
THE EDITOR'S PAGE

PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY AND PUBLIC INTERPRETATION: A NEW APPROACH

INTEREST IN the American Indian, his diversified ways of life, his contributions to a growing America, and his role in contemporary society, continues to accelerate. The prehistoric archaeology of the American Indian has a significant role to play in satisfying this need for knowledge of a long, successful culture history. Like other facets of American Indian life and history, interest in his prehistoric past grows rapidly. Any archaeological crew working in the field during the summer months is immediately aware of this public interest, for visitors are constant onlookers. Archaeologists in the laboratory are also aware of this because letters and verbal requests for information form a constant stream of inquiry. Primary and secondary schools throughout the state are steadily enriching their curriculum coverage of the American Indian, both past and present, and Indian peoples themselves have a new awareness of the significance of their own cultural heritage. American Indian archaeology in Minnesota has a distinctive character and it has an important place in this enlarging public awareness.

The archaeologist doing the research and the educational-cultural institutions supporting him have an obligation to provide information not only to scholars but to the public. To better serve this public need, publications of research results are being produced in increasing quantity through the Minnesota Historical Society's new series on prehistoric archaeology, through the journal called the *Minnesota Archaeologist*, and through a variety of other local publication outlets. While publication is vital and provides the necessary first step in disseminating archaeological information,

it is not enough and it does not take advantage of the distinctive nature of archaeological data.

Both places and objects are important to prehistoric archaeology. The most meaningful and understandable interpretation of archaeology occurs when the excavated objects can be seen, when the sites from which they came can be visited, and when the objects and sites are interpreted in place and in the context of the ecological setting in which the people lived. By establishing regional visual interpretation centers, a unique and exciting dimension of archaeological interpretation can be provided for the public.

Minnesota has a start on such a program, for an interpretation center focusing on prehistoric archaeology is being developed at Big Stone Lake State Park northwest of Ortonville. Another center is in the planning stage for Mille Lacs-Kathio State Park, and important archaeological sites such as the Cottonwood petroglyphs near Jeffers, the Grand Mound on the northern border, the Stumne Mounds near Pine City, and the Morrison Mounds at the outlet of Otter Tail Lake in west-central Minnesota have been acquired by the Minnesota Historical Society.

To capitalize on the investment already made and to provide a framework for future development, I suggest the establishment of six or seven regional interpretation centers devoted to prehistoric archaeology. These centers should be located at significant sites which represent the major archaeological regions of the entire state and they should offer an interpretation of both the particular site and the larger regional prehistoric sequence. Because Minnesota exhibits such contrasting ecological areas, and because prehistoric peoples and their cultures had quite different adaptations to varied ecological settings, the interpretations should be placed within the framework of each ecological setting as it changed through time.

Where these six or seven centers should be located is not difficult to determine. The Grand Mound on the

Rainy River west of International Falls is a logical place for the interpretation of not only this significant site but the region of the Canadian Shield and the Border Lakes country. The largest remaining prehistoric burial mound in the Upper Mississippi region, the Grand Mound belongs to the Woodland tradition (roughly dated from 1000 B.C. to 1000 A.D.), one of four major cultural traditions of prehistoric Minnesota. More specifically, it was part of a local Woodland culture called Laurel which flourished sometime between 500 B.C. and 1000 A.D. and demonstrated a northern forest adaptation related to cultures found in Ontario and Manitoba.

The Big Stone Lake State Park center is ideally suited to interpret the prehistory of the west-central prairie. Sites there belong to the latest prehistoric culture tradition—the Mississippian (1000 A.D. to 1700 A.D.)—and were based on agriculture. Mille Lacs-Kathio State Park, with its rich archaeological sites of not only the late Woodland and Mississippian cultural traditions but also the earlier “old copper” Eastern Archaic (5000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.), is centered in the distinctive east-central Minnesota region.

Perhaps the Jeffers petroglyph site in Cottonwood County should be the location of a center interpreting the southwestern quarter of the state and the Upper Minnesota River Valley. Certainly a site in the Mississippi River Valley of southeastern Minnesota is a necessity, and a center in the north-central wild rice region between Grand Rapids and Bemidji is also needed. Possibly the site at White Oak Point below Deer River would be a desirable location. I should also like to see a center in the Red River Valley. Though a portion of the lower valley can be interpreted in the Big Stone Lake center, the central and northern valley has a distinctive prehistoric sequence quite different from that of west-central Minnesota.

The tentative interpretation plan devised for Big Stone Lake State Park offers an example of what might be done at these regional centers. It draws upon excavated materials from the University of Minnesota collections, and the interpretation is built upon the concept of changing patterns of land utilization

through prehistoric times into the era of early European settlement of the region. Data from the interpretation of the surface geology of this region at the outlet of Glacial Lake Agassiz is used with paleoecological data on changing climatic-vegetation patterns to provide the ecological context. Central to the exhibits, which follow a chronological sequence, is a reconstruction of a segment of one of the distinctive archaeological sites on Big Stone Lake. The center is being built especially for summer park visitors, but it can easily be used by school groups and others during the warmer months of the school year.

The development of plans for these interpretation centers demands a co-operative program involving archaeologists, paleoecologists, museum experts, and recreational-planning specialists. Both the Minnesota Historical Society and the Division of Parks and Recreation need to be directly involved, for they have some of the expertise needed to take part in the operation of the centers. The archaeological laboratory of the University of Minnesota has most of the archaeological collections and data to be drawn upon in the interpretation and thus should also be directly involved. Ecological background might come from the specialists of the James Ford Bell Museum of Natural History at the university who have had a long association with nature interpretation within Minnesota's state parks. To plan and co-ordinate a program such as that envisioned here, co-operation is essential and I would hope that the initiative to form such a group will be forthcoming.

Finally, I should also note that the establishment of regional interpretation centers does not obviate the need for smaller outdoor interpretation units at the state historic sites and in state parks, nor do these centers diminish the need for a state-wide museum interpretation of the entire Minnesota prehistoric sequence located in the metropolitan area. These supplementary developments along with the regional centers would give Minnesota an unmatched position in the interpretation of American Indian culture history.

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