

Masthead Logo

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Prehistoric Red Men

Charles Reuben Keyes

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Prehistoric Red Men

Everybody knows stone arrowheads. Very interesting they are, these sharp-pointed bits of chipped flint of so many forms and colors, and not thoughtlessly does a person throw away a find that so pleases the eye and challenges the imagination. The tiny messenger from another age has a way of putting questions.

Who made me, do you suppose, O curious finder? And how was I fashioned, and when and where? Whose muscles grew tense as I was sent whirring toward the distant mark? Was I fatal to man or beast before you knew me, or did I miss the intended quarry and drop into the forest floor — to rest there until the coming of a strange people whose iron axes and resistless plowshares finally brought me to the light?

In a broad way, many of the questions raised by the stone arrowhead can be answered. But the de-

tails of its history must generally abide in that mystery which incites to an ever-increasing interest. The stone age in Iowa, at least in respect to one of its most marked characteristics, appears to have come to an end without white witnesses. Marquette did not see really primitive Indians in the three Algonkian villages visited by him in 1673 at the mouth of the Iowa River. Those Peorias were already in possession of the white man's guns and powder! That the Indians once made these little flint projectiles in vast numbers in Iowa is very clear, however, from the quantities of flint chips and other shop refuse found on scores of sites where once sat and worked the ancient arrowmaker.

Besides the arrowheads, though less numerous, the fields and hillsides of Iowa produce a great variety of other stone weapons, implements, and ornaments. Grooved stone axes, the original tomahawks, are nowhere more highly developed than in our State; grooved war-club heads and the still heavier grooved mauls are common enough; domestic tools, such as flint knives, drills, and scrapers, abound in certain places; tobacco pipes of red pipestone occur in a wonderful variety of forms; ornamental and ceremonial objects of diorite, banded slate, and porphyry frequently come to light. All these things testify, of course, to the one-time presence in Iowa of men concerning whom history has left no records.

Those who collect these relics of Iowa's prehistoric past, as hundreds have done and are still do-

ing, are likely to become aware sooner or later of certain general facts: that most of their relics are found in the rougher country along the streams, not on the open prairie; that certain types of relics, such as arrowheads, spearheads, grooved and ungrooved axes, are found scattered widely and rather evenly over the entire extent of the creek and river bluffs; that certain other types, such as drills, knives, scrapers, gouges, and the various kinds of ornaments, occur most frequently on quite restricted areas. Many a collector, especially the farmer who knows every foot of his ground, makes the discovery that a small area of only an acre or two produces a large part of his relics. If this collector becomes unusually observing, he will generally find that his best hunting ground yields a number of things besides the perfect specimens that are the pride of his collection: bits of broken bone and clam shell; many small thin chips of flint that surely were never broken by any of nature's processes; larger and more irregular pieces of flint and quartz; still larger river pebbles that often, on close examination, show the marks of fire; bits of broken pottery unlike anything that the white man makes.

Now let our collector take a careful look about him on the strength of the hint offered by that prolific acre on the low and rather sandy elevation above the creek bottom. Near-by, on ground that slopes gently to the stream and has always been kept in pasture, he notices little parallel ridges only

about four inches high by a foot and a half wide and some four feet apart from center to center. Garden beds surely! On the neighboring high ridge that commands so fine a view up and down the valley is a row of nineteen regular elevations with a round base some thirty feet in diameter and a height in the center of three or four feet. Nature certainly did not form these either. Indian mounds without a doubt! Down across the tough sod of the hill slope that has always seemed too steep for cultivation is a deep winding groove, too broad for a cow-path and too narrow for the pioneer road of migrating whites. Remnant of an old Indian trail, very likely!

Then the mind reverts to that low, sandy elevation down there in the angle between the creek and the river, and back to memory comes the sight and babble of the big spring that formerly, until the timber was cleared from the river bluffs, produced such an abundance of pure cold water. How clearly now the details of the picture emerge! In imagination the hills and valleys are again covered with primeval forest; wigwams arise; men bend to their tasks over the obdurate flint and greenstone; with hoes of bone or flint the women tend the precious garden beds; children splash in the brooklet that flows down to the quiet river; canoes are pulled up on the sandy shore; the smoke of numerous campfires floats away.

Along the creeks and rivers of Iowa are scores, probably hundreds, of sites where ancient Indian

villages flourished long before any white man looked across the Father of Waters. Tribes belonging to different stocks with divergent cultures adapted themselves to forest or prairie or rock-walled valley, each occupying and defending its chosen domain as the centuries came and went. The prehistoric Indian of Iowa was not a nomad, always moving, always fighting. To be sure he had his wars and sometimes migrated, but he established his villages with the intent that they should be permanent, and in truth he did occupy them through the changing seasons and the incalculable visitations of fate. The refuse of village activities does not accumulate to a depth of ten feet in a year or a decade. Those chosen spots have become for the Indian's successor the repositories which must take the place of history.

CHARLES REUBEN KEYES