STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

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Blood Run History

The Land and Changing Patterns of Use

The geology of Blood Run stretches back millions of years into the pre-Cambrian period, when Sioux Quartzite, its ancient bedrock, was formed from compressed grains of quartz sand. Glaciers – advancing across the region some 10,000 to 30,000 years ago - deposited a layer, sometimes quite thick, of soil and gravel atop the bedrock. Finally, a mantle of loess, a fine-grained windblown material, covered the land as the glaciers retreated. Slowly over time, Blood Run Creek and the Big Sioux River have eroded the loess deposits and rearranged the gravel and sand deposits, carving a widening path through the rolling landscape. Prairie grasses and trees help keep erosion in check.

Prehistoric use of Blood Run began as early as 6500 B.C., judging from the few spear or dart points characteristic of that time that have been found on the surface. Archaeological evidence suggests that the most intensive site use was between A.D. 1500 and 1700, when Oneota people dominated the region. The villages and mound groups that characterize Blood Run are found on the high flat terraces bordering the Big Sioux; gardens were probably placed primarily in the bottom lands.

At the time of first European contact, perhaps in the 1690s, the area was primarily covered with a variety of prairie species. A few stands of over story trees probably grew centuries ago along the river bottom and on the north and east facing valley walls just as they do today. These trees were doubtless important to prehistoric groups and certainly were to the first European settlers in this almost treeless land dominated by prairie forbs and grasses. At present, pasture and row crops constitute the dominant groundcover on the privately-owned portions of the site.

Both terraces where the largest mound groups are located are underlain with sand and gravel deposits. Quarrying began in the area just prior to 1886 when the former railroad line was constructed. Quarrying over the past century has unearthed many artifacts while destroying considerable archaeological evidence. Thousands of artifacts have been dug out and then spread along with gravel over county roads, destroying forever the stories those objects could have told.

The latest quarrying activity within the National Historic Landmark boundaries was initiated in 1984 adjacent to the northern mound group. Earlier quarrying had removed approximately five acres of the terrace on which the mound group is located and

another three to four acres were removed during the 1980s quarrying activity. This disturbance led to the 1985 and 1986 archaeological investigations and the state purchase of approximately 200 acres of the site.

Oneota, a Traditional Native American Culture

The Oneota culture may have originated in Wisconsin. A definable cultural entity by A.D. 1150, it evolved from a Late Woodland cultural base. Regarded as a Midwestern phenomenon, characteristic villages, cemeteries and, occasionally, mound groups are found within an area from around lower Lake Michigan, the St. Louis locality, along the lower Missouri and into the eastern Plains in Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota, across the southern half of Minnesota and northern Illinois back to Chicago and Lake Michigan. By far, the majority of Oneota sites are found in Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Missouri.

Oneota village sites are characteristically quite large, often ranging upwards of 50 acres and more. They are rarely fortified but were placed in easily-defended positions. Blood Run is the largest Oneota site: 650-1,250 acres, although the site margins have not been precisely determined. The Leary National Historic Landmark site, located in extreme southeastern Nebraska, is believed to be the second largest Oneota site: estimates of size {again the margins have not been determined) are consistently over 500 acres. The Utz National Historic Landmark site, located high *above* the Missouri River in central Missouri, is probably third in size, with estimates ranging from 300 acres.

Archaeologists readily identify Oneota sites by the presence of characteristic shell-tempered pottery which ranged in size from teacup- to bushel-capacity vessels. Typical was a constricted-necked jar with a flaring rim and one or two pairs of handles. A few shallow bowls, usually without handles, have also been found.

The Oneota were gardeners whose horticultural activities included growing corn, beans, squash and a number of plants with edible seeds that we now consider weeds. In addition to garden products, the Oneota ate bison, deer, elk, dogs, smaller mammals, birds, fish and mollusks, depending upon regional availability and cultural preference. Cemetery areas were often placed near villages, but human remains have been found in house floors and occasionally with village refuse.

Only four Oneota sites {all in northwest Iowa) are associated with mounds. Other Oneota earthworks are found in northeast and northwest Iowa and in central Missouri. They characteristically are 'enclosures,' perhaps functioning as redoubts that afforded some protection when a village was under attack.

Oneota villagers interacted frequently with other groups; such contacts were usually Oneota-to-Oneota, but they obviously dealt (not always peacefully) with late Mississippian peoples along the Mississippi River Valley and in northern Illinois as well as with some eastern Plains villagers and Late Woodland groups.

The Oneota Tradition and Historic Tribes

Tribes that apparently were part of the Oneota cultural tradition when first contacted by Europeans are the Winnebago, Ioway, Oto, Missouria, Omaha, Ponca, Kansa and Osage, the quality of evidence varies from tribe to tribe. It should be noted here that the Ioway/Oto and the Omaha/Ponca were once single tribal units but they had split, forming independent tribal entities, at about the

time European traders and explorers came into the upper Midwest. Tribal locations for the Oto or Ponca have not been verified historically prior to the mid-1700s. They are often simply referred to in early historic accounts as the Ioway or the Omaha.

Blood Run, an Oneota Site

Blood Run is unique among Oneota sites and not simply because of its size. It is one of only four sites that offer evidence for Oneota mound building, all of them in northwestern Iowa. At one time, researchers documented 275 mounds on Blood Run of which fewer than 80 are still visible. Many mounds were quickly reduced or destroyed by cultivation. These were probably constructed of heaped up, unprocessed soil and rocks. The mounds we see today probably survived because they were constructed of carefully selected stone and soils which were tightly compacted. Some are still *over* six feet high and measure 80 feet in diameter despite a century of cultivation. Some Blood Run mounds that were carefully excavated and subsequently reported upon were specially prepared for human burial. Others were doubtless built as part of important ceremonies, but lack evidence for full inhumation.

Mounds are generally regarded by Native Americans as holy places. They may contain human remains and associated artifacts placed in accord with Native American ritual and belief systems and should always be given the respect due a sacred place. [They are also protected by Iowa law.] Other impressive earthworks were once prominent on the Blood Run surface. There was a 15 acre enclosure of heaped up earth that was quickly plowed away. And, an earthen serpent effigy 1/8 mile in length that is described in early accounts offers no visible trace today.

Other unique surface features were 'boulder outlines' and pitted boulders. Boulders (mostly Sioux Quartzite) formed outlines that were once visible. One estimate is that there were over 800 boulder outlines on the Blood Run site prior to cultivation. The majority of these are assumed to have delineated the edges of houses. Most were circular and from 12 to 30 feet in diameter and a few were ovoid, up to 125 feet long and 30 feet wide. The boulders were probably placed around lodge edges to hold the covers (mats and hides) in place. None can be seen today. Some of the boulders that have had numerous pits ground into their surfaces remain in place; the largest is covered with at least several hundred small ground pits. The purpose of these pits is a matter of speculation.

The Omaha appear to have been the principal occupants of Blood Run at the time of European contact, perhaps just before they separated from the Ponca. Some Ioway (and, probably Oto) also lived on the site at times. Archaeological evidence, specifically their characteristic pottery, suggests that the Arikara were frequent visitors as well. Their presence is corroborated by Omaha legend, stating that both the Arikara and Cheyenne visited regularly. The most intensive occupation was probably during the late 1600s, when as many as 6,000 individuals may at times have been there, trading and interacting in social and ceremonial activities.

This place offered an excellent location for tribal interaction at the turn of the 17th century. It was located along the Plains-Prairie Peninsula border along a major body of water in a place where valuable trade materials (Bijou Hills quartzite, pipestone, animal hides) were readily accessible, where good food supplies (especially bison and elk) could easily be obtained and where a great variety of both plains and prairie resources could be exploited.

Past Excavations

Mound Excavations

1. Office of State Archaeologist and Luther College - 1985. A salvage excavation of one mound remnant, in response to damage caused by gravel operations.

2. University of Wisconsin -1964. One small mound just north of Johnson farmstead (Decker farm).

3. Charles F. Keyes/Ellison Orr (WPA) - 1934. Apparently, one mound on Johnson farm (Decker farm).

4. F. W. Pettigrew - late 1800s. Several mounds on South Dakota side and probably some on Iowa side as well.

5. Fredrick Starr, Davenport Academy of Science - late 1800s. Reported on four mounds, two dug by railroad engineers.

6. Numerous curiosity-seekers and relic-hunters that leave few, if any, records of what was found or where things came from.

Village Excavations

The Office of the State Archaeologist, Luther College, the Iowa Archeological Society, the South Dakota Archeological Society, and Augustana College conducted excavations in 1985 and 1986 in response to damage/disturbance caused by gravel operations.

Cache or storage pits, which ranged in size up to nine feet in diameter and over six feet deep, functioned like root cellars and were the principal features excavated. They were located using heavy machinery to re-strip the disturbed areas adjacent to the gravel pit. Once the dark organic-rich circular features were revealed, they were excavated with trowels and shovels. All soil removed was screened through 1/4" mesh and the materials found were bagged for washing, cataloging, and analysis.

Materials that were found in these pits are listed below:

1. Pottery fragments
2. Chipped stone - arrow points, knives, and scrapers
3. Ground stone maul (hammer) - heads with encircling grooves for affixing the handle
4. Ground stone grinding implements - probably used for processing corn and beans
5. Bone tools - especially digging tools made from bison or elk shoulder blades, some awls, punches, flaking tools of antler, and items of ornamentation
6. Pipestone - fragments of plaques, pipes, and items of adornment
7. Items suggesting European trade - including small beads, brass kettle fragments, brass beads and tinklers, and iron knives
8. Animal bone - principally bison and dog with some elk and smaller mammals. Fish bone, mollusks and bird bones were rare in the features excavated. This is surprising because the Big Sioux doubtless offered large fish and clams and this was part of a major flyway for migrating birds. The absence of these food resources may suggest a cultural bias against

these easily obtained resources; however such remains may be present in abundance elsewhere on the site given the proximity of riverine resources.

Blood Run has been dated using radiocarbon (C14) analyses, giving a range of dates from A.D. 1500-1700. Historic documentation, the presence of small European-derived trade items and no guns or traps confirms dates from ca. A.D. 1650-1700. Guns and traps were introduced into this region through direct trade with Europeans shortly after A.D. 1700.

Life at Blood Run, an Oneota Village

For many archaeologists, historians and practitioners of related fields, it is gratifying to transform the piles of ancient potsherds, broken tools, bones, shells and bits of charred food remains, enhanced by some recollections by the occupants' descendants and a few old maps and early accounts into a reasoned interpretation of what life here might have been like. So, indulge us for a few minutes while we step back in time just over three centuries and place ourselves on Blood Run right on the high spot just south of Blood Run creek. Early evening is upon us, let's imagine!

We are standing near a huge boulder covered over with ground-out pits and depressions. From this vantage point we can look in every direction and see hundreds of round and some long oval houses; smoke from the fires within slowly rises and drifts toward the southwest. The houses are arranged in groups of varying sizes, suggesting they are established as clan units.

Our attention is drawn to a large group of houses, placed among dozens of large mounds that dot the broad terrace sloping away to the south. And, just south of these mounds and their associated houses is a long, low serpent effigy of heaped-up earth, probably constructed as part of an important ceremony. And just beyond that effigy is a large enclosure, again of heaped-up earth, to which some villagers can run should their homes be attacked by marauding Sioux. Even farther to the south more houses and a small group of large mounds are just visible.

In and around the houses, children are playing. Some of the young boys are practicing with the bow and arrow, expecting to be great hunters one day; others are playing at games that require both skill and luck. Most of the girls are with their mothers, learning what grown Oneota women must know: weaving, preparing food, working in the garden and dressing hides. Many women are preparing bison, elk, deer and beaver hides for clothing, lodge covers and, of special importance, for trade. Others are making mats for lodge coverings and to place on the floors inside. A few women are digging a fresh storage pit, removing the last of the small boulders that on this terrace are all too numerous just a few feet below the surface. Most of the boulders are immediately tossed into an old adjoining pit that has become moldy and rodent-ridden, no longer useable for food storage. Soon that pit will be filled with broken and worn out digging tool blades and other tool fragments, unusable rocks, smashed pots, anything that is no longer useful and is littering the surface. The interior surfaces of the new pit will soon be daubed with a layer of clay-rich soil which will stabilize and cover over the gravel and rock walls, making it temporarily impervious to rodents and other pests. Soon this pit will be filled with dried corn, beans, pieces of squash and some dried meat in preparation for the long winter ahead. Off to the east, we see a party of successful hunters returning, some bearing large pieces of a bison that was partially butchered where it was killed in order to facilitate moving it to the village. After all, a full grown bison can easily weigh over a half ton; no sense trying to bring it back whole. Some bison are often found near the village and can be killed with a few arrows driven by the men's powerful bows.

Our gaze is then directed toward the west, across the broad river bottomland where Blood Run Creek empties into the Big Sioux River. Here and there are a few lodges, but most of that broad low terrace is devoted to small gardens, probably family plots tended by the women, their girls and smaller boys.

Across the river, we can see many more lodges and at least one small group of mounds.

What's this? Some small boys are rushing to the river to greet a group of men who are pulling several small canoes onto shore. These men, probably Arikara whose home villages are along the Missouri River, have come to trade. Their travel likely took several days, most of that time spent walking to the Big Sioux, then coasting downstream by boat to Blood Run. A few days ago, the Blood Run villages were abuzz with the news that several Ioway families had just arrived with many trade items received in exchange for the red pipestone pipes, beads, and plaques and bison hides they left here with several months ago.[1]

Tomorrow, after all the appropriate ceremonies have been concluded, we should see some lively trading accompanied by feasting, dancing and games. The Omaha villagers are renowned hosts and are well positioned to draw traders from far and wide. Blood Run is very near (about 60 miles) to the great red pipestone quarries, giving the inhabitants easy access and some control over quarrying activities. Raw pipestone slabs and chunks are brought back to the village and made into the beautiful pipes, tablets, beads and pendants that are highly regarded all across North America. And, with herds of both bison and elk readily available, their processed hides are also a top commodity as are the hides of smaller animals, their meat, and excess produce from the gardens. No wonder these villages were such a popular gathering-place for trade, ceremony and fun!

Footnote (1) European trade materials initially came to Blood Run, perhaps as early as the mid-1600s, through a series of Native American intermediaries, not directly from European traders. We know that in 1676 some Ioway families were living with the Winnebago not far from Green Bay, Wisconsin (at least 10 days journey from Blood Run) where they could easily interact with friendly tribes whose homes were in that region. Those tribes, the Huron and Ottawa, the Peoria and others, traded with many other tribes, including the powerful Iroquois who lived in villages near and along the Atlantic coast. The Iroquois were among the first contacted by Dutch, French and English traders who were busy trying to satisfy European desires for exotic furs from the New World. Thus, small and light (easily transported) glass beads, brass kettles, brass and copper strips, bracelets, rings, iron awls and needles, knives and light axes, were made in Europe specifically for the fur trade and shipped across the Atlantic to the New World. These items quickly found their way well into the interior by 'down-the-line' (Indian-to-Indian) means to places where no

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Oneota Culture Yields to Change

The European influence began to infiltrate Blood Run around A.D. 1700 with the arrival of French trappers and fur traders. The Oneota here had become well aware of French trade items, including glass beads and metal goods and by this time were also aware that guns and horses were available to some tribes. They wanted those commodities as well. Soon, horses, guns and a broad array of metal tools were available, radically changing the traditional ways to the point where, by A.D. 1725, traditional Oneota culture had virtually disappeared. Their characteristic pottery vessels were replaced with brass and iron kettles, their chipped stone knives, scrapers and choppers quickly superseded by their metal equivalents and the bow and arrow succeeded by the gun. And, once available to them, the horse changed not only the prevailing mode of land transportation, but allowed great changes in village mobility, hunting patterns, warfare and social structure.

Europeans also brought with them diseases that Indians had no immunity to, resulting in total decimation of some groups. Those who survived these exotic diseases were often forced out of the region by eastern Indians who already had guns and some horses, later by Europeans coming in increasing numbers from the east. As this period of turmoil and rapid change began, the Omaha and their friends abandoned Blood Run and never returned, leaving an archaeological wonder for future generations.