

Prehistoric Oklahomans:

Or the Boomers Came Lately

By ROBERT E. BELL

Last summer I dug into the ruins of an ancient village at least 2,000 years old. This was not in some romantic faraway section of the world, but within forty miles of Muskogee, Oklahoma. Archaeological excavations along the Illinois River in the colorful Cookson Hill country of eastern Oklahoma indicate that this region had been inhabited by unknown peoples for centuries. Aside from being the unknown frontier for white pioneers in the early days, it was also a frontier centuries before to Indian tribes who pushed westward to the Great Plains. Unknown tribes entered the region, settled down, built their villages, prospered and finally disappeared, leaving nothing but their bones and ruins to indicate their former existence. Today, this region is again a frontier for the archaeologist who is attempting to learn about these people and what happened in the past. Who were they? How did they live? Where did they come from and what happened to them?

During the summer of 1951, the University of Oklahoma sponsored an archaeological expedition to this area in order to learn more about these prehistoric Oklahomans. Excavations were conducted at two localities and much information, as well as many specimens, such as tools, utensils, implements, etc., was obtained. The specimens will help furnish additional facts concerning the life and customs of the inhabitants. Explorations were necessarily slow; all work was done carefully by hand, digging with shovels, trowels, knives, and brushes in order to discover every clue or to observe some fact which might offer information about the site.

Materials found at the two sites examined clearly prove that they were not occupied at the same time in the past. One is more recent than the other although both represent pre-Columbian villages. We are not yet sure whether the two villages were occupied by the same people at different times in their history or whether two different peoples are represented. In all probability, an early people inhabited the area, moved on elsewhere, and then a second tribe entered the region, even this latter group hav-

ing disappeared long before the first white explorers arrived. A later people, the Cherokee, settled along the Illinois River in the early nineteenth century, but by this date the prehistoric villages had been in ruins for several centuries.

This is certainly not the whole story either. Knowledge of the existence of unexplored sites and specimens found on the surface suggest that many events in addition to those mentioned have happened at the two localities excavated. As more exploration is carried out, the story of those ancient days and forgotten people will become more distinct and less speculative. Current work presents but one or two pages from the book of archaeological history on the Cookson Hill country. Much remains to be examined.

One site investigated last summer has been named the Vanderpool site, in honor of the former owner of the land. It is a village located on the bank of the Illinois River on the north side of a broad bend in the valley. The site, situated close to the river but high enough to avoid any damages by spring floods, had originally been carefully selected. The nearby hills certainly must have abounded with game, and the clear waters of the Illinois are still favorite fishing spots. The valley offers broad fields and fertile land for the cultivation of various crops. Actually, the village extends for several hundred yards along the high ter-

race adjacent to the river. Apparently it represents the community of a sedentary people who lived in permanent houses scattered along the river's edge.

That this was a permanent village is known from the discovery of two houses, one of which was completely excavated. Of course, when a house has been abandoned and subjected to the destructive elements of nature for several hundred years, not much survives. In fact, it is perhaps surprising that archaeologists find anything at all. Yet, the evidence indicates that the Vanderpool village houses were very satisfactory and comfortable for the inhabitants. The house examined was about twenty-five feet square in floor plan with a narrow vestibule facing the river. The walls of the structure were composed of upright wooden posts placed in the ground every foot or so, the intervening areas having been filled with sticks and clay to produce a solid wall. The roof was supported by several wooden posts arranged about a fire hearth located in the center of the house floor. A partition and what were perhaps seats or sleeping platforms extend along the eastern side of the interior. No other house furnishings were recovered although basketry, woven mats, pottery vessels, and various perishable utensils were undoubtedly a part of the ordinary household equipment. Immediately outside the house were two adjuncts of family life, a fireplace for out-of-doors



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since he joined the University faculty in 1947, Dr. Bell has directed summer field trips in archaeological research in various sites in Oklahoma, chiefly in the Cookson Hill country. This article is based on the excavations made during these summer "digs." In 1951 Dr. Bell published, with David A. Baerreis, "A Survey of Oklahoma Archaeology," in The Bulletin of the Texas Archaeological and Paleontological Society (Vol. XXII).

cooking and a deep cistern-like pit or granary used for the storage of surplus foods.

Not far from the house two graves were found. The burials had been placed in circular pits dug into the ground about two feet deep. One burial was especially interesting; it had been placed in a circular grave about three feet in diameter. The body had been folded up in order to fit into such a small space, and three large stones, each weighing many pounds, had been thrown in on top of the body. One cannot help but wonder why these three stones had been thrown into the grave. Two arrowheads were found with the burial; whether they represented personal property of the individual or whether they were the instruments causing his death, we do not know. The bones of the skeleton had all but disintegrated, making it impossible to recover them for laboratory study even with the most patient and careful labor.

The Indians who once lived at this village were certainly an agricultural people. Although no actual grains were found in the excavations, the presence of crude stone hoes, storage pits, and grinding stones suggest an agricultural economy. The abundance of arrowheads and spearpoints indicates that wild game was also an important item of their diet. In addition, these people certainly caught fish and utilized various wild plant products, such as nuts and berries, still plentiful in the region.

With a fairly limited number of crude tools, weapons, and implements, the technological development still represents that of a stone age and reveals an ignorance of metals. Stone tools are represented by flint knives and cutting instruments, flint drills or perforating tools, digging implements, hide scrapers, and flint axes. Some of these axes show battered cutting edges and worn areas, resulting from the handle lashings, and point to a long and strenuous usage. This is not surprising, however, since it would be no easy task to cut house timbers with a crude axe of stone. Flint arrowheads are plentiful, and many certainly served as points for spears or javelin-like weapons rather than as arrow points. They are usually made from local materials, suggesting a familiarity with and exploitation of the natural resources in the region. Other common articles include round hammerstones and cupped rocks, possibly used for cracking nuts.

Pottery made from clay was an important item to the people although the specimens uncovered do not suggest a developed knowledge of ceramics. The clay containers are crude, thick walled, and without decoration. They appear to have been purely utilitarian, probably serving as cooking pots or containers.

Nothing is available to show how these

people dressed although some ornaments were found. Personal adornment items include large beads of stone and flat oval-shaped pendants. Some pieces of rubbed hematite lead one to believe that they served as raw material for the production of a red pigment for paint or dyes.

As to the family life, social customs, political structure, there is no information; unlike stone tools, such things are not preserved in the ground. It is probable, however, that these people lived very much as did some of the later Indian tribes encountered by the early explorers.

The origin of these people is still a matter of guesswork, when they lived or what happened to them. In all likelihood, they came from the east, perhaps up the Arkansas River valley, to explore and settle along the Illinois tributary. Possibly population pressures and the desire for better hunting or better lands stimulated their movement into the area. Certainly these have been powerful motivating factors throughout history.

These unknown people were not the first, however, to inhabit the Cookson Hill country; prior to their arrival, other groups had lived along the Illinois River. These were a more simple hunting and gathering people, living a more nomadic type of life and being ignorant of agriculture. Other than this, we have little information concerning them, and further data lie still buried in the earth. As to what happened later, more facts are available.

The Morris site was the second investigated last summer. This is also a village, located some four or five miles further downstream from the Vanderpool site. An exploratory excavation revealed a prehistoric cemetery, and fifteen Indian burials were discovered. Judging from the associated burial offerings and other specimens recovered during the digging, we conclude that the Morris site was not inhabited at the same time as the Vanderpool village. This second village is later in time, and the evidence recovered suggests considerable cultural advancement. By this time, new customs are evident; the pottery shows greater ceramic knowledge; and widespread trade or contact was maintained with distant peoples. Marine conch shell from the Gulf of Mexico, flint from north-central Oklahoma, and galena from the Tri-State area all suggest a loss of isolation.

From the limited excavations so far made, we cannot be sure whether these later people represent a second group entering the Illinois River country long after the earlier inhabitants had abandoned the Vanderpool village, or later descendants of these earlier people who had developed a more advanced society. With additional fieldwork, the answer to this question, and to many others

which now remain concerning the Morris site, may become available; consequently, a better understanding of the Cookson Hill prehistory will be possible.

The immediate concern for recovering information about the Illinois River area arises out of the fact that the Tenkiller Reservoir is now under construction and nearing completion. This reservoir will form a large lake in the Illinois valley which will inundate and destroy a large number of ancient sites. It is necessary to dig now or lose this portion of the cultural record of Oklahoma's prehistory.

This, however, is not the only area in the state where reservoirs will flood or have already destroyed important sites. Other important areas are represented by the Wister Reservoir in eastern Oklahoma and the Fort Gibson Reservoir on Grand River. A large portion of the archaeological evidence for Oklahoma has already become inaccessible; hence it is essential that every effort be exerted in collecting information while it is yet possible to do this. This need is further emphasized by the fact that much of the state is archaeologically unknown and unexcavated.

Oklahoma, as a state, offers excellent opportunities for research in archaeology or prehistory. Not only is the state relatively unexplored archaeologically, but we have little more than a general idea concerning what happened in the past 10,000 years that men have lived in the area. As the historian attempts to push our knowledge of Oklahoma history backward into the past, his data become more and more limited, until finally there are no documents at all. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, we have no written information; yet we know from the finding of various archaeological remains that Oklahoma has a much longer unwritten history yet to be unearthed. We know that at various times in the past Oklahoma was considerably different from the days recorded by early explorers in the state. We have evidence of larger native populations, of people attaining a rather high degree of cultural achievement, and of people who seem to disappear into the poorly understood ages of the past. It becomes the obligation of the archaeologist to piece together a story of Oklahoma's prehistory from the bones, stones, and debris remaining.

Not only do rich research opportunities exist within the field of Oklahoma prehistory, but the interpretation of the prehistory of the surrounding states is impossible so long as Oklahoma remains relatively unknown. Solutions to archaeological problems arising in other states can indeed be solved only by research done in Oklahoma. This is true partly because the state is strategically situated so as to include different

archaeological areas. In eastern Oklahoma we find cultures which have a relationship to peoples of the lower Mississippi Valley; in the central section of the state we find materials associated with the Great Plains, while in the western Panhandle, we can observe influences emanating from the Anasazi culture of New Mexico. This situation makes Oklahoma especially favorable for the study of cross-cultural influences between the Mississippi Valley, the Plains, and the Southwest. In addition, Oklahoma is especially suited for the study of cultural movements between the Southern Plains of Texas and the Central Plains of Kansas and Nebraska. As a result of this favorable location, a wide variety of archaeological remains are to be found within the confines of the state.

Throughout the past five years the University of Oklahoma has sponsored considerable archaeological research within the state. This has been in the nature of preliminary surveys, excavation programs, laboratory analyses, and preparation of final reports for publication. Actual fieldwork has been limited to the summer months although laboratory work and the interpretation of collected data continue throughout the year. This recent research in archaeology is not, by any means, the first efforts in that direction. The University sponsored extensive archaeological research throughout the years prior to World War II; the activities of the last five years are merely a resumption of long established interests which were temporarily suspended during the war years.

The research accomplished has been sponsored and directed by the Department of Anthropology and the University Museum of the University of Oklahoma. Various other agencies, as well as individuals, have worked in co-operation with the University in order to carry out a successful program. The Tulsa District of the United States Army Engineers has permitted easy access to lands under its jurisdiction, supplied various items of equipment, and furnished transportation, detailed maps, data, and vital information. The River Basin Survey section of the Smithsonian Institution has supplied financial aid to conduct several surveys, as well as major excavations within the Fort Gibson and Tenkiller Reservoirs. The United States National Park Service has furnished funds for excavation in the proposed Eufaula Reservoir. The University of Oklahoma Research Foundation contributed financial support for excavations at the Harlan site to solve a critical situation arising in 1949. A large number of individuals, both on the campus and scattered throughout the state, have aided fieldwork and analyses in a variety of ways, all of which have contributed to the success

of our research program. Without this extensive co-operation and assistance, what has been accomplished would not have been possible.

Yet, what has been done is but a small sample of what should be done. For example, within the Tenkiller Reservoir there are 43 known sites on record; yet only six of these have been investigated. Of these six, three are represented by limited excavations and small collections. Additional work, however, is planned for the coming summer within the Tenkiller lake area. New discoveries will be made and additional data will become available so that the story of Oklahoma prehistory will become more nearly complete.

Clash of Cultures . . .

Russian and Ukrainian laborers and maids. We sang at our work, but the moment the song would interfere with efficiency it was dropped. Our laborers and maids, to our exasperation, went right on singing.

We did adopt a few other things, but these were largely superficial, like some forms of clothing and food and a few dozen words and expressions. We felt there was little they could teach us. Indeed, had we not been brought in to teach the Russians? It had been the expressed hope of Catherine that the Russian peasant would learn efficient methods of agriculture from us. We were model farmers, no doubt of that. Our villages were the garden of the Steppe. But what Russia needed was complete agricultural reform, not a handful of model farmers. With the exception of a few Russian villages settled under the direction of the early Mennonite leader Johann Cornies, our Russian neighbors generally continued to cultivate their fields with the "sokhas" (a wooden hand plow) and to reap the grain with the scythe.

The bulwarks of our isolation were the church and the school. Our forefathers had come to autocratic Russia to find complete religious liberty for themselves. The Mennonites were a small sect which zealously guarded its life. Deserting the flock was made very difficult. For a Mennonite to join the Russian Orthodox Church was, of course, unthinkable, but even to turn Lutheran (there were Lutheran villages nearby) was considered a grave error. Undoubtedly the fact that leaving the church meant the loss of our Mennonite privilege, exemption from military service, made many a man content to remain in the fold. I believe that there was a considerable proportion of passable Christians in our sect, but we could not escape the effects of our puritanism—narrow-mindedness and intolerance.

Our schools were the other bulwark. We realized very early that preservation of our language was synonymous with self-preservation. For some time Russian was not even taught in our schools. Even after the schools became bilingual, Russian was often slighted to the advantage of German. Moreover, little effort was made to inculcate in the children a love for the Russian language, literature, and culture. The peasant children in our Russian primers and readers, who wore "lapti" (bast sandals), left us cold. *We wore shoes!* Besides, they looked just like the little brats we had to chase out of our apple orchards and watermelon patches. Since most of my people did not continue beyond grade school, they never were properly introduced to Russian literature and remained blissfully unaware of Russian intellectual life. One evening, as a high school boy, I was reading the great Pushkin's *Kapitanskaya dochka*. My cousin, a young man, looked over my shoulder. "Pushkin?" he said. "Ah, that Russian!"

Few among our teachers and other intellectuals would encourage the broadening of our minds beyond a safe conservative limit. Our religion taught us the brotherhood of man, but in practice we failed as miserably as the rest of the world. Exceptions to the rule were admired as oddities, as for example, when Peter Friesen, the historian of the Mennonites and a Christian, publicly and with true affection embraced "Nikanorushka," the ragged, louse-ridden cleaner of privies.

Such "Nikanorushkas" we saw every day, yet we never became aware of the plight of Russia's submerged masses, of which he was a part. Such a thing as Gorky's *Lower Depths* we could not understand. The Revolution came as a complete surprise to us. And now the Russians descended upon us. They came to our prosperous homes to "share" and in the process, beat us up, and kill us. Ever since that time, my people have been scourged and starved and murdered by the Communists. And since our tormentors were Russians, what was more natural than that many of us should have conceived the deepest hatred for the Russians?

When I left Russia in 1924, the masses were still sympathetic to Communism, and were therefore our hated enemies. But those of my people who escaped from Russia at the end of the last war had seen these masses become the persecuted slaves of a handful of commissars. When I talked with some of these refugees, I was surprised not to find the old hatred any more. The Russian people had suffered the same persecution as they. It is ironical, yet supremely human—in hell Germans and Russians had become brothers.