

In Quest of Facts

What about prehistoric man in Iowa? Were there tribes of the great Indian stocks in the Iowa country during times prehistoric? And, if there were, how and where did they live? How long had they been here? How numerous were they? What were they like, physically and mentally? Were any stocks represented in prehistoric times, concerning which history has nothing to say? Many persons are now helping to collect information concerning the prehistoric population of Iowa, and many others are asking questions about Iowa's ancient men, but many of these questions cannot, at the present time, be fully answered, and some will have to be passed by altogether.

The term "prehistoric" covers all the past of Iowa up to June 17, 1673, the day on which Marquette and Joliet, with their sturdy oarsmen, paddled out of the Wisconsin River and began their exploration of the eastern border of Iowa. The first historical record of the red men of Iowa is Marquette's account of his visit to some Indian villages. The Indian kept but few written accounts of his doings and these not very consistently.

In the field of man's prehistoric past, the strongest sort of temptation exists to use imagination as

the principal source of knowledge. Fancy gives quick returns, and the exercise of it is, moreover, a rather pleasant occupation. There are, however, three main avenues leading to reliable knowledge of prehistoric man. These three avenues should be carefully noted: (1) some facts can be drawn, and others sometimes safely inferred, from early historical records; (2) much can be learned of the material culture, and even more of the spiritual, from a study of the myths, traditions, folklore, and rituals of the living Indians; and (3) much remains to be uncovered only by archaeological methods.

Early Iowa history contains little definite information concerning the tribes resident in the Iowa country at the coming, and consequently before the coming, of the whites. As already noted, Marquette tells in some detail of three Peoria villages found by him near the mouth of the Iowa River in 1673. Thus we know from early history that the Peoria, a tribe of the Illinois branch of the Algonkian stock, were resident on the Iowa River in times antedating the coming of the first white men, for of course those villages had not sprung up in a day. Another precious item is the account by Nicholas Perrot of his visit in 1685 to the Ioway Indians living in their village "nine leagues beyond" (at Trempealeau, Wisconsin). The archaeology of the Upper Iowa Valley offers very satisfactory corroboration of that item — and, incidentally, shows us where Iowa got its name.

For the most part, however, the early explorers of the upper Mississippi did not penetrate into Iowa very far, but only reported vaguely what they heard about the Indian inhabitants. The simple fact seems to be that the great rivers of her borders carried white travel past the Iowa country, as a rule, and not through their tributaries into it. The many vague statements in the early literature are generally of little value in locating the dwelling places of prehistoric man. In some other states, explorers and early students of the native tribes described primitive Indian settlements reaching back into prehistoric times. For example, the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa villages of the Dakotas were visited by Lewis and Clark, Prince Maximilian, Catlin, and others, none of whom had seen much of the Iowa Indians on their journey up the turbulent Missouri. When records begin to grow definite in Iowa, in the eastern part especially, about the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is too late to gain much information from them concerning prehistoric conditions. Most of the tribes were on the move; all had lost their primitive mode of living to some extent (even Marquette found firearms in the hands of the Peoria in 1673); and some of them, as the Potawatomi, Sauk, and Meskwaki of the Algonkian stock (the last two being the Sauk and Fox of early Iowa history), had come from the east since 1673.

Thus far the myths and traditions of the living

tribes and their carefully memorized stories and rituals have not made a large contribution to our knowledge of prehistoric man in Iowa. The reason is that, although a considerable number emanating from tribes that once occupied the state have been collected, comparatively few of these have been published. The late Alanson Skinner, while employed by the Milwaukee Public Museum, made collections of Ioway, Sauk, and Wahpeton tales and rituals; likewise the late Dr. Truman Michelson of the United States Bureau of American Ethnology had been engaged in collecting a large amount of material from the Meskwaki, or Fox, Indians now residents of Tama County, Iowa.

How rich these materials often are in their revelation of the past life of the people who impart them, for doubtless many of the stories and other forms of composition have been handed down for long periods of time, may be illustrated here by a little tale collected by Alanson Skinner among the Ioway of Oklahoma in 1922 and printed here by courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum. It is the story of Turtle's war-party, ending, as Indian stories often do, in a conventional phrase that has no connection with the plot — for of course the listening children must be assured that the story is now done.

Box Turtle decided to go to war, so he called his trusty friends Inapa, the Stone Corn-crusher, and Bone Awl to help him. They journeyed until they came to the village of

the enemy. Corn-crusher struck the first blow; for, when he was captured and they tried to crack corn with him, he crushed one of the fingers of his captor. The man threw him away, so that he escaped; but the enemy died of blood poisoning later on. Thus Inapa counted a coup. In like manner Bone Awl was taken prisoner and succeeded in pricking his captor's hand severely, so that he too was thrown away and escaped. The captor, however, contracted blood poisoning from the wound, so Bone Awl also counted a coup. When it came Turtle's turn to enter the village, he too was captured. But he did not have any opportunity to count any coups; for the Indians boiled and ate him — and then I came home.

Thus one short tale furnishes evidence of both material and spiritual phases of the old Indian life. Stone corn-crushers and bone awls must have been used by the Ioway. If one is not inclined to believe it, he can dig up actual specimens from the debris of an old Ioway village site and thus have one kind of evidence to corroborate the other. The story also explains something of the Indians' free-and-easy manner of warmaking, doubtless true for many a generation before the white man knew him. There was no forced military service, but only a system of "follow the leader." Finally, the story is a revelation of the Indian's attitude of mind toward animals and even inanimate objects. When the same physical environment and the same mental traits are encountered again and again in such literature, perfectly safe conclusions may be drawn.

After other sources of information have been exhausted, it will be found that a vast amount of

detailed fact can be recovered only by the precise methods of archaeological research. Archaeology begins where history begins, but it proceeds in the opposite direction as it delves into human evolution. Everything that ancient man left behind him, his creations in the form of great earthworks or tiny arrowheads, his places of abode or of burial, his deep-worn trails or his sacred shrines, all these are the objects of the quest.

As the story to be read is generally buried, it is necessary to uncover the tablet with care and according to tested methods, or the blurred and shattered characters will be rendered altogether illegible. But if, at the right moment, the spade is laid aside and the last covering of dust and earth is carefully removed with a small hand trowel and whisk broom the story will often lie revealed in astonishing clearness and completeness. History, as in the case of Marquette's account, speaks of calumet pipes owned by the Peoria Indians; archaeology seeks to recover these pipes and show us their actual size, shape, and material. Folklore, as in the case of the Ioway tale, tells us about a stone corn-crusher and a bone awl; archaeology puts the specimens into our hands and invites us to study every detail. Tradition is insistent that in a certain region lived a race of giants; archaeology takes the exact measure of the "giants" and bids us be less credulous.

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