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Conserving Iowa's Prehistoric Heritage

MARSHALL MCKUSICK¹

Abstract. A hundred years of farming and relic hunting has destroyed much of Iowa's archeological resources. An active program of research is currently underway at the State University of Iowa in order to preserve these prehistoric remains before they are entirely lost. It will require a strenuous effort to salvage enough information to piece together the ten thousand years of Iowa's past. Current research emphasis is upon publishing reports and organizing the results of previous work throughout the state. After this phase of the program is completed a series of excavations will be made in different parts of the state to fill the gaps of the scientific record.

One hundred years ago Iowa possessed abundant archeological remains. As the land became settled, many archeological sites were destroyed by plowing and by the growth of towns. Soon after the settlement of Iowa, people began collecting Indian relics and many major sites were systematically destroyed by men who thoughtlessly dug into burial mounds seeking antiquities. It would be a reasonable estimate that 80 percent of Iowa's sites have been destroyed or heavily damaged within the last hundred years. Among those that remain almost all have been disturbed to a greater or lesser extent by relic hunters, construction, and farming activities. It is doubtful if there are more than a handful of sites in the state which have remained completely untouched and undisturbed. Obviously, the conservation of Iowa's archeological resources represents a special situation. The usual conservation problem of depleted game can be readily solved by restocking streams and forest preserves and by giving legal protection. However, the rapid destruction of Iowa's prehistoric past cannot be replenished. Once an early Indian mound or camp is destroyed or heavily damaged, there is no way of bringing it back, and an interesting piece of history is lost forever.

The dwindling archeological resources in the state have placed scientific investigation in an important conservation role. For example, nineteenth century descriptions of artifacts and Indian camps oftentimes cannot be duplicated by the evidence remaining in Iowa at the present time. And, we can probably add, scientific investigations made during the 1960's will be impossible to duplicate thirty years from now. This puts a great deal of pressure on the archeologist to salvage as much information as possible. Fortunately, there is a long history of archeological research in Iowa.

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Eighty years ago the first scientific work began with the aim of collecting information about the Indian remains. Alfred T. Hill, of St. Paul, Minnesota, hired a surveyer named Theodore Lewis to map the various earthworks, fortifications, mound groups and effigy mounds which were then so common in the midwest. Other important work was carried out in southeastern and western Iowa and extensive reports were published in the *Proceedings of the Davenport Academy of Sciences*. The most active member of the Davenport Academy was Frederick Starr (1897), who published an extensive bibliography and wrote a summary of antiquities from a large number of Iowa counties.

In the 1920's the State Historical Society, of Iowa City, which had long had an interest in Iowa archeology, actively supported Charles Keyes' investigations. During the 1930's Keyes and Ellison Orr directed excavations at a series of very large village sites in the western and northeastern parts of the state. As a result of this work, Keyes (1951) was able to formulate the first outline of Indian occupations in Iowa. Keyes and Orr also laid the groundwork for more recent investigations. They were instrumental in creating the Iowa Archeological Society, an organization founded in 1951, which has kept the interest in archeology alive in the state. Effigy Mounds National Monument was created largely because of the work of Keyes and protects and maintains under Federal Law extremely interesting mounds in the form of birds, bears and other shapes.

A number of individuals have more recently added new dimensions to the prehistory of Iowa. Mildred Mott Wedel (1959) has written a monograph on Oneota culture. Two former National Park Service archeologists at Effigy Mounds, Wilfred Logan (1958) and Paul Beaubien (1953), made valuable studies of Woodland and Hopewell cultures. The archaic, preceramic culture in western Iowa, dating back to 6500 B.C. has been studied by W. D. Frankforter (1959, 1960) of the Sanford Museum in Cherokee. Finally Reynold Ruppe, former State Archeologist, undertook a series of investigations in all parts of the state, and Ruppe's students at the State University of Iowa have written a series of reports on various prehistoric cultural groups (Flanders, 1960; Anderson, 1961; Scholtz, 1960; Fugle, 1957; Ives, 1956; Henning, 1960).

The creation of the post of State Archeologist by the 1958 legislature was an important step forward in the conservation of Iowa's resources. According to law:

"The state board of regents shall appoint a state archeologist, who shall be a member of the faculty of the depart-

ment of sociology and anthropology of the state university.

“The state archeologist shall have the primary responsibility for the discovery, location and excavation of archeological sites and for the recovery, restoration and preservation of archeological remains in and for the state of Iowa, and shall coordinate all such activities through cooperation with the state highway commission, state conservation commission, and other state agencies concerned with archeological salvage or the products thereof.

“The state archeologist is authorized to enter agreements and cooperative efforts with the United States commissioner of public roads, the United States departments of commerce, interior, agriculture and defense, and any other federal or state agencies concerned with archeological salvage or the preservation of antiquities.”

(Approved April 7, 1959, Chapter 201, Acts of the 1958 Regular Session.)

The role of the state archeologist as coordinator of research leads us directly to the problem of conservation. What needs to be done? Antiquity laws have been passed in a number of states to protect significant archeological sites. Although useful, the laws are difficult to enforce. Conservation must ultimately be considered in terms of scientific objectives or goals. The archeologist is primarily concerned with making cultural interpretations and reconstructing former ways of life rather than with random collections of specimens. For this reason the salvaging of specimens in the path of a bulldozer or new housing development can absorb all available research time and only return relatively unimportant yields of information.

A balance of research activity is necessary to achieve the goal of studying the evidence from the past. It is neither necessary nor practical to excavate every site threatened with destruction. To make a conservation program work one must plan in terms of practical problems of available financial resources and limitations of time and personnel. A realistic appraisal of what can be accomplished is currently being made by the State Archeologist.

1. The first step is to draw together the various published and unpublished reports into a book systematically describing Indian prehistory. This project will be largely finished during the summer of 1961, the State Archeologist having received a grant for this purpose from the Old Gold Development Fund at the State University. It is an-

anticipated that this book will stimulate a greater interest among Iowans in their state's prehistoric heritage.

2. In cooperation with the State Conservation Commission, contracts have been negotiated for the summer of 1961 to make surveys of archeological resources in Humboldt and Webster counties. Some excavation will also be carried out under the direction of graduate students from the State University. It is anticipated that additional surveys will be carried out in future years in order to evaluate the nature of archeological remains throughout Iowa.
3. Greater cooperation with the Highway Commission will provide information about sites endangered by road construction. Where the site is of major importance federal funds are available for salvage work. Generally it is not our plan to become involved in minor sites. It is also necessary to know sufficiently in advance when a site is endangered because of time involved in planning and actually putting an expedition into the field. By agreement with the Highway Commission, county maps with known site locations marked on them are being submitted. These sites will then be plotted automatically on all future highway maps and the State Archeologist will be informed when individual sites are endangered by construction.
4. At present, an archeological contract is being completed for the National Park Service for a survey at Effigy Mounds National Monument. It is expected that the National Park Service will give greater support to archeological salvage in the state, particularly for sites endangered by federal reservoir construction. For example Red Rock Reservoir will destroy a number of important sites.
5. The Archeological Laboratory at the State University of Iowa has been reorganized and new research equipment has been added. This laboratory is the nucleus of archeological research in the state because of its functions in training students, maintaining site records, and storing archeological collections.
6. The publication of archeological reports is being stressed because of the number of manuscripts which have accumulated. These reports are being published in the *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society*, a self-supporting publication.

As a result of the long tradition of research a great deal is known about the Indians who inhabited Iowa. At the present

time research at the State University is emphasizing publication of reports and organizing the results of previous investigations. After this first phase of the research program is completed, a series of large scale excavations will be made in different parts of Iowa in order to fill in the gaps of the scientific record. It will require a strenuous effort to salvage enough information to piece together the ten thousand years of Iowa's past. However, a great deal can be accomplished through the cooperation of various state and federal agencies. The future of archeological research in Iowa is very promising and there are many important discoveries to be made.

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