men is only in its early stages. As the cliff overhangs are rarely over a hundred feet in length and the caverns from fifty to as small as eight feet in diameter, the evidences of occupation are naturally found in greater concentration than on most of the village sites. In one case the excavation had to be carried down to a depth of six feet. The material recovered from the shelters is not greatly different, however, from that found on the village sites in the same general region and is probably but a part, therefore, of the culture of a wider area. THE PALIMPSEST for January, 1943, contains the story of a small rock shelter on the Palisades-Kepler State Park, near Mount Vernon.

Agricultural plots and garden beds. Any to be seen in our day must be in places where the soil has never been turned, as in timber or pastures near

streams — and of course near an old village site. The Indian corn hills will persist in undisturbed areas for centuries. People now living remember the old Indian garden beds of Muscatine Island, though it is possible that these were not all prehistoric. Some twenty years ago, a series of low, parallel ridges was found, measuring about three feet wide and five or six inches high in the center, leading down a gentle slope from an old Indian village near LaPorte City to Indian Lake, a bayou of the Cedar River. These were surely ancient garden beds. A recent visit to the site showed only some small summer cabins and soil rolled flat by the comings and goings of motor cars. Fortunately, John C. Hartman, owner for many years of the Waterloo *Courier,* had one of his expert photographers visit this old site, very early one morning soon after the discovery, when the first rays of the sun fell across the low ridges of the ancient garden plot. They did nicely their full share to record, while time remained, one of the rarest of our archaeological pictures.

Storage and refuse pits. These were dug in or near the villages for purposes of both food storage and refuse disposal. As things thrown into the pits generally remain below the plow line, they are apt to escape the deterioration suffered by articles left on the surface. It is a fact well known to archaeological collectors that they may expect many of their best fragments of pottery and bone imple-

ments from the refuse pits. Surprisingly often the specimens are not broken at all. Indians, too, sometimes threw out perfectly good knives, spoons, and dishes with the kitchen refuse. Depressions in the ground commonly reveal the locations of pits — unless there has been too much plowing. At other times their contents may come to light through the operation of steam shovels working in gravel pits on river terraces. Such easy excavations have inured to the benefit of collectors in Correctionville.

Shell heaps. On the banks of some of the larger rivers, and usually in or near a village site, are sometimes found deep accumulations of mussel shells removed from the near-by streams. They were apparently opened to obtain food or pearls, probably both. Shell heaps have been reported near Keosauqua and at Cedar Rapids, and considerable remnants of the old accumulations are still to be seen at Bellevue on the Mississippi.

Caches. Nests of stone implements or other materials were often buried in the ground for safe keeping and, for reasons that can only be conjectured, never claimed by the original owner. A number of these buried hoards has come to light in Iowa through the operations of agriculture, the wash of rains, or the cutting of streams. They are perhaps most often found in or near village sites, but there is no definite rule as to their location. A number of the Iowa caches have consisted of a few

score rough-chipped blades, quarry blanks apparently, all of the same variety of flint and seemingly intended for later elaboration — doubtless some ancient flint worker's stock-in-trade. A few others have contained finished specimens, generally, but not always, of a single type. A good example of a mixed cache was recently found on the Mississippi bluffs, three miles west of Guttenberg. It consisted of twenty-four well-finished blades of mottled flint, a single hammerstone of basaltic rock, and two greenstone gouges.

Workshops. In a variety of locations, both in the valleys and on the hilltops, are found large quantities of flint chips, and sometimes other stone refuse which tell the story of implement and weapon making, but which are frequently not connected at all with any village site. In many instances it seems as if the location of the site were determined by the beauty of the place or some such personal consideration. In other cases, workshops are found close to the sources of material used, like those near the old flint quarries at Burlington.

Cemeteries. The cemeteries vary greatly in location, and there is much variation also in the manner of burial. Sometimes the bodies were buried in an extended, sometimes in a flexed, position; again the bones, or more likely only a part of these, were collected from an earlier tree or scaffold burial and either interred in a common mass along with many other skeletal remains, constituting thus an "ossu-

ary," or deposited separately and compactly, often in or beneath a mound, constituting thus a "bundle burial." Generally speaking, cemeteries called for a loose soil, either within the village itself or on some near-by knoll, terrace, or hilltop. The knolls, and especially the highest points and ridges of the Missouri River hills, all the way from the southern boundary of Iowa to South Dakota, contain a great number of burials, generally of the ossuary type.

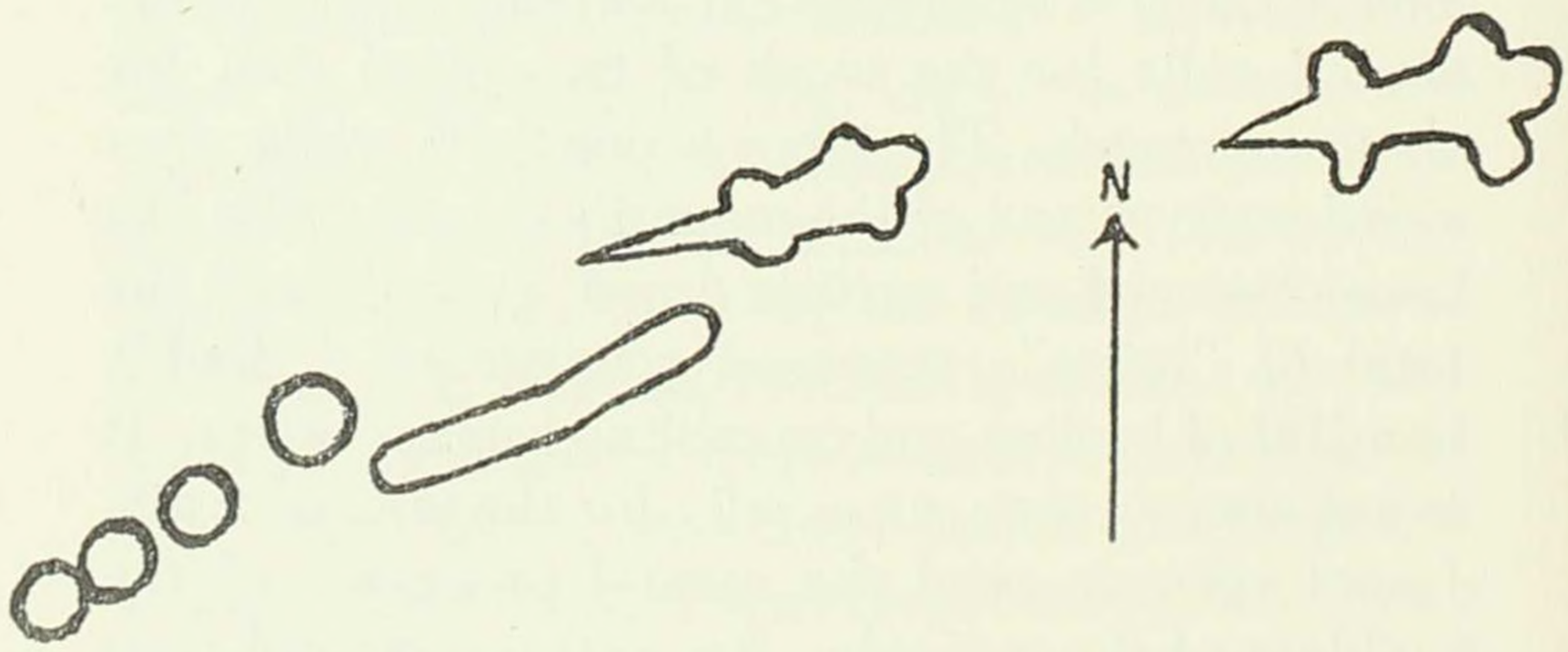
As the loess hills of our western border erode rather rapidly, skeletal remains may frequently be examined without the necessity of digging. During a test excavation conducted at the great Blood Run village site on the Big Sioux, a burial of quite an opposite kind was encountered. This was a primary, extended burial that lay at the bottom of a pit eight feet in diameter and seven feet below the tough sod of a prairie terrace. And the instruments of excavation were the shoulder blades of the bison, ten worn and broken specimens of which were found in the compact humus, clay, and gravel with which the pit was filled. In the cave region of Iowa, a great ossuary was found hidden away in a deep cavern far removed from light, heat, and frost. This was the discovery of some high-school boys at Cascade, inspired, it was said, by the then much publicized fate of Floyd Collins, who lost his life when cave hunting down in Kentucky.

Mounds. Originally Iowa possessed thousands

of Indian mounds, the great majority built in prehistoric times. They occur in all parts of the state, although somewhat more numerous along the terraces and bluffs of the Mississippi, and in these same locations in the Mississippi drainage of the eastern two-thirds of the state. Many have disappeared through continued cultivation of the soil; others are being slowly reduced; still others occupy positions where they have escaped destruction, except that by relic hunters who, in hundreds of instances, have dug ugly holes in their tops — and nearly always found nothing at all. The reason is that most Iowa mounds contain a few bones only, whole or ceremonially broken, and deposited anywhere on the mound floor, or in a pit below the mound floor. The proper excavation of an average mound calls for the work of two good men for about one week. The labor is worth its while, provided every detail of the mound's construction has been observed and written down, even though the total of "relics" recovered consists of a double handful of broken and crumbling human bones. It is not always easy, especially for the man of a different race, to read the mental processes of the builders of the mounds. An average mound contains about a hundred cubic yards of earth, all of this built into a symmetrical form without the use of any metal tool, any machinery, or any beast of burden. There must have been a compelling motive, one might think, especially as the number

built in Iowa could hardly be fewer than ten thousand — and perhaps as many more.

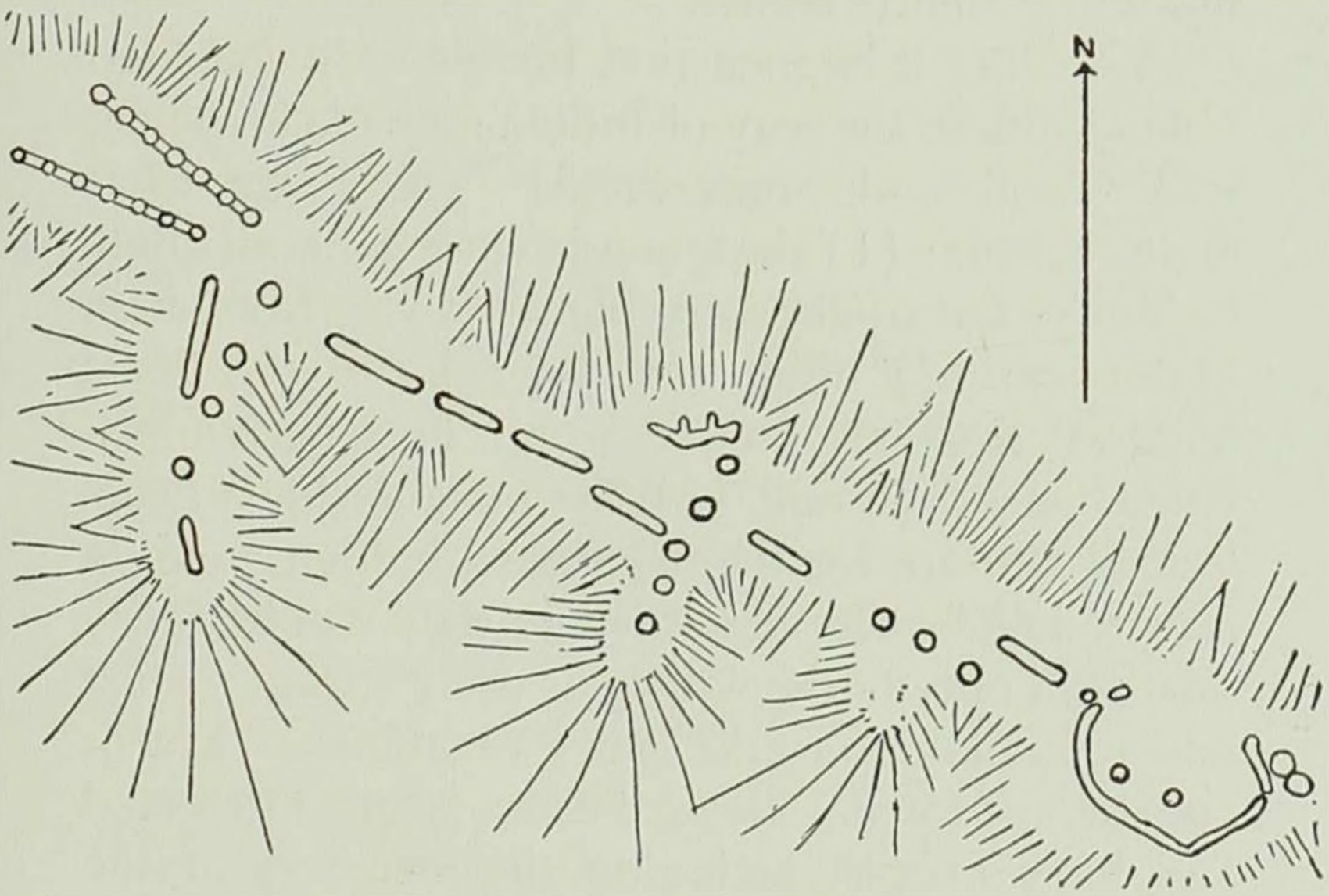
The great majority of mounds have a round base of from twenty-five to seventy feet in diameter and a height of from two to seven feet. These are called "conicals." Some are considerably larger; the great Boone mound on a terrace of the Des Moines River measured 130 by 160 feet in diameter and 14 feet high before its excavation about forty years ago by T. Van Hyning of the Historical Department at Des Moines. Still larger mounds have been reported, but the evidence that these are artificial is thus far lacking. Some have proved to be natural erosional mounds, made along stream courses by the action of flood waters.



Conical, Linear, and Effigy Mounds in Clayton County

In northeastern Iowa along the Mississippi bluffs are many mounds in the form of bird, reptile, and animal effigies, and also long, straight embankments. These are described simply as "effi-

gies" and "linears." The latter range from sixty to three hundred feet in length and have a diameter of about twenty feet and a height of two or three feet. The effigies are great cameos laid out



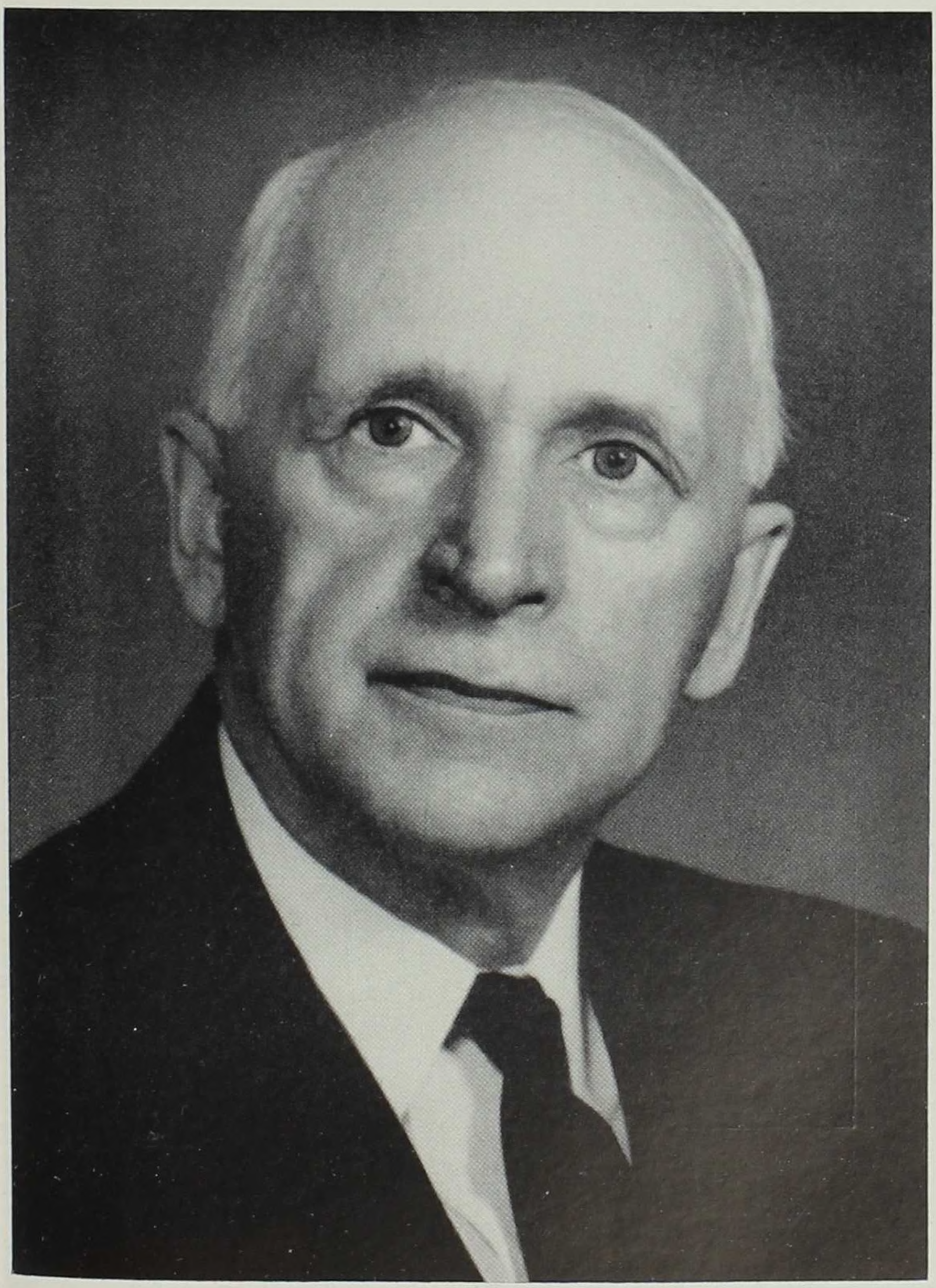
Turkey River Group of Mounds in Clayton County

on the ground, the birds with outstretched wings, the reptiles as seen from above, and the animals, generally representing the bear, though a few other forms occur, recumbent on their right sides and built up sharply to a height of from two to four feet. The birds measure from 70 to 170 feet across the wings, while the animal effigies are from 80 to 140 feet in length from nose to tail. All the undisturbed mounds are so regular in form and so artificial in appearance that they need rarely be mis-

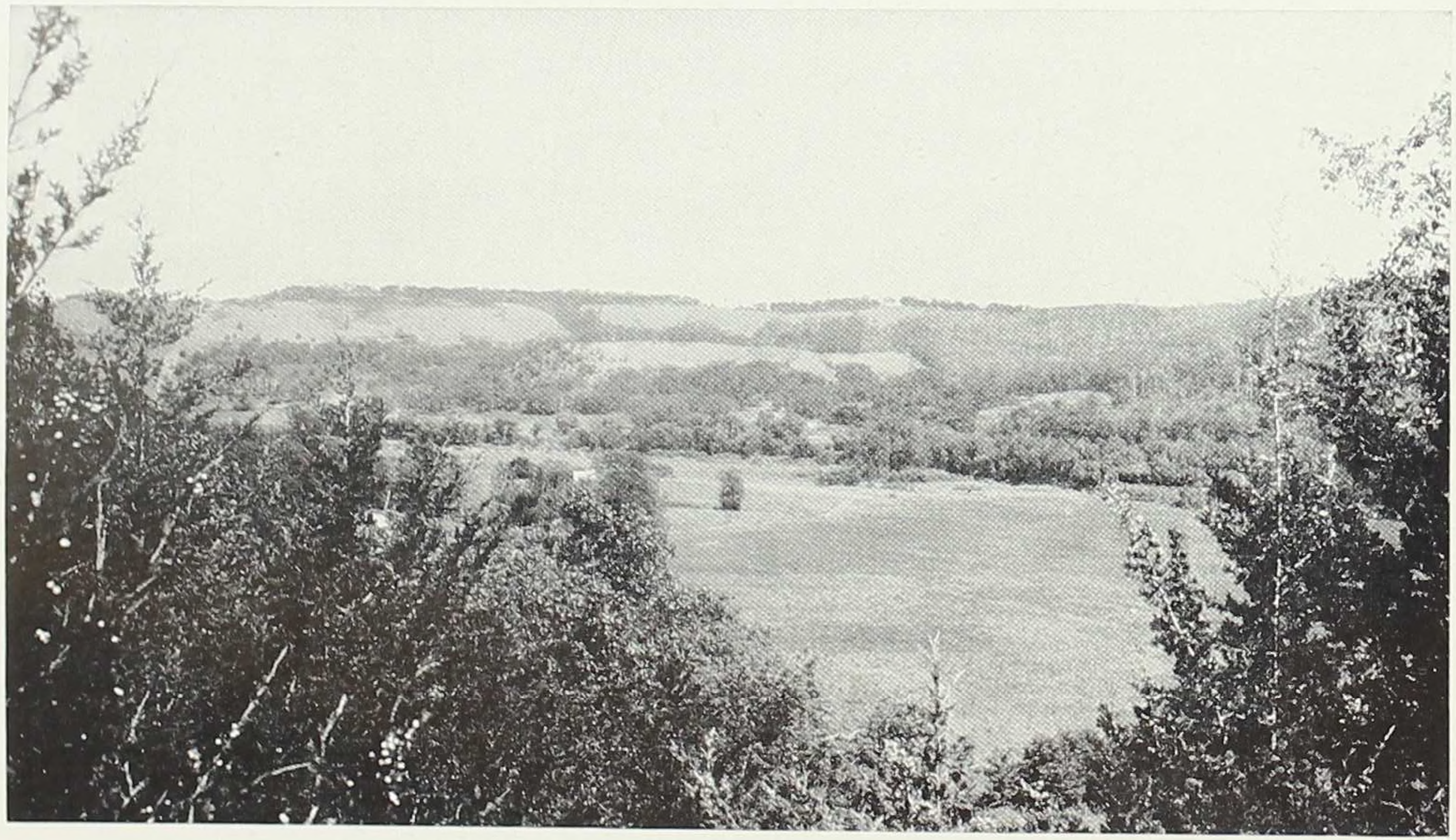
taken for anything else. They sometimes occur singly, but as a rule they stand either in groups on or near the old village sites or in rows along the ridges overlooking the dwelling place and the hunting grounds below.

How does it happen that Iowa's very considerable wealth in the way of Indian mounds is so little understood and appreciated? There are three main reasons: (1) the mounds were generally built in bluffy, out-of-the-way places, away from main highways; (2) until recently, most of the finest and best preserved mound groups have been in private ownership; and (3) the mounds have been, indeed still are for the most part, hidden away in forested or brushy areas where they can be fairly well seen only in the winter or early spring — just when people don't take many vacations — except outside of Iowa. Nevertheless, some interested and busy people, including the members of the Iowa State Conservation Commission, never lost sight of the mounds and have, as they say, "cashed in" rather well on their unremunerated investment of time.

During the last quarter century the state of Iowa has come into possession, by gift or because of their presence on areas within the State Park system, of a considerable number of Indian mounds. State Parks with small numbers of mounds are these: Bellevue, Dolliver Memorial, Lacey-Keosauqua, Palisades-Kepler, and White

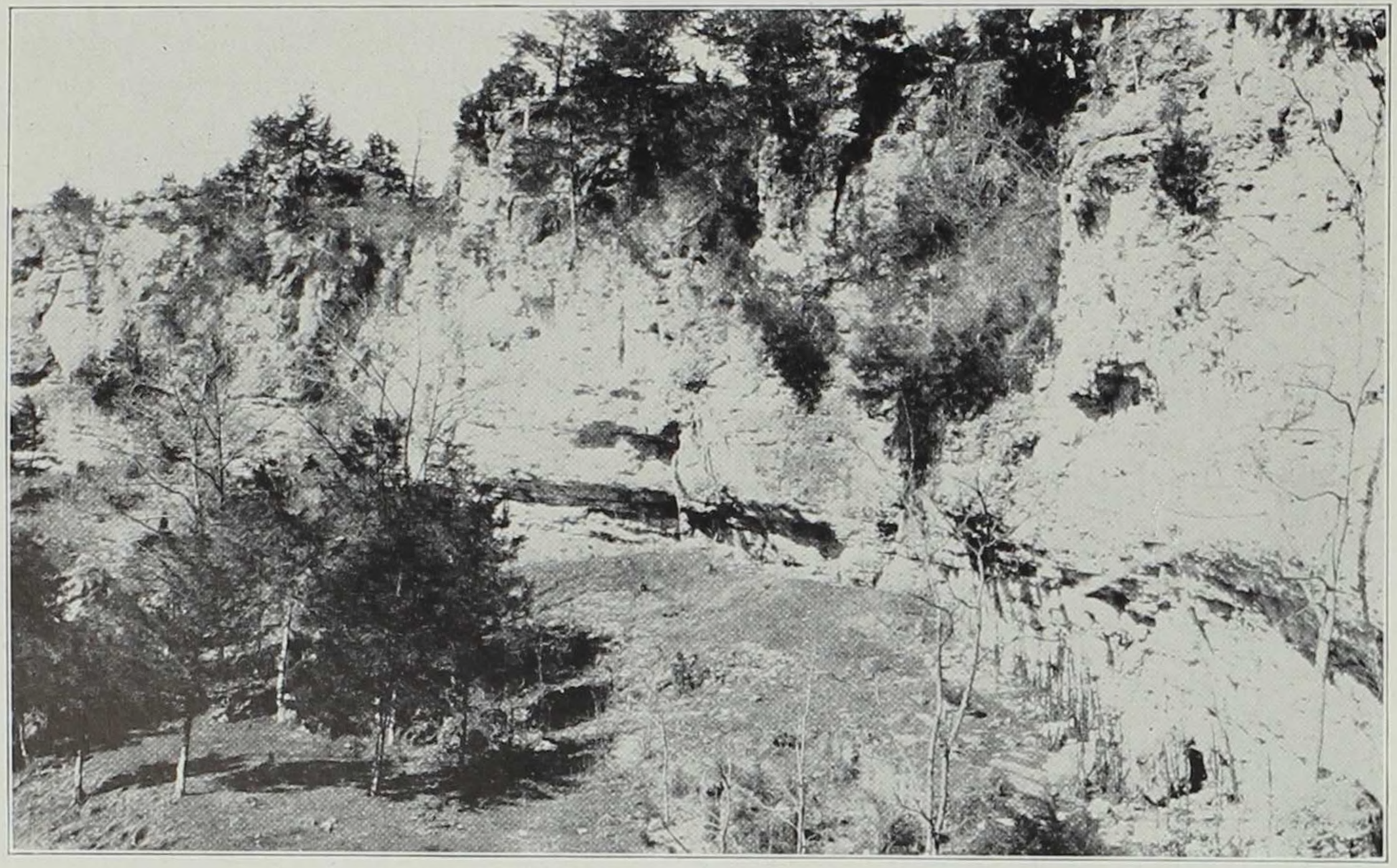


Charles Reuben Keyes
1871–1951

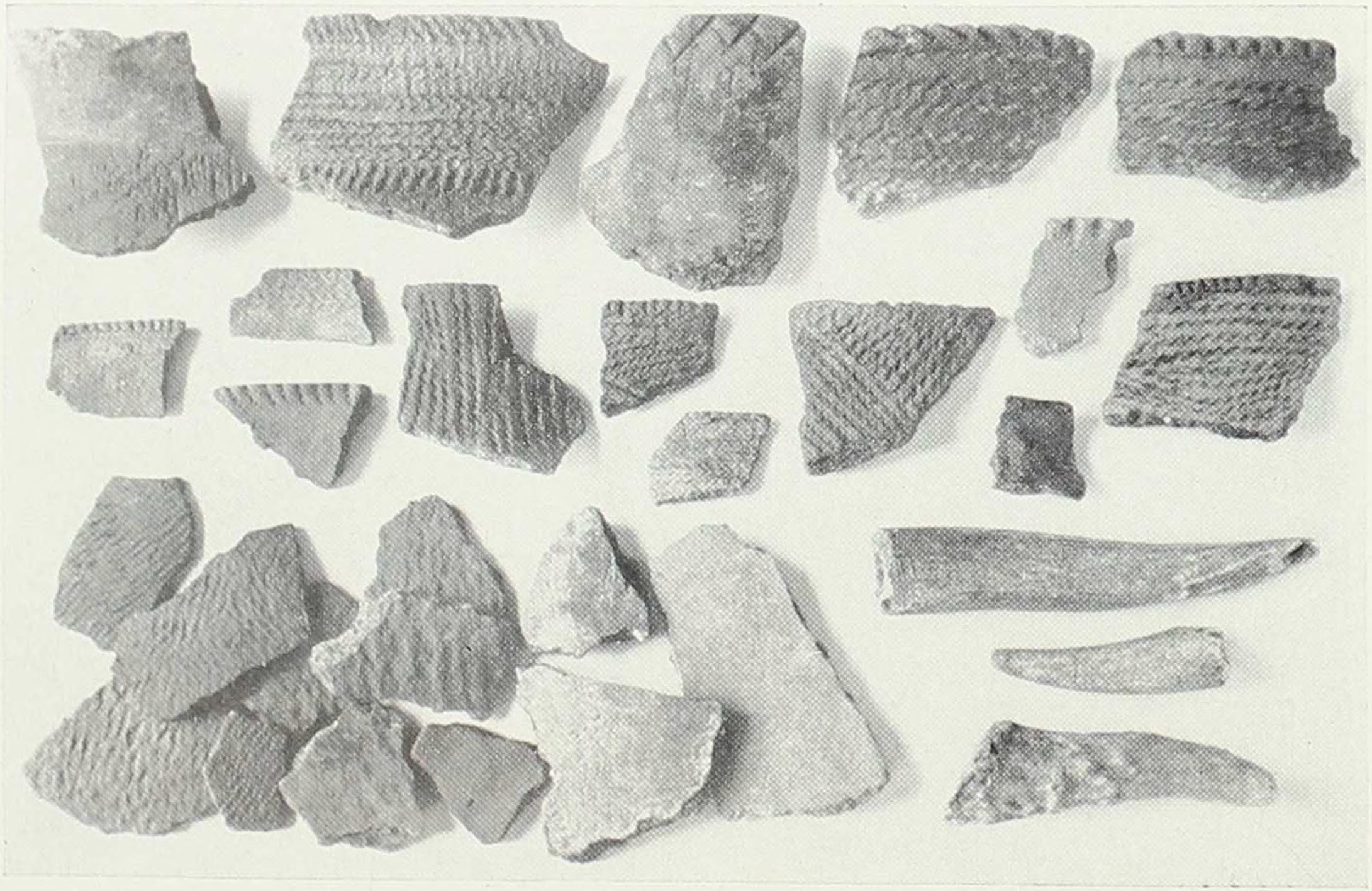


Photograph by Ellison Orr

Looking Southeast Across the Oneota Valley
O'Regan Bench, Site of an Old Siouan Village, in the Foreground

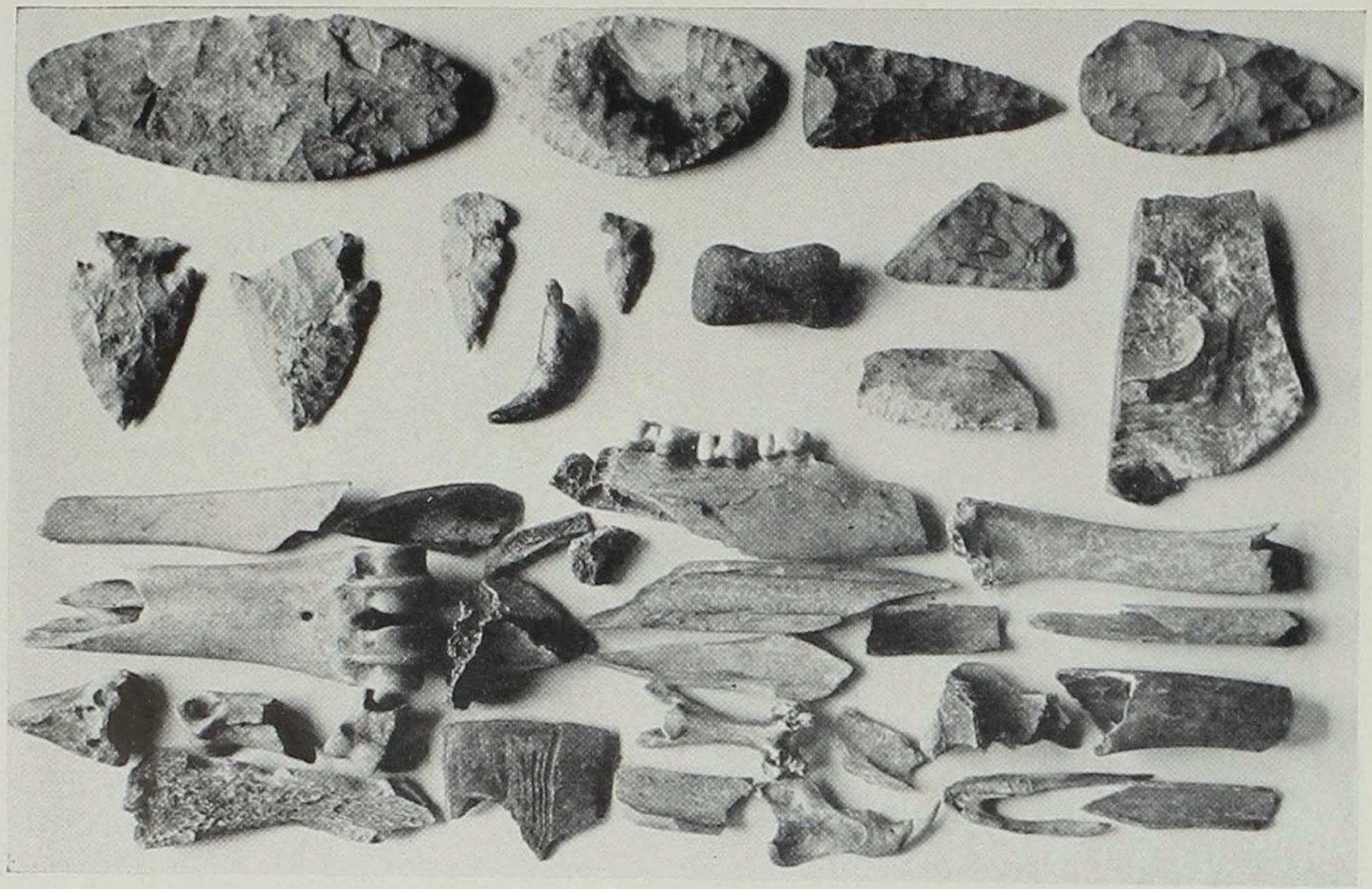


An Ancient Rock Shelter Three Miles East of Monticello, Iowa



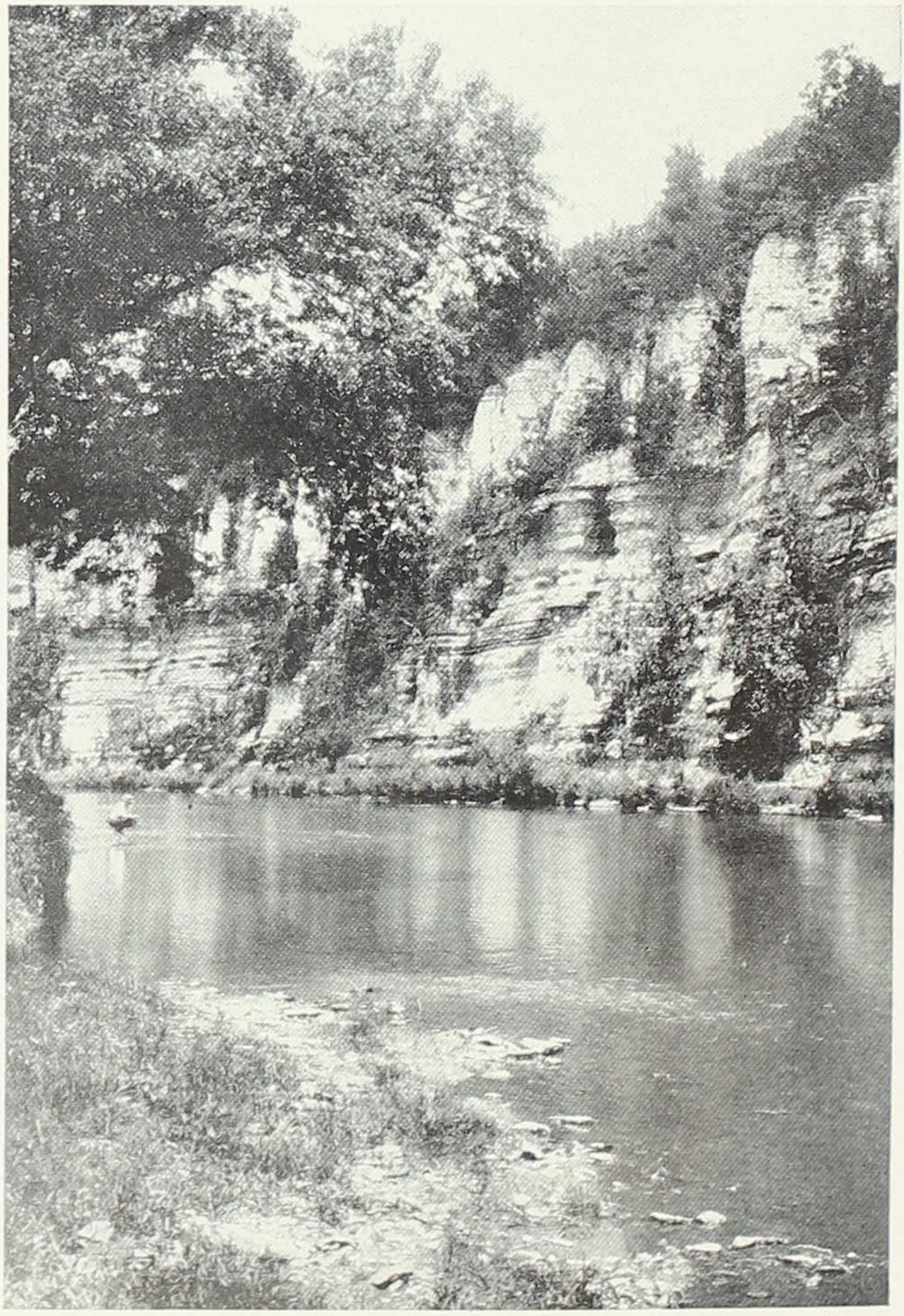
Photograph by Charles R. Keyes

Rimsherds and Bodysherds from Pottery Vessels Used in Minott's Rock Shelter;
Three Antler Tips



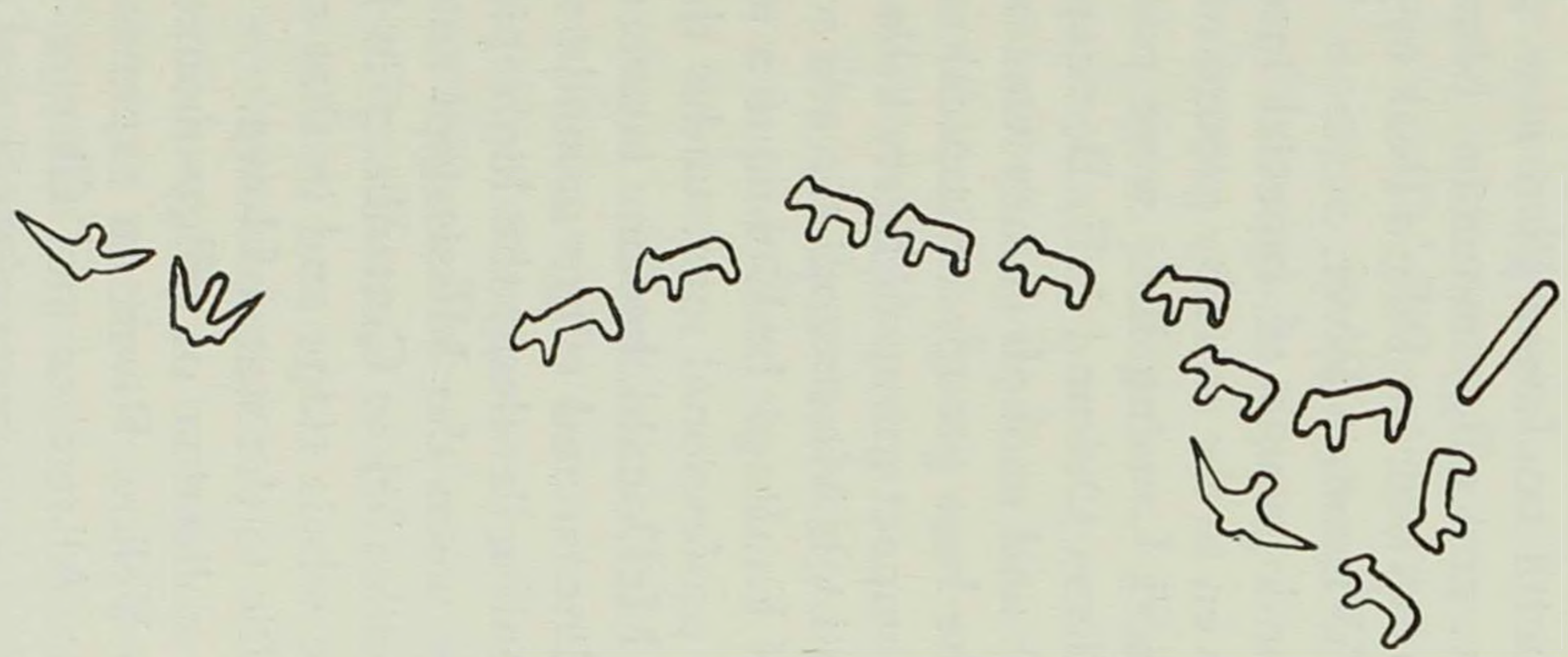
Photograph by Charles R. Keyes

Flint Knives, Projectile Points, a Canine-Tooth Pendant, Sandstone Abrader, Scraper-Knives, and Bone Refuse from Minott's Rock Shelter



Photograph by Charles R. Keyes

The Upper Iowa River



Effigy and Linear Mounds on Mississippi River Bluffs, Clayton County

Pine Hollow. The McGregor areas, which came to Iowa through the Munn Estate in 1936, deserve especial mention, including, as they do, Pike's Peak, Point Ann, and McGregor Heights, 544 acres in all, with no fewer than nine groups of conical, linear, and effigy mounds. Many people have seen the big bear on Pike's Peak opposite the mouth of the Wisconsin River.

Other mound groups of especial interest and value were given to the state by groups of citizens: in Waukon and Lansing hats were passed (belonging to Ellison Orr and I. E. Beaman, according to report) and enough money was secured to buy one of the best groups of conical mounds in existence, a compact group of thirty little ones and big ones on a high Mississippi terrace some eight miles north of Lansing. In Dubuque a number of business and professional men, under the leadership of J. M. McDonald, became interested in the fine conical, linear, and effigy mounds extending for about a half mile along the high, picturesque ridge lying between the Mississippi and Turkey rivers, a few miles below Guttenberg; in 1934 they purchased the whole ridge and in that same year they passed title to the state of Iowa.

The great collection of effigy mounds at the mouth of the Yellow River, an expanse of some 1,200 acres in Allamakee and Clayton counties, was at last, after long years of work and agitation, made into Iowa's first National Monument on No-

vember 22, 1949, when President Truman formally established the Effigy Mounds National Monument. The land had been bought up by the Iowa Conservation Commission; it was turned over to the national government by the legislature; the national government in turn gave the area to the National Parks Service for the establishment of the Monument. Iowa's first National Monument, fittingly enough, is a memorial to Iowa's prehistoric Indians.

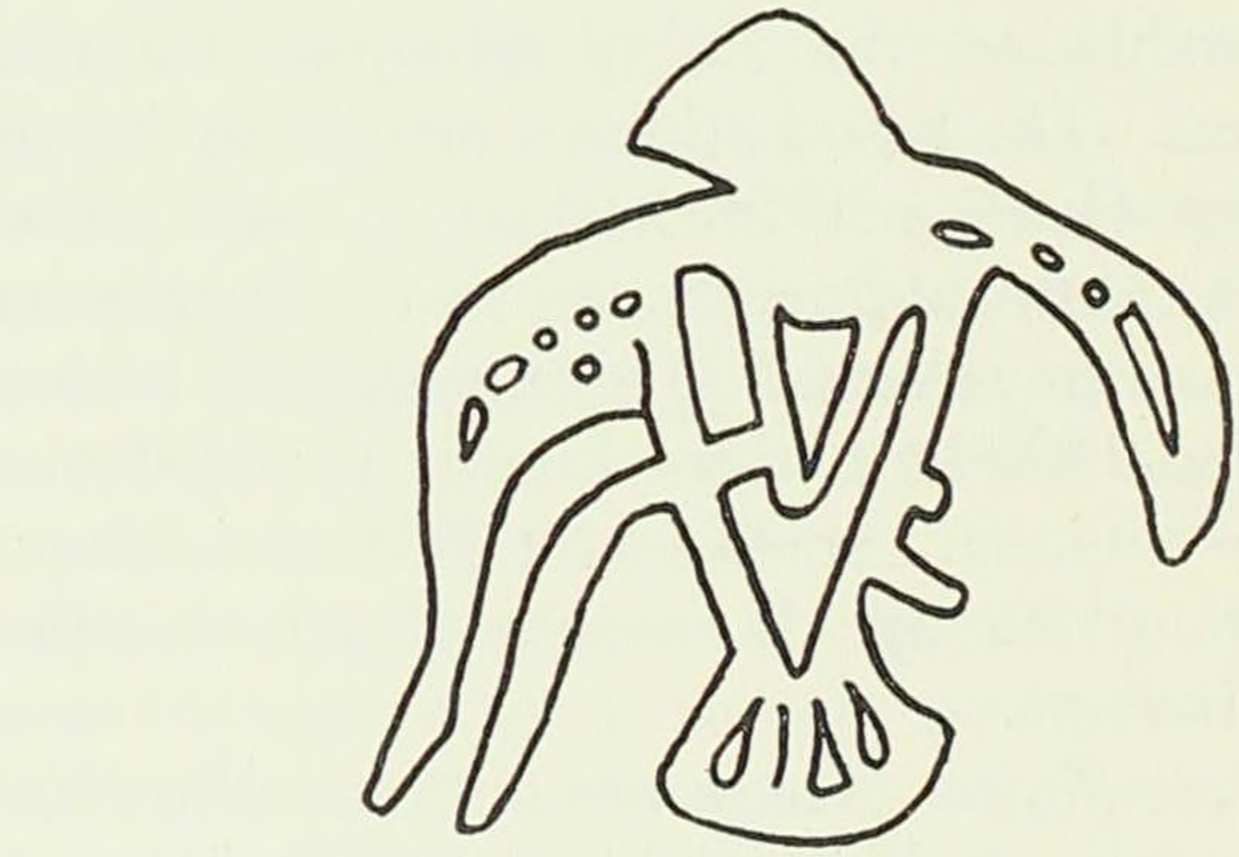
Boulder effigies. These are outlines of an animal or reptile, made by sinking small boulders in the original prairie sod. A number formerly existed in northwestern Iowa; apparently all have disappeared under cultivation.

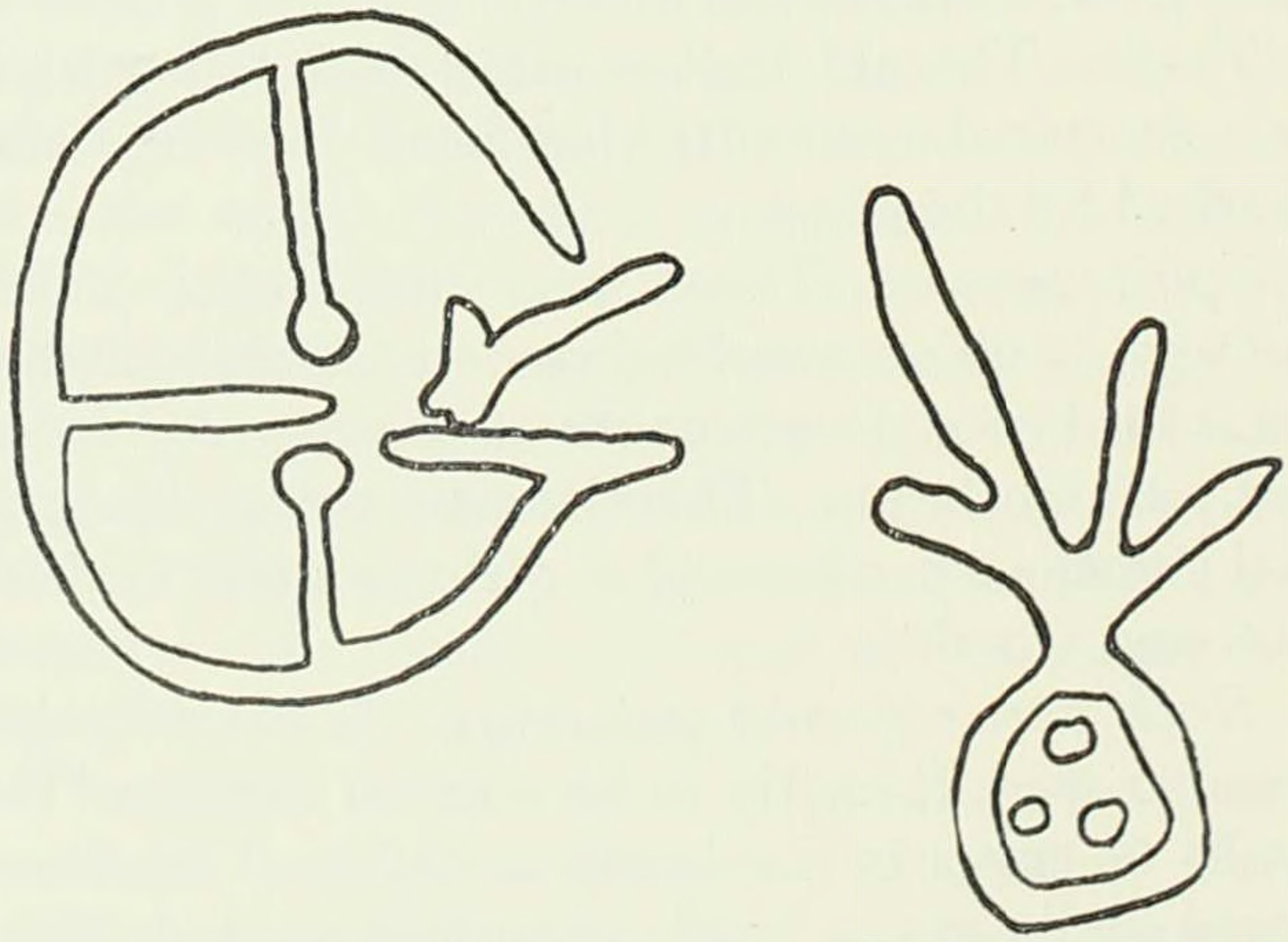
Trails. The old Indian trails exist today as a few scattered remnants that have remained untouched by the plow.

Spirit places. These are hills, trees, cliffs, springs, boulders, and other natural objects that were held sacred on account of some special form, use, or association. They became places for special ceremonies, offerings of gifts, or quiet meditation and worship.

Rock carvings and paintings. A considerable number were formerly to be seen on cliffs and the walls of caves in northeastern Iowa. They have fared badly at the hands of picnickers, but a few remain in out-of-the-way places.

Stone dams. V-shaped boulder dams, with the





Rock Carvings on Mississippi River Bluff near
Lansing, Allamakee County

open point down stream, provided places where the ancient Indians set their fish traps. But few of these have come down to the present. The best known example is in the Iowa River south of Middle Amana, where it may be seen at a time of low water.

Quarries. These are places where the Indians formerly mined their flint and hematite for the making of implements, ornaments, or paint. The sources of hematite occur in south central Iowa, and the old flint quarries were most numerous a few miles north of Burlington.

CHARLES REUBEN KEYES