

A GROUP OF MINNESOTA LOWLAND MOUNDS

Out on the lowland meadows, valley trains, outwash plains, and along the drainage channels of the late Wisconsin ice sheet lie approximately two thousand mounds, all within a radius of about ten miles from Northfield. This means that the region contains about one-fifth as many mounds as all the rest of Minnesota put together—truly, a respectable number. In point of size, however, these mounds are by no means so imposing as are many of the earthworks found in Ohio, Mexico, or even within the confines of our own state. Nevertheless they form an integral part not only of the archaeological remains of Minnesota, but also of America. The grand scheme or panoramic picture of prehistoric America will not be complete unless these mounds have been accorded the proper place to which they are rightly entitled. The true solution of the problem presented by them may reveal a more interesting chapter than is at present supposed. And, inasmuch as many are doomed to the same destruction that already has overtaken many others as the result of clearing, drainage, dust storms, and agricultural operations, the following is offered in the hope that it may assist competent investigators in appraising correctly the meaning of these prehistoric remains and in solving the mystery that now surrounds them.

In shape and outward appearance the mounds are of the typical midwestern kind—low, circular, lenticular, from one to three feet high, and from twenty to fifty feet in diameter. A few measure sixty feet across, and some are longer than they are broad. They occur in scattered groups of many, or of a few, mounds. Single specimens are not uncommon. Along the outwash flats from Stanton to Dennison and beyond there were 575 mounds, along the Cannon

River between Northfield and Dundas there are 57, at Dundas and a mile beyond there are over 40, a mile farther south is a group of 90, and on five adjoining sections in Greenvale and Waterford townships there are 602. West of this wide area decreasingly smaller groups occur at various intervals along the drainage channels that descend from the higher morainic tracts. Manifestly such large numbers of archaeological remains raise the question: "Who built these mounds, when were they built, and why?"

As possible factors leading to the distribution and location of mounds may be mentioned the water courses, the big open flats with abundant gifts of nature, and the many beaver dams, which bespeak a numerous beaver population that may have lured the builders of the mounds into these parts. No long earthen walls, no very high mounds, no village sites with numerous relics have been found. The only structures of an apparently defensive kind are more than seventy small embankments with pits flanking both sides, arranged in roughly parallel rows in arc-like formation over an area of about three acres. They vary in height from one and a half to two feet, and in length from four to five feet. Two or three are seven to eight feet long. One pit measures eighteen feet in length. As the walls all face in a southerly direction, it appears that an attack was warded off in that direction. The west and north sides of the place were protected by steep slopes bordering a creek. Until recently the area was forested. Excavations into some of the embankments and inquiry among people failed to give any further information. If these works prove to be of the defensive kind, it may be questioned whether they indicate a sporadic struggle between very ancient tribes or warfare between Sioux and Iowa for the possession of these domains. These earthworks are on Mr. Stanley Ripple's farm in Bridgewater Township.

The mounds were first observed by the writer in 1887 or 1888. From passing trains one can easily see some of

them, but, owing to the fact that they are far less striking in appearance than the wonderful effigy mounds previously admired in Wisconsin, they did not seem to merit much attention. From 1904 to 1908, however, a better understanding of the significance of mounds led to a systematic search and tabulation of over two thousand in this region. Although ponds, sloughs, small lakes, rank growths of tall weeds and sedges, thickets, and fringing forests made exploration difficult, the region doubtless had much the same appearance as when the mounds were erected. The so-called "improvements" made by the white man have changed the country to such an extent that some statements made hitherto about the mounds will, in the future, appear untrue.

The attention of Jacob V. Brower was repeatedly called to these mounds with the hope that, after he had finished his work on the Red Wing area, he would make a detailed study also of this region. When the writer examined the newly discovered Fort Sweney at Welch, Brower's attention was called to the subject, and he wrote that he "made a hasty trip to Castle Rock and saw fifty mounds." Notice the word "mounds." This highly experienced field-worker classified these tumuli as mounds. Unfortunately his death in 1905 put an end to further work. His successor, the well-known geologist N. H. Winchell, was busy for several years editing the *Aborigines of Minnesota* (St. Paul, 1911), but he did spend several days examining the mounds, and he published a map showing their distribution in the *Aborigines* (p. 129). His opinion there recorded is: "These earthworks cannot be excluded from the category of 'Indian mounds.' . . . Their numbers are so startling, and their having not been observed by any other archæologist is so remarkable, that it seemed necessary to make some examination before incorporating them into this report." These plans, however, were not carried out. Since the mounds occurred in such unheard-of places, the perplexing question whether they had really been made by man or by some other

agency was at first raised. In 1915 Dr. Warren Upham learned that similar mounds had been observed by Joseph B. Thoburn, later curator of the Oklahoma Historical Society. On July 11, 1916, Dr. Upham wrote: "Through several weeks of last year I had much correspondence with him [*Thoburn*] on this subject. . . . These unusual and very numerous 'lowland mounds,' hitherto not very generally known . . . I now believe to be made by primitive people." When Mr. Frank Leverett, an outstanding geologist, was determining and mapping the extent of glacial drift deposits in this region, the writer made various trips with him to Dennison, Faribault, Hampton, Lakeville, and other places, and called his attention to the mounds, but never once did he pay the slightest attention to them as glacial features. This opinion from so eminent a glaciologist makes further arguments unnecessary. Some of the mounds even lie outside of the area that was either covered by the ice or reached by its outwash waters. Therefore, they are post-glacial formations. That four men, each an authority in his line, arrived along different routes at the respective conclusions cited, warrants the inference that these tumuli are not due to glacial action, but to human agency.

In 1916, at the request of the Minnesota Historical Society that further explorations be made, twenty-six mounds were excavated by the writer. The only indication of human agency was a flaked stone, found about two feet beneath the top of a mound. Additional excavations in 1934 brought to light a flaked but unpolished club. It lay at the base level of a mound. On April 14, 1934, Irwin F. Smith, city engineer of Faribault, said that he had excavated six mounds in none of which artifacts were discovered. In excavating more than forty mounds, only two relics have been found. The almost total absence of relics is, perhaps, the most distressing feature about the excavation of these mounds. It precludes all comparison with cultural products of identified regions. Naturally one would think:

“Many mounds, many people. Many people, at least a fair number, if not many relics.” However, repeated examinations of miles of the mound-dotted area, even under the most favorable conditions for field work, revealed only two specimens—a scraper and an arrow. True it is that finds of arrowheads, two pestles, two catlinite pipes, a big stone hoe, and a few other things have been made in this region. They occurred, however, in widely separated areas and not in association with mounds; thus they may easily represent articles that were lost by hunting parties that roamed over the land and camped temporarily in various localities long after the mounds had been built. Worst of all, not a single piece of pottery of any kind has been recovered either from mound or field. This makes it appear that the builders of the mounds were not acquainted with the art of making pottery. Hence the mounds do not appear to be of Siouan origin, and they therefore cannot be linked with the Red Wing groups. For years it was believed that when the area was plowed over, plenty of Siouan pottery would show up. But, no such Rosetta relic appeared. Hence, a Siouan relationship does not seem to fit the problem of these mounds. The finding of hundreds of Siouan mounds without a trace of pottery looks like a paradox. Nevertheless, there may be undiscovered relics present. The silent but unexcavated mound does not tell what is inside. A fortunate find may some day change the views now held. One good find of the right kind reveals much.

Perhaps the condition of these mounds can be best explained by postulating a greater age for the mounds than that of Siouan occupancy. Dr. Upham suggested that the mounds were constructed so long ago—possibly by glacial man, who used implements of bone—that all vestiges of human occupancy, such as charcoal, ashes, and skeletal remains, had been removed by decay. Professor Thoburn suggests that the mounds probably are of the “domiciliary” type that he discovered in Oklahoma. He was very successful in

finding pottery, implements, fireplaces, postholes, and even skeletal remains in collapsed earthen huts. Such huts were made by placing posts in the ground, roofing them over with timber, and then covering all with turf or mud. When the inhabitants left, they took their possessions with them. When the huts collapsed, they formed the mounds. Hence, mounds without relics. While proof for such an explanation is lacking in this region, the absence of relics and the nature of the mounds themselves favor the earthen lodge explanation. The Iowa are known to have lived in this region before the arrival of the Sioux, they built such huts elsewhere, and they may have built similar ones here; or some tribe that preceded the Iowa may have built them. William W. Warren, in his "History of the Ojibways," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 5:160-180, frequently mentions "earth wigwams." He writes: "The villages consisted mostly of earthen wigwams." "The Dakotas took refuge in their earthen lodges." "The Gros Ventres stated that their fathers lived in earthen wigwams." "The remains of their earthen wigwams are still plainly seen in great numbers." "The numerous earthen mounds . . . on the upper Mississippi . . . are safely considered as the remains of earthen lodges of these former occupants." "Nearly all the tribes of the red man who lived in an open prairie country . . . were accustomed to live in earthen wigwams." Brower may have struck such mounds farther north in Minnesota, for he notes that "The very old mounds have no recognizable remains." All such considerations create a suspicion that the Northfield mounds were built long ago by a people who did not make pottery and who used weapons of a perishable nature.

If these suggestions prove to be a stepping stone to the identification of the builders of these mounds, our efforts will not have been in vain.

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