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The Pre-History Of Central And Western Oklahoma

by Stanley Bussey

As late as the early 1920's, it was generally assumed that the American Indians had entered the continent about the time of Christ, perhaps replacing earlier immigrants from Egypt or Phoenicia. Some groups, the Apache for example, were believed to be relative latecomers to the scene, Mongol refugees from Genghiz Khan or one of his descendants. Ar-

chaeologists were gradually filling in the picture of human occupation of North America; however, there were few archaeologists, and they were hampered by the lack of good dating techniques.

In 1926, a geologist excavating the remains of extinct Pleistocene bison near Folsom, New Mexico, found stone spear points with the bison bones and suddenly quintupled the length of time humans were known to have been in the Americas. Later work pushed the earliest date of human occupation back even further, and some archaeologists feel we have not yet finished with this task.

This summary may give the impression that we know more about Oklahoma's prehistoric past than we really do. Of necessity it ignores the confusion and controversy that exist about most major aspects of the human past in Oklahoma. In fact, our task is like trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing--we think we know what the picture is, but we still don't know many of the details.

THE PRE-PROJECTILE POINT HORIZON

There is good evidence for humans in North America 12,000 years ago and fair evidence for occupation as early as 14,000 years ago. Some archaeologists believe that human occupation in the Americas is much older, perhaps as much as 100,000 years. Evidence for these very early occupations is shaky, and most professional archaeologists are skeptical; but before the Folsom discoveries, the same thing could be said about the belief that humans lived here in the late Pleistocene.

The Pre-Projectile Point Horizon is a period created to include all of the very early evidence. No sites of this period have been identified in Oklahoma.

PALEO-INDIAN PERIOD

This period, which began sometime between 12,000 and 10,000 years ago, includes the best documented early evidence of hunters in North America.

It includes many groups of hunters who lived around the end of the Pleistocene and hunted Ice Age animals before they became extinct. These animals included mammoth, several species of large bison, wild horses, and camels to name the most common. All of the groups of this period used assemblages of stone tools developed for killing and processing large game, although the animals emphasized vary through time.

While interpreting archeological data, archeologists rely heavily on distinctive artifacts that have a restricted distribution in time and space--the "diagnostic" artifacts. In the Paleo-Indian period, most of the diagnostic artifacts are flaked stone spear points. Other tools, which are not as distinctive, include flaked stone scrapers, choppers, and knives; bone awls and needles; and shell and stone beads.

Archaeologists divide the Paleo-Indian material of the Southwestern Plains into two complexes. The Llano complex, marked by Clovis and Folsom points, is earlier (roughly 10,000 B.C.-7,500 B.C.) and is found with the remains of extinct animals species. The Plano artifact complex, marked by such point types as Plainview, Midland, Eden, Scottsbluff, and Meserve/Dalton, is later and is found with mixtures of extinct and modern animals.

One characteristic of the period is that artifact types are spread over broad areas, suggesting the people followed herds across the plains and prairies without any particular territorial restrictions. In general, the Paleo-Indian way of life probably resembled that of the bison-hunting peoples the Spanish found on the Southwestern Plains in A.D. 1541.

Three National Register sites in Oklahoma date from this period. The Cedar Creek site in Washita County probably is the oldest. This site, exposed in creek banks, covers about 3,360 acres and includes hearths and other camp evidence as well as mammoth and bison bones. The other two

sites, the Johnson-Cline and the Shores archaeological sites, are in Texas County. These sites are camp areas in sand dunes and show long occupations. Beginning with the late Paleo-Indian Plainview and extending into the Plains Village period, both sites appear to have some stratification. Bat Cave, in Cimmaron County, may contain Paleo-Indian material.

ARCHAIC PERIOD

During the entire Paleo-Indian period, the climate of the area had been gradually changing, becoming warmer and drier. For reasons not fully understood, many species of animals (elephants, camels, and several varieties of bison) became extinct in North America. Others (musk ox, some large bison, and perhaps horse) shifted north where they survived in smaller numbers. By the end of the Paleo-Indian period, the climate and the plants and animals of the area were essentially modern in character. The only major herd animals left were bison, and they tended to stay in the north during dry periods.

From about 6,000 B.C. to about A.D. 300, people of several local Archaic traditions roamed restricted territories in Central and Western Oklahoma, gradually becoming more efficient at exploiting the resources of their own areas. Artifact distributions reflect the smaller territories used by Archaic groups. Artifact types, especially spear points, are spread over much smaller areas than previously and the use of imported rock is much less common.

Hunting patterns changed from an emphasis on large herd animals (horse, camel, bison) to an emphasis on smaller, more solitary animals (deer, turkey, squirrel, racoon). Fishing was added to the inventory of skills, and vegetable foods became much more important than in the Paleo-Indian period.

Spear points of the Archaic tend to be large and crudely flaked. Most types have stems or tangs formed by side-or-corner notching or by indenting

the sides of the base. The tool inventory continues to include a variety of chipped knives, scrapers, drills and choppers. Grinding stones for processing seeds and other vegetable foods appear. Ground stone tools and ornaments gradually become more common.

About A.D. 300, pottery-making part-time farmers of the Woodland tradition began moving into the area along stream valleys. However, the Archaic tradition remained important in Central and Western Oklahoma for several centuries and probably continued to exist locally until the historic period.

Because of the complexity of Oklahoma's Archaic cultures, the lack of dense occupations, and the susceptibility of Archaic sites to damage by European farming methods, archaeologists have not made as much progress in defining local Archaic traditions as might be desired.

Both the Johnson-Cline and the Shores National Register sites have evidence of Archaic occupations. Bat Cave probably contains Archaic material. Other National Register sites with remains of this period include the Red Ghost Cave and Three Entrance Cave sites in Cimarron County, the three sites of the Gore Pit District in Comanche County, and the East-erwood site in Texas County.

THE WOODLAND PERIOD

The Woodland tradition, the first farming tradition, was established in the Eastern United States by 1000 B.C. In many places, the Woodland tradition was a continuation of the local Archaic traditions, with the addition of pottery, burial mounds and other earthworks, and the use of some domesticated plants. Farming does not appear to have replaced the existing hunting and gathering economy, but to have supplemented it. A simplified version of the Woodland tradition reached Eastern Oklahoma about the time of Christ and had spread along drainages into Central Oklahoma by A.D. 300.

Artifacts of this period include plain and cord-marked pottery, stone pipes, arrow points (indicating the introduction of the bow), and shell and flaked stone hoes. This period is very poorly known in Central and Western Oklahoma. Because the domesticated plants grown by Woodland peoples--corn, squash, and sunflowers--should have provided a more stable food base than hunting and gathering alone, we would expect to find sedentary villages with Woodland artifacts, but no definite villages have been found.

Of the National Register sites, Woodland occupation is found only in the Three Entrance Cave District in Cimarron County.

THE VILLAGE FARMING PERIOD

These cultures were more successful and more widespread than the earlier Woodland tradition. Although there were regional variations, they shared a number of general characteristics. These include the use of permanent houses in sedentary villages, the bow, pottery, ground stone axes, and hoes made of bison shoulder blades. Beans, an important protein supplement, appeared early in the period. There is some evidence of warfare, and some late villages are protected by stockades.

At least four distinctive local traditions--the Custer, the Washita River, the Henrietta, and the Panhandle--are found in Oklahoma, though the last two are more common in Texas. Villages tend to be on the heights above stream valleys, and farming probably was done in the valleys.

The Panhandle groups show some evidence of influence from the Puebloan Southwest, especially in the houses. Panhandle houses include both single and multiple room with sunken floors and foundations of vertical stone slabs. The other Plains Village cultures used single room square or rectangular houses with thatched roofs supported by four support posts and walls of branches and clay. Storage pits scattered around houses were common.

Of the four traditions identified so

far, the Washita River is the best known. Our knowledge of the others is marginal at best, and it is likely that some distinctive regional variants have not yet been identified.

It is probable that the origins of many of the historic Indian tribes of the Southern Plains are traceable to local variants of the village farming sites, but few definite conclusions have been reached at this time.

In the historic period, there was considerable cultural confusion in the area as new groups moved in and older groups began moving around. This process actually began late in the prehistoric period when northern groups, probably Plains Apaches, began moving down into the Panhandle from Colorado and Kansas. These peoples are represented archaeologically by the Antelope Creek cultures.

Of the Village Farming cultures, the Washita River and the Panhandle are best represented on the National Register. Washita River sites include the McLemore site in Washita County, the Jewett site in Grady County, and the Lamb-Miller and Goodwin-Baker sites, in Roger Mills County. Panhandle sites include the Nash II-Clawson site, the Two Sisters site, and the Stamper site in Texas County, the Sharps Creek Crossing or Roy Smith site in Beaver County. The Johnson-Cline and Shores sites in Texas County may also have Panhandle remains.

Four National Register sites--the Allee site in Roger Mills County, the Billy Rose and Lonker sites in Beaver County, and the Beagley-Stinson sites in Harper County--are of the general village farming tradition style but have not been identified by local variant.

HISTORIC PERIOD

The historic period saw the end of the village farming tradition as well as the end of any Archaic remnants that might have survived in Western Oklahoma, but the changes occurred without European observers and were unrecorded. Many factors seem to

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have been involved. Although European presence was largely absent, the Village Farmers probably were, ultimately, the victims of European actions. One factor may have been the spread of European diseases, especially smallpox, and a mutated syphilis. From the south, west and north, the addition of domesticated horses increased mobility and expanded the parameters of warfare. From the south, east and west, dislocations of peoples responding to French and Spanish actions probably were a factor.

Six National Register sites are of this historic period. The Longest site, in Jefferson County, was a fortified Taovayas Wichita village attacked by Colonel Don Diego Ortiz Parrilla in 1759 in retaliation for an earlier Wichita raid on the San Saba mission. The Edwards site, in Beckham County, is a fortified farming village of unknown affiliation. The Little Deer site, in Custer County, is also of unknown affiliation, but has Plains Apachean affinities. The Cedar Breaks Archaeological District in Cimmaron County includes three sites, one of which includes tipi rings (rings of

rocks used to anchor tipi bases). Other sites contain historic rock art. Finally, the Goodwin-Baker site in Roger Mills County, which also has a Village Farmer occupation, has evidence of a historic occupation that may be Plains Apachean.

These sites are only a few of many in Oklahoma. Many sites are still unrecorded and many have not been adequately investigated. There will always be questions to be answered by archeological research, but only by awareness and action can we preserve the resource necessary to answer these questions. ●

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the long abandoned arristras stimulated interest in this particular area, but because of government interest in the same locale an order was given for all to quit the premises. Meers, named after Col. A. J. Meers, relocated to a site north of the original location and soon boasted the usual assortment of hotels, cafes, stores, blacksmith shops, saloons, and churches. In 1903 the newspapers continued boasting of the mining activity in the area. By 1907 it was all over and miners and prospectors were moving on to greener fields or settling on the newly opened land as farmers or ranchers.

A STORE BUILDING--ALL THAT REMAINS OF MEERS

The unpainted, vertical, board and batten covered wood frame, false fronted, ramshackle building is almost enhanced by the metal soft drink advertising signs. It has been used as a drug store, general store, grocery store, post office, living quarters, art gallery, meeting place, and cafe. Meers remains a memorial to the Wichita Mountains "Gold Rush" of the early 1900's and to the mystique of vast underground riches which hangs over the entire region since the first Spaniards came this way from Mexico three centuries before.

SILO--AN UNORDINARY INNOVATION IN WOOD

Twenty miles southeast of Arnett, the Davison Silo, constructed over 60 years ago, along with a two-story log house, is evidence that the owner, Francis Davison was considered no ordinary man. He held a deep interest in wildlife conservation and raised countless quail, prairie chicken, and wild turkey on his ranch. In 1921, he reintroduced buffalo to the ranch under an agreement with the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge. The buffalo roundups were always popular with his visitors but no one was ever allowed to take aim at any of the game, in season or out.

Perched on its foundation of concrete is Davison's fourteen-sided (6 feet to each side) Silo (see front cover). Constructed of 2 x 4's laid flat expressing individuality and structural integrity. Thirty-six feet tall, the structure is capped with pitched shingled roof planes. The roof proper is ornamented with a cupola having 14 small windows and, repeated again, a tiny shingled roof of 14 sections topped with a 5 foot wood pole.

On the south side of the silo is a feed chute, crafted with similar workmanship and care. Capping the chute is a wall dormer which ties back into the

silo's main roof. To further keep the elements on the exterior of the building, the builder clad the entire structure with tongue and groove siding. Originally, the joints were covered with sheet metal mouldings where the roof panels changed planes (or direction). Most of these pieces have rusted or blown away, and where shingles are missing many holes are now appearing in the roof. But in spite of its deterioration, the silo is basically sound and standing proud.

Innovation, expertise, function and ingenuity were words used at the beginning of this article. These words were applied to the actions of our early-day businessmen, farmers, miners, and builders as they created the built environment. Sometimes by trial and error, many times with materials at hand, and most times with grit, guts, and persistence, these achievements are today marvels to behold. The structures introduced here are barely representative of the multitude that existed and were every bit as important in the development of Western Oklahoma. ●