

In Quest of Facts

What about prehistoric man in Iowa? Were tribes of the great Indian stocks in the Iowa country during times prehistoric? And, if they 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 most of these questions can not, 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 paddled out of the Wisconsin River and began their exploration of the eastern border of Iowa. And the first historical record of the red men of Iowa is Marquette's account of his visit to some Indian villages. History, then, is in terms of the white man's records, for 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, though travel on any of these, as on all unimproved highways, is somewhat slow and tedious. Some facts can be drawn, and others sometimes safely inferred, from early historical records; much can be learned of the material culture, and even more of the spiritual, from a study of the myths, traditions, folk-lore, and rituals of the living Indians; and much will remain that can be uncovered only by archeological methods.

Early Iowa history is peculiarly barren of information concerning the tribes resident in the Iowa country at the coming, and consequently before the coming, of the whites. Almost the only explorer that makes a worth-while and definite record is Marquette, who 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.

For the most part, however, the early explorers of the upper Mississippi did not penetrate into Iowa to any extent at all, but only reported vaguely what they heard about the Indian inhabitants. The

simple fact seems to be that the great rivers of its borders carried white travel past the Iowa country, as a rule, and not, through their tributaries, into it. Vague statements — that the Sioux had a village a hundred leagues west of the mouth of a certain river — are of rather doubtful value in definitely locating the dwelling places of prehistoric man. In 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, especially in the eastern part, about the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is too late to gain much information from them concerning prehistoric conditions. Most of the tribes of the region were on the move; all had lost their primitive mode of living to some extent (even Marquette found fire arms in the hands of the Peoria in 1673!); and some of them, as the Huron of the Iroquoian stock and the Pottawattamie, Sauk, and Meskwaki of the Algonkian stock (the last two being the Sacs and Foxes of early Iowa history), were certainly newcomers from the east since the days of Marquette.

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, only a 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; also in recent years Dr. Truman Michelson of the United States Bureau of American Ethnology has been engaged in collecting a large amount of material from the Meskwaki, or Fox, Indians now resident on their lands in 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 Ioway tale collected by Mr. 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 many of the Indian stories do, in a conventional phrase that has no connection with the plot.

"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 find an old Ioway village site, dig up a few actual specimens, and thus have one kind of evidence corroborate the other. The story also explains something of the Indians' free-and-easy manner of war making, 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, what 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 inevitably be drawn.

After other sources of information have been ex-

hausted, it will be found that a vast amount of detailed fact can be recovered only by the precise methods of archeological research. Archeology 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; archeology seeks to recover these pipes and show us their actual size, shape, and material. Folk-lore, as in the case of the Ioway tale, tells us about a stone corn crusher and a bone awl; archeology 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; archeology takes the exact measure of the "giants" and bids us be less credulous.

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